

The Impact of Procurement Processes on Vendor Perceptions of Fairness in University Contracts; Special Reference to The Open University of Sri Lanka

Vendor
Perceptions

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Abstract

This study examines how procurement processes at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) shape vendor perceptions of fairness. OUSL's operational efficiency depends on a diverse supplier network, highlighting the importance of effective procurement. However, research on vendor fairness perceptions, especially in developing countries, is scarce. Using a deductive, quantitative approach, data were collected from 326 vendors engaged with OUSL between 2023-2024 via a structured questionnaire to assess fairness perceptions. Findings indicate that clear evaluation processes, effective communication, timely payments, and staff expertise significantly boost vendor satisfaction and trust. Statistical analyses confirm strong positive correlations between these factors and perceived fairness. The results emphasize the need for OUSL to adopt transparent, accountable procurement practices to foster positive vendor relationships and ensure equitable treatment. A robust, ethical procurement system requires integrating ethical standards and anti-corruption measures to mitigate risks and enhance performance. Transparency promotes fair competition and accountability, while secrecy may lead to reduced competition and collusion. This study offers insights for higher education institutions aiming to improve procurement and vendor relationships. Information dissemination is key to driving change. Future research should investigate long-term procurement reform impacts and technology's role in enhancing transparency and efficiency. Public procurement aims to ensure a reliable supply of materials and services, with digitization supporting operations and decision-making.

Keywords: Procurement Processes, Vendor Perceptions, Fairness, Contracts, The Open University of Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The Open University of Sri Lanka stands as a pivotal institution within the higher education sector of Sri Lanka, with a primary mission to deliver accessible and inclusive educational opportunities to a diverse student body throughout the country (Oware et al., 2016). OUSL is dedicated to democratizing education and serves students from diverse geographic and socio-economic backgrounds by ensuring that high-quality educational programs are accessible locally through its main campus in Colombo, its nine regional centers, and seventeen study centers (Karunanayaka & Naidu, 2018) ("Open Praxis," 2022) (Karunanayaka & Naidu, 2019). The university's commitment extends to pioneering approaches in educational resource integration, particularly in Open Educational Resources, aiming to enhance teaching and learning methodologies (Karunanayaka & Naidu, 2018). To fulfill its educational objectives and ensure operational efficiency, OUSL relies on an extensive network of suppliers (Karunanayaka & Naidu, 2019). This network is essential for consistently delivering crucial resources, including textbooks, laboratory equipment, office supplies, furniture, and IT infrastructure, all vital to the university's daily functions (Karunanayaka & Naidu, 2019). As procurement processes grow in complexity, cultivating robust vendor relationships has become increasingly critical for improving operational effectiveness and achieving superior educational results (Karunanayaka & Naidu, 2019).

Despite the acknowledged importance of efficient procurement and vendor relationships in higher education, this study highlights a significant gap in the lack of research on how vendors view fairness in procurement processes, especially in open universities in developing countries like Sri Lanka. While previous studies (e.g., Hassan et al., 2020) discussed general procurement issues in higher education, few focus on vendor perceptions of fairness as a key factor in procurement success. These perceptions directly affect bid competitiveness, supply chain reliability, and institutional reputation. These factors are crucial for resource-limited universities in developing countries, where feelings of unfairness can discourage vendor participation, raise costs, or weaken trust in public institutions. The problem is made worse by three contextual gaps. First, although accountability and transparency are often promoted in public procurement, their application in decentralized open universities such as the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), with its regional centers and mixed governance, has not been thoroughly studied (Karunanayaka & Naidu, 2019). Second, developing countries encounter unique challenges, such as bureaucratic delays, corruption risks, and informal vendor relationships, which can cloud fairness perceptions. The effects of these challenges are not well documented. Third, there is a lack of empirical connections between specific procurement practices, such as bid evaluation clarity and dispute resolution methods, and vendor perceptions of fairness, particularly in Sri Lanka's social and economic context, where regulatory enforcement and cultural norms may influence these relationships. Addressing this gap is urgent. Unfair perceptions in procurement can systematically disadvantage small or local vendors, lessen competition, and maintain institutional inefficiencies. By exploring the case of OUSL, a model for similar institutions in developing nations, this study aims to reveal how procurement practices influence vendor fairness perceptions. This will provide theoretical insights and practical recommendations to improve procurement governance.

This study is directed to solve the underlying problems mentioned above, so the forthcoming literature review will pave the way to unearth some hidden facts to conduct this research further.

Research Questions and Objectives

Based on the above scenarios and previous scholarly findings, in order to address the main research problem, the following five research questions are raised.

1. How does the clarity of the evaluation process influence vendors' perception of fairness in the procurement process at the Open University of Sri Lanka?
2. How does communication effectiveness from the procuring entity influence a Vendor's Perception of Fairness in the procurement process?
3. To what extent does the timeliness of the procurement process affect a vendor's perception of fairness?
4. What is the impact of the staff's expertise and engagement on a vendor's perception of fairness in the procurement?
5. Which of the four factors, clarity of evaluation, communication effectiveness, timeliness of the procurement, or staff expertise and engagement, is the most significant predictor of a vendor's perception of fairness in the procurement process?

Based on the above five research questions, the following five objectives are created in order to address the questions.

1. Assess the impact of evaluation clarity (e.g., clear criteria, transparent terms) on vendor perceptions of fairness in procurement.
2. To examine the influence of communication effectiveness (e.g., timely updates and clear responses) from the procuring entity on a vendor's perception of fairness in the procurement process.
3. To assess the extent to which the timeliness of the procurement process (e.g., Adherence to deadlines and the speed of decision-making) affects a vendor's perception of fairness.
4. To analyze the impact of staff expertise and engagement (e.g., responsiveness, problem-solving skills) on a vendor's perception of fairness in the procurement process.
5. To identify which of the four factors (Clarity of Evaluation, Communication Effectiveness, Timeliness of the Procurement, or Staff Expertise and Engagement) is the most significant predictor of a vendor's perception of fairness in the procurement process.

Literature Review

The significance of public procurement within organizational frameworks, particularly in institutions like the Open University of Sri Lanka, necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its multifaceted dimensions, especially concerning vendor perceptions (Moe, 2014). Operational efficiency within such universities relies heavily on a diverse supplier network; therefore, the effectiveness of procurement processes is of utmost importance (Moe, 2014). The existing literature underscores the critical role of transparent and accountable procurement practices in fostering positive vendor relationships and ensuring equitable treatment, which is vital for the sustained success of any organization that depends on external suppliers (Knack et al., 2018).

The Role of Transparency and Accountability

An effective procurement system requires strong ethical standards and strict anti-corruption measures to reduce risks and improve performance. The processes underpinning public procurement have received limited attention in academic discourse, with most studies focusing on discrete tasks such as tendering and vendor selection (Moe, 2014). These studies frequently adopt variance or snapshot approaches, further limiting the scope of understanding of public procurement's longitudinal impacts and holistic nature (Moe, 2014).

To address these limitations, a process-oriented research approach is advocated, emphasizing issues such as stakeholder involvement, management strategies, and the application of dialectics to navigate the inherent complexities of procurement (Moe, 2014). Integrating e-procurement systems has emerged as a strategic approach to enhance transparency and accountability, which are critical in mitigating corruption within public procurement processes (Neupane et al., 2014).

Empirical Evidence and Stakeholder Engagement

Empirical evidence suggests that improved public access to comprehensive, reliable, and timely procurement information correlates with increased participation from firms in public procurement markets, alongside reduced instances of kickbacks to officials when open competition exceptions are explicitly justified, and independent complaint mechanisms are in place (Knack et al., 2018). Sustained and participative reforms that involve all essential stakeholders are necessary to effectively control corruption in public procurement systems, with integrity and commitment to good governance practices being preconditions for a sound public procurement system (Achua, 2011).

Factors Influencing Vendor Satisfaction

Furthermore, prior research highlights the positive relationships between clarity in evaluation processes, effective communication strategies, and the promptness of payments, all essential in enhancing vendor satisfaction and trust (Knack et al., 2018; Neupane et al., 2014). These elements are pivotal in shaping vendor perceptions of fairness, influencing their willingness to engage in future collaborations. Applying the Principal-Agent theory offers a valuable lens for understanding and addressing potential conflicts of interest and ensuring that procurement practices align with organizational objectives.

Challenges in Procurement Processes

Governments facing economic challenges may be tempted to manipulate procurement processes to alleviate socio-economic impacts, such as supporting employment. Still, few prioritize assessing these objectives' costs, benefits, and actual effects. Adopting technology acceptance models further elucidates the factors influencing the acceptance and utilization of e-procurement systems, including perceived usefulness, ease of use, and trust. Governments may manipulate procurement processes to alleviate socio-economic impacts, but often overlook costs, benefits, and effects. Technology acceptance models reveal factors influencing e-procurement system acceptance and utilization. These factors play a significant role in determining the

successful implementation of anti-corruption technologies within public procurement frameworks (Neupane et al., 2012).

Implications of Ineffective Procurement

Ineffective procurement processes can lead to compromised vendor relationships, increased costs, and negative reputation. Adopting best practices in public procurement fosters fairness, transparency, and accountability, improving vendor trust and quality.

The Role of Information and Communication Technology

Integrating information and communication technology offers new models of public governance that promote fairness and accountability (Ferreira et al., 2014). This is crucial in sectors like public procurement, which is particularly vulnerable to corruption risks (Ferreira et al., 2014). Investments in public e-procurement, such as those seen in Portugal, may impact the level of trust between citizens and governance (Ferreira et al., 2014). E-procurement technologies can significantly reduce corruption opportunities in public procurement by addressing factors like monopoly of power, information asymmetry, and transparency (Neupane et al., 2014; Ferreira et al., 2014).

Research Methodology

This research aims to analyze vendor satisfaction with the procurement process at the Open University of Sri Lanka. The methodology involved a survey design to collect data from vendors who had previously participated in the university's procurement process. The target population was 326 vendors who had supplied goods or services to the Open University of Sri Lanka in the last 02 years (2023/2024) (Amarasekara & Marasinghe, 2020). The data collection method was an online questionnaire distributed electronically to all vendors registered in the OUSL supply registry via email and WhatsApp (Suparto, 2021). Of those contacted, 73 vendors responded to the questionnaire and were considered part of the sample. The 73 responses were cleaned by the standard deviation and 11 responses were removed, leaving 62 responses as the final sample. The questionnaire included five points Likert Scale questions to assess vendor satisfaction with different aspects of the procurement process, such as clarity of evaluation, communication effectiveness, timeliness and staff expertise, as well as open-ended questions to gather detailed insights into positive and negative experiences, and suggestions for improvement (Hassan et al., 2020; Suparto, 2021)

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software for descriptive statistics and inferential statistics like correlation, and regression analysis. Correlation measures the strength and direction of the association between two variables, while multiple correlation coefficient extends correlation analysis to encompass multiple independent variables such as clarity of evaluation, communication effectiveness, timeliness and staff expertise and their combined influence on a single dependent variable, vendor perception of the fairness (Basheikh et al., 2023). ANOVA test helps assess the statistical significance of the regression model, determining if the observed relationships between the variables are likely due to chance or if they are significant.

(Munyimi, 2019) (Das, 2020) The research methodology employed in this study is consistent with previous studies on procurement practices and vendor perception of fairness.

A conceptual framework is developed that captures the interrelations between the identified variables of clarity of evaluation, communication effectiveness, timeliness of the procurement, and staff engagement and expertise in relation to vendor perception of fairness in the procurement.

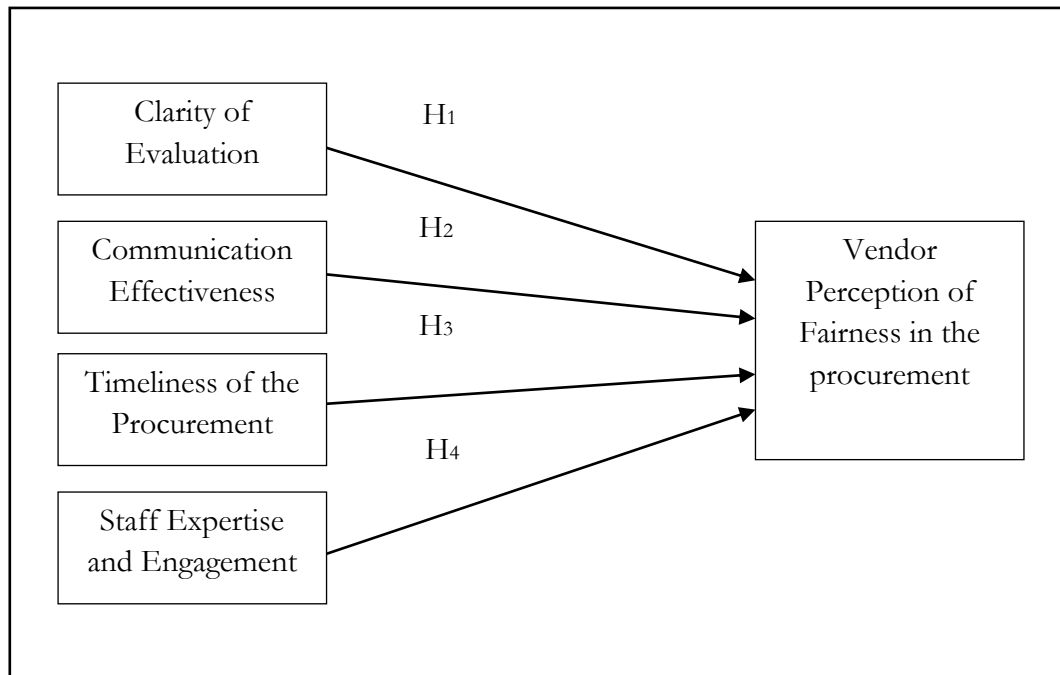


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Model

Source: Authors' presentation

Hypotheses

H1: Greater clarity in the evaluation process is positively correlated with vendors' perceptions of fairness in the procurement process.

H2: Effective communication from procurement staff leads to higher vendor perceptions of fairness in the procurement process.

H3: Timeliness in the procurement process is positively associated with vendors' perceptions of fairness.

H4: Higher levels of staff expertise and engagement result in more favorable perceptions of fairness in the procurement process.

Data Analysis and Presentations

The following sections present a detailed analysis of the relationships between several key constructs: clarity of evaluation process (ICP), communication of effectiveness (ICE), timeliness of the procurement process (ITP), staff expertise and engagement (ISE), and vendor perception of fairness (MPF).

This analysis employs a range of statistical techniques, including convergent and discriminant validity testing, reliability analysis, and correlation analysis, to comprehensively understand how these constructs interact and influence each other. The simple random sampling method was used to collect data with a structured questionnaire. The sample size of 62 was utilized to run the statistical test. Before starting the final analysis following pre-requisites were done in order to enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis. The data collection was operationalized during the month of June 2024 to August 2024.

Table 1. Vendor Profile

Demographic Variables	Descriptions	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
i). Type of Business	Sole Proprietorship	13	21%	21%
	Partnership	10	16%	37%
	Limited Liability Company (LLC)	23	37%	74%
		16	26%	100%
	Public Limited Company (PLC)	62	100%	
ii) Nature of Primary Business of the vendor	Construction	03	04%	04%
	Information Technology	14	23%	27%
	Laboratory Chemical, Glassware, and Equipment	16	26%	53%
		11	18%	71%
	Office Equipment	07	11%	82%
	Supplies	11	18%	100%
	Service Provider	62	100%	
iii) Experience in the Relevant Business	Stationery Suppliers			
	1-5 Years	05	8%	8%
	6 - 10 Years	11	18%	26%
	11-15 Years	09	14%	40%
iv) Contracts received from the university	16 ≤ Years	37	60%	100%
		62		
	1-2 Contracts	15	24%	24%
	3-5 Contracts	12	19%	43%
	6-10 Contracts	19	30%	73%
	More than 10 Contracts	17	27%	100%
		62	100%	

Source: Authors' survey data

Table 1 present the procurement landscape at the Open University of Sri Lanka, showcasing a diverse vendor pool, with Limited Liability Companies (37%) and Sole Proprietorships (21%) being prominent. Key business activities include Information Technology (23%) and Laboratory Chemical Supplies (26%), indicating a demand for specialized resources

(Ketemaw, 2020). Notably, 60% of vendors have over 16 years of experience, suggesting a wealth of expertise (Suparto, 2021). The frequency of contracts reveals that 30% of vendors have 6-10 contracts, highlighting recurring engagements. Fair procurement processes are essential for fostering trust and collaboration, as perceived unfairness can lead to dissatisfaction (Cui & Hasija, 2012; Vlachos, 2020). Strategic partnerships, built on mutual trust and effective communication, enhance procurement outcomes and vendor loyalty (Morauski, 2019; Ondieki et al., 2023). Ultimately, aligning procurement goals with vendor capabilities is crucial for achieving high-quality outcomes (Yahya & Kingsman, 1999).

Validity Test

Table 2. Discriminant Validity Test Results

	ICP	ICE	ITP	ISE	MPF
ICP	.824				
ICE	.780**	.849			
ITP	.673**	.628**	.707		
ISE	.793**	.817**	.705**	.866	
MPF	.788**	.814**	.699**	.836**	.888

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Vendor Registry of OUSL (2023/2024)

Table 2 presents the discriminant validity test results, a crucial assessment in validating the distinctiveness of the constructs employed in the study (Talwar et al., 2020). Discriminant validity ensures that the constructs are empirically unique and not simply overlapping measures of the same underlying concept (Talwar et al., 2020). The values on the diagonal, representing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct, are all above 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and convergent validity (Thakur, 2013). Specifically, the square root of the AVE for ICP is 0.824, ICE is 0.849, ITP is 0.707, ISE is 0.866, and MPF is 0.888. These values exceed the inter-construct correlations, providing strong discriminant validity evidence (Rönkkö & Cho, 2020). The inter-construct correlations, which are the off-diagonal elements, represent the relationships between the constructs, and these values are all lower than the diagonal elements, confirming that each construct is distinct (Rönkkö & Cho, 2020). For example, the correlation between ICP and ICE is 0.780, which is lower than the square root of the AVE for both ICP (0.824) and ICE (0.849), supporting discriminant validity. This table confirms that each construct measures a unique aspect of the phenomenon under study and that no overlap or redundancy exists among them. (Rönkkö & Cho, 2020).

Reliability Result

Table 3. Reliability Test Results

Variable	No of items	Alpha Cronbach	AVE
ICP	5	0.879	0.7
ICE	6	0.869	0.7

ITP	5	0.732	0.5
ISE	6	0.883	0.8
MPF	8	0.906	0.8

Source: Vendor Registry of OUSL (2023/2024)

Table 3 presents the reliability test results, demonstrating the consistency and stability of the measurement instruments used in the study. Reliability is a critical aspect of measurement quality, ensuring that the results are dependable and reproducible. The table includes Cronbach's Alpha and Average Variance Extracted values for each construct. Cronbach's Alpha assesses the internal consistency of the items within each construct, with values above 0.70 generally considered acceptable. The Average Variance Extracted measures the amount of variance captured by the construct about the amount of variance due to measurement error. The Cronbach's Alpha for ICP is 0.879, for ICE is 0.869, for ITP is 0.732, for ISE is 0.883, and for MPF is 0.906, all indicating strong internal consistency (Cook & Beckman, 2006). The AVE for ICP and ICE is 0.7, AVE for ITP is 0.5 and AVE for ISE and MPF is 0.8, which further supports the reliability and validity of the constructs (Cook & Beckman, 2006; Hesamamiri et al., 2013). These values are above the recommended threshold of 0.5, indicating that the constructs explain more variance than error. These reliability results confirm that the measurement instruments used in the study are consistent and stable.

Pearson Correlation Coefficients

Table 4. Correlation Results

	ICP	ICE	ITP	ISE	MPF
ICP	1	.780**	.673**	.793**	.788**
ICE		1	.628**	.817**	.814**
ITP			1	.755**	.699**
ISE				1	.836**
MPF					1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).\

Source: Vendor Registry of OUSL (2023/2024)

Table 4 illustrates the correlation results, providing insights into the relationships between the constructs examined in the study. Correlation analysis is used to assess the strength and direction of the relationships between variables. The correlation coefficients range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating stronger relationships. It shows the inter-construct correlations among the constructs in the study. For example, the correlation between ICP and ICE is 0.780, the correlation between ICP and ITP is 0.673, the correlation between ICP and ISE is 0.793, and the correlation between ICP and MPF is 0.788, all indicating significant positive relationships. Similarly, the correlation between ICE and ITP is 0.628, between ICE and ISE is 0.817, and between ICE and MPF is 0.814, which also shows significant positive relationships. Further, the correlation between ITP and ISE is 0.755, and the correlation between ITP and MPF is 0.699, indicating positive associations between these constructs. The correlation between ISE and MPF is 0.836, indicating a robust positive relationship between these constructs.

Overall Performance of The Regression Model**Table 5.** Model Summery

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.879a	.773	.759	.43127	2.090

^aPredictors: (Constant), ISE, ITP, ICP, ICE. ^bDependent Variable: MPF

Source: Vendor Registry of OUSL (2023/2024)

The regression model's overall performance, as summarized in Table 5, reveals a strong and significant relationship between the independent variables and vendor perceptions of fairness. The R value of 0.879 indicates a high degree of correlation, signifying that the model effectively captures the relationship between the predictors and the outcome variable (Leila et al., 2020). The R-squared value of 0.773 suggests that the model explains approximately 77.3% of the variance in vendor perceptions of fairness, demonstrating a substantial explanatory power (Leila et al., 2020). The adjusted R-squared value of 0.759 provides a more conservative estimate of the variance explained, accounting for the number of predictors in the model and the sample size, suggesting that the model's explanatory power is not solely due to overfitting. The standard error of the estimate, at 0.43127, reflects the precision of the model's predictions, indicating the average deviation of the observed values from the predicted values; this suggests that the model provides reasonably accurate estimates of vendor perceptions of fairness. The Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.090 falls within the acceptable range, indicating that there is no significant autocorrelation in the residuals, which is a crucial assumption for the validity of the regression analysis (Leila et al., 2020). These findings corroborate previous research emphasizing the importance of fairness in maintaining successful partnerships (Divita et al., 2006).

Statistical Significance of The Regression Model**Table 6.** ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	41.779	4	10.445	56.156	.000b
Residual	12.276	66	.186		
Total	54.055	70			

a. Dependent Variable: MPF

b. Predictors: (Constant), ISE, ITP, ICP, ICE

Source: Vendor Registry of OUSL (2023/2024)

The statistical significance of the regression model is further supported by the ANOVA results presented in Table 6, which demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between the independent variables and vendor perception of fairness. The F-statistic of 56.156, with an associated p-value of 0.000, indicates that the overall model is highly significant, suggesting that the predictors, as a set, have a significant impact on vendor perceptions of fairness. This aligns with prior studies highlighting the crucial role of fairness in shaping perceptions and behaviors

within business relationships. The sum of squares for regression (41.779) represents the amount of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variables, while the sum of squares for residuals (12.276) represents the unexplained variance. The mean square values are calculated by dividing the sum of squares by the degrees of freedom, providing an estimate of the variance per degree of freedom. The regression model demonstrates a strong and statistically significant relationship between the predictors and vendor perceptions of fairness (Divita et al., 2006).

Regression Coefficient

Table 7: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-.409	.327		-1.251	.215
ICP	.284	.146	.206	1.945	.056
ICE	.327	.117	.306	2.787	.007
ITP	.127	.102	.114	1.254	.214
ISE	.369	.139	.337	2.662	.010

a. Dependent Variable: MVS

Source: Vendor Registry of OUSL (2023/2024)

The regression coefficients presented in Table 7 provide insights into the individual contribution of each predictor variable to vendor satisfaction. The unstandardized coefficients (B) indicate the change in the dependent variable for each unit change in the independent variable, while the standardized coefficients allow for comparison of the relative importance of the predictors, controlling for differences in their scales; specifically, the beta coefficients provide a measure of the effect size for each predictor (Abir et al., 2020). The statistical significance of each coefficient is assessed using t-tests, with associated p-values indicating the likelihood of observing the obtained results if there were no true effect. Communication effectiveness and staff expertise emerge as significant predictors of vendor satisfaction, underscoring the importance of these factors in shaping positive vendor experiences, highlighting the importance of effective communication and competent staff in fostering positive relationships and enhancing vendor satisfaction.

However, it is noteworthy that clarity (ICP) and timeliness (ITP) did not reach statistical significance, with p-values of 0.056 and 0.214, respectively. This raises questions about potential contextual factors at OUSL that may influence these results. For instance, procurement policies or gaps in staff training could be contributing to the lack of significance for these predictors. Understanding these contextual elements may provide deeper insights into the dynamics of vendor satisfaction and inform strategies for improvement.

Normality, linearity, heteroscedasticity and Multicollinearity Test

The data was first assessed for the assumption of normality to ensure the residuals of the model were normally distributed. Next, the assumption of linearity was confirmed, verifying a

linear relationship between independent and dependent variables. Then, the analysis included a test for heteroscedasticity to ensure that the variance of errors was constant across all levels of the independent variables and finally multicollinearity test was performed.

Table 8. Multicollinearity Test

Variable	Tolerance	VIF
ICP	0.308	3.247
ICE	0.285	3.510
ITP	0.414	2.416
ISE	0.215	4.652

Source: Vendor Registry of OUSL (2023/2024)

The multicollinearity test results, as shown in Table 8, provide evidence that multicollinearity is not a significant concern in this regression model. The variance inflation factor quantifies the severity of multicollinearity in an ordinary least squares regression analysis. Tolerance values, which represent the proportion of variance in each predictor that the other predictors do not explain, are all above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.2, and VIF values are below the threshold of 5, indicating that there is no substantial multicollinearity among the predictors, in that each independent variable has a value of no more than 10. The presence of high maximum value indicates that the other eigenvalues are low relative to the maximum (Kim, 2019). This suggests that the independent variables are not excessively correlated with each other, and that the regression coefficients can be reliably interpreted. The observed tolerance and VIF values collectively confirm that the regression model is robust and not unduly influenced by multicollinearity (Kim, 2019) (Abir et al., 2020).

Discussion

The research highlights the critical role of procurement processes in shaping vendor perceptions of fairness within the context of university contracts of the OUSL. The findings emphasize that clarity in evaluation processes, effective communication, and timely payments are pivotal in enhancing vendor satisfaction and fostering trust (Hui et al., 2011). These elements collectively contribute for equitable treatment, which is essential for maintaining strong vendor relationships and ensuring the smooth operation of university functions (Hui et al., 2011). Statistical analyses further validate the significance of these factors, demonstrating strong positive correlations between them and vendor perceptions of fairness, corroborating the importance of these aspects in the procurement ecosystem (McCrudden, 2004). The study suggests OUSL should adopt transparent and accountable procurement practices, promoting ethical standards and anti-corruption measures to reduce risks and improve performance. Transparency is identified as a cornerstone for fair competition and accountability, as opaqueness can breed less competition and increase the chances of collusion, thus highlighting its importance in an ethical procurement system (Rawat, 2021).

The research findings align with the academic literature on public procurement, emphasizing transparency and process-oriented approaches. A lack of transparency can reduce competition and increase the risk of collusion, which can be avoided through the dissemination

of information, constructive feedback, and protests (Rawat, 2021). The study emphasizes the need for comprehensive research on procurement processes, involving stakeholders and management perspectives, to address challenges and foster positive relationships. It emphasizes fairness and equity in procurement systems and gathering first-hand information from vendors.

The need to ensure a continuous supply of materials and services from reliable sources is paramount, while objectives such as expanding the local industrial sector and promoting multiple sourcing are perceived as less critical by government suppliers (Hassan et al., 2020). The results also reveal moderate adherence to public procurement principles, including public accountability, transparency, open and fair competition, fair dealing, and value for money (Hassan et al., 2020). Reforms to control corruption in public procurement systems should be participatory, inclusive, and transparent, involving all stakeholders for constructive suggestions, criticisms, and protests.

In conclusion, this research highlights the significance of transparency, effective communication, and ethical practices in fostering positive vendor relationships and ensuring equitable treatment in university contracts. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this study, OUSL can enhance its procurement processes, strengthen vendor relationships, and contribute to a more efficient and ethical procurement system (Knack et al., 2018).

Managerial Implication

This research has significant implications for the OUSL and other institutions aiming to optimize procurement processes and foster positive vendor relationships. University procurement managers must recognize the pivotal role they play in shaping vendor perceptions of fairness, which significantly impacts the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the university's supply chain (Young et al., 2010). The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for a paradigm shift towards prioritizing transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct within the procurement system. Implementing clear, well-defined evaluation processes that are consistently and impartially applied can substantially enhance vendor satisfaction and trust (Hui et al., 2011). Establishing objective criteria for bid assessment, providing vendor feedback, and ensuring fair, transparent decision-making, along with fostering open communication, is crucial for building strong, collaborative relationships. This includes proactively sharing information about procurement policies and procedures, responding promptly to vendor inquiries, and providing regular updates on the status of their bids (Eriksson & Westerberg, 2010). Moreover, the timely payment of invoices is essential for maintaining positive vendor relationships and ensuring the smooth operation of the supply chain (Hui et al., 2011).

This study emphasizes the significance of incorporating ethical standards and anti-corruption measures into the procurement system to reduce risks and improve performance. Universities should develop comprehensive codes of conduct for procurement staff, implement robust internal controls to prevent fraud and corruption, and establish mechanisms for reporting and investigating allegations of misconduct (Hui et al., 2011). Moreover, institutions should invest in training programs for procurement staff to enhance their understanding of ethical principles and best practices in procurement (Young et al., 2010). Training initiatives aim to equip procurement professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills to make ethical decisions and promote fairness in the procurement process. Enhancing transparency through the dissemination

of information empowers stakeholders with constructive insights, criticisms, and protests, driving positive change within the procurement process (Rawat, 2021). E-procurement technologies significantly benefit from reducing corruption opportunities within public procurement processes (Neupane et al., 2014).

Managers should adopt e-procurement systems to improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability, streamline procurement, reduce administrative costs, and minimize human error or manipulation. Implementing e-procurement systems can reinforce transparency, accountability, and integrity in procurement functions, reducing opportunities for corruption (Mohungoo et al., 2020). These systems can also provide real-time data on procurement activities, enabling managers to monitor performance, identify potential problems, and make informed decisions. Moreover, the university should actively seek feedback from vendors on their experiences with the procurement process and use this feedback to identify areas for improvement (Köhler & Dimancesco, 2020). Regular vendor surveys and focus groups can provide valuable insights into vendor perceptions of fairness and identify specific issues that need to be addressed.

Procurement managers should foster long-term relationships with strategic vendors through trust, respect, and collaboration. This can lead to improved quality, reduced costs, and innovation. Companies should consider extending their responsibility beyond ownership and incorporating sustainability principles into procurement processes.

Conclusion

This research explores the impact of procurement processes on vendors' fairness perceptions in university contracts, highlighting the intricate relationship between procedural transparency, ethical conduct, and vendor satisfaction. The study's findings reveal a compelling correlation between clear evaluation processes, effective communication, and timely payments, and enhanced vendor satisfaction and trust, highlighting the pivotal role of these factors in shaping vendors' perceptions of fairness (Rawat, 2021). Statistical analyses further validated these observations, demonstrating strong positive relationships between the aforementioned factors and vendor perceptions of fairness, thereby reinforcing the importance of implementing transparent and accountable procurement practices to cultivate positive vendor relationships and ensure equitable treatment (Suparto, 2021). The need for longitudinal research that covers the entire process is critical as previous studies have focused on particular tasks such as tendering and vendor selection (Moe, 2014).

The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate context of OUSL, offering valuable insights for other higher education institutions and public sector organizations seeking to optimize their procurement processes and foster stronger, more collaborative relationships with their vendors (Quayle & Quayle, 2000). By prioritizing transparency, ethical conduct, and open communication, organizations can cultivate a procurement ecosystem characterized by fairness, trust, and mutual respect, ultimately leading to improved vendor performance, reduced procurement costs, and enhanced organizational outcomes (Quayle & Quayle, 2000; Suparto, 2021). This research addresses vendor perceptions of fairness in public procurement, emphasizing the importance of integrating ethical standards and anti-corruption

measures to mitigate risks and enhance performance. Transparency is highlighted as a crucial element for fostering fair competition and accountability, as opaqueness can lead to reduced competition and increased opportunities for collusion (Rawat, 2021).

Organizations should invest in continuous training and development for procurement staff to ensure long-term sustainability and effectiveness of procurement practices, promoting ethical principles, best practices, and vendor relationship management. Moreover, organizations should establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track vendor perceptions of fairness and identify areas for improvement in procurement processes (Knack et al., 2018). Organizations can foster stronger vendor relationships and ensure procurement practices remain aligned with evolving needs and expectations by actively soliciting and incorporating vendor feedback into procurement policies. The dissemination of information through transparency can lead to constructive suggestions and criticisms, facilitating positive changes in the procurement process (Rawat, 2021).

Future research could explore the impact of e-procurement technologies on vendor perceptions of fairness, examining how these technologies can be leveraged to enhance transparency, streamline processes, and reduce opportunities for corruption (Neupane et al., 2014). Such endeavors should consider how the intent to adopt e-procurement positively correlates with independent variables that may inform strategies to combat corruption in developing countries (Neupane et al., 2014). Further research could explore the impact of supplier diversity programs on promoting fairness and inclusion in procurement, assessing their contribution to creating a level playing field for all vendors. By delving deeper into these and other related areas, researchers can continue to advance our understanding of the complex interplay between procurement processes, vendor perceptions of fairness, and organizational outcomes, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective and equitable procurement systems (Knack et al., 2018).

Finally, Higher Education Institutes (HEI) can tackle ethical and sustainable procurement by prioritizing suppliers and subcontractors who guarantee adequate environmental and social performance (Belvedere & Grando, 2016). HEI could also broaden their responsibility scope beyond ownership and direct control. (Belvedere & Grando, 2016). Focusing on the procurement process, integrating sustainability principles involves identifying key stages such as needs definition, vendor pre-selection, tender evaluation, and vendor control (Belvedere & Grando, 2016). Open bidding via the Internet, using reverse e-auctions, is one method HEIs use to reduce costs by sourcing from least-cost suppliers, ultimately enhancing companies' strategic planning for both buyers and suppliers (Yu et al., 2008).

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

The study offers valuable insights into vendor perceptions of fairness in Open University of Sri Lanka's procurement processes, but it has limitations for future research planning. The scope of this research was confined to a single institution, the Open University of Sri Lanka, which inherently limits the generalizability of the findings to other universities or contexts (Young et al., 2010). Future studies could broaden their scope by including multiple universities or organizations, potentially employing comparative analysis to identify common themes and

contextual differences in vendor perceptions (Young et al., 2010). While providing a comprehensive understanding, the study's reliance on quantitative surveys may still be subject to biases inherent in self-reported data. Further research might incorporate observational methods or experimental designs to validate the survey results and offer a more objective assessment of procurement practices (Moe, 2014). The study suggests further research on the impact of procurement reforms or interventions on vendor perceptions, with potential for longitudinal studies to track changes over time.

The current study primarily focused on transparency, communication, and payment timeliness as key factors influencing vendor perceptions, however, other potentially relevant factors, such as supplier awareness of labor rights and environmental considerations in procurement, were not thoroughly explored (Young et al., 2010). It is crucial for future investigations to expand the scope of inquiry to encompass a more comprehensive set of variables, including ethical considerations, sustainability practices, and the impact of supplier development programs, to provide a more holistic understanding of vendor perceptions (Young et al., 2010). The study's sample size may not have adequately represented the diverse vendors involved with the Open University of Sri Lanka, potentially limiting the statistical power of the quantitative analyses. Subsequent studies should aim to increase the sample size and ensure representation across different vendor categories to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings (Hassan et al., 2020). Further investigations could also explore the role of technology and digitization in shaping vendor perceptions of fairness, assessing the impact of e-procurement systems, online portals, and data analytics on transparency, efficiency, and communication in procurement processes (Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018).

Future research could also address the limitations of the study's methodology by incorporating more sophisticated statistical techniques to analyze the relationships between procurement practices and vendor perceptions, exploring potential mediating or moderating variables that may influence these relationships. Furthermore, there is a need for research that examines the impact of political and socio-cultural factors on procurement processes and vendor perceptions, particularly in developing countries (Dza et al., 2013). Further research could also explore the impact of power dynamics and negotiation strategies on vendor perceptions of fairness, examining how different negotiation approaches and power imbalances may influence vendor satisfaction and trust. This would shed light on the ethical and environmental considerations, which are often neglected due to political and socio-cultural sensitivities (Dza et al., 2013).

Notably, the limited number of suppliers registered at the university during the years 2024 and 2025 posed significant challenges. Additionally, there was a lack of awareness regarding the importance of research within the vendor community. These factors collectively affected our ability to gather comprehensive data and engage with a broader range of resources.

Moreover, future studies could benefit from adopting a process-oriented approach, examining the entire procurement process from initial tendering to contract completion, to identify specific pain points and opportunities for improvement (Moe, 2014). Such an approach would facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how different stages of the procurement

process contribute to vendor perceptions of fairness (Moe, 2014). Long-term studies are also needed to observe the effects of procurement strategies on vendor perceptions over time. It is also worth exploring how the digitization of procurement processes influences vendor perceptions, focusing on factors such as transparency, efficiency, and accessibility (Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018).

In conclusion, Future research should expand inquiry, refine methodology, and include more variables to understand vendor perceptions of fairness in university contracts, promoting ethical, transparent, and efficient procurement practices. Addressing these limitations and pursuing these opportunities will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing vendor perceptions of fairness and inform the development of more effective and equitable procurement practices in the higher education sector and beyond (Trammell et al., 2019).

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