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EXCELLENCE IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING THROUGH SELF-ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Technikon of Southern Africa has recently been involved in a series of in-house evaluative research projects. The majority of these projects are aimed at improving institutional excellence in its pursuit to satisfy its customers, its internal human resources (staff) and other stakeholders, including the government.

Part of Technikon SA's evaluation processes included "*The Corporate Stakeholder Survey*" which focused on the *perceptions of suppliers and partners*, "*The Employee Satisfaction Index*" (ESI), which looked at *the internal people management and people satisfaction* and "*The Evaluation Of Postgraduate Research Supervision*", which examined *customer satisfaction*. This paper presents the findings of two research projects, i.e., postgraduate research supervision and the corporate stakeholder survey. The South African Excellence Model (SAEM) has been adopted as a referral and a point of departure for evaluation purposes.

It is apparent from the findings of these two studies that Technikon SA is making steps in the right direction. However, to become a world-class institution, a great deal of hard work remains to be done.

EXCELLENCE IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING THROUGH SELF-ASSESSMENT

BACKGROUND

In its pursuit of excellence, Technikon SA has commissioned the Institutional Review Panel (IRP) to conduct an institutional review of the Technikon, based on stipulated terms of reference. These terms of reference focus on aligning Technikon SA to meet the demands of its huge and diverse market without compromising quality. Changing legislation, government policy requirements, advances in technology as well as the ever-changing needs of the Technikon's customers have added impetus to this initiative. The Technikon is therefore currently assessing itself in order to benchmark the quality of its services and products in the interest of all its stakeholders. In order to determine the satisfaction of all the stakeholders, the institution engaged itself in assessing the satisfaction of customers and corporate stakeholders.

The direction of the institution is of primary importance and is largely determined by the corporate stakeholders. For this reason, a corporate stakeholder survey had to be conducted in order to ascertain their perceptions about the role that the Technikon plays in higher education in Southern Africa (Zwane & Mavundla, 1999:2).

As part of customer satisfaction, Technikon SA has to evaluate the research supervision it provides to its postgraduate learners at all times. Since 1995 Technikon SA has been offering postgraduate degrees at Masters and Doctoral levels. The degree-awarding status of Technikon SA brings it in line with all other South African universities and as a result, the institution attains its credibility through developing a sound research and postgraduate learner base (Netswera, 1999:1).

To improve the quality of our postgraduate research supervision as well as to maintain a positive perception of the institution by its corporate stakeholders, continuous self-assessments could help to outline the requirements of a sustained quality distance education service by Technikon SA. The adopted excellence improvement model, known as the South African Excellence Model (SAEM), is discussed briefly.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXCELLENCE MODEL (SAEM)

The South African Excellence Model has been used to underpin the framework of these studies. The SAEM was developed by the South African Excellence Foundation (SAEF), formerly the South African Business Excellence Foundation (SABEF). The model was developed in 1997 through joint consultations between the following organisations; Amalgamated Banks of South Africa (ABSA), Armaments Corporation of South Africa (ArmcorSA), Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), South African Society of Quality, Benz South Africa, and so on (SABEF, 1998) through the facilitation of the South African Quality Institute (SAQI). It was designed and developed based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards (United States of America) and the European Foundation for Quality Management (Europe). The model aims at achieving good results through the involvement and consultation with customers, management, employees, stakeholders, and so on, in improving processes in any organisation (Kopke, 1998:3).

The model enables an organisation to:

- assess its performance objectively against a number of internationally recognised criteria
- identify the strengths of the organisation
- single out areas for improvement
- set improvement plans in action
- prepare an application for the SAEF Award as a bonus

The SAEF model comprises eleven elements that can be used to assess an organisation's progress towards **business excellence**. The first six criteria are referred to as **enablers** and the second five as **results**. Enablers are concerned with how things get done, whereas results are concerned with what is achieved (outcome). The model is dynamic rather than static.

According to this model, the enabling roles of the leading indicators are acknowledged, whereas as far as the results are concerned, the objective is to satisfy the customers, employees, suppliers and partners as well as society at large. The total weight of all the eleven criteria of the model equals 1000. **Customer focus** weighs 23 per cent of the total score, making it the most important criteria.

PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to describe self-assessment initiatives being conducted by Technikon SA in pursuit of excellence in distance education.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In order to ensure a clear understanding of the overall purpose of this paper, research objectives are distinctly outlined in two phases in the following manner:

Objectives of phase I: The postgraduate research supervision survey

The objectives of this survey were as follows:

- To determine the demographic profile of learners who are registered for the M Tech and D Tech degrees at Technikon SA
- To determine the learners' satisfaction with regard to guidance and feedback received from the Technikon's supervisors
- To determine the learners' access to supporting materials such as policy guidelines, information on funding, etc.

Objectives of phase II: The corporate stakeholders' survey

The objective of this survey was as follows:

- To determine the perceptions of Technikon SA's corporate stakeholders with regard to the effectiveness and efficacy of the Technikon's role in higher education in South Africa (and indeed Southern Africa)
- To make recommendations that inform strategic and tactical operational plans to the management of Technikon SA, based on the findings of the study

RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive quantitative survey was conducted for the purposes of phase I. Phase II used a qualitative research design, which was explorative, descriptive and contextual.

Research method used in phase I

For the purpose of fieldwork, a questionnaire was developed and mailed to all Technikon SA postgraduate learners registered in 1996, 1997 and 1998, a total of 358 learners. Checks for reliability and validity of the questionnaire are illustrated below:

Validity and reliability

- Content validity was ensured through the use of literature information.
- The tool was given to peer researchers for checks against biases, double barrelling and relevance, and was found to be appropriate for the purposes for which it was intended.
- The findings of this study are not generalised because of the small number of respondents who participated.

A total of 31 questionnaires, which constitute a return rate of 9 per cent, were returned. Although this response rate does not constitute a representative sample, certain important trends and patterns are indicated by the findings.

Data analysis

Data analysis was done using SPSS, a social science statistical data analysis computer program. The type of data analysis done comprised descriptive statistical techniques, such as frequency distributions, percentages and measures of central tendencies.

Research method used in phase II

In order to achieve the objective of phase II, a purposive sampling method was employed in identifying the corporate stakeholders who would participate in the study. They included representatives of:

- other higher education institutions
- suppliers, e.g. Integrated Tertiary Software (ITS)
- customers, e.g. the South African Police Services (SAPS)
- the Coalition for Open Learning Institutions of Southern Africa (COLISA)
- National Science Councils (NSC)
- the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC)
- South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) and
- the National Department of Education and Training (DET)

The number of participants could not be determined at the outset of the study, as this depended on the saturation of data (Morse, 1998:385). Data was gathered by conducting semi-structured individual interviews with the participants, which were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews were conducted by two qualitative researchers. Qualitative research relies heavily on inductive reasoning. Therefore, in this study, the spontaneous descriptions of the respondents rather than parameters deductively constructed by the researchers provide the empirical field findings.

Data analysis

Tesch's method of descriptive data analysis was followed (Cresswell, 1994:155). An independent coder was used to triangulate the data analysis and coding. To ensure rigour of the whole research process, a model of trustworthiness was employed. Table 1 shows how this model was applied in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1990:280).

Table 1
Measures for ensuring trustworthiness

STRATEGY	CRITERIA	APPLICABILITY
Credibility	Prolonged engagement	The researchers spent three years in the clinical field where research was conducted, prepared 3-4 months for the fieldwork, and also kept field notes.
	Reflexivity	A field journal was used to reflect the behaviours and experience of the researchers. Consensus discussions were held with the independent coder.
	Triangulation	Both in-depth individual interviews and field notes were used as methods of data collection. A combination of qualitative research design, which is explorative, descriptive and contextual, was used.
	Member-checking	Research findings were continuously checked with the participants.
	Peer examination	An independent expert coded the data.
	Structural coherence	The focus was on the perception of Technikon SA as a major role-player in higher education in South Africa. The structure of the findings was guided by the format of the SAEM model.
	Researchers' authority	Researchers are experienced in qualitative research, serve as consultants and hold doctoral degrees.
Transferability	Nominate sample	A purposive sample was used in identifying corporate stakeholders.
	Dense description	A comprehensive description of research was done, including verbatim, illustrative quotes.
Dependability	Dependability audit	A <i>data analysis protocol</i> was developed, and the independent expert was used to code the data.
	Dense description	As discussed in transferability
	Code-recode procedure	A consensus discussion between the two researchers and an independent coder was held to confirm themes and categories.
Conformability	Conformity audit	An audit was done by an independent expert researcher.

RESULTS

This paper briefly presents the findings of the two research projects separately. Phase I presents the results of the postgraduate research supervision survey, and Phase II the results of the corporate stakeholders survey respectively.

Results of phase I

The biographical details of respondents

The findings of this study indicated that the majority of respondents are males, and most respondents are aged between 35 and 44 years. The majority of respondents are registered in the faculty of Business Management, and the majority of respondents are enrolled for a coursework Masters programme. Since 1998 Technikon SA has introduced three registration cycles, the first registration cycle in January, the second in May, and the third in September. During the study's fieldwork the first registration cycle of 1999 only had been completed. Table 2 below provides a summary of the overall profile of respondents.

Table 2
Respondents' biographical details

Gender	<i>Male</i>				<i>Female</i>	
	<i>F</i>		<i>P</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
	25		81%		6	19%
Age	<i>25-34 years</i>		<i>35-44 years</i>		<i>45 years +</i>	
	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
	7	23%	17	54%	7	23%
Academic divisions and programme groups					<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
	Business management				11	40.7%
	Correctional services				1	3.4%
	Education				6	22.2%
	Human Resources Management				1	3.7%
	Logistics Management				1	3.7%
Public Management				7	25.9%	
Degrees enrolled for					<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
	Masters (coursework)				20	64.5%
	Masters (dissertation)				10	32.3%
D Tech (PhD)				1	3.2%	
Year registered					<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
	1996				3	9.7%
	1997				13	41.59%
	1998				13	41.9%
1999 (<i>first registration cycle</i>)				2	6.5%	
Totals						100%

It became apparent that some respondents who were registered in 1996 are still at their proposal development stages. A few of the respondents who registered in 1997 are at the data-analysis and report-writing stages, whereas others have decided to discontinue their studies. The results of table 3 indicate that a few respondents have maintained a good pace of research and are now at the report-writing stage.

Table 3
Progression with study

<i>Research stage</i>	<i>Year of registration</i>							
	<i>1996</i>		<i>1997</i>		<i>1998</i>		<i>1999</i>	
	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Problem identification	3	9.7%	2	6.5%			1	3.2%
Proposal development			5	16.1%	4	12.9%	1	3.2%
Literature review					2	6.5%		
Data collection					1	3.2%		
Data analysis			1	3.2%				
Writing of the final report/results			3	9.6%	4	12.9%		
Discontinued studies			2	6.5%	2	6.5%		
TOTAL	3	9.7%	13	41.9%	13	41.9%	2	6.5%

The majority of respondents have made appointments with their supervisors during their studies, and most of those have indicated that their supervisors did not keep to agreed appointments, neither rescheduling nor informing learners about the cancellation of appointments. The majority of respondents are dissatisfied with the time-frames between the handing in of work and receiving comments. Table 4 summarises these findings.

Table 4
Accessibility of supervisors (total percentage of respondents in each case)

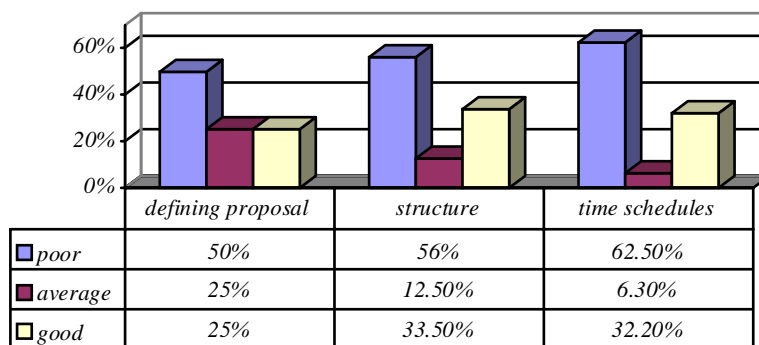
	YES		NO	
	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Made appointments with supervisors	21	64.7%	10	35.3%
Supervisor kept to appointments	11	35.7%	20	64.3%
Rescheduling of appointments	24	77.8%	7	22.2%
Learner informed of appointment rescheduling	23	71.4%	8	28.6%
Satisfaction with time-frames between handing in work and receiving comments	9	30%	22	70%

Evaluation of the guidance and feedback received from supervisors

The evaluation of guidance that learners received from supervisors had been presented in a Likert scale format in the questionnaire, and a rating was given for each of the six identified research stages from writing the proposal to writing the report, indicated in figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1
Guidance received from supervisors

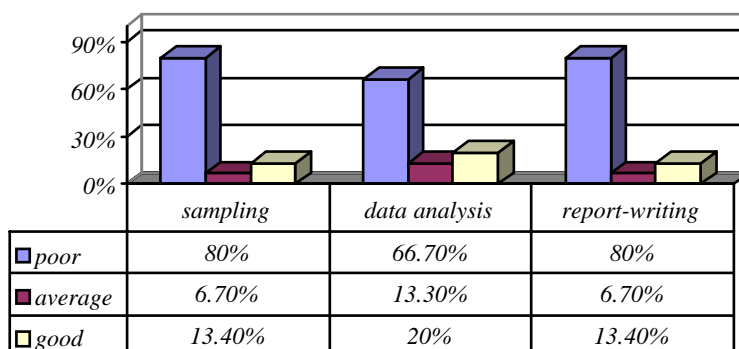
- *Guidance in defining research proposal*
- *Guidance with the structure of the research study*
- *Guidance in developing an appropriate time schedule for the study*



The findings of figure 1 show dissatisfaction by the majority of respondents with the guidance received from supervisors on writing the research proposal, structuring the study and in developing appropriate time schedules. The above findings are supported by the evidence of table 3 where some respondents are still in their proposal-development stage even after three years of registration. The results of figure 2 show poor ratings by more than two third of respondents on the guidance received from supervisors on the methodological stage of their studies, sampling and data analysis. The majority of respondents indicated an overall poor rating of guidance.

FIGURE 2
Guidance received from supervisors...continued

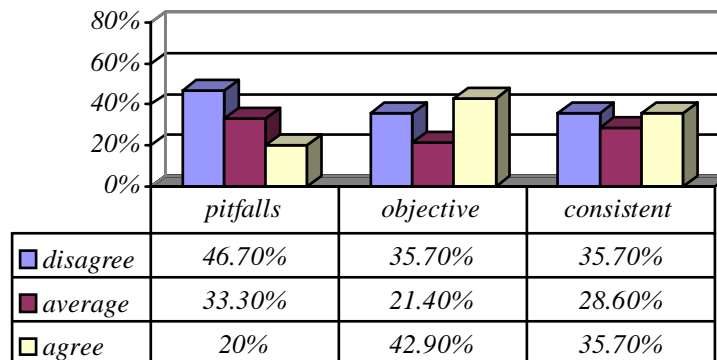
- *Guidance in drawing a sample*
- *Guidance with data analysis*
- *Guidance in writing the research report*



Most respondents rated the feedback received from supervisors to be fairly objective and consistent. However, nearly half of the respondents felt that their supervisors could not easily identify their pitfalls as indicated in figure 3.

Figure 3
Feedback received from supervisors

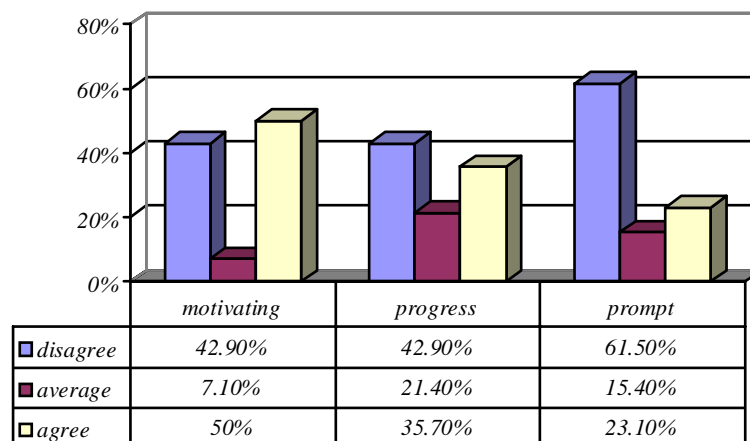
- *The promoter identified my pitfalls (gaps, shortcomings, etc.)*
- *He/she is objective (not biased)*
- *He/she is consistent (does not change feedback given previously)*



Half of the respondents felt that their supervisors give them motivating feedback, but for most respondents feedback given does not always indicate progress. Table 4 shows that for the majority feedback is not at all prompt.

Figure 4
Feedback received from the supervisors...continued

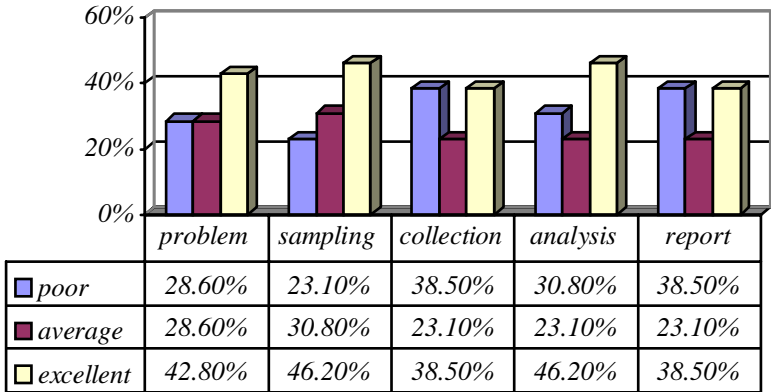
- *Encouraging/motivating feedback*
- *Feedback given always indicates progress*
- *Feedback received always prompt (on time, as agreed)*



The majority of supervisors are rated to have average to excellent knowledge of most of the research stages as given in figure 5.

Figure 5
Supervisor’s knowledge

- *Problem identification*
- *Sampling*
- *Data collection*
- *Data analysis*
- *Report-writing/results*



RESULTS OF PHASE II

The results of the corporate stakeholders survey is summarised into two themes, namely the positive perceptions that indicate the institution’s effectiveness and the negative perceptions, or concerns, which indicate the institution’s weaknesses /areas for improvement, indicated in table 5 below.

Table 5
Summary of findings for phase II

Positive perceptions: more effective	Negative perceptions (concerns) : less effective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Useful medium in higher education ● Flexibility/decentralisation ● Co-operation and collaboration ● Crisis intervener/problem solver ● Expertise/leadership ● Commitment ● Assertiveness/openness ● Financial advantage/benefit ● Community-oriented programmes ● Good administration and marketing ● Improved library services ● Growth and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Poor quality of programmes ● Unreliable learner evaluation strategies ● Problematic service delivery ● Publicising staff salaries ● Unsatisfactory communication ● Flawed systems, processes and procedures ● Lack of a culture of research

POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS

The following discussion addresses positive categories revealed by corporate stakeholders about Technikon SA.

Useful medium in higher education

A popular notion amongst the corporate stakeholders is that because Technikon SA is a distance-learning institution, it provides a useful medium for extending education to as many students as possible, who would not otherwise be able to attend a residential university or Technikon. In other words, it brings education to the people.

“...Technikon SA is covering an area of the country where very few other Technikon can reach...”, “...They are bringing higher education to people in rural areas, in outlying areas where nobody else can reach. They are also er...er... attempting to provide the service on a good level...”, “...We think that Technikon SA has such a major role to play and it is playing that major role; it is accommodating the largest number of students of any Technikon in South Africa by far...”, “...So I feel that Technikon SA has played an important role in education in an area for people who would otherwise not have the opportunity to get that...”

Flexibility/decentralisation

Participants do not view Technikon SA as a correspondence institution since it has decentralised the provision of its services, but as a flexible learning institution.

“...and I think they have been very keen to portray themselves not as a correspondence institution, but as a distance or flexible mode institutional delivery, whatever that means.”, “In other words it is not going to be the same wherever you find it, they will respond to the situation in context as they find it...”, “The Technikon has over the yen years that we’ve been involved with them, shown flexibility; and here I want to congratulate the Technikon that they have shown the flexibility.” “The most successful student support and regional support initiative that we have at the moment is our initiative in Nelspruit.”

Co-operation and collaboration

The perception that Technikon SA is willing to co-operate and collaborate with other institutions of higher learning (especially distance education institutions) augurs well for the Technikon. It is seen as the driving force behind the COLISA initiative.

“...Premier of the Mpumalanga Province is of the opinion that something should be done about higher education in Mpumalanga. The Premier’s commitment to changes in higher education afforded us the opportunity to develop a pilot project, which has become the norm for regional co- operation amongst the COLISA partners. It certainly does appear as if Technikon SA in the regions has developed a reputation for participation with other regional institutions, which seems to be quite positive.”

“But the Technikon has been the driving force behind COLISA in the past two years and from my perspective, most successfully so, whenever they decided that they want to be involved in an initiative, that initiative flourished.

“Another example is the joint examination venture, which, although UNISA staff members are doing the work at the moment, the drive behind the thing, the development of the idea came from people at Technikon SA,...hm... who just kept on working at the idea, involving the other people, and we are now developing the idea of having joint examination with the three institutions initially run by a unit.”

Crisis intervener/problem solver

Technikon SA is viewed as being able to monitor potentially problematic situations, solving its own problems and also assisting in managing crises whenever these arise.

“We can enrol students and we can send out study material - that was a problem some time ago. But we... the Technikon itself monitored that and they are very happy that students are enrolled and receive their study material and that; and that happens very effectively.”

“...and whenever we have indicated shortcomings, the Technikon has attempted...made serious attempts to improve on the shortcomings that we have pointed out; and for that, we are very pleased and we want to congratulate the Technikon.

“Another example is on the technology side where VISTA university lost the services of the head of its computer department and they had some difficulties of getting sufficient staff to keep their show running properly, that is, their computer services running properly to their seven campuses and to the VUDEC distance education campus. Technikon SA immediately stepped in and said, ‘*We’ve got the same systems as you have. We can do some of the work for you; we can run your show for you*’.”

Expertise/leadership

In more ways than one, Technikon SA is seen as leading the pack when compared with other higher education providers, especially in the provision of human resources and physical facilities.

“They are the driving force behind COLISA.”, “Technikon SA has taken the lead which works marvellously and serves as an example about collaboration now in the Kimberley regional office, which we are launching on the ninth of April, again from the offices of Technikon SA.”, “Your Technikon is moving in the direction of becoming a university of technology.”, “They take the leadership in terms of police training.”

Commitment

When Technikon SA sets out to do something, it commits itself entirely to it, as some stakeholders observed. It demonstrates commitment in all its initiatives and those of its partners.

“Also, if you look at the commitment of board members when we have board meetings, it’s very impressive.”

Assertiveness/openness

Most stakeholders commended Technikon SA for its openess and assertiveness (behaviour directed toward claiming one’s rights without denying the rights of others) in approaching issues. They observed that some of Technikon SA’s partners in distance education have been dragging their feet in participating in some joint ventures. Because of difficulties unknown to Technikon SA, some of the partners failed to participate, thus inviting a firm stance from Technikon SA.

“...Technikon SA isn’t afraid to state its case and urge its colleagues to participate.” “Ja...ja...er...the last thing I want to say at this stage is that er...if you look at the openess of the Technikon – the real concern is of providing a service that the client needs; I’m impressed with that.”

“The people are really open...they were very open and accepting to whatever we suggested.”

Financial advantage

Some of the corporate stakeholders felt that Technikon SA is economically more accessible compared with other institutions of higher learning in terms of its fee structure. Besides, learners are able to study and earn a living at the same time.

“Secondly I feel that Technikon SA has actually been useful in a sense that it is cheaper – people who are working, who don’t have the money or couldn’t be able to access education in time.”

Community-oriented programmes

In certain specific areas, Technikon SA is seen to be relevant in that it focuses on niche markets, based on the needs of the local communities it serves.

“But certainly some of the most useful programmes that I think Technikon SA has run, have been those that actually help society to work, e.g. the special programme for police and other non-formal programmes.”

Good administration and marketing

An apparent contradiction prevails amongst the various corporate stakeholders as some experience Technikon SA’s administration and marketing as good, whilst others have experienced its systems, processes and procedures as flawed.

“Whenever I have a query I know who to speak to in your organisation and it gets solved. If it does not get solved, I would know who is the one up higher to speak to.”

“I have met a number of people in your organisation and I’ve been very impressed with the quality of those people...with the way they’ve handled things very well; that impressed me.”

“Er....., obviously with the enrolment goes the statements, that is, out to the students. That happens...the tasks are marked and recorded, and the students can write the exam and er...a lot of those processes happen very effectively and smoothly.”

“TSA was an inward-looking, small institution that dealt with police training; I think it’s certainly...it has certainly been put on the national and international map by the new staff.”

“I think TSA has done quite a bit of er...quite a bit of marketing.”

Improved library services

A laudable aspect in the findings is that library services at Technikon SA have changed for the better - for both students and staff.

“...the library at TSA (main campus) was a library only for use by staff; that ...I think that has changed.”

“But they have made serious attempts in improving their library services.”

Growth and development

It is the view of the majority of the corporate stakeholders that Technikon SA has developed and grown from strength to strength. It has moved from being a police training institution only to offering a wide range of programmes.

“Technikon SA currently qualifies the largest number of students per year in the country, compared to any other Technikon.”

“I knew Technikon SA before the present principal and I know the TSA after this principal... and there is a very distinct difference between the two. The principal has brought about some positive changes in terms of the recruitment policies of the institution and so on.”

“I think that last year in June, Technikon SA held an international conference at Sun City on crime prevention and so on. That conference has done a lot for international recognition of technikons. So I think there has been significant advances made by the TSA the last five years.”

One thing for certain is that a favourable general impression (save for a discussion of the identified concerns that follow below) has been created in the minds of Technikon SA’s corporate stakeholders. As to how long such an impression will last is another question, given all the daunting challenges that have been identified in the survey with a view to making Technikon SA a world-class institution in the face of fierce competition and technological advances.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

Although corporate stakeholders are convinced that Technikon SA is moving in the right direction with its developments, there are some concerns raised regarding its weaknesses, or rather, areas for improvement (AFI). The following are areas in which Technikon SA was rated as less effective:

Poor quality of programmes

Participants revealed that there was a problem with the maintenance of quality in some programmes offered by the Technikon. They cited fields like engineering as examples in this regard. They felt it was difficult for a distance-learning institution to provide adequate practice to students, especially in the field of the natural sciences. They also pointed out experiential learning, which they felt was not adequately monitored, administered and assessed.

“...Centres were not necessarily very well resourced nor were there seemingly adequate resources available for tutoring...”, ...Are students starting to get better service with regard to student support, learner support...”

Unreliable learner evaluation strategies

Participants also commented about inadequate and inappropriate evaluation strategies. They were of the opinion that assessment strategies are not reliable, hence compromising accountability on the part of the students with regard to doing/completing assignments.

“...There are too few assignments...”, “There is also too little control over whether the work done by a student is really the student’s own work...”, “...The Technikon should look very carefully at the proportion of the yearmark and how much that weighs in relation to the examination mark...”

Problematic service delivery

Participants were of the opinion that service delivery is problematic at Technikon SA as a result of inadequate information given by students in the poorly completed registration forms. As a result, it became very difficult, if not impossible, for the suppliers to trace students’ places of abode in order to deliver study material.

“...that if you send something to a street address and there’s no provision for delivery in that particular area, except for postal box addresses, we send it back to you immediately...”

“What happens is, you pay for us to deliver, the address is invalid...”

Publicising staff salaries

Corporate stakeholders were divided on this issue, making it controversial in a sense. A few were dissatisfied with the publicising of staff salaries by Technikon SA when posts are advertised in the media. This, they asserted, tends to give Technikon SA an “unfair” advantage/mileage over other institutions, especially the historically disadvantaged institutions. Technikon SA is, after all, not necessarily unique, they observed.

“I know that what did cause some excitement in the academic world is the...er...er...the salaries that TSA advertised; you know when they advertise a position, they advertise salaries as well and...”

“...it was an eye-opener for many of us. I don’t know whether that was...er...I understand the competition of the market and all those sort of things, but I think that may have been a negative issue.”

...I think TSA is dealing with a lot of the difficulties that all of us are dealing with. I don’t think there’s anything sort of unique to TSA.”

Unsatisfactory communication

It also became clear that there is poor internal communication at Technikon SA. Respondents revealed that the Technikon failed to think through relevant processes and procedures before implementing them. The participants doubted the internal communication system of the Technikon.

“...I don’t want to concentrate on shortcomings only, but let me put one more to you, and that is the relationship between the academic staff at the main campus and the staff at the regional directorates...very closer communication would be valuable...”, “...er... and we find often that the internal communication, is not up to standard...”

Flawed systems, processes and procedures

Participants also verbalised dissatisfaction with the way systems and processes were planned and implemented in the institution.

“...Uh, it is whole process that must be evaluated and implemented, um, and those processes are not always thought through properly. Before implementation starts...”

“...Before implementation starts. And it is communicated to the user community without...without gearing the internal procedures to support the decision...”

“...You made use of the personnel system. Because our systems are integrated you cannot run the salary system without the personnel system...”

LACK OF A CULTURE OF RESEARCH

In terms of research, corporate stakeholders were dissatisfied with the way research is handled at the Technikon. They cited three areas of concern, namely lack of interest in research, lack of clear research structure, and lack of research support.

Lack of interest in research

The changing policy of higher education in South Africa leads to high expectations in terms of research. The findings of this study revealed that few people show interest in research and that there is poor communication about research issues. As a result, corporate stakeholders felt research is not part of a culture in terms of the natural sciences.

“...There has to be a visible commitment from top management. That it is, uh, that research becomes part of the agenda. Part of the mission...”

“...We requested that they bring other people who could be involved and they, nobody, either showed...”

Lack of clear research structure

Apart from a lack of interest in research, participants revealed that there was a vacuum in Technikon SA's research structure. This alone resulted in a number of problems, such as poor response time by Technikon SA, irregular and erratic meetings, and disappointing TSA turnout at meetings.

“...There seems to be a bit of a vacuum in terms of um of a structure...”

“...Because we heard incidentally that there had been a change in structure. We weren't informed and told “we are changing things”. It means next time contact so and so or contact so and so...”

“...I must say that those that have a definite person who is dedicated top driving research, in the Technikon. Make a difference...”

Lack of research support

As a result of the vacuum in the research structure, the institution does not support research initiatives. The commitment of Technikon SA, especially its leadership, to research is questionable.

“...TSA not involving staff in research...”

“...TSA relationship with Foundation of Research and Development (FRD) very poor...”

RECOMMENDATIONS

It became clear from the findings that Technikon SA is also facing a number of daunting challenges. These challenges are not discussed in detail in this report as they are closely linked and flow directly from some of the negative perceptions that have already been described.

Establishing and maintaining closer student-lecturer interaction

The major component of student/lecturer interaction when referring to distance education should also be contact. Laboratory work should be done properly; laboratory work should not just be demonstrations to students, but students should get hands-on experience.

Developing and sustaining research

Because of a poor culture of research within Technikon SA, a well-developed programme of research should be established. Faculties like the natural sciences and engineering, which currently do not have postgraduate research programmes, should re-align their research focus.

Follow-up, in-depth qualitative studies should be conducted on the following two themes. The first study or theme would gather opinions to clarify the following issues concerning learners:

- Reasons why some learners have decided to discontinue their studies
- Reasons why the majority of respondents seem not to be progressing from the proposal development stage
- Reasons given by the majority of supervisors for not keeping to their appointments with learners
- Reasons that lead to dissatisfaction by the majority of respondents with time-frames between the handing in of work and receiving feedback/comments
- Reasons why the majority of learners would not recommend their friends and colleagues to their present supervisors

The second study or theme would address perceptions or opinions of supervisors concerning the reasons as to why the majority of supervisors received poor ratings by learners in terms of supervision in the following areas:

- Guidance in developing time schedules
- Drawing of samples for the study
- Data analysis
- Report-writing/results
- Giving prompt feedback
- Reasons why the majority of learners were not provided with the following information:
 - Research policies guiding Technikon SA's M Tech degrees
 - Possible research grants

Granting more autonomy to regions

The regional directorate system should be improved and expanded not only in numbers, but also in the activities that go on in those regions. The regions can play a much bigger role in bringing education to the outlying area. The Technikon's regional branches have got a major role to play in terms of contributing towards developing and sustaining provincial commerce and industry.

Adopting a global stance

Under the current circumstances, no institution can survive without being an international player and, more so, being globally competitive. It becomes difficult for residential institutions to go beyond a certain radius. Therefore, Technikon SA has an advantage in that no distance separates it from its constituency or the student that it wants to target.

Addressing the ability of Technikon SA to meet the practical requirements of some courses

The institution does not see fit to provide certain courses at the moment, courses like engineering and natural sciences that require extensive laboratory settings and practical work. The Technikon's target market at the moment is learners within other social disciplines other than engineering and natural sciences. There is a need therefore for the Technikon to redefine its target market in order to accommodate learners from all spectrums.

Improving communication strategies

Much closer communication within the institution would be valuable. The regional directors and their staff should have access to easier communication with staff at the main campus. Close liaison is also of great importance between the institution and the commerce in the regions in order to address the needs properly.

Maintaining quality of services and products

It is important that the Technikon closely guard the quality of its work to ensure employee and customer satisfaction. Since the environment within which the institution operates is dynamic, things can only improve if there is flexibility to adapt to changes.

CONCLUSION

The fact that more positive themes than negative ones emerged out of these studies should not give Technikon SA a false, delusional sense of winning the battle of excellence. South African customers of this era are now, more than ever before, highly sensitised and aware of their rights pertaining to service and products. Therefore, Technikon SA should do all in its might to ensure that the positive themes identified by corporate stakeholders are sustained, and the negative ones as well as the challenges are vigorously addressed with the commitment and the urgency they deserve.

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