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UNIVERSITIES AS SYSTEMS: EXPLORING THE LECTURERS' EXPERIENCE

Abstract:

South African higher education institutions are faced with a number of challenges (Mushemeza, 2016), and as an important role player and service provider in society (PwC, 2013), higher education institutions should be enabled to respond proactively to societal needs and changes. Systems theory dictates that organisations (including higher education institutions) need to understand that they function within a system, and that all the areas within this system are interrelated and should work in synergy (Ingram, 2018). Mofokeng (2002:69) specifically argues for the importance of the role of the lecturer within higher education institutions, because they serve as important service providers in a people-intensive system. As an initial step towards understanding how universities can become more responsive to changing needs, this paper takes a systems perspective of a university. It opens with a focus on one unit: the role of the lecturer as an important service provider in this complex and interrelated system. The objectives of the study also include a service design perspective to understanding lecturers, and therefore focus predominantly on exploring and uncovering their overall experiences at a specific university in South Africa. The study makes use of a qualitative and exploratory research design, and presents findings from in-depth interviews conducted with eight lecturers. Data were analysed using an interpretative analytical perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and themes were developed. The main themes identified include 'Time management', 'Student concerns', and 'Teaching and research'. A framework demonstrating the interrelatedness of the themes, as well as the impact of the two themes, 'Time management' and 'Student concerns', on lecturers' core function (teaching and research) is presented. Recommendations focused on the removal of specific time-consuming duties, as well as the improvement of identified concerns about students, are proposed. The recommendations strive to provide initial solutions to optimising this specific unit in the greater complex system of a university structure.

Keywords:

Systems theory, Service design, Higher education institutions, Lecturers

JEL Classification: M31

1   INTRODUCTION

An increase in student enrolments, overall student demand that exceeds the capabilities of universities' systems, rising tuition costs, and a decline in government funding are only some of the most pressing challenges facing universities in the emerging market of South Africa (Badat, 2014; Mabelebele, 2015; Mushemeza, 2016). Universities are seen as an important contributor to societal well-being, and are expected to help address the problems of a highly unequal South African society (Hornsby, 2015; PwC, 2013). With such a large responsibility on their shoulders, universities in South Africa can no longer function with their traditional and often outdated structures when they are faced with the challenges of the 21st century (Hornsby, 2015).

As a people-intensive service provider that has multiple units, departments, governing structures, faculties, and support systems, and is responsible for managing and serving multiple stakeholders, the complexity of a university's structures seems endless. Von Bertanlanffy (1972:413) advocates the application of systems theory in understanding the various aspects of large organisations, while Ingram (2018) posits that systems theory and contingency theory can help organisations to identify the various sub-systems in their structures that need to work together, and that an acknowledgement of these sub-systems' interrelatedness is important and should be managed to achieve synergy and success. The further characterisation of universities as people-intensive service providers suggests that incorporating a service design perspective, which presents innovative ways to design service solutions in people-intensive service systems (Segelström, 2013), can add further value to understanding how universities can improve their service offerings through a complex system.

Mofokeng (2002) argues that lecturers are important role players at universities, as they are involved in numerous functions across multiple systems. In taking a service design perspective, understanding the role of the lecturer – with a specific focus on their experiences as service providers and as important units in the complex integrated system of a university – therefore forms the focus of this study. The research objective of this paper is therefore to explore university lecturers' experience of working in a higher education institution. Limited studies have concentrated on the application of systems theory to the context of a university (Mofokeng, 2002), and no studies could be found that incorporate a service design perspective in this context. This paper therefore aims to extend the body of knowledge on the application of systems theory to the context of universities, and to extend the body of knowledge of service design, through the application of service design principles and perspectives to this context. The paper begins with a discussion of systems theory, how it links to service design, and its importance within the higher education system. Then a problem statement is provided, with a discussion of the methodology, findings, and recommendations for the study.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature that follows focuses on systems theory as developed by Niklass Luhmann, as this provides a grounding for the study by identifying higher education as a system. In addition, service design and the higher education landscape are discussed as foundations for the context of the study.

2.1   Systems theory

Luhmanns' systems theory is based in Aristotle's notion that "the whole is more than the sum of its parts" (van Bertanlanffy, 1972:407). Gerim (2017:142) explains that systems theory has a number of applications in various fields, including law, religion, art, economics, politics, and even business management and its sub-fields. According to Ingram (2018), systems theory argues that all areas function as a system that is synergistic and in which they are interdependent. Although this theory has had its supporters, the main deficiency of the theory in social science is that it can been seen as abstract, and can be too complex to understand and implement (Gerim, 2017:142).

Although systems theory has been criticised, Von Bertanlanffy (1972:413) maintains that the theory is valid, as it enables the understanding of various aspects and how they function as a system, and that using the theory helps to solve many problems in many areas. According to Ingram (2018), systems theory is relevant from a business perspective, as a business can be understood as consisting of various departments, units, facilities, and – most importantly – employees as key areas for business success. Specifically, for businesses to be competitive and to function within a dynamic and changing environment, these key areas must work synergistically, be interrelated, but also be independent – which is the focus of systems theory. Ingram (2018) adds that systems theory allows an organisation's management to recognise that the organisation is made up of many sub-systems, and that each of these must work together for the organisation to survive. In addition to systems theory, contingency theory – which states that the dynamics of all departments / units / subsystems will influence how a business will function – also needs to be considered within the context of this study. This is because contingency theory recognises that the interrelatedness of all departments and units within an organisation such as a higher education institution can help to achieve organisational success. All systems within an organisation need to work together and function efficiently before success can be achieved (Von Bertanlanffy, 1972:409). Thus systems thinking should be assimilated into and integrated throughout a whole organisation so as to identify and consider all system participants (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017:3).

2.2   Systems theory and the higher education landscape

As the higher education landscape is considered in this study, which can be seen as an integral service in an economy, it is necessary to consider what constitutes a service system from the systems theory perspective. Sim *et al.* (2018:427) define a

service system as a "relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange". Specifically, from a university perspective, Mofokeng (2002:69) explains that universities as a service system are organised as different integrated sub-systems that all need to work in an integrated, effective, and efficient fashion. Sim *et al.* (2018:423) explain that many organisations functioning in a service system (such as universities) fail to consider the interrelationships and engagement between the sub-systems in their organisation, even though it has been widely acknowledged that interaction between various levels in an organisation requires engagement. Vauterin, Limmanen and Marttila (2011:185) emphasise that, in higher education, identifying how to create a successful service environment needs more attention.

Mofokeng (2002:75) also stresses that universities are very complex organisations that are impacted by factors, not only within themselves, but also on a national and international level. The higher education landscape is made more complex due to the increase in demand for quality education; the greater number of private institutions entering the market; decreased funding from the government; the growing access of international institutions to the local higher education market; national policies emphasising the need for employability; and the diverse nature of the student demographic. In addition, Fomunyam (2018:45) emphasises that higher educations' mandate includes enhancing national development through enabling students and society to create their own wealth and to alleviate poverty. Hornsby (2015) explains that higher education institutions should play a role in alleviating the problems of an unequal society – especially in the case of South Africa. Universities are therefore important service providers in the sense that they are deeply involved in social development. This requires universities to compete for student numbers through increased services; higher levels of quality; and increased student experience and employability (Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan & Seebaluck, 2016:245; Sim *et al.*, 2018:423; Mofokeng, 2002:36).

Systems theory enables universities to identify all areas that specifically affect lecturers within their system, and makes it possible to find out what problems lecturers experience and how these can be solved (Mofokeng, 2002:66&74). Vauterin *et al.* (2001:185) explain that, in many cases, the lecturer is responsible for dealing with all of the complex changes in the higher education system, and are a vital part of the co-production of services with the university and its stakeholders. A lecturer's duties may differ from one university to another; but they include providing quality education and improving students' knowledge; conducting research to enhance the scientific agenda; and providing support to various stakeholders. In many cases, there is sufficient support for lecturers to fulfil their roles; but these can be difficult to access or to identify (Hughes, 2010:115). Taking this into consideration, the role of the university and of the lecturer as a service provider cannot be disputed. As a service provider, a university will need to design services that are unique, and provide competitive advantage and value throughout the system (Furrer, Sudharshan, Tsiotsou & Liu,

2016:452). Teixeira, Patricio, Nunes, Nobrega, Fisk and Constantine (2012:364) emphasise that service providers need to design their services while keeping their stakeholders and their experiences in mind.

2.3 Service design

Within the context of social systems theory and of universities and lecturers working within a wider system and being a service provider, the concept of service design from a services marketing perspective should be considered.

Jaaron and Backhouse (2017:3) state that service design requires all individuals participating in the system, and their respective roles, to be identified and included as part of the service innovation and design process within the system. Harviainen, Ojasalo and Kumar (2018:193-194) define 'service design' as "the use of designerly ways of working when improving or developing people-intensive service systems through the engagement of stakeholders, such as users and frontline staff" (Harviainen *et al.*, 2018:193). Durl, Trichler and Dietrich (2018:442) explain that service design can be identified as a human-centred but creative and iterative approach to service innovation and stakeholder satisfaction (Durl *et al.*, 2017:442). This is supported by Jaaron and Backhouse (2017:1), who indicate that service design should be considered on the employee, functional, and corporate levels, as knowledge and experience with customer needs on all levels influence organisational success.

The concept of service design also requires that all customers' (internal and external) experiences be considered in designing the service, as it will influence the satisfaction of all participants. It has been noted that research is lacking into service design from a customer needs perspective, and that it could aid in producing service delivery and stakeholder satisfaction (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017:1&3). In addition, many organisations have failed to identify service design as a strategic resource for business success (Maduro, Fernandes & Alves, 2018:76).

2.4 Service design and higher education

As mentioned above, service design falls within the scope of services marketing, in which educational services is a sub-field (Voss & Gruber, 2006:5). Therefore considering service design from a higher education perspective makes sense. Hornsby (2015) explains that universities functioning within the higher education system include various stakeholders – students, lecturers (academic staff), support staff, management, and others – who contribute to the functioning of the system. Maduro *et al.* (2018:80) add that these stakeholders are vital in the service design process, as any gaps in these stakeholders' perceptions can negatively influence customer satisfaction. Therefore, service design in this context needs to ensure that value is created for all stakeholders, as they are all regarded as users in the process (Durl *et al.*, 2017:441).

Many tools within service design, including service blueprinting and multi-level service design, have been suggested as ways to manage the integrated experiences of services. But it is essential that higher education institutions manage the customer experience throughout the system, and that this should be a research focus for organisations, as it is vital to service delivery (Følstad & Kvale, 2018:198). Understanding all stakeholder experiences with the system is important. Mofokeng (2002:51) notes that understanding the term 'experience' is not easy, as it has many meanings; but it can be summarised as the feelings of pleasantness or unpleasantness in a given situation. Harviainen *et al.* (2018:193) add that experience is a result of the interaction between stakeholders. Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonella (2009:53&54) add that consumption experiences are multidimensional in nature, but can be categorised according to five types: senses (aesthetics and senses), feelings (moods and emotions), thoughts (convergent / analytical and divergent / imaginative), actions (motor actions and behavioural experiences) and relations (social experiences) (Brakus *et al.*, 2009:54). Given this, within a service design context the task of any service design is to gain insight into the experiences of all stakeholders (Harviainen *et al.*, 2018:193).

From a higher education perspective, Mofokeng (2002:36) explains that service design should be considered from two perspectives. The first includes how the university will meet the external challenges of socio-economic and political factors, while the second perspective includes how university lecturers as service providers be included in the process. How well the university can respond to the external challenges relies heavily on how well its staff can solve problems and provide quality services (including education) and increase external customer satisfaction (Voss & Gruber, 2006:5&8). Designing quality services is a requirement for higher educational institutions, and should be seen as multidimensional (Teeroovengadum *et al.*, 2016:244). Therefore, within this multidimensionality, universities need to understand and identify the experiences of their stakeholders, and keep these in mind in order to develop quality services (Teixeira *et al.*, 2012:364). This study specifically focuses on one stakeholder: the lecturer.

3   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Mofokeng (2002:69 & 75) emphasises the need for universities to understand that they function within a service system that is organised as different integrated sub-systems. Universities are important service providers: they are vital in social development, and therefore need to ensure that they find ways to be competitive and successful (Teeroovengadum *et al.*, 2016:245). In the South African context in particular, this can be challenging, as universities function in very complex internal and external environments, and face an increased demand for quality education, decreased government funding, and a greater competition for higher student numbers (Mofokeng, 2002:75), while often still operating within old-fashioned structures (Hornsby, 2015). Universities therefore need to identify how to create a successful and responsive service environment (Hornsby, 2015; Vauterin *et al.*, 2011:185); but many

institutions fail to do this, and do not consider how all areas within the institution function as a system (Sim *et al.*, 2018:423). In addition, many organisations fail to identify service design as a strategic resource for success (Maduro *et al.*, 2018:76). Service design is said to present unique ways in which to improve on and develop people-intensive service systems, and to consider the experiences of all stakeholders within an organisation as the basis for designing service solutions (Segelström, 2013). Hornsby (2015) explains that lecturers are one of the most important stakeholders in a university, and Maduro *et al.* (2018:80) and Mofokeng (2002:66) emphasise that understanding all areas that affect lecturers within the university system, and identifying the problems that they experience, are key to identifying service gaps. Once these gaps have been identified, quality services can be developed that can influence stakeholder experiences positively and thereby increase customer satisfaction and the university's success and responsiveness.

Against this background, the following objectives were formulated for this study:

- To explore university lecturers' experience of working in a higher education institution
- To uncover factors that affect university lecturers' experience of working in a higher education institution
- To identify potential service gaps between lecturers' experience of their daily tasks and their responsibilities as key service providers in a university system

4　METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research design, using a qualitative approach, was deemed most suited to achieve the objectives, as limited research is available on this particular topic (Hair, Wolfinbarger Celsi, Ortinau & Bush, 2013). Participants were sampled using a probability sampling approach – more specifically, systematic random sampling. Each lecturer was selected from a list of academics who appear on the higher education institution's email contact list system, using a skip interval to identify and sample a total of eight participants. The institution's ethical clearance process was followed, and permission was obtained to use the above-mentioned list. Participants were not given any incentives for participating in the interviews. The objectives of the study were communicated to them when they were approached to participate in the study. Before the interviews began, the participants were also asked to sign a consent form, and the interviewer assured them of the confidentiality of their responses. The use of an external company to sample the participants, conduct the interviews, and transcribe the data meant that the participants could also be assured of the anonymity of their responses.

The data were collected through in-depth interviews, for which a semi-structured interview guide was developed and used to guide the questions posed to the participants. Following the guidelines of Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006), it was concluded that interviewing eight lecturers would be sufficient to reach saturation. In line with the objectives, the questions were predominantly focused on uncovering the

lecturers' experiences. The experience-related questions started broadly, asking participants questions such as "How would you describe your experience at this institution?", and gradually becoming more specific, asking about specific experiences focused on their typical duties, which include teaching and learning, research, and administrative tasks.

The interviews, lasting between 50 and 90 minutes, were transcribed; the transcripts were then provided to the researchers for analysis. The data were analysed using an interpretive analytical stance. Following the methods of Strauss and Corbin (1990), three researchers reviewed the transcripts and developed codes inductively from the data. As suggested by Spiggle (1994), the researchers then compared their findings through repetition and re-reading, and a final set of themes was established from the data. The use of three researchers for the analysis ensured that triangulation was applied, and therefore contributed to the credibility of the final findings, which are reported in the next section. Table 1 contains descriptions of the participants who were interviewed for the study.

Table 1: Description of participants

Pseudonyms	Level at institution	Years at institution	Years in current position	Age	Gender
Ingrid	Associate Professor	5 months	5 months	37	Female
Albert	Full Professor	21 years	21 years	50	Male
Rita	Full Professor	4 years	4 years	48	Female
Amanda	Senior Lecturer	11 years	11 years	50	Female
Michael	Lecturer	3 years	2 years	28	Male
Vanessa	Lecturer	15 years	7.5 years	35	Female
Paul	Senior Lecturer	13 years	11 years	60	Male
Maria	Lecturer	16 years	10 years	40	Female

5   FINDINGS

Three dominant themes were identified from the analyses; these are discussed in this section in the order of most to least prominent.

5.1 Theme 1: Time management

The daily management of time is the aspect that appeared most often during the interviews. Within this theme, three sub-themes were identified and subsequently discussed.

Sub-Theme 1: Fulfilling a number of roles: Senior level academics (senior lecturers and professors) most frequently mentioned the challenge of fulfilling multiple roles and activities on a daily basis, and the negative impact that these have on how they

manage their time. These roles include being teachers, researchers, coordinators of various programmes, committee members, supervisors, and administrators, to name the most prominent. Within all these roles, the dominant frustration experienced by participants was the time taken to serve on multiple committees, even though this is not recognised in performance appraisals and assessments of output. Participants clearly indicated the difficulty they had in controlling and determining the amount of time that each of these diverse roles and duties takes during a day, causing problems in planning and managing their time. Some participants expressed a need for specialisation, for being responsible for less, and for focusing only on either teaching or supervision and research, as these numerous roles become too taxing. Participants expressed this sub-theme clearly in their own words:

[Albert]: *"Ag, I think the thing that frustrates me the most is time management. There is a lot of roles I play, to get to all the roles."*

[Rita]: *"Yes, there are lots of things on our table, it's not like if you are doing teaching and learning you only focus on that. You also have to incorporate research, then you have your own admin job, then you have your internal citizenship, you are part of so many committees, external citizenship. We juggle so many things."*

[Amanda]: *"I think that the real issue is things like you sit on a 100 committees… the amount of meetings that one has to go to in any given week is ridiculous. You know, if you sit in committees it doesn't count for much in terms of if you translating it back to your KPAs, but it's hugely time consuming …I have to sit on this committee and it counts for nothing."*

Sub-theme 2: Staff capacity – Some participants expressed a concern about limited staff capacity within their Schools or Departments. This influences the number of other roles that a staff member must fulfil, such as serving on more than one institutional committee, having a higher load of students to be served, lectures, and marking volumes. This theme also links to participants who mentioned that there is limited academic support, as lecturers are responsible for many administrative functions, such as booking venues and invigilators for tests. Participants argued that institutional budget cuts, as a result of numerous factors in the external environment, are the main reason for the limited staff capacity in their Department. The following quote summarises this:

[Rita]: *"Yes, staff capacity is a challenge. You can open the posts, but the posts are not available because budget is not available… especially for a school where we have very few academics. If we had, suppose, 20 staff members, then we can allocate one to each; but in our school one is a part of four or five committees… sometimes for the whole day you are attending one meeting after another."*

Sub-Theme 3: Increased administrative duties due to technology – In addition to the increased number of roles lecturers play due to limited staff capacity, another aspect was the increased administrative duties that technology brought that were previously managed by administrative staff. This aspect was identified as a high time-stealer by senior staff members, but less often by junior staff. A major frustration was the

requirement to complete the same administrative templates multiple times for various activities, and inconsistencies in the availability of administrative staff among different departments. The general sentiment was that excessive admin loads take lecturers away from their core duties. Quotes that support this theme include:

[Rita]: *"Normally we expect the support staff to take over the administration responsibilities, but the more we get technologically equipped the more tasks is coming to us. We must book venues, we must book invigilators, we must send work to moderators."*

[Vanessa]: *"What happens is we have so many templates to fill out, and it gets annoying. And I have to fill out my name and my surname and my qualification level and my level of appointment so many times in different templates."*

5.2 Theme 2: Student concerns

The second theme identified was the quality of the students served at the institution. Three sub-themes are outlined below, explaining this identified theme.

Sub-theme 1: Language issues – A large proportion of students at this institution are not being taught in their mother tongue, with English as a second and in some instances even a third language. Participants often mentioned concerns about the students' ability to read and write effectively in English (especially at postgraduate level), as well as their concerns about students' comprehension of what they are being taught in class. Of particular concern is the additional time both lecturers and students need to commit to helping students to comprehend the work and to read and write effectively. The following quotes summarise this:

[Albert]: *"Again, in my experience, if the student can read and write, they can get the information themselves. But if they battle to write and read, they tend to take too long to get the information. So the writing and reading skills is a big problem they need to over-come, so that they can work with any new material."*

[Rita]: *"… We have language practitioners, and we use them to put the language right; but to put the knowledge first is also not an easy task."*

Sub-theme 2: Quality produced by schooling system – Concerns about the quality of the students enrolling at the institution was expressed. The poor schooling system in South Africa was mostly blamed for failing to equip students to succeed at university level. This lower quality student results in lecturers having to put in additional effort and time to help students to comprehend the work. As participant Paul states:

[Paul]: *"Yeah, it has become more difficult over the years, in the sense that I think in South Africa we sitting with a big problem in terms of what comes through to the university from the schools, and we are getting students that are not up to standard, so you have to put in a lot more to try and get the student up to standard; but it's also to me, university students should be not be spoonfed, and to a large extent and in many instances we don't have much of an option but to do that."*

Sub-theme 3: Commitment, responsibility, and engagement – Participants were of the opinion that students lack commitment and responsibility, and assume that, because they are registered at the higher education institution, they will get their degrees, thus lacking a sense of responsibility for the effort that they need to put in to graduate successfully. Participants argued that the schooling system creates an expectation that the responsibility to succeed lies predominantly with the lecturer and not the student, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Participants also expressed frustration with the student seeming to be chasing qualifications, but losing a sense of commitment to truly learn and develop. Concerns were expressed about of students' engagement both with activities (e.g., to complete an online quiz after class) and with lecturers during consultations. Participants noted that students rely heavily on email to enquire more about administrative aspects and not necessarily about class content. A sense that students merely want a pass mark, and do not truly want to learn and understand content, was expressed. Participants expressed a concern that technology used in class could be distracting, and that they are never sure whether students are actually engaging, listening, learning, and using the technology for the lecture or whether they are doing something else. This made participants feel less satisfied with their teaching experience. The following quotes from participants express these views:

[Albert]: *"…they rely too much on the lecturers to take the responsibility to take them through. I think it starts with the schools. When they come from school, take a step and take their own responsibility…it is quite difficult with students."*

[Rita]: *"And that the fact that you registered, you are not automatically going to get your degree. They need to know their responsibilities and know that the lecturer's role is only there to guide them. The real learning experience they need to do. They think the supervisor will take care of everything. The supervisor has so many students, and obviously we can work with students, we cannot work for students. They think we work for them and not with them. It is a very challenging task. We do not get commitment from the students."*

[Vanessa]: *"I don't have a lot of student consultation, I always say to them, if you want to see, me please make an appointment. Mostly they just enquire via email about basic things."*

[Rita]:*"You don't normally get a lot of students coming and asking for consultation. As long as they get a pass mark, that's a benchmark."*

[Rita]: *You are thinking they're sitting there recording a lecture, they might be sms-ing each other. So you cannot monitor what is happening in the classroom. It doesn't make the job difficult, but the lack of satisfaction is less because you are not sure if the students are really getting the knowledge you are sharing with them, are they receiving and absorbing that knowledge?*

[Maria]: *"…Or students are ignorant of what you saying. Or you do a session on time management, but they keep coming late for classes."*

5.3 Theme 3: Teaching and research

The third theme identified is teaching and research. The following three sub-themes identified are discussed:

Sub-theme 1: Passion – Participants generally expressed a passion for teaching and for the fulfillment gained from seeing students develop and grow. The creation of new content and the freedom to explore new ways of teaching and assessment methods were mentioned as enjoyable aspects, and that the sharing of knowledge with students creates satisfaction. Some participants also expressed a sense of feeling very responsible about helping students to grow as individuals, and felt that their jobs entailed more than just teaching students content, but included instilling values and developing their characters. Some also said that this type of job is very fulfilling, and that, compared with working in a corporate environment, this job provides a lot more satisfaction.

[Amanda]: *"I really enjoy dealing with the students… it's… yeah, that's the great part of the job, seeing students go through a process and come out successful, so that's awesome."*

[Ingrid]: "*I think in overall the freedom that you have in terms of putting an assignment together is wonderful, I did for the first years …It was very well received*."

[Rita]: *"I feel that I may not get this kind of satisfaction in any other kind of environment. That's very rigid if I join the corporate, and here every year you see some changes. You see students from the first year to the third year. Then you see them going through the Honours to the Masters. Seeing them elevating themselves is a very good feeling. And you feel you are part of that evolvement in their life."*

Sub-theme 2: Limited recognition – Participants said that they receive limited recognition for their teaching – both indirectly from students, and directly from the institution. If, for example, they commit to developing extra content and put in additional hours with a lecture, students will likely not notice this, and just accept it as the norm. In addition, many participants felt that, from an institutional perspective, and in their KPAs, teaching is not recognised as highly as research is. As participants stated:

[Vanessa]: *"You can develop a course, and it can be fine, but to do the extra stuff that isn't required necessarily, I can't explain why I do it, there's acceptable and then there's doing more. No one's really going to appreciate it in terms of the students, they think that's just the ways it is*."

[Paul]: *"…you don't really get any recognition for teaching and learning…teaching and learning is just something you have to do, and you have to do it well; but it's not…part of the equation"*.

Sub-theme 3: Prioritising research – Participants in general indicated that they enjoy doing research, but that time constraints due to their multiple roles makes it challenging, even though this aspect is prioritised by the institution. This means that staff can only focus on research by eliminating unnecessary time-consuming tasks

and collaborating with other researchers. The following quotes from participants express this view.

[Amanda]: "*I really enjoy doing research in as much as I have time for it. I like the idea of knowledge creation and I like looking at data, what it says, producing output… looking at new areas… those kind of things I really enjoy.*"

[Ingrid]: "*Not getting my actual work done, predominantly research, because I am not putting enough boundaries.*"

[Albert]: *"Ideal would be, to be much more focused and to get rid of all the admin and stuff and say this is what I can do when I am focused, to get more time to do research, that would be ideal."*
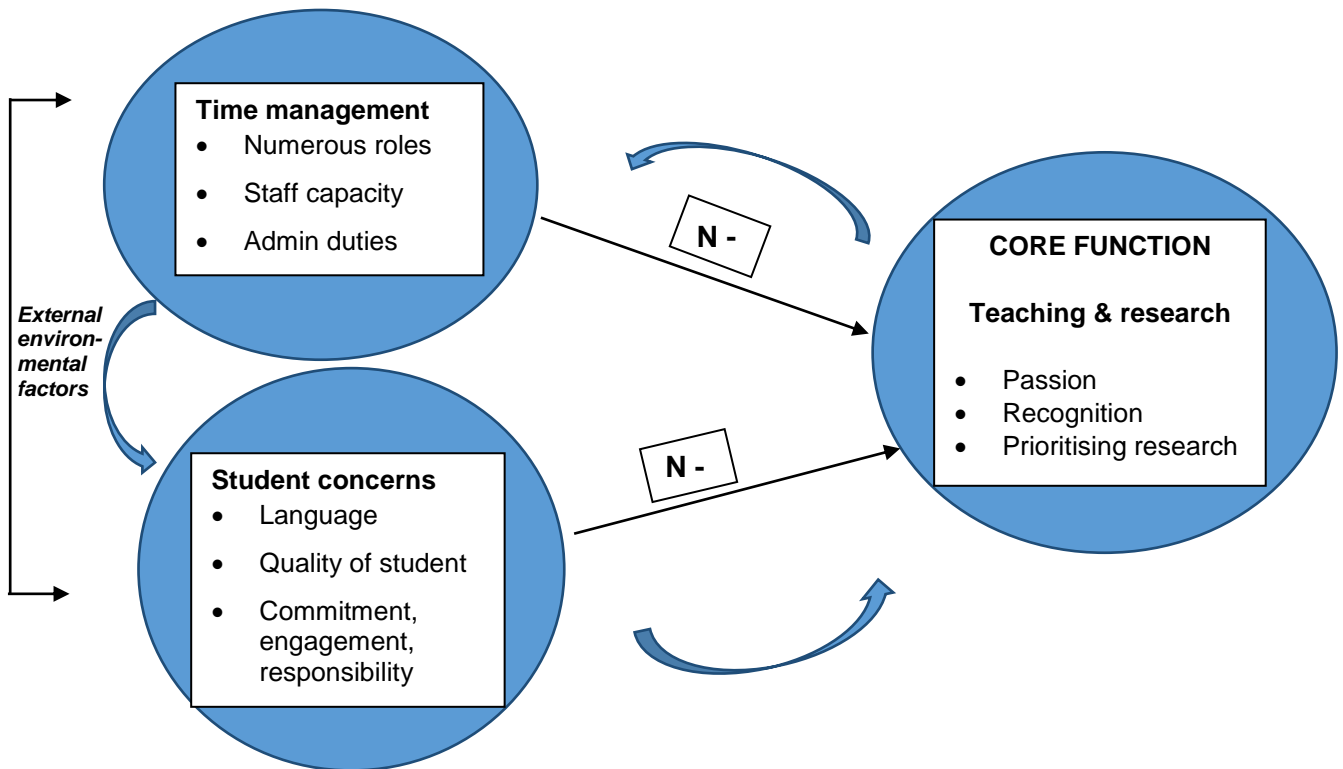
[Rita]: *"You know, teaching and learning and research are two equal aspects that are important for the functioning of the university, but somewhere research is more dominant here because that's where the university gets subsidy…So that is why the demand to publish is higher".*

[Albert]: *"I think what we are starting to create something where people are much more working together, and each one will start to have a role in the bigger research. So I think over time our quality of our PhD students and the research that we are going to do is going to increase substantially."*

6   DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Service-providing institutions (such as universities) are encouraged to view the interrelationships, interactions, and engagements between the different functions in their service systems (Sim *et al.*, 2018). Mofokeng (2002) identifies lecturers as a key function in the service system, in particular because they work in so many parts of this system. In addressing the objectives of the study, which are focused on exploring lecturers' experiences in their duties, roles, and challenges in an effort to identify potential service gaps, three main themes were identified from the analysis of the data. The themes include 'Time management', 'Student concerns', and 'Teaching and research'. The three themes seem highly interrelated, with two of the themes in particular appearing to have a negative impact on the lecturers' core functions. Hughes (2010) states that lecturers' duties may vary between institutions, but that their core duties include the provision of quality education and conducting research in order to enhance the scientific agenda.

In viewing the design of services as an iterative process, an initial framework is developed and depicted in Figure 1. The framework demonstrates the interrelationships between the three themes, and indicates the negative impact of two of the themes, 'Time management' and 'Student concerns' (both in turn highly affected by external environmental factors), on the theme of 'Teaching and research; (representing lecturers' core duties).

Figure 1: Interrelationship of themes

The negative impact of the two themes on the core theme of 'Teaching and research' seems to suggest that the majority of the daily tasks that lecturers encounter at this particular institution is due to service tasks that deviate from the lecturers' core functions, representing a gap in their service offering that should be addressed. In terms of the 'Time management' theme, the numerous roles and diverse nature of the roles that lecturers fulfil make it difficult to estimate how long different tasks will take, creating a backlog in preparing for classes or conducting research. In addition, issues of staff capacity affect the daily duties of the lecturers because they have to serve on numerous committees and engage in time-consuming administrative duties. Factors from the external environment have an impact specifically on staff capacity, as institutions have experienced a decrease in funding from government (Fomunyam, 2018); so appointing additional help must be funded from other sources.

In terms of 'Student concerns', the external environment is a major contributor: the South African schooling system produces graduates who are not well-prepared, alongside the diverse nature of the country with its multiple languages. These factors impact predominantly on lecturers' time, as they need to allocate additional time to help students to pass. Especially those lecturers involved with postgraduate students seem to experience delays in students' completing their studies, due to a lack of commitment and battles with reading, writing, and general comprehension of content in the English language. Students' low levels of engagement with lecturers is an element that requires further exploration from the students' perspective in order to determine the exact reasons; but the low level of engagement is nonetheless an issue,

especially in light of the additional help that the students require. The multiple mentioning of engagement issues by lecturers also led to the conclusion that it is not isolated only to one particular lecturer.

The theme of 'Teaching and learning' suggests that lecturers generally enjoy lecturing, and see it as a duty that involves more than sharing knowledge, but includes helping students to grow and develop as individuals, and is seen as a job described as giving them a sense of fulfilment. The limited recognition received from students could possibly be due to the overall lack of their engagement with the lecturers. The limited institutional recognition could possibly be due to the drive to advance and focus on research, as this is an additional source of government subsidy in an environment in which funding to higher education institutions has been reduced. Lecturers seem generally to enjoy research, and want to commit to it; but they experience it as a stressful task, because research requires focus and time, yet lecturers are limited in this by additional tasks, multiple roles, and the additional time needed to help students.

Based on the above findings, the following specific recommendations are proposed, which focus on enhancing the lecturer experience and job satisfaction, and facilitating a better flow in producing core service duties at this specific higher education institution:

- Collapse meetings / committees into more functional ones that can look at multiple issues in one meeting, so as to reduce the number of meetings that academic staff need to attend. This can also be achieved by removing all meetings during 'non-academic' time so that lecturers can concentrate on research when students are not in class.
- Initiate and develop a strong cost-saving culture, review current fund allocations, and identify alternative income streams in order to compensate for the reduced funding from government.
- Prioritise the generation of additional income to finance administrative support for lecturers with high administrative loads and for specific departments that are understaffed.
- Include the time that academics sit in meetings and on committees in the performance appraisal document, and include this as a KPA.
- Allow staff the option of specialising in specific roles such as research / supervision / teaching. Consider allowing this for a year before rotating to another area so that all areas are covered within a three-year cycle and so that academics can still meet all KPA criteria.
- Generate templates that collect all relevant information once, and only need to be completed once. This template can then be disseminated to various other areas that can use the information.
- Include a compulsory English reading and writing module that students must complete before they are allowed to register for a qualification. Each year, students must do a follow-up module that is on the appropriate level (e.g., from undergraduate to postgraduate).

- Limit the time that students can use technology in the class. For example, only allow students to take out their phones for certain activities in class when the lecturer indicates that they may do so. This could also increase engagement in the classroom.
- Ensure that teaching has the same emphasis as research in the KPAs, performance appraisals, and promotions.
- Incorporate both class and online activities that contribute towards overall student marks in order to stimulate student engagement.
- Develop more research networks within the institution and outside it to encourage collaborative and multi-disciplinary research and co-authorship, in order to complete projects faster.

7   LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study is not without its limitations. The research was conducted at only one specific institution in South Africa, and was further limited to a focus on academic staff only. Future studies that incorporate the experiences of other stakeholders who function in this system should be conducted, thereby allowing for the creation of a holistic view of the interrelationships of the entire system and functioning of the university. The study could also be expanded to other higher education institutions to identify whether similar problems are experienced, and whether the findings of this study are an industry phenomenon, or are limited to this specific institution.

8   CONCLUSION

This study contributes to extend the body of knowledge on the application of systems theory to the context of universities, and to extend the body of knowledge of service design, through the application of service design principles and perspectives to this context. This study is necessary, as universities are important service providers from a social development perspective, and need to find ways of being competitive, more responsive, and successful (Teeroovengadum *et al.*, 2016:245). The only way in which universities can do this is by identifying and improving the expectations, experiences, and satisfaction levels of all stakeholders (Jaaron & Backhouse, 2017:1). This study focused on academic staff as a stakeholder within the university system, and determined that they experience a number of frustrations while delivering their service to other stakeholders. These frustrations include having too many 'time wasters' as part of their job; the low quality, commitment, and engagement of students, and the lack of focus on core duties, because of all the roles that academics play within the system. Universities will need to remove these frustrations experienced by academics in order to provide quality services to other stakeholders, thereby ensuring the success and competitiveness of the university and the improved functioning of the university as a system.

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