# STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH TEXTBOOK USAGE AT DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS VERSUS MEDIA AT MORE TRADITIONAL/RESIDENTIAL UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract**

One of the initiatives that universities across the world have embarked on is to investigate students' dependence on textbooks and their satisfaction with the textbooks they use. The purpose of this research paper was to determine to what extent students in South Africa use textbooks in their studies. Students from various academic institutions participated in the survey-based research. The results indicate a strong reliance on the textbook as a study resource with limited differences between the University of South Africa (Unisa), as an open distance learning (ODL) institution, and the more traditional/residential universities. The results offer a number of proposals for the use and development of textbooks and other supporting resources.

**Keywords:** Textbooks, teaching resources, open distance learning (ODL), student perceptions

## INTRODUCTION

Educators continuously deliberate on which delivery modes are best for student retention and teaching. According to Calechman (2012), the number of students taking online classes has increased from 1.6 million in 2002 to 6.1 million in 2012. This significant increase raises the important question of whether distance education will remain of the same high quality.

Considerable research on student retention and throughput has been conducted at residential institutions, while a few studies have also been undertaken in distance education contexts (Van Schoor 2010:41). One of the initiatives that universities worldwide have embarked on is to investigate students' dependence on textbooks and the increase in professionals' and teachers' reliance on textbooks (Watt 2004:4). According to Watt (2004:51), research literature on the use and curriculum role of materials (textbooks) in the United States has emphasised that teachers and students depend on such materials. In South Africa we have the additional debate

about the role of the African Renaissance in curriculum development on the African continent (Higgs, Van Niekerk & Van Wyk 2010:134).

A project was commissioned by a private publisher that provides textbooks for the further and higher education environments. The main purpose of the research was to explore ways of improving the development, integration and use of textbooks and other supporting learning materials in the learning environment. The project consisted of two surveys, one for lecturers and one for students, at South African universities, universities of technology and nursing colleges. This article focuses only on the perceptions of students.


## STUDENT SATISFACTION

Rowley (2003) identified four main reasons for obtaining student feedback:

(1)    to provide auditable evidence that students have had the opportunity to make comments on their courses and that such information is used to bring about improvements
(2)    to encourage students to reflect on their learning
(3)    to allow institutions to benchmark and to provide indicators that will contribute to the reputation of the university in the marketplace
(4)    to provide students with an opportunity to express their level of satisfaction with their academic experience

The publisher who sponsored the project was interested, not only in the use of textbooks, but also in aspects such as:

- whether lecturers actually use a large percentage of the prescribed textbooks
- for what purpose students mainly use textbooks
- whether students have attended a reading course at their university
- which textbook characteristics make it easier for students to study
- what other textbook resources would be of benefit to students

In addition, the question was raised as to whether there are any differences between the perceptions of students at traditional/residential universities and those at Unisa as a distance learning institution/university.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A two-pronged approach was used to obtain information from students. First, at all the publisher's branches across South Africa, students were approached by briefed staff to complete the student questionnaire. On completion, each student received a pen for his/her time and input. Second, the publisher contacted key people at the institutions and was assured of their willingness to distribute questionnaires to their students and then post them back to the publisher. The purpose was to obtain a broad and representative sample of students at all the institutions.

A total of 501 students participated in the student survey (table 1). The majority of students were enrolled at Unisa (16.2%) and the University of Pretoria (14.7%). Most

of the students who participated were first-year students (26.5%) or fourth-year students (23.8%), female (66.5%) and full-time students (76.8%). Overall, students from 12 institutions participated in the survey.

**TABLE 1: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF STUDENTS**

| UNIVERSITIES | FREQUENCY | % |
|---|---|---|
| University of the Free State | 17 | 3.4 |
| North-West University | 11 | 2.2 |
| University of Pretoria | 74 | 14.7 |
| University of Stellenbosch | 43 | 8.6 |
| **COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES** | | |
| Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University | 23 | 4.6 |
| Unisa | 81 | 16.2 |
| University of Johannesburg | 42 | 8.4 |
| University of the Western Cape | 34 | 6.8 |
| **UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY** | | |
| Vaal University of Technology | 49 | 9.8 |
| **NURSING COLLEGES** | | |
| Ann Latsky Nursing College | 33 | 6.6 |
| Excelsius Nursing College | 48 | 9.6 |
| Vrystaat Nursing College | 40 | 7.9 |
| No response | 6 | 1.2 |
| **TOTAL** | **501** | **100** |
| **ACADEMIC YEAR OF STUDY** | | |
| 1st year | 133 | 26.5 |
| 2nd year | 98 | 19.6 |
| 3rd year | 75 | 15.0 |
| 4th year | 119 | 23.8 |
| 5th year | 13 | 2.6 |
| Master's and Doctorate | 15 | 3.0 |

| UNIVERSITIES | FREQUENCY | % |
|---|---|---|
| No response | 48 | 9.5 |
| **TOTAL** | **501** | **100** |
| **GENDER** | | |
| Male | 148 | 29.5 |
| Female | 333 | 66.5 |
| No response | 20 | 4.0 |
| **TOTAL** | **501** | **100** |
| **PART-TIME OR FULL-TIME** | | |
| Part-time | 102 | 20.4 |
| Full-time | 385 | 76.8 |
| No response | 14 | 2.4 |

## COMPILING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A project team, consisting of the publishing company, academics and the researcher, then compiled the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of biographical questions, yes/no questions, scale-based questions using the four-point scale and two scales focusing on the satisfaction with and importance of current textbook characteristics. The questionnaire was piloted to determine whether students would understand the terminology used and whether the length of the questionnaire was appropriate.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the students (82%) at all the institutions, lecturers use prescribed textbooks and, therefore, most students (88%) purchase these prescribed textbooks. A research project in China, among English Language teachers, policymakers and administrators revealed that more than 90% of their content comes from the textbook (Goa 2007:106). The main purposes for which students use textbooks are either as a learning or study material source (Unisa 48.1%; Other 62.5%), or as a source of information (Unisa 39.5%; Other 27.1%). It was interesting to note that many students (Unisa 69.1%; Other 60.4%) are willing to buy a workbook (self-evaluation questions and answers), while a further 72.8% (Unisa) and 63.9% (Other) would buy a CD (with additional information) that supplements the textbooks. Students also indicated that, if a website or an e-learning tool that supplements the textbook was provided online, they would use it. Unisa students were more willing to use a website or e-learning tool than students from other institutions (76.5% versus 67.7%). Table 2 lists the 10 textbook characteristics which, according to the students, help to make it easier for them to study.

**TABLE 2:  STUDENTS' AGREEMENT ON 10 TEXTBOOK CHARACTERISTICS THAT FACILITATE STUDY**

| CHARACTERISTIC | % AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE – OTHER | % AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE - UNISA |
|---|---|---|
| • When the language is easy to understand | 93.8 | 93.3 |
| • When practical, real-life examples are used | 93.8 | 95.8 |
| • When using the textbook helps me to perform better in tests and exams | 93.4 | 94.6 |
| • When it is easy to understand the content | 93.3 | 93.8 |
| • When the content is relevant to the course | 92.9 | 96.0 |
| • When the activities promote analytical and critical thinking | 92.2 | 95.9 |
| • When it is easy to find information in the textbook | 91.4 | 94.5 |
| • When a summary is included at the end of the chapter | 91.4 | 93.1 |
| • When the main ideas are summarised at the beginning of the chapter | 91.4 | 91.8 |
| • When the textbook includes self-evaluation questions or exercises, and provides model answers to these | 91.2 | 88.7 |

Students agreed (Unisa 96%; Other 92.9%) that the content must be relevant to the course. Students (more than 90%) placed a high value on activities that promoted analytical and critical thinking.

The characteristics which students did not perceive as being so important in making studying easier for them are highlighted in Table 3. These are characteristics such as an appealing cover, visual images, content written in a conversational style, information presented in "bite-sized chunks", activities requiring collaboration with other students, attractive layout and representing various ethnic groups in examples,

case studies and illustrations. It is also interesting to note the congruence between Unisa students and students at other institutions.

Over and above the questions asked to determine how satisfied students were with regard to the various textbook characteristics, students were also required to rate the importance of each of these characteristics. For this analysis a satisfaction-importance analysis was used, focusing only on the results of the Unisa students.

**TABLE 3: STUDENTS' AGREEMENT ON THE SEVEN LOWEST-RANKED CHARACTERISTICS (BELOW 75% AGREEMENT)**

| CHARACTERISTIC | % AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE – OTHER | % AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE - UNISA |
|---|---|---|
| • When the cover of the book is appealing | 51.2 | 52.2 |
| • If I like the visual images | 55.3 | 52.8 |
| • When the content is written in a conversational style | 59.4 | 61.1 |
| • When the information is presented in "bite-sized chunks" | 62.3 | 72.5 |
| • When the activities require me to collaborate with other students | 68.7 | 62.9 |
| • When the layout of the book is attractive | 70.2 | 80.0 |
| • When various ethnic groups are represented as part of examples, case studies and illustrations in the book | 71.9 | 74.0 |

In their studies, Douglas, Douglas and Barnes (2006) used an importance-performance analysis, which was first applied to elements of marketing, the so-called "quadrant analysis". It is a graphic technique used to analyse importance and satisfaction evaluations. In this study quadrant analysis was conducted for the textbook characteristics of both importance (ie "very important" and "important") and satisfaction ratings (ie "very satisfied" and "satisfied"). Thus, for every characteristic the percentage scores of those respondents who were either satisfied or very satisfied were identified, as were the percentages of respondents who considered that aspect to be important or very important. A cut-off point of 75% was used to distinguish between high and low importance or high and low satisfaction. Figure 1 illustrates the 2 x 2 matrix of the perceived degree of student satisfaction with a textbook characteristic or with its perceived importance. Responses can fall into one of the four areas on the grid, depending on whether they are considered to be of high

importance and high satisfaction (B), high importance and low satisfaction (A), low importance and low satisfaction (C), or low importance and high satisfaction (D).

The results of the 2 x 2 matrix analysis are portrayed in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

**FIGURE 1: SATISFACTION AND IMPORTANCE MATRIX**



The results give a clear indication of the textbook characteristics students are satisfied with as well as those they experience as important. More important are the results in Table 5, which portray those characteristics that are considered to be of low importance and high satisfaction. These can typically be seen as overkills. Table 4 refers to those characteristics that are perceived as of low importance and low satisfaction, thus a very low priority. No results were obtained for quadrant A.

**TABLE 4: LOW IMPORTANCE AND LOW SATISFACTION**

| |
| --- |
| • When the information is presented in "bite-size chunks" |
| • When content is written in conversational style |
| • When the layout of the textbook is attractive |
| • When the cover of the book is appealing |
| • If I like the visual images |

**TABLE 5: HIGH SATISFACTION AND LOW IMPORTANCE**

| |
| --- |
| • When the textbook makes use of icons throughout – these are a useful "roadmap" |
| • When the illustrations are up-to-date (eg not dated in terms of dress or hairstyles, unless a certain period is portrayed) |
| • When various ethnic groups are represented as part of the examples, case studies and illustrations in the book |

Students were also asked to indicate whether they are experiencing language problems and if their universities offered reading courses. These courses usually aim to improve both reading speed and comprehension.

## TABLE 6: HIGH SATISFACTION AND HIGH IMPORTANCE

| |
|---|
| • When the language is easy to understand |
| • When it is easy to understand the content |
| • When it is easy to find information in the textbook |
| • When the layout of the textbook is attractive |
| • When difficult words are explained in the glossary |
| • When the textbook has clear headings and subheadings |
| • When the textbook includes bulleted lists |
| • When the textbook includes tables and flowcharts |
| • When the illustrations or graphics are of high quality |
| • When the content is relevant to the course |
| • When the activities promote analytical and critical thinking |
| • When using the textbook helps me perform better in tests and exams |
| • When the main ideas are summarised at the beginning of a chapter |
| • When practical, real-life examples are used |
| • When textbook includes case studies |
| • When a summary is included at the end of a chapter |
| • When the textbook includes self-evaluation questions or exercises, and provides model answers to these |
| • When the activities are interactive |
| • When sufficient examples are included to explain theoretical concepts |
| • When one concept at a time is introduced – I don't feel overwhelmed by the volume of information |
| • If the text is interesting; I enjoy reading it |

A small percentage of students (29.6% Unisa; 45.6% Other) indicated that they have attended such reading courses, but only 14.8% (Unisa) and 26.7% (Other) indicated that they found them to be useful. A further 56.8% (Unisa) and 47.4% (Other) indicated they are not aware of such reading courses. A study at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) indicated that English was the home language of only 42.4% of their students in 2009 (Dlomo, Jansen, Moses & Yu 2011). This is similar to the results obtained by Van Schoor and Potgieter (2011:605) who found that only 40% of those students who cancel their studies have English as a first language at school. Stephen, Welman and Jordaan (2004:697) investigated English Language proficiency as a predictor of academic success at another South African university, and found that black students performed relatively worse compared with their Indian counterparts, with the latter exhibiting higher proficiency levels in English. The

problems students experience with English was also highlighted by Pretorius (2005, 791) in his qualitative study of the reading abilities of first-year psychology students: "They often found it difficult to articulate where and why they had difficulty in understanding the texts. Although their spoken conversational English was relatively fluent, at times they found it difficult to express themselves in English and to reflect on the reading."

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to determine to what extent students use textbooks.

Students' results emphasised the importance of textbooks; they indicated that more than 80% of their lecturers use textbooks and, therefore, most students buy textbooks. One of the reasons for this might be that textbook publishers claim to have made changes to the format and content of their latest textbooks; however, teachers and administrators tend to have contrary opinions (Gao, 2007, 109).

The results show that students still feel that the current resources available to them are not sufficient. Students are willing to buy workbooks and CDs and use e-learning tools to supplement the textbook and lectures. Unisa students are more willing to use a website or e-learning tool. It was, however, interesting to note that Unisa students were only 8.8% more willing to use electronic resources, given the focus on online learning tools, such as myUnisa, at this institution. It appears that Unisa students still use their study guides to a large extent and rely on the input they receive during lectures. A reason why students do not use myUnisa may be because most lecturers still do not use myUnisa for teaching (Mabunda 2010).

A main issue that emerged from the study is the problems that students experience with regard to language. The main resource, used by most students, is the textbook. This and other research indicates, however, that only about 40% of students at universities use English as a home language. This poses an important restriction on the textbook writer, namely the language needs to be easy to understand. The main characteristics of textbooks which students perceive as important in making studying easier are highlighted in Table 4.

It is important to note that students are not very concerned about aspects such as an appealing cover, whether the textbook is written in a conversational style, whether the activities help students to collaborate with other students, and whether various other ethnic groups are represented in examples, case studies and illustrations in the textbooks. These are typically regarded as overkill or low-priority textbook characteristics.

Given the results of this survey, a number of recommendations can be made. Universities need to note the important role that the textbook plays in student study. It would enhance student throughput if universities gave more support to lecturers who intend to write a textbook by providing specific policies on textbook development, financial support similar to that for accredited articles, and professional guidance on the layout of textbooks to support the curriculum. Areas where universities can also play a major role in textbook compilation are supplying lecturers

with information about the student profile and how this will impact the content, language, layout and so on of the textbook.

Another relevant point worth mentioning is that academics who embark on the process of writing a textbook should take note of those textbook characteristics that students feel enhance learning and those that are possibly regarded as overkill or of a low priority.

It is also important that publishers take note of the research findings and that they cooperate closely with academics when planning textbooks for a specific module. It appears from this research that universities, especially Unisa, need to give more encouragement to students to attend reading courses and, at the same time, ensure that these courses add value for students.

Academics at Unisa should be sensitised to the value of a blended approach to teaching, although consideration needs to be given to their workload if such an approach is adopted. The research has clearly indicated that the textbook plays a crucial role in student learning, but has to be supported by other teaching resources.

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