

## **An analysis of factors influencing student-athlete recruitment: A case study**

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### **Abstract**

With the professionalisation of sport in South Africa, the pressure to perform in sport amongst tertiary institutions has increased the competition to recruit the best athletes with the highest potential to perform. Tertiary education student-athlete recruitment has become a fiercely competitive market and being able to identify the factors which indirectly or directly influence a potential recruit's decision of whether or not to attend a tertiary institution is of great value to any institution. A sustainable and effective recruitment strategy is needed to ensure the recruitment of the highest calibre athletes. This study aims to determine which factors influence sport recruitment of student-athletes at tertiary level and the importance thereof. Questionnaires were distributed to potential University of Johannesburg recruits for 2013 (n=6); current UJ student-athletes (n=46); and unsuccessful 2012 recruits from various sporting codes consisting of athletics (n=4); cricket (n=1); football (n=18); hockey (n=5); netball (n=1); rowing (n=8); rugby (n=13) and other (n=2). Results were interpreted through the use of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The role of academic recruitment factors for student-athletes proved to be inconsequential overall with just the quality of the course presented measuring any significance, however sporting factors such as the quality of the High performance programme, sporting facilities and sporting participation opportunities of different levels were identified as strong recruitment factors on which student-athletes based their decisions on with regards to attending an institution. Higher education sport practitioners and/or coaches working with constrained student development programming and/or recruiting budgets are better able to streamline these processes with a better understanding of student athlete choice factors. Knowing which factors to emphasise during the choice stage of choosing a university will better assist urban-serving universities during program development or recruiting.

**Keywords:** Recruitment, student-athlete, scholarships, UJ Sport.

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### **Introduction**

The Higher Education (HE) environment across the globe has become a highly competitive sector with institutions competing to recruit students (Maringe,

2006). South African HE institutions are no exception as they are also subjected to the demands and competition of the market in which they function (Singh & Surujlal, 2006). With South Africa's highly successful hosting of the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, there has been renewed interest and participation in sport. Hence, the recruitment of top athletes has become a key focus of educational institutions. Students comprise the highest percentage of a university's clients and are a major source of its income. Hence, one of the important functions of the university is to recruit students who will be able to perform well academically as well on the sport field. An important part of the student population is student-athletes who are the primary clients of the university (Singh & Surujlal, 2006). Bolsmann & Miller (2008) regard student-athletes as the heart and soul of every participating organisation. Therefore, in order for a sport entity (e.g. University of Johannesburg -UJ Sport) to continue performing and improving performance, it is of importance that the best calibre athlete is recruited. This would require identifying the sport and academic factors that attract potential student-athletes (Cooper, 2009).

Literature pertaining to tertiary academic and sport recruitment has over the years become more marketing-orientated in order to attract prospective students; hence the identification of the students' needs has been highlighted as a crucial factor. Using the correct marketing techniques could potentially increase an institutions' chances of attracting students.

In the field of academic recruitment, Bolsmann and Miller (2008) indicated that websites are a popular method to gain access to university information on, for example, types of courses and subjects. However campus visits and open days were also important ways to recruit students. Although impersonal methods proved to be popular, it did not mean that personal interaction between potential students and the universities' representatives had no influence on their decision to join that institution. Bolsmann and Miller (2008) found a variation between the students' expectations and the standard of the sources of information the university has to offer.

A university is similar to any other business in that it has a consumer market (potential students) and its strategic goals are based on attracting potential students to further their studies at that institution. Soutar and Turner (2002) posit that HE has evolved from a centrally funded non marketised entity to a highly marketised one. In their new role, universities offer a wide range of programmes from which students are able to choose. Among these is the sport programme. In their decision to register for a particular programme, students take several factors into account.

With regard to the recruitment of student-athletes factors such as the university brand, university reputation, opportunities and other related factors would be

taken into account. Branding refers to “what a university is, what it stands for and what it’s going to be known for” (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008:1). This implies that the reputation of the institution plays a crucial role in the recruitment of potential students. Brand management is important as it helps identify the source of the product, it can reduce risk and search costs and most importantly brands are a signal of quality (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). Therefore, it is important to be able to build an internal commitment to the brand and produce a consistent ‘top quality’ brand (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). According to Beneke (2011), the task of managing an academic brand is trickier than it may seem. Various concepts that make up a university’s brand (e.g. signage around the campus, student conduct, condition of the buildings etc.) need to be sufficiently controlled. These factors have a direct impact on the institutions’ recruitment levels (Beneke, 2011).

Research on factors pertaining to recruitment of student-athletes prior to the 1980’s was scarce (Gayles, 2009) and only since the time that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) got involved with regard to recruitment regulations, academic performances and overall experiences of student-athletes, was there a slight increase in related literature. Many studies refer to the recruitment process directly and the impact it has on coaches. Majority of the recent international literature also refers to the changes in technology which has influenced the recruitment methods and costs.

Examples include home phone calls and mail to cellphones, text messages, emails and streaming video (Krause, 2007; Sander, 2008). Projected statistics of a sport recruitment drive that Sander (2007) conducted in Washington yielded that from a recruitment drive of a potential three hundred, one third of the potential recruits stated that the particular university is not for them, one hundred and fifty did not have the academic requirements to gain entrance into the university and of the fifty left, only about twenty-five accepted the scholarship offer leaving three to five willing to commit seriously to the athletic programme. More specifically considering literature which refers to factors influencing sport recruitment at a tertiary level, most studies identified scholarships and scholarship packages offered. Typical packages include full athletic scholarship, consisting of accommodation, books, tuition and fees, in addition to application fees and aided admissions process. Sander (2008:10) describes the recruitment process as including “e-mailing recruits and their parents, arranging visits to the campus, and generally being available at any hour of the day (or night)”. Factors included “sponsored recruitment” which is whereby a significant other encourages the athlete’s involvement, new relationships, role identities, social reference and programme infrastructure (Sander, 2008).

Marketing, branding, academic and sporting factors influence a potential recruit’s decision on whether or not to attend a particular tertiary institution.

Factors in marketing and branding included the importance of communication; brand awareness and brand reputation. Factors within academic and sport include personal communication; scholarship package; socialisation influences; and the recruits' perception of the University and their sporting abilities. Importance of continued research in this regard is also emphasised due to the changing nature of the consumer market (Cooper, 2009).

The conceptual framework associated with this study includes the Symbolic Interactionism (SI) theory. The SI theory gives insight into organised sport programmes that increasingly emphasise the 'performance ethic' (Coakley & Burnett, 2014). This means that participants in sport, even in recreational programmes, are encouraged to evaluate their experiences in terms of the progress they make in developing technical skills and moving to higher levels of competition (Coakley & Burnett, 2014). Student-athletes in elite, specialised programmes can become marketing tools for managers and symbols of the moral worth of higher education institutions. Student-athletes in high performance programmes work at their sport for long hours, week after week and year after year. They compete regularly and often generate revenues (indirect or directly) for their coaches, clubs, institutions and families (Coakley & Burnett, 2014). The Symbolic Interactionism (SI) theory — a sociological theory focusing on identity, social interaction, and symbolic interpretation—is easily applied to many areas within the institution of sport. Using a micro level of analysis, SI provides a description or explanation of the constructed reality of spectators, athletes, or coaches (Coakley & Burnett, 2014). Additionally, SI understands how people give meaning to their participation or consumption of daily activities. Recently, SI has been used by a variety of scholars to examine a wide variety of sport-based social dynamics, including student athlete choice factors.

### *Problem statement*

Information regarding the reasons why applicants choose a particular university is "central to developing institutional positioning in a competitive HE environment" (Maringe, 2006). How students view an institution plays a crucial role in the development of strategies to recruit students. Student-athletes' participation in sport benefits universities in many ways. These include providing a positive influence on the general welfare of the university (Singh & Surujlal, 2006), increased revenue, and enhancing the universities reputation through which the university, student enrolments as well as sponsorship opportunities are increased (Smart & Wolfe, 2000).

Gaining prospective students is one of the greatest challenges as the competition to do so is fierce, especially during the recruitment season (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008). Cooper (2009:15) suggests that universities need to step away from "playing it safe". Recruitment plans should include fun, creative and engaging

values in order to attract students (Cooper, 2009). This could mean that by approaching the market differently, recruitment levels can increase if this is done correctly. Because universities have now adopted the same attitude as any other business, they have started referring to students as well as their parents as customers. Cooper (2009) suggests universities should approach their customers being academic students as well as sporting athletes (student-athletes) in a different and more interactive way.

Research within South Africa was limited to only a few articles. Studies by Bisschoff and Lotriet (2009) identified customer service as an important factor in recruiting potential student-athletes. Research by Burnett (2010) considered factors influencing the recruitment of students within the University of Johannesburg. Findings included socialisation influences such as peers, friends, family or significant other, for example a coach or team manager. The potential recruits' perception that the University of Johannesburg was the preferred choice of institution for a particular academic field also played an influencing role. Other offered student activities, occurring outside of academics and sporting context were also identified. With specific reference to the sporting code, influences such as level of programme availability, quality of the sporting facilities and the associated coach also impacted on the potential recruits' decision.

Given the limited research attention paid to the recruitment of student-athletes, this study sought to add to the knowledge base of student recruitment by identifying factors which influence student-athletes to join UJ Sport.

## **Methodology**

### *Design*

A cross-sectional research design using a case study was adopted for the study. Subsets of the population who shared common characteristics associated with the phenomenon being researched were recruited to provide information on the phenomenon. In this study the following cohorts: potential 2013 recruits, successful 2012 recruits, and current senior University of Johannesburg (UJ) student-athletes were the subsets of the population. Cherry (2014) postulates that the defining characteristic of this approach is that it takes place in a single point in time without manipulating the variables. It allows researchers to examine various aspects such as age, gender and income at once regarding the prevalence of something in a given population.

### *Sample*

The sample of the study included participants from the following categories: a) Potential 2013 UJ student-athlete recruits who have completed a data card and currently participate within one of the high performance sporting codes (n=6); b) Successful 2012 UJ student-athlete recruits (n=17); and c) Current senior UJ student-athletes (n=29). Participants were identified through completed UJ Sport data recruitment cards held at the Sport Bureau at UJ.

### *Instrument and procedures*

Data were collected using an adapted version of Burnett's (2010) questionnaire which contained ranked close-ended five point Likert type rating scale questions on possible factors influencing a student-athlete's decision to attend a specific university (1=Strongly agree, 2= Agree, 3= Neutral, 4=Disagree and 4= Strongly disagree). A two-section questionnaire was developed for the study. In Section A biographical information of the participants was requested. Section B comprised items from Burnett's (2010) study.

The following procedures were used to collect the data: a) potential 2013 UJ student-athlete recruits had questionnaires emailed to them; b) successful 2012 UJ student-athletes were handed a questionnaire to complete at their training sessions and through their sport managers; and c) current senior UJ student-athletes were handed a questionnaire to complete at a training session.

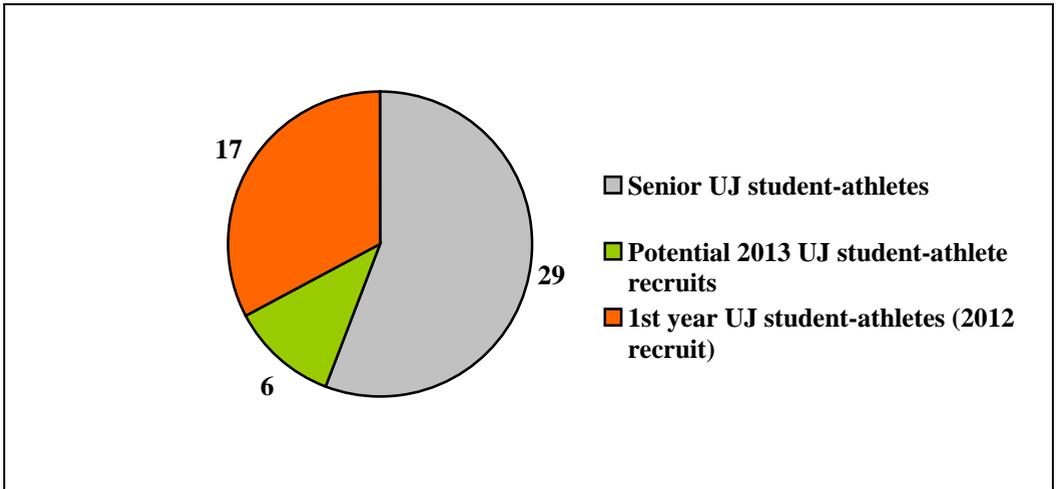
Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary could be discontinued at any time without consequences. Participants were also made aware that their responses would be confidential and their participation would remain anonymous.

### *Data analysis*

The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS – Version 21). Descriptive statistics were used to report on the data. Frequency charts and tables were utilised in the interpretation of the data.

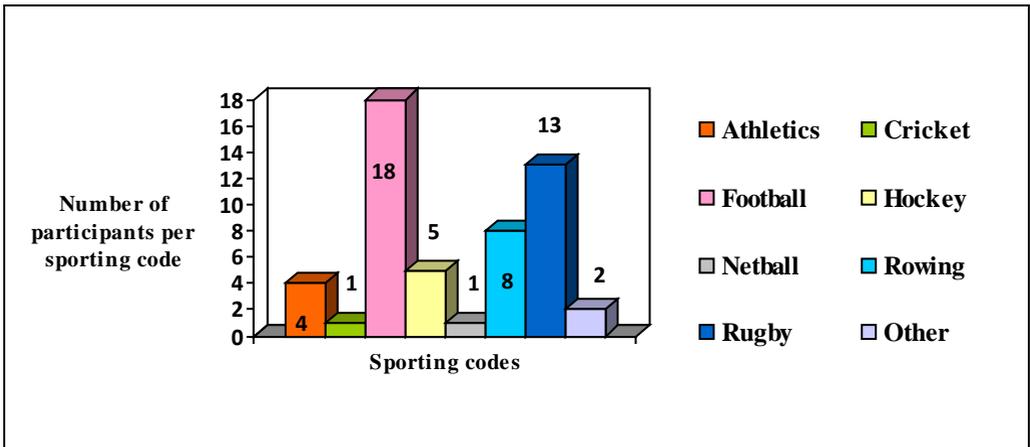
## **Results**

Participants (n=52) who completed the questionnaire, consisted of senior students (n=29, 55%), first year students (2012 recruits) (n=17, 33%) and potential students (2013 recruits) (n=6, 12%).



**Figure 3:** Research sample according to cohorts

Participants from the various sporting codes consisted of athletics (n=4); cricket (n=1); football (n=18); hockey (n=5); netball (n=1); rowing (n=8); rugby (n=13) and other (n=2).



**Figure 4:** Sporting codes

The level of participation consisted of student-athletes from below 1<sup>st</sup> team at UJ (n=2); 1<sup>st</sup> team/club level (n=22); provincial (n=14) and national level (n=11). Additionally, sport bursary holders were (n=31), with academic bursary holders consisting of (n=5).

#### *Academic recruitment factors*

Academic recruitment factors assessed within the questionnaire included quality and cost of the qualification, administration and registration process, the ability to provide distance learning, student activities offered, alumni family and/or staff

member, friends attending UJ, quality of accommodation offered and the opportunity of being recruited for academic purposes.

The 'Potential 2013 students-athletes recruits' indicated that there were no significant academic recruitment factors influencing their decisions to attend UJ. The 'Recruited student-athletes from 2012' felt that the quality of the standard of the course presented (n=4; 66%) significantly influenced their decision to attend UJ.

The following aspects were reported as not having any influence on the participants' decision on what university to attend: Having a family member that previously studied at the institution (n=33, 64%); the availability of the course presented at UJ (n=32, 62%); having a family member or parent that works at UJ (n=43, 82%) and receiving a leadership bursary and/or academic bursary (n=36, 70%). The 'Senior UJ student-athletes' (registered before 2012) felt that there were no academic factors that had a significant positive influence on their decision to attend UJ. Factors which did not significantly influence them included: the courses presented by UJ (n=34, 65%); family and/or friend member studying or working at UJ (n=52, 100%); and recruited for academic and/or leadership purposes and bursaries (n=42, 81%).

### *Sport recruitment factors*

Sport recruitment factors that were assessed with regard to influencing the student-athlete in being recruited or joining the tertiary institution were: sport bursaries; the availability of programmes offered by UJ; the quality of the sporting facilities; the human resources support such as coaches; access to sport housing; participation as a Junior UJ Club member; being recruited for specific sporting purposes; the management of UJ Sport; the possibility of selection into provincial/national team via UJ Sport; the High performance programme and sporting results obtained by UJ Sport. For the 'Potential 2013 students' the following factors had a significant positive influence on their decision to attend UJ: the level of programme availability offered by UJ (n=4, 83%) and the High performance programme (n=4, 83%). The 'Recruited student-athletes from 2012' perceived the following factors as having a significantly positive influence on their decision to attend UJ: the availability of programmes offered by UJ (n=12, 70%); the sports bursary offered to them (n=11, 64%); the quality of UJ Sport facilities (n=13, 76%); being recruited for specific UJ Sports (n=8, 47%); The High performance programme offered by UJ (n=14, 82%); the management of Sport at UJ (n=11, 64%); the coach coaching at UJ (n=11, 64%); the availability of programmes offered by UJ (n=11, 64%); the possibility to be selected on provincial or national level while representing UJ (n=14, 73%); and the results by obtained by UJ Sport (n=12, 70%). In the case of the 'Senior UJ students' the following sport factors significantly influenced their decision to attend UJ: the

quality of UJ Sport facilities (n=22, 75%) and the possibility to be selected on provincial or national level while representing UJ (n=19, 65%). According to this group the following factor did not influence their decision to join UJ: being a member of UJ Junior Club (n=26, 89%). The common factors which had the strongest influence on student-athlete recruitment among all three groups was that of the quality of the High performance programme and the quality of the UJ Sport facilities (Figure 3).

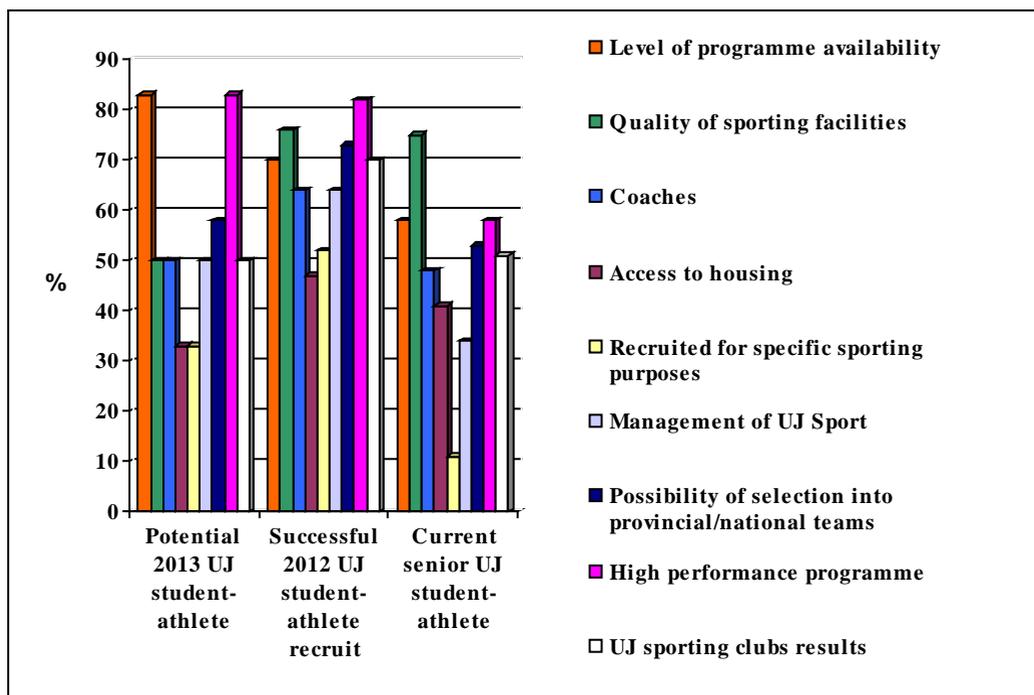


Figure 5: Positive sport recruitment factors

### Ranking of recruitment factors

In assessing the importance weighting of recruitment factors among the student-athlete participants, factors were ranked from important to least important.. The ‘High performance programme’ was ranked as the most influential factor when it came to recruitment with 74% of participants in agreement. The second most influential factor was that of ‘Level of programme availability’ (70%) with students looking at what sport leagues and level of competition the university is involved in. ‘Quality in sporting facilities’ (67%) and the ‘Possibility of making a provincial or national team’ (61%) were other factors very much deemed as important in a student-athlete’s decision. The quality and competence of ‘Coaching staff’ (57%) as well as the reputation of ‘Results’ (54%) obtained by the sport teams of a university were further highlighted as significant factors. Lower in the ranks were factors such as ‘Management of UJ Sport’ (49%) and ‘Access to housing’ (40%). Last in the ranking of recruitment factors was that of

being ‘Head hunting’ (32%) where student-athletes did not deem as significantly important.

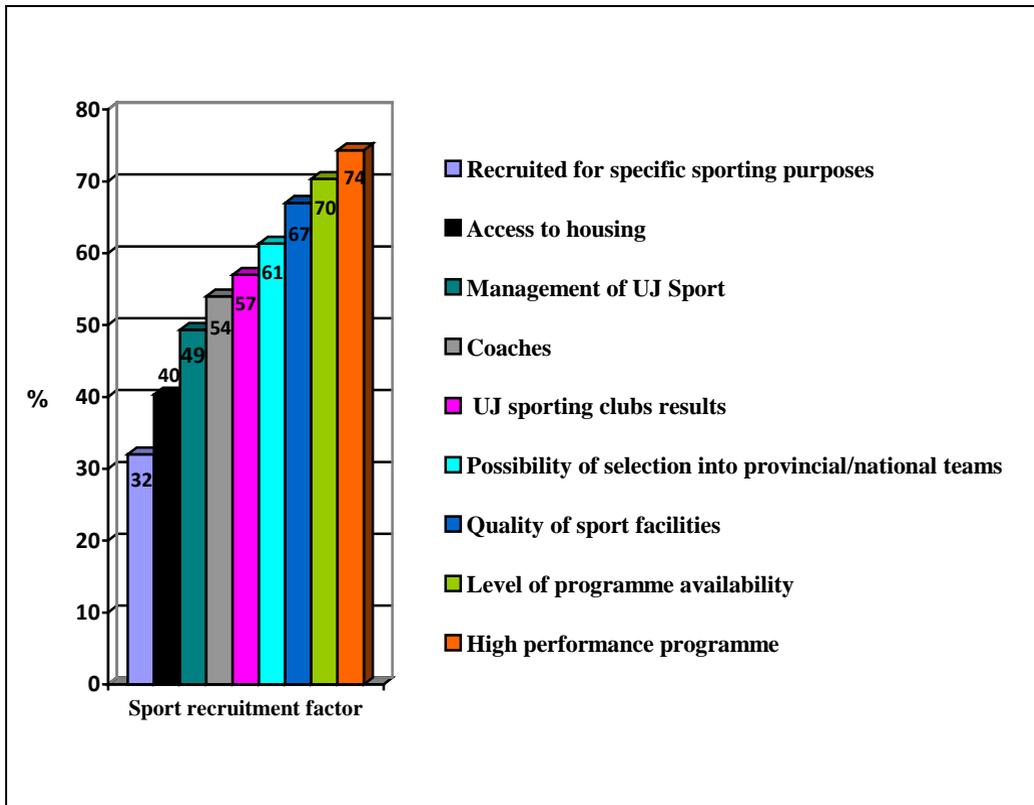


Figure 6: Sport recruitment factors according to ranking

## Discussion

With regard to academic recruitment factors, only the standard of the courses presented at UJ significantly influenced the decision of UJ as the preferred choice of tertiary institution within the category of successful 2012 UJ student-athlete recruits (n=11; 65%). This finding resonates with that of Burnett’s (2010) study which identified the perception that UJ being the best in a particular academic field was the main academic attractor to students. Wæraas and Solbakk (2008) further highlighted this in their study, with the reputation of being a top quality brand influencing the likelihood of recruitment.

Social agents and related influencers had no influence on student-athletes’ decision to study at UJ. This is in contradiction to Burnett’s (2010) study which indicated that the most influential recruitment factor was indeed that of peers and/or friends studying at UJ (n=112, 76%). In fact, other factors such as receiving a leadership and/or academic bursary, which is an important financial incentive in a difficult economic climate (Hatt & Baxter, 2005), did not influence

student-athletes. A plausible reason for this could possibly be that potential student athletes took it for granted that they would automatically receive a bursary regardless.

The huge influence of programme availability offered by UJ, the High performance programme available to student-athletes, the quality of UJ Sport facilities, the management of Sport at UJ, the coach coaching at UJ, the possibility to be selected on provincial or national level while representing UJ and the results obtained by UJ sport on student-athletes' decision are significant factors that need to be considered by marketers and recruiters of students (Figure 4). The afore-mentioned factors appear to be the competitive edge that UJ Sport has compared to many other universities in South Africa. The factors are also indicative of the high quality sport brand that UJ Sport has developed into. This, according to Beneke (2011) has a direct influence on institutions' recruitment levels. Research by Allen and Aldebron (2008) refers to the offer of scholarships and external funding as being important recruitment strategies to attract students. In this study, however, the strongest influencers on the decision to attend UJ were the High performance programme and quality of the UJ Sport facilities. These findings corroborates those of Green's (2005:237) study which identified "programme infrastructure" as a positive recruitment factor while "sponsored recruitment" was identified as "significant others" to encourage student-athletes to get involved in sport, develop new relationships, role identities and social reference". Overall the findings of this study refute many of the findings of previous studies on student recruitment.

Recruitment factors such as peer and family alumni (Burnett, 2010) and/or scholarships and external funding (Allen & Aldebron, 2008) received less importance in student-athletes decision to study at UJ. Plausible reasons for this could be that with sport becoming more competitive and the student-athlete directed towards a more performance ethic orientation, the choice of university is no longer dependent on merely financial funding but factors such as the quality of facilities and programmes, the reputation of the university and the quality and competence of the human resources (e.g. sport coaches) which can ensure their athletic success. While the study did not directly explore customer service, which Bisschoff and Lotriet (2009) regarded as a potential recruitment factor, in the recruitment of student-athletes, questions regarding the administration and recruitment process as well as the management of UJ sport were posed to the participants. While the responses of the participants indicated that this did not influence them to attend UJ, a poor customer service experience could be a potential deterrent for academic and sport recruits

## **Implications for further research**

This study did not assess methods of recruitment such as information needs, open days or campus visits, home phone calls, text messages and emails. Further research could explore the influence of recruitment strategies on student-athlete recruitment. Furthermore, research on all sporting codes and not limited to only high performance sporting codes can be conducted. Researchers should also include branding, marketing and product identification questions which would possibly identify whether the institution's reputation affects recruitment. In addition, within the biographical section of the survey, a question requesting one's income bracket and source of income should be included, as this may possibly influence scholarship and bursary factor trends.

## **Conclusion**

Recently there has been much research attention focused on the university choice factors of potential student-athletes. However, in South Africa it is very limited. Hence the aim of this study was to identify the choice factors with which student-athletes align their decisions with which to attend a university or not. Results revealed that academic recruitment factors were insignificant in the decision of the student-athlete overall with just the quality of the course presented having a minimal influence. In contrast, sporting recruitment factors such as the quality of sporting facilities, the level of programme availability and the university's high performance programme were the most salient factors in a student-athletes' decision in being recruited. The results of this research may help to streamline the recruiting process for sporting departments by addressing the most important choice factors for student-athletes. As a result, a better and more efficient allocation of recruiting funds may be developed in order to maximize recruitment processes and outcomes.

## **Recommendations**

Recommendations to UJ Sport would be to focus on the maintenance and continuous improvement of their High performance programme. Due to the quality of sporting facilities being identified as the second most important recruitment factor, UJ is encouraged to focus on keeping the quality of the facilities at a high level which would, in turn, attract a larger number of athletes of which are of a higher calibre. It would be beneficial for UJ to maintain relationships with the provincial and national federations to continue creating opportunities for their athletes' exposure. From this research it is evident that the management of UJ Sport is a contributing factor to the success of student-athlete recruitment, clear communication channels would ensure a sustainable, efficient and proactive recruitment process. UJ Sport needs to increase the availability of housing for sports students and also ensure that the quality of the sport housing is

up to standard and that there is a proper maintenance programme for the housing if they intend to increase the salience on this recruitment factor.

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