

## **PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY AND SATISFACTION OF HIGH PERFORMANCE PROGRAMMES (HPP): A CASE STUDY OF A COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **—Abstract—**

Sport is a multi-billion dollar industry that has become an important marketing tool to attract a higher calibre of students to universities. Students do not only consider the educational value a university can offer but also what it can offer in terms of advancing their sporting achievements and their sporting careers. High performance programmes (HPP) which include superior facilities, high quality coaching and management staff, educational subsidies, body/health conditioning facilities as well as supportive staff for the purpose of driving and maintaining a high calibre of development are required to assist students in meeting their sporting aspirations. The aim of this study was to gain constructive insights regarding perceptions of service quality and satisfaction of the different member associates of the High Performance Programmes (HPP) of Rugby, Hockey, Soccer, Netball, Athletics, Rowing and Cricket at a comprehensive university in South Africa (SA). A concurrent mixed method approach was used to collect data. Ko and Pastore's (2005) Scale of Service Quality in Recreational Sports (SSQRS) was used to collect the quantitative data from one hundred and nineteen (n=119) first team players. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the respective sport managers (n=7) and team captains (n=7) within each sport programme. Quantitative data was analysed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS), whereas the qualitative data

were analysed using the Atlas.ti software package. The results from the study revealed that the service quality of the HPP ranged from moderate to high indicating that some dimensions required attention. The study provided useful insights regarding service quality which could assist the management of the HPPs in developing effective strategies to maintain and improve the quality of their services.

**Key Words:** *High performance programmes, satisfaction, service quality*

**JEL Classification:** I10, I14

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The competitive nature of today's society has led to a number of different organisations having to improve their offerings to their clientele to retain existing ones and attract new ones. Higher education institutions are no exception. They embark on extravagant marketing drives to attract the best calibre student in terms of academic and sport ability to improve their image and profile. In order to attract excellent student-athletes, universities are required to produce and deliver excellent quality sport services to prepare their athletes for national and international competition. The nature of competition is such that continual and sustainable development is essential for a successful association (Grönroos, 1992).

Globally sport has developed into a multi-billion dollar industry which attracts an array of individuals who recognise its potential as a career path. Many students wanting to enrol at a university do not only consider the educational value a university can offer but also what it can offer in terms of advancing their sporting aspirations and their sporting careers (Burnett, 2010). High performance programmes are thus required at universities to cover a multitude of facets. These include, but are not limited to, superior facilities, high quality coaching and management staff, educational subsidies, body/health conditioning facilities as well as supportive staff for the purpose of driving and maintaining high quality sport development. University sport in the South African context includes the overall experiences of all relevant stakeholders in relation to the sport department/bureau, their personnel, activity programmes and offerings, as well as the sport-related support services provided by their institutions (Singh & Surujlal, 2006). This study focuses specifically on the high performance sport such as Rugby, Hockey, Soccer, Netball, Athletics, Rowing and Cricket offered at a comprehensive university in the Gauteng province of South Africa. A comprehensive university is characterised by: a) diversity - through the offering of a diverse range of academic programmes (vocational, career-focused, professional and general formative) of both university and technikon type, b) accessibility – through the opportunities created by a variety of entry and exit points c) Student mobility – through developing strong vertical and horizontal articulation pathways, d) responsiveness – through the development of a range of educational programmes and research foci appropriate to local, regional and national needs, and d) flexibility – through the strengthening of relationships with community,

civic, government, business, and industry partners for local and regional development (Department of Education, 2004).

Over the years the university focused greatly on improving its sporting facilities, management of its programmes and player progression within the seven high performance sports. This is in line with the university's strategy to ensure the continuous inflow of talented students so that its competitive edge in higher education can be strengthened and its students perform well on the international stage. Internationally, the trend has been one of competing at above average standards to achieve a more prominent stature within the sporting arena. It is therefore imperative that the service quality of the programmes offered to prepare athletes is of a high standard so that the desired results are achieved.

While research interest continues to increase regarding the personal and cultural benefits accruing to university students through the provision of high quality sport programmes, increased research interest has also been experienced regarding the university-wide benefits such as the positive influence on the general welfare of a university, institutional loyalty and unity, increasing revenues, increasing prestige to the institution's reputation, enhanced student applications, enrolment, fundraising and sponsorship associated with the provision of high quality sport programmes (Singh & Surujlal, 2006). Increased demands and competition, globalisation, internationalisation, commercialisation and rapid developments in technology innovation have compelled universities to devote more attention and importance to quality service and customer care. Soleymani, Ali, Tojari and Ghafouri (2012) alluded to the fact that universities globally have recognised the positive benefits and profits that have accrued from students attending sport courses.

## **2. SERVICE QUALITY**

Over the past decades service quality has become a staple of management thought and approach (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). Although the phenomenon has been extensively researched not all researchers share the same view of service quality. Some describe service quality as a comparison of performance perceptions with expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988) while others view it as a comparison of performance and ideal standards (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). There is, however, consensus that the perception of service quality is dependent on the user's judgement of the service encounter (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Sivadas &

Baker, 2000). In the context of this study service quality is defined as the difference between expected service and actual service received. It is the customer's (student-athletes and programme managers) overall impression and reflection of the service performance, service delivery systems, physical environment quality, interaction quality and overall consumption experience (Yong & Pastore, 2004; Brady & Cronin, 2001).

Marketers and researchers continuously attempt to answer basic questions regarding quality judgements made by customers, how customers evaluate service quality and what aspects of service quality are assessed (Lentell, 2000). Answers to these questions are critical to managers and researchers as such knowledge would enable them to focus their marketing efforts to areas which are important to their customers (Dhurup, Singh & Surujlal, 2006). Furthermore, such information provides guidance regarding how organisations (universities) can achieve competitive advantage and differentiation (Metha, Lalwani & Han, 2000). For service organisations (such as universities) knowledge of customer perceptions of their experience is vital. Dhurup *et al.*, (2006) posit that the service encounter in sport is complex because it often takes place over an extended period of time and is influenced by numerous factors. In the offering of high performance programmes these factors could include presentation of the programme, attitude and interaction of staff, facilities and other resources associated with the programme, and applicability of the programme.

Extant literature on service quality indicates that four characteristics, namely intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability distinguish a service from a physical product. Unlike most of the products in mainstream industry the service encounter associated with the high performance programmes in the different sports are intangible and subjective. Hence, students would look out for evidence or signs of service quality (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Furthermore, unlike goods which are first produced then sold and consumed, the high performance programmes are first sold and then produced and consumed simultaneously. Because there are several different suppliers (e.g. administrators, coaches) within the high performance programme, the quality of the service encounter may differ in terms of consistency and predictability; varying from individual to individual (Kotler, 2003). In most instances services provided through the high performance programmes cannot be stored. Hence, managers of the programme are unable to develop and keep an inventory of their services and performance for future reference (Du Plessis, Rousseau & Blem, 1995).

A participant develops a service quality perception and a level of satisfaction after the participation experience. A highly satisfied participant tends to be committed to a particular service and eventually becomes a loyal customer (Brady & Robertson, 2001). Therefore, it is important to assess customers' level of satisfaction. Dhurup *et al.*, (2006) argue that sport services do not have shelf life. Therefore it is important for high performance sport programme managers to ensure that high quality service is provided from the beginning.

### **3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Taking into account the afore-mentioned the purpose of the study was to gain constructive insights regarding the perceptions of overall service quality and satisfaction of the different member associates of the high performance sports such as Rugby, Hockey, Soccer, Netball, Athletics, Rowing and Cricket at a comprehensive university in the Gauteng province of South Africa (SA).

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Research design**

An evaluative case study utilising a concurrent mixed method approach was adopted for the study. The rationale for this approach was to triangulate the findings so that there may be mutual corroboration and greater validity (Bryman, 2006). Questionnaires were administered during the quantitative data collection phase and semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data.

#### **4.2 Sample**

Due to the large number of sports that the university offers, including recreational events, the sample was delimited to the seven High Performance Programmes (HPP) of Rugby, Hockey, Soccer, Netball, Athletics, Rowing and Cricket. One hundred and nineteen questionnaires were administered with first team players. The composition of male and female participants comprised twenty two (n=22; 11 male and 11 female) hockey players, seven (n=7; 5 male and 2 female) rowers, nine (n=9; 9 female) netball players, fourteen (n=14; 14 male) rugby players, eighteen (n=18; 11 male and 7 female) athletes, twenty five (n=25; 25 male) cricket players and twenty four (n=24; 12 male and 12 female) soccer players. For the qualitative study, seven managers (n=7) in charge of each sport, as well as

seven (n=7) captains of each team were interviewed. The majority of the respondents were in the 17-20 years year brackets (n=56; 47%) as well as 21-23 years of age bracket (n=54; 45.4%) with the age bracket of 24-26 years (n=7; 5.9%) and age bracket of 27+ years making up the minority of the sample group (n=2; 1.7%). The majority of the sample group was involved in club level sport (n=61) followed by (n=39) playing further at provincial level and (n=19) at national level.

### **4.3 Instrument and procedures**

A questionnaire comprising three sections was designed for the study. Section A requested demographic information such as gender, age and level of participation of the participants. Section B was an adapted version of Ko and Pastore's (2005) Scale of Service Quality in Recreational Sports (SSQRS) and Section C requested information regarding participants' overall satisfaction with the high performance programmes. The SSQRS consists of items representing four dimensions of service quality assessment: (1) Programme Quality; (2) Interaction Quality; (3) Outcome Quality; and (4) Physical Environment (Ko, 2000; Ko & Pastore, 2005). All items in the scale were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The first dimension of SSQRS is related to programme quality which refers to the participants' relative perception about the excellence of the programme. The range of activity programmes, operating times, and dissemination of programme information are typical of the items in this dimension. Interaction quality is the second dimension of the instrument which is the subjective perception of how the service is delivered and reflects participants' perception of the interactions which take place during the service encounter. An employee's behaviour, attitude, and expertise are typical of the items in this dimension. The third dimension is that of outcome quality which refers to the outcome of the service act and represents what participants receive from the service. Participants evaluate the outcome of the experience in terms of physical and social benefits and overall attitude toward what they actually gain through the services. Lastly, the physical environment quality has been perceived as one of the most important aspects in participants' service quality perception and service evaluation (Bitner, 1992; McDonald, Sutton & Milne, 1995; Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996). Ambience condition, facility design, and equipment are typical of the items included in this dimension. Ambience condition refers to the background characteristics of the environment

such as temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scent. Design quality is defined by both the functional and aesthetic nature of the facility. Equipment includes the devices used to enhance the sport experience. They should be in usable condition (Brady & Robertson, 2001).

With regard to the qualitative study, an interview schedule was developed. The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore, in depth, the ways in which the managers and team captains thought and felt about the services that they deliver to the students. Questions covered the different components of the Ko and Pastore's (2005) Scale of Service Quality in Recreational Sports namely, overall quality satisfaction of the sport department, the overall quality of the specific sport code, the programme quality, interaction quality, outcome quality and the interaction quality. Questions included the following: "What is your overall feelings and perceptions about the overall quality of your sport department's delivery to the student-athlete population?", "How would you describe your sport code's overall quality?", "How would you describe the programme quality in your sport?", "Interaction is important in any sport code, could you elaborate on this quality component in your sport?", "What is the main outcome or vision of in your management of your sport code?" and "What physical quality properties do you envisage for your sport code?."

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with managers in their respective offices. Captains of teams were interviewed at a venue and time that was convenient for them. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and the resulting texts analysed through the use of the qualitative software package of Atlas.ti (Mouton, 2008). In the cases where permission was not granted for tape-recording, extensive notes were pencilled and resulting texts analysed similarly. Similarly, the questionnaires were administered personally prior to the student-athletes' training slot times at their respective sporting fields. The purpose of the study was explained to the potential participants before the questionnaires were distributed. In all instances the completed questionnaires were collected before the commencement of the training session.

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

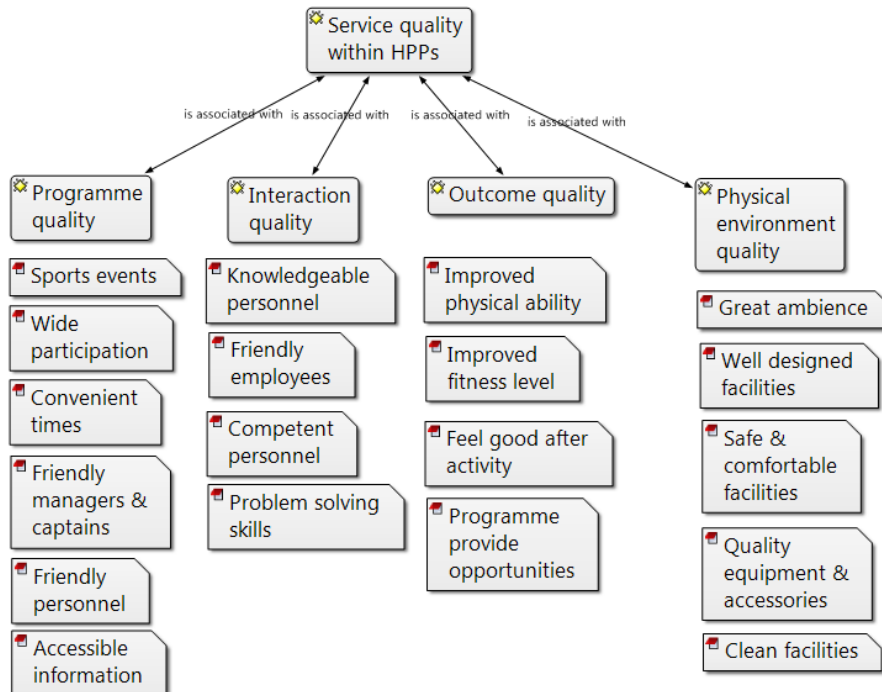
The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS – version 20) was used to analyse the quantitative data. Data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using the ATLAS.ti software package. Descriptive statistics (mean



scores, standard deviations and frequencies) were used to report on the quantitative data. Validity and reliability of the SSQRS were established through standard scale development procedures suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994).

Using the Atlas.ti program the researchers created codes, wrote memos and mapped relevant concepts graphically in the process of identifying relevant themes and subthemes for the study. Codes were based on a review of the literature and on the theoretical frameworks of Ko and Pastore’s (2005) Scale of Service Quality in Recreational Sports. Through the use of inductive reasoning, a theme or implicit topic was developed that represented the group of repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The visual maps (Atlas.ti networks) with the themes, subthemes and codes are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Themes and sub-theme of service quality of HPPs**



## 5. RESULTS

Data from one hundred and nineteen completed questionnaires (n=119) were analysed.

### 5.1 Overall Service Quality within the HPPs

With regard to overall service quality overall within the university's HPPs the outcome ( $2.78 \pm 0.1$ ) and interaction dimension ( $2.78 \pm 0.37$ ) scored high with programme ( $2.68 \pm 0.48$ ) and physical ( $2.67 \pm 0.75$ ) scoring slightly lower. The overall satisfaction experienced by the high performance athletes was that of a mean score of ( $2.66 \pm 0.18$ ).

During the interviews the following quotes support the above scores for overall quality service of the HPPs:

*'Overall observation for service quality – yes I am satisfied. We have an excellent support structure that allows players to reach their goals, put in place by the sport department.'* – Hockey

*'I don't think there is overall satisfaction. My sport has switched between coaches so often that they don't actually give the coach time to build themselves. This year, three weeks before USSA, our coach got fired.'* – Netball

### 5.2 Overall service quality dimension within the sports

Service quality represented participants' overall impressions about the services provided by the programme. The overall service quality within each sport is shown through the use of total mean scores – with the highest being 3. Netball scored the highest overall service quality with a mean of ( $2.78 \pm 0.77$ ), followed by hockey ( $2.77 \pm 0.25$ ), athletics scoring lower with ( $2.75 \pm 0.47$ ), with rugby close by on ( $2.71 \pm 0.14$ ) and cricket (2.64), rowing ( $2.57 \pm 0.7$ ) and soccer ( $2.39 \pm 0.24$ ) reporting less of an overall service quality score.

Overall service quality was reported very high in general with team captains and managers highlighting the weaknesses as such:

*'Overall service quality I am half happy about. Soccer has never been a big deal, especially the women's, but we have performed really well over the years – the women are in the highest league. If they take away women's*

*varsity football, the women won't be happy, I want to see the women celebrated more.'* – Soccer

*'Overall rowing service quality – the programme does attract, but we don't get enough depth, not based on the programme but based on finance. Programmes offered at the university, I think are in the top two, but financially a lot of athletes don't come here as we can't help everyone. A limiting factor of our programme is the amount of time rowing takes, and the university takes its rowing seriously so we train a lot compared to other universities for instance who don't train as often. They will never be as competitive as us, we are competitive so we lose that social element. – Rowing*

### **5.3 Programme quality dimension**

The programme quality dimension consists of sub dimensions such as the range of the programme, its operating times, as well as the information and the ease of contacting relevant personnel. The overall programme quality scores revealed hockey and rowing having a score of  $(2.71 \pm 0.71)$ , netball scoring the highest with  $(2.80 \pm 0.1)$ , rugby  $(2.75 \pm 0.54)$ , with athletics  $(2.62 \pm 0.22)$ , cricket  $(2.58 \pm 0.94)$  and soccer  $(2.56 \pm 0.16)$  scoring the lowest. The sub dimension of range of the programme had positive outcomes for each sport scoring above  $2.50 \pm 0.45$ . In terms of the operating times, the scores proved netball  $(3.00 \pm 0.14)$  to have a perfect programme quality dimension with athletics  $(2.89 \pm 0.32)$  scoring high, rugby  $(2.71 \pm 0.19)$ , hockey and cricket scoring equally with  $(2.68 \pm 0.11)$ , soccer  $(2.25 \pm 0.81)$  and the lowest score shown to rowing with a mean score of  $(2.14 \pm 0.58)$ . The dimension results for information being easily accessible on the university's website as well as information available on activities and events were relatively low.

Throughout the interviews, the range of programme sub dimension scores were similarly supported by interviewees. Additionally, so were the low scores for the sub dimensions of information and personnel contact accessibility.

*'I think in terms of sports people, the programmes are attractive as long as there is sufficient balance between academics and sports with reference to time schedules, achievements, and growth possibilities.'* – Soccer

*'Now that we have a different coach for the women and the men, there is a slight split and they aren't as close as they used to be. We are not socializing as much as we used to. Because our coach used to coach both teams, they were always together, the programmes were the same as well as training etc. Now we can have different times of training etc., which suits different studies etc.'* – Rowing

#### **5.4 Interaction quality dimension**

This dimension is based on the athletes' perception of how service is delivered as well as the interactions which take place during the service encounter, which entails behaviour, attitude, and expertise. The overall mean scores for the client-employee interaction and inter-client interaction were (2.83 ± 0.21) for hockey, rowing and netball scoring equally high with (2.94 ± 0.55), (2.73) soccer, (2.86 ± 0.62) rugby, (2.67 ± 0.27) for cricket, and athletics scored lowest with an overall mean score of (2.58 ± 0.13).

The overall amicable environment client-employee and inter-client interaction was equally supported through the statistics as well as the interviews with captains and team managers respectively.

*'The university ensures that there is consistent assistance by offering self-development courses or workshops to equip individuals on and off the pitch.'* – Soccer

*'I would hope that I have the skills to facilitate my role. I have grown into the skill sets required to accomplish the tasks my role demands. There are definitely times where I struggle to balance it all, but the sport managers is of great help and have never left me stranded with a problem.'* – Hockey

#### **5.5 Outcome quality dimension**

In this dimension the outcome of the service act as well what the athlete receives from the service is considered. The athlete evaluated the outcome of the experience in terms of physical (fitness and skills) and social benefits and overall attitude toward what the athlete actually gains through the services. The mean scores for the sub dimension physical fitness were all very high – hockey (2.73 ± 0.21), rowing (2.57 ± 0.25), netball (3.00 ± 0.28), soccer (2.96 ± 0.38), rugby (2.93 ± 0.44), athletics (2.78 ± 0.5) and cricket (2.80 ± 0.84).

In terms of the social interaction the athletes get from the outcome quality are as follows: hockey ( $2.77 \pm 0.25$ ), rowing ( $2.57 \pm 0.28$ ), netball ( $3.00 \pm 0.38$ ), soccer ( $2.67 \pm 0.24$ ), rugby ( $2.86 \pm 0.25$ ), athletics ( $2.78 \pm 0.62$ ) and cricket ( $2.80 \pm 0.75$ ). The overall mean scores for each sport were ( $2.83 \pm 0.21$ ) for hockey, ( $2.52 \pm 0.15$ ) for rowing, netball scored highest with a ( $2.98 \pm 0.22$ ), soccer ( $2.83 \pm 0.54$ ), rugby ( $2.80 \pm 0.68$ ), athletics ( $2.70 \pm 0.47$ ) and lastly cricket with an overall mean score of ( $2.80 \pm 0.58$ ).

The overall outcome of perceptions of quality of the different high performance programmes are highlighted through the following excerpts:

*'Yes I think the outcome quality is good. There is enough depth as the university's programmes cater for all the different aspects that each player displays and helps them to work on those aspects that in the end, will help them to perform better and at a higher level.'* – Hockey.

*'We have a club of individuals playing a team sport, there are a few that will die for each other, or for their coach. From a 1st team perspective they won't die for the coach, maybe 40% will. The first team coach and fitness/conditioning coach plan their sessions together.'* – Rugby.

## 5.6 Physical quality dimension

The physical environment has been perceived as one of the most important aspects to an athlete for the service quality perception and service evaluation. Ambience condition, facility design, and equipment are items in this category. Ambience condition refers to the background characteristics of the environment such as temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scent. Design quality is defined by both the functional and aesthetic nature of the facility. Equipment includes the devices used to enhance the sport experience.

The overall physical quality scores revealed that netball was the highest ( $2.85 \pm 0.21$ ) followed by hockey ( $2.79 \pm 0.33$ ), cricket ( $2.73 \pm 0.27$ ), athletics ( $2.71 \pm 0.37$ ) and rugby ( $2.68 \pm 0.37$ ). The lowest in the physical quality dimension was scored by soccer ( $2.47 \pm 0.41$ ) and rowing ( $2.45 \pm 0.41$ ).

Possible reasons for the low scores for soccer and rowing were highlighted in the comments that were derived from the interviews with team captains and managers. Similarly, reasons for the good scores in netball and hockey are also highlighted in the following excerpts:

*'Our gym facilities – high performance definitely we have the best in the country. In terms of equipment we share everything which doesn't help as the urgos get broken or damaged. The facilities on campus are good. If you look at our boats we are a good 3 or 4 years behind. The money we get given as a rowing club is a lot more than any other rowing club, but boat wise we have a bigger fleet, but other universities are buying new boats.'* – Rowing

*Against top 3 –We are up there. We could do with a facility branch out – meaning a 2<sup>nd</sup> turf for commercial uses. Other varsities have 2 turfs. Our current turf is doing well, but top management needs to be questioned as we could make more use of it. Allowing people to train more, early mornings, off academic times, freeing up evening times – allowing more juniors for recruitment. Making it more competitive – having gym there etc.'* - Hockey

## **5.7 Discussion**

The mean score for the dimension programme quality of university sport was (2.68 ± 0.48), with soccer, athletics and cricket scoring the lowest. The results suggest that members' evaluation of operating time and information were relatively low compared to their perception of the range of programme, suggesting that managers of the programme should focus their attention more on operating time and information delivery system. Managers, therefore, need to investigate operating times as well as practice and match times to suit the individuals more, and most importantly the information that is available via the university sport website needs to be updated on a regular basis indicating new activities and events to please all athletes. According to Singh and Surujlal (2006) as increased demands and competition, internationalisation, commercialisation and rapid developments in technology innovation have compelled universities to devote more attention and importance to quality service and customer care. Furthermore, the marketing department in the Sports Bureau may be encouraged to use more aggressive advertising and effective information delivery systems for the university community as this is particularly important because it may reduce the time an individual spends researching for information regarding events and programmes (Lentell, 2000).

Secondly, the overall mean score for the interaction quality dimension was (2.79 ± 0.12), with cricket and athletics being the lowest scores. The moderately high

mean scores indicate that current university sport department staff display a proper attitude toward their customers and expertise in their jobs which is a resultant of perception of service quality dependent on the user's judgement of the service encountered according to Sivadas and Baker (2000). Also, the staff associated with the respective sports appeared to react to the customers' questions and problems promptly creating a positive customer's perception of the interaction with other participants which are regarded as signs of service quality from a student's perspective posited by Zeithaml and Bitner (2000). The rest of the sports had very high mean scores, indicating that majority of the high performance athletes are happy with the respective personnel of the different HPPs. Approaching the relevant staff when help is needed and the belief that the personnel are competent in their relative positions are just some of the areas that are imperative for service quality of the programme offered to athletes so that the desired results are achieved (Brady & Robertson, 2001). Contrary to the aforementioned, the two sports that scored a low mean score were those of athletics and cricket, which highlights Kotler's (2003) findings where quality of a service encountered, may differ in terms of consistency and predictability, varying from individual to individual.

The overall mean score for the outcome dimension was that of  $(2.78 \pm 0.22)$ , with the lowest score being rowing. This indicates that the programme may help participants accomplish their goals and objectives from a sporting perspective and has helped create bonds within the teams, although, the rowers felt in terms of social interaction and participating times and what they gain from practices could improve highlighting Brady and Robertson's (2001) idea of participants developing a service quality perception and level of satisfaction after the participation experience. Perhaps management for rowing could look into changing one team practice slot into a team building event or discussion session to keep the athletes rewarded and content outlining Brady and Robertson (2001)'s findings of highly satisfied participants tended to commit to a particular university/sport, when they were rewarded and content which eventually led to sport loyalty.

The mean score for the sub-dimension of physical environment quality was  $(2.67 \pm 0.2)$ . The results indicate that athletes have relatively high perceptions of quality regarding the physical environment of the programme, except for rowing and soccer scoring the lowest scores. With this information managers can plan to provide a better workout environment for athletes as knowledge of the

customer/student-athlete perceptions of their experience is vital (Dhurup *et al.*, 2006). Minor and major renovations of the facility were recommended to improve design and atmosphere of the facility, as well as simply replacing equipment and having more thereof.

Lastly, the results of the survey indicate that overall ratings of service quality were moderately high. Specifically, participants in this study indicated, on average, higher levels of perception about the interaction, outcome and fitness and skill improvement outcomes than they did about the physical environment and the programme quality outcomes ( $2.66 \pm 0.35$ ) The level of customer satisfaction is expected to increase when facility design and ambience are improved and old equipment is replaced with up-to-date equipment which is in line with Yong and Pastore (2004) whom posited that service delivery systems are essential for the overall impression and consumption experience. Offering special events, group activities and a personalised service delivery system may increase a sense of belonging among individuals. This may ultimately increase overall participant satisfaction with the sporting programmes which resonates with Grönroos (1992) who outlines that the nature of competition is such that continual and sustainable development is essential for a successful association.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Perceptions of service quality play a significant role in one's assessment of a programme. In this study athletes perceived an overall moderate to high level of service quality and satisfaction from the HPPs that the university offers. This suggests that while there is still room for improvement, the offerings are of an acceptable standard to help the university to attract talented athletes. The study also provided useful pointers to redesign and improve programme service quality so that a higher level of satisfaction is experienced by athletes. These positive outcomes may assist in enhancing the competitive edge of the university's sport department.

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