"Students as customers of higher education: Perceptions of South African students"

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BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

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STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS

Abstract

An increase in the number of privately-owned higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa has created greater competition among private and public HEIs since all are competing for the same pool of potential students. Thus, marketers of HEIs have begun to realize the importance of placing a renewed focus on their students' (customers') needs. This study aimed to establish whether students perceive themselves as customers of HEIs, as well as the extent to which they perceive the attitude of academic and administrative staff toward them as being customer-focused.

A total of 411 online questionnaires were administered to students at select private and public HEIs in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted on the survey data using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. As a result, the majority of students perceived themselves as customers of the HEI. Furthermore, students' perception of the attitude of academic and administrative staff toward them reinforced the view that they are indeed customers of their HEI. Thus, by working with the academics and administrators, HEIs should consistently identify and satisfy the service needs of students.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of student as a customer has been extended from its application in commercial industries and is now used across all organizations (C. Laing & G. Laing, 2016). Although recently it is becoming increasingly common to view students as customers of higher education, this concept is not universally accepted in the higher education sector (Jabbar et al., 2018). According to Ma (2020, p. 463), "treating *Students as Customers* is built on the business philosophy of higher education management," in which every customer is a source of profit (Peppers & Rogers, 2016). Higher education has thus been converted into a commodity that is highly reliant on an institution's ability to strategically package education products and programs to meet the requirements of (students) customers who can afford it (Allen & Withey, 2017; Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020).

According to the 1997 Dearing Report, the concept of "student as customer" was first recognized in the United Kingdom, where students were identified as customers of higher education institutions (HEIs) as a result of their fee-paying capacity (Bunce et al., 2017). There are various studies globally regarding private and public HEI students emerging as customers (Ho & Yu, 2016; Canning, 2017; Fantauzzi et al., 2019; Dalati, 2017; Sisson et al., 2016; Terzic & Ascic, 2018; Parrott, 2019).

The rising number of private HEIs in South Africa created robust competition within the higher education market (Terzic & Ascic, 2018). Increased competition has led to HEIs "adopting marketing practices to differentiate themselves from the competition to attract as many potential students as possible and satisfy the needs of current students" (Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2017, p. 533). Seke (2021) argues that the global landscape of higher education has been transformed, and more students are emerging as customers, and HEIs as service providers. According to Jamieson (2018), student (customer) experience and customer satisfaction play a fundamental role in a student's decision to stay or to leave an HEI.

Although there are several studies on service quality in the South African higher education sector, there are inconsistent approaches to "students as customers" (T. Finney & R. Finney, 2010). The definition of a customer determines the perspective that HEIs take on a customer, and, thus, the services they provide to customers (Pitman, 2000, p. 166 cited in Guilbault, 2016).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chiguvi and Guruwo (2017) argue that organizations are well aware of the significance of customer loyalty on corporate performance and, as a result, are focused on establishing successful customer interactions and positive customer experiences. There is a common consensus that a customer is essential when marketing any product or service across all types of industries (Guilbault, 2016). The rapid expansion of HEIs, the increase in available HE options globally, and the intense competition between HEIs force HEIs to adopt a more customer-orientated approach (Hsu et al., 2016).

The South African public higher education sector is currently facing "strong competition from new providers of higher education services and significantly reduced public funding" (Milojević & Radosavljević, 2019, p. 558). Furthermore, with increased competition from institution to institution and country to country, HEIs are continually trying to improve the quality of their curricula and services (Chui et al., 2016). Thus, they have become more strategic in their marketing by emphasizing being more competitive, resourceful, and improving customer satisfaction.

There are differing and highly contested views on whether higher education students can be viewed as customers (Campbell-Perry & Williamson, 2017). Bay and Daniel (2010 cited in Mark, 2013) argue that often it is challenging to perceive students as customers as they are not paying their own tuition fees. Hence, they do not possess the fee-paying capacity of a genuine customer. However, few researchers have addressed the concern that students should not be viewed as customers of HEIs (Tight, 2003 cited in Budd, 2017).

A student is considered to be a "consumer or a co-producer "of the HE service, and the benefits of the "service" or the "degree" are not immediate in comparison to other services whose benefits can be assessed immediately. Campbell-Perry and Williamson (2017) refer to existing research that frames students as consumers, receiving, paying for, and consuming a service: all qualities associated with customers. Due to the commercialization of higher education, the educational process is being considered a service (Pankova & Khaldeeva, 2017).

It has been suggested that "the new generation of students, who increasingly regard themselves as customers, have become more aware of how they are taught and how they learn, and they have become more selective and interactive in their education choices and how they participate in the education process" (Petruzzellis et al., 2006 cited in Xiao & Wilkins, 2015, p. 100).

HEIs have been attempting to adapt to new commercial demands and have increased their attempts to influence their students' experiences (Bunce et al., 2017). More specifically, "the service nature of higher education is emphasized, which puts students as customers and their experiences at the center of service enhancements in higher education" (Ostrom et al., 2011 cited in Ma, 2020, p. 464).

Even though the notion of students as consumers is not commonly recognized or acknowledged, Guilbalt (2018) claims that the discussion over

whether or not students are customers must cease. Students must be treated like customers without jeopardizing their academic integrity. However, treating students like customers has a variety of consequences. To begin with, HEIs are financially dependent on student fees, and high enrolment is critical. Students are also financially responsible for the HEIs' ability to continue their programs (Seke, 2021).

South African students have many options. With the steady influx of readily available information, the concept of 'students as customers' has raised the bar in terms of what they (students) expect to receive from both private and public HEIs, their service expectations, as well as the overall higher education experience (Dalati, 2017). Mamica and Mazur (2020) associated student fees with consumeristic views toward the services provided by HEIs.

All components of customer experience have been described as part of the student experience (Bates et al., 2019). Although higher education cannot be commodified, many components of the higher education experience can (Connell, 2013 cited in Bossu & Stagg, 2018). Pucciarelli and Kaplan (2016) state that HEIs are competing for resources from the same pool, both locally and internationally. Therefore, strategies applied initially in the private HE sector are now being adopted by the public sector. Pucciarelli and Kaplan (2016) argue that HEIs have an apparent need to market themselves to allow them to attract students and increase profits. This has prompted HEIs to take a more consumerist perspective in satisfying student needs.

Students and higher education institutions have distinct motivations for improving their students' experience. Due to increased competition and student growth, HEIs have been compelled to focus not only on their academic programs but also on their service offerings (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Students are pleased with several aspects of their university experience as consumers, including academic and administrative staff support, value for money, interpersonal relationships, goals met, and hassle-free/smooth academic and administrative procedures. The attitude of HE service providers toward students is extremely important, particularly for first-year students (Elsharnouby, 2015).

It has been argued that HEIs should be more committed to ensuring that students receive the help and support they require to have a positive experience, allowing them to succeed academically, contribute to society, and have a positive impression of the institution (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Mulyono et al., 2020). High tuition costs, without a doubt, encourage students to value their money and think more like consumers rather than students of higher education (Royo, 2017). Students will choose an institution if the service is student-friendly and technology-based (Ho & Law, 2022). Administrative services are an important element of organizational planning and educational activities. Hence, global HEIs use market-based administrative management and higher education models (Steppacher et al., 2021).

According to Chan and Tan (2016), organizations are transitioning from a service-based to an experience-based economy. According to Celuch and Robinson (2016), higher education is a complete experiential service that requires active engagement throughout the process. Higher education is categorized as a service due to its characteristics and thus requires involvement (Celuch & Robinson, 2016, p. 53). Excellent customer service builds lasting relationships, and individuals who have positive experiences become long-term loyal customers (Dickerson et al., 2016, p. 25).

"Higher education, however, is unique from other services in that its value is almost entirely unpredictable until one not only completes the experience but years and even decades later when one uses the experience for knowledge application or career purposes" (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019, p. 227). Marschhausen (2017) emphasizes the need to be deliberate in establishing pleasant and memorable experiences via each service engagement. The study maintains that when there is a lot of competition, people pick services based on their experiences. Employee-to-customer interaction is vital for businesses because employees are in a position to add value by connecting with consumers in a central location to ensure loyalty and promote continued transactions. Employees are also empowered to drive positive experiences and customer commitment (Kandampully et al., 2018). Customer experience influences customer loyalty, satisfaction, word-of-mouth referrals, and repeat

purchases (Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Bilgihan et al., 2016; Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). In turn, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth behavior are all influenced by the customer experience (Kranzbühler et al., 2018).

It is against the above background that this study will attempt to offer some important insights into what shapes students' perceptions and how they perceive the attitude of academic and administrative staff toward them as customers. Therefore, to explore the perceptions of the service students receive from the HEI, as well as the attitude of academics and administrators as 'service providers,' a study was conducted among a sample of students in private and public HEIs in South Africa.

2. METHODS

A cross-sectional survey approach was adopted since it allowed the study to evaluate quantitative data. The research population comprised all currently registered students at select private and public higher education institutions in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Data were collected through an online survey from a sample of 335 students at the public HEI and 76 students at a private HEI. Random probability sampling was used in conjunction with convenience sampling. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal after getting permission from private and public HEIs.

The research constructs were operationalized in accordance with previous studies, and modifications were made to fit the current research context and purpose. A seven-item scale was adopted from Watjatrakul (2010) and Meštrović and Zugic (2018) to measure 'academic staff attitude.' Next, a seven-item scale was adopted from Rastoder et al. (2015) and to measure 'Administrative staff attitude.' Finally, a seven-item scale was also adopted from Bunce et al. (2017) to measure 'students' perceptions as customers.'

The questionnaire consisted of six (6) sections, of which five (5) measured each of the research constructs. Section A requested background information from the participants, and Sections B, C, D, E, and F focused on the attitude of academic and administrative staff toward students, as well as the student's perceptions of themselves as customers. The data were analyzed using the "Statistical Package for Social Sciences" program (Version 27).

3. RESULTS

Based on the consolidated student population, a sample size of 370 students was deemed acceptable using a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 5. The overall response of 411 was overwhelming, which exceeded expectations.

It is evident from the data in Table 1 that the majority of the respondents were female (72.7%), within 18-20 years of age (40.9%), black (81%), and in their 2nd year of study. The data also shows that most of the respondents were from the Faculties of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences (31.4%), as well as Science and Agriculture (31.4%). In relation to the size of the public HEI compared to the private HEI, the respondents from public institutions constituted the larger part of the sample (81.5%).

Concerning the perception of students of themselves (SPC), the attitude of academic staff (ASA) and administrative staff (ADSA) toward them, positive responses to the statements (agree and strongly agree) were interpreted (collapsed) as agreement. Negative responses to the statements (disagree and strongly disagree) were interpreted (collapsed) as disagreement. The mean value was used to show the level of agreement and disagreement. Finally, a one-sample t-test was applied to determine if there was significant agreement or disagreement among the respondents to each statement.

Table 2 reflects the students' level of agreement with the statements pertaining to the attitude of the academic staff towards them. The mean value for the following statements: ASA1; ASA2; ASA3; ASA4; ASA5; ASA6; ASA7; ASA8; ASA9; ASA10; ASA11; ASA12; ASA13; ASA15; and ASA16 were above 3, which implies that the respondents significantly agreed with each of these statements. The strongest agreement was with statement ASA3, which was stated as "academic staff do their best to answer my questions correctly" (M = 3.94; SD

= 0.888; t (410) = 21.436, p < 0.001). Significant disagreement was with the following statements: ASA14, ASA17, ASA18, and ASA19, with the strongest disagreement being with statement ASA18, which stated that "academic staff get to know students on a personal level" (M = 2.15; SD = 1.060; t (410) = 2.512, P = 0.012).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the students

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Variable	Categories	N (%)
Gender	Male	112 (27.3)
	Female	299 (72.7)
Age (years)	<18	4 (1.0)
	18-20	168 (40.9)
	21-23	149 (36.3)
	24-26	59 (14.4)
	27-30	21 (5.1)
	31-35	6 (1.5)
	36+	4 (1.0)
Race	Black	333 (81)
	Colored	14 (3.4)
	Indian/Asian	43 (10.5)
	White	21 (5.1)
Level of study	1st year	101 (24.6)
	2nd year	128 (31.1)
	3rd year	96 (23.4)
	Honors	42 (10.2)
	Masters	35 (8.5)
	Doctorate	9 (2.2)
Division	Education	17 (4.1)
	Engineering	20 (4.9)
	Health Sciences	10 (2.4)
	Humanities, Dev and Social Sciences	129 (31.4)
	Law	24 (5.8)
	Management Studies and Commerce	82 (20.0)
	Science and Agriculture	129 (31.3)
Type of institution	Private	76 (18.5)
	Public	335 (81.5)

To determine the students' perception of the attitude of administrative staff toward them, they were asked to indicate the level of their agreement with each of the statements highlighted in Table 3. It can be noted from Table 3 that there is significant disagreement with statement A12, which was stated as "administrative staff make them feel like they are the only student" (M = 2.60; SD = 1.071; t (410) = –7.551, p < 0.001). However, a significant agreement was found concerning all the other statements, with the strongest agreement being with the following statement: "administrative staff

do their best to assist them with their administrative needs/request," (M = 3.58; SD = 1.029; t (410) = 11.358, p < 0.001).

With respect to students' perception of themselves, they were also requested to indicate the level of their agreement with the statements highlighted in Table 4. The mean values measured for statements SPC1; SPC2; SPC3; SPC4; SPC5; SPC8; and SPC10 were above 3, which suggests that the respondents significantly agreed with these statements (p < 0.001). The statement with which the students (respondents) indicated the most significant level of agreement was SPC8, which was stated as 'What I learn in my course needs to be useful for my future' (M = 4.49; SD = 0.744; t(410) = 40.727, p < 0.001), followed by the statement SPC4, 'I regularly think about the financial cost of my degree' (M = 4.09; SD = 1.016; t(410) = 21.845, p < .001), and the 2nd statement 'I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career' (3.94; SD = 1.193; t(410) = 15.960, p < .001).

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show a link between the students' perception of the attitude of academic staff toward them and their experience at both private and public HEIs in South Africa. The study also highlights the importance that students place on the attitude of frontline staff, more specifically academics and administrators. The findings are consistent with Bates et al. (2019), who reported that in many themes surrounding the student experience, the most important was the positive relationship with university staff, and for some students, this had a profound impact on their entire educational experience. Customers' (students) affective states are likely to be positively influenced by frontline staff who are capable of understanding them because their emotional competencies foster a more pleasant service environment and favorable customer behavior and attitudes (Fernandes et al., 2018). Such positivity encourages customers to trust and rely on the institution, as well as willingly promote this institution to others (Fernandes et al., 2018). Drawing from the service quality literature, HEIs need to consider that they render a service, and thus ensure that service delivery translates into a delightful service experience, which leads to service satisfaction.

Table 2. Students' perception of the attitude of academic staff

Item	Responses as Frequency (%), N = 411					Mean (SD)	t	Df	p-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree				
ASA1 Academic staff go out of their way to assist me	22 (5.4)	46 (11.2)	105 (25.5)	181 (44.0)	57 (13.9)	3.50 (1.037)	9.753	410	< .001*
ASA2 Academic staff try to help me achieve my goals	10 (2.4)	32 (7.9)	81 (19.7)	224 (54.5)	64 (15.6)	3.73 (0.901)	16.419	410	< .001*
ASA3 Academic staff do their best to answer my questions correctly	7 (1.7)	21 (5.1)	70 (17)	205 (49.9)	108 (26.3)	3.94 (0.888)	21.436	410	< .001*
ASA4 Academic staff have my best interest in mind	15 (3.6)	34 (8.3)	137 (33.3)	155 (37.7)	70 (17)	3.56 (0.987)	11.548	410	< .001*
ASA5 Academic staff are cheerful/positive in their dealings with me	11 (2.7)	36 (8.8)	130 (31.6)	177 (43.1)	57 (13.9)	3.57 (0.928)	12.388	410	< .001*
ASA6 Academic staff show me empathy	9 (2.2)	59 (14.4)	154 (37.5)	145 (35.3)	44 (10.7)	3.38 (0.933)	8.249	410	< .001*
ASA7 Academic staff do their best to satisfy me	16 (3.9)	40 (9.7)	131 (31.9)	175 (42.6)	49 (11.9)	3.49 (0.959)	10.344	410	< .001*
ASA8 Academic staff consider my point of view when they make decisions that could affect me	27 (6.6)	56 (13.6)	135 (32.8)	143 (34.8)	50 (12.2)	3.32 (1.064)	6.167	410	< .001*
ASA9 Academic staff always give good value	8 (1.9)	35 (8.5)	119 (29)	191 (46.5)	58 (14.1)	3.62 (0.898)	14.064	410	< .001*
ASA10 Academic staff understand my needs	20 (4.9)	61 (14.8)	126 (30.7)	166 (40.4)	38 (9.2)	3.34 (1.001)	6.950	410	< .001*
ASA11 Academic staff treat me with courtesy	15 (3.6)	35 (8.5)	127 (30.9)	186 (45.3)	48 (11.7)	3.53 (0.935)	11.448	410	<.001*
ASA12 Academic staff take an interest in my academic progress	18 (4.4)	32 (7.8)	103 (25.1)	184 (44.8)	74 (18)	3.64 (1.005)	12.952	410	< .001*
ASA13 Academic staff nurture/take care of me	30 (7.3)	80 (19.5)	149 (36.5)	117 (28.5)	35 (8.5)	3.11 (1.050)	2.209	410	.028
ASA14 Academic staff make me feel like I am the only student	73 (17.8)	145 (35.3)	107 (26)	72 (17.5)	14 (3.4)	2.54 (1.078)	-8.742	410	< .001*
ASA15 Academic staff treat my problems as important	30 (7.3)	62 (15.1)	144 (35)	142 (34.5)	33 (80)	3.21 (1.034)	4.104	410	< .001*
ASA16 Academic staff give me individual attention	34 (8.3)	75 (18.2)	139 (33.8)	130 (31.6)	33 (8)	3.13 (1.066)	2.452	410	.015
ASA17 Academic staff know me by name	68 (16.5)	115 (28)	91 (22.1)	93 (22.6)	44 (10.7)	2.83 (1.253)	−2.755	410	.006
ASA18 Academic staff get to know me on a personal level	121 (29.4)	142 (34.5)	89 (21.7)	43 (10.5)	16 (3.9)	2.25 (1.105)	−13.793	410	< .001*
ASA19 Academic staff treat me as if I am a customer	49 (11.9)	94 (22.9)	150 (36.5)	98 (23.8)	20 (4.9)	2.87 (1.060)	−2.512	410	.012
ASA2 Thinking about my overall experience within the HEI, I feel that academic staff perceived me as a customer	32 (7.8)	90 (21.9)	147 (35.8)	123 (29.9)	19 (4.6)	3.02 (1.008)	.342	410	.732

Note: * indicates significance at the 95% level.

Table 3. Students' perception of the attitude of administrative staff

<div align="right">Source: Authors' elaboration.</div>

Item	Responses as Frequency (%), N = 411)					Mean (SD)	t	df	p-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree				
ADSA1 Administrative staff always provide the best service possible	34 (8.3)	50 (12.2)	113 (27.5)	164 (39.9)	50 (12.2)	3.36 (1.102)	6.534	410	< .001*
ADSA2 Administrative staff do their best to assist me with my administrative needs/requests	19 (4.6)	46 (11.2)	89 (21.7)	193 (47)	64 (15.6)	3.58 (1.029)	11.358	410	< .001*
ADSA3 Administrative staff have my best interest in mind	26 (6.3)	54 (13.1)	151 (36.7)	138 (33.6)	42 (10.2)	3.28 (1.026)	5.579	410	< .001*
ADSA4 Administrative staff show me empathy	28 (6.8)	71 (17.3)	145 (35.3)	138 (33.6)	29 (7.1)	3.17 (1.019)	3.341	410	.001
ADSA5 Administrative staff try to understand my point of view	23 (5.6)	69 (16.8)	123 (29.9)	159 (38.7)	37 (9)	3.29 (1.029)	5.656	410	< .001*
ADSA6 I always get good value from administrative staff	23 (5.6)	65 (15.8)	129 (31.4)	148 (36)	46 (11.2)	3.31 (1.046)	6.084	410	< .001*
ADSA7 Administrative staff always try to satisfy me	24 (5.8)	59 (14.4)	123 (29.9)	168 (40.9)	37 (9)	3.33 (1.020)	6.528	410	< .001*
ADSA8 Administrative staff try to understand my needs	26 (6.3)	59 (14.4)	112 (27.3)	172 (41.8)	42 (10.2)	3.35 (1.050)	6.813	410	< .001*
ADSA9 Administrative staff use a problem-solving approach with me	22 (5.4)	68 (16.5)	116 (28.2)	157 (38.2)	48 (11.7)	3.34 (1.055)	6.590	410	< .001*
ADSA10 Administrative staff are courteous with me	23 (5.6)	53 (12.9)	144 (35)	150 (36.5)	41 (10)	3.32 (1.007)	6.513	410	< .001*
ADSA11 Administrative staff are cheerful/positive in their dealings with me	23 (5.6)	63 (15.3)	140 (34.1)	150 (36.5)	35 (8.5)	3.27 (1.006)	5.442	410	< .001*
ADSA12 Administrative staff make me feel like I am the only student	64 (15.6)	143 (34.8)	112 (27.3)	77 (18.7)	15 (3.6)	2.60 (1.071)	−7.551	410	< .001*
ADSA13 I get the feeling that administrative staff view my problems as important	34 (8.3)	72 (17.5)	129 (31.4)	150 (36.5)	26 (6.3)	3.15 (1.051)	2.911	410	.004
ADSA14 Administrative staff go out of their way to find a solution to my problem	37 (9)	72 (17.5)	116 (28.2)	149 (36.3)	37 (9)	3.19 (1.109)	3.431	410	.001
ADSA15 Administrative staff treat me as if I am a customer	39 (9.5)	78 (19)	135 (32.8)	129 (31.4)	30 (7.3)	3.08 (1.082)	1.504	410	.133
ADSA16 Thinking about my overall experience within the HEI, I feel that the administrative staff perceived me as a customer	37 (9)	63 (15.3)	147 (35.8)	135 (32.8)	29 (7.1)	3.14 (1.053)	2.624	410	.009

Note: * indicates significance at the 95% level.

Table 4. Students' perception of themselves as customers of HE

Item	Responses as Frequency (%), N = 411					Mean (SD)	t	Df	p-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree				
SPC1 The main purpose of my university education is to maximize my ability to earn money	27 (6.6)	54 (13.1)	75 (18.2)	124 (30.2)	131 (31.9)	3.68 (1.232)	11.134	410	< .001*
SPC2 I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career	14 (3.4)	62 (15.1)	35 (8.5)	124 (30.2)	176 (42.8)	3.94 (1.193)	15.960	410	< .001*
SPC3 I think of myself primarily as a paying customer of the university	20 (4.9)	53 (12.9)	87 (21.2)	163 (39.7)	88 (21.4)	3.60 (1.105)	10.980	410	< .001*
SPC4 I regularly think about the financial cost of my degree	12 (2.9)	23 (5.6)	53 (12.9)	149 (36.3)	174 (42.3)	4.09 (1.016)	21.845	410	< .001*
SPC5 I think of my university degree as a product I am purchasing	28 (6.8)	80 (19.5)	78 (19)	137 (33.3)	88 (21.4)	3.43 (1.215)	7.189	410	< .001*
SPC6 If I could get a well-paying job without going to university, I would not be interested in studying for a degree	65 (15.8)	97 (23.6)	73 (17.8)	74 (18)	102 (24.8)	3.12 (1.425)	1.765	410	.078
SPC7 If I cannot earn a lot of money after I graduate, I will have wasted my time at university	64 (15.6)	133 (32.4)	78 (19)	77 (18.7)	59 (14.4)	2.84 (1.299)	−2.507	410	.013
SPC8 What I learn in my course needs to be useful for my future	6 (1.5)	2 (0.5)	20 (4.9)	138 (33.6)	245 (59.6)	4.49 (0.744)	40.727	410	< .001*
SPC9 If I cannot get a good job after I graduate, I should have some of my tuition fees refunded	74 (18)	138 (33.6)	85 (20.7)	62 (15.1)	52 (12.7)	2.71 (1.277)	−4.634	410	< .001*
SPC10 Generally, I perceive myself as a customer of this higher education institution	14 (3.4)	49 (11.9)	109 (26.5)	163 (39.7)	76 (18.5)	3.58 (1.029)	11.408	410	< .001*

Note: * indicates significance at the 95% level.

HEIs are increasingly acknowledged as service industries due to their increased efforts to meet their customers' needs (Chui et al., 2016). For HEIs, core services are lectures given by academics, which makes the teaching ability of academics a potential determinant of service quality (Hsu et al., 2016, p. 980). Furthermore, when students are asked about service quality in higher education, one of the first things that come to mind is administrative services, as this is the most frequent direct contact service. As a result, when assessing service experience and service quality, student administration is becoming a determining factor in ensuring satisfaction (Fathurrochman et al., 2020). Much research leans towards the influence of interactions with academics and administrators on the overall student experience (Hart-Baldridge, 2020).

Social theory and empirical research have confirmed the impact of positive attitudes on the attitudinal perceptions of others (Shareef et al., 2018). Therefore, it may be argued that positive staff attitudes would eventually affect student retention in higher education.

Overall, the findings are consistent with those of several other researchers (Keng et al., 2007; Vahdat et al., 2020; Sivapalan & Jebarajakirthy, 2017), who concluded that perceived positive attitudes have a positive experiential impact on customers. This conclusion might be explained by the fact that frontline employees are crucial in customizing the service to the demands of different clients to improve the overall customer experience.

These findings add to the body of available knowledge (Sabri, 2011; Le et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017; Clark et al., 2019; Shieh & Lai, 2017) since it was asserted that customers' positive perceptions are likely to have a beneficial impact on their experience behavior. Students' opinions of themselves as customers are influenced by a variety of things: inter-alia, fees, rankings, and surveys, all of which are intended to inspire and empower students to think like customers (Budd, 2017). In this study, the major reasons why students regarded themselves as consumers were inter-alia, the usefulness of their qualification in their future, and the financial cost of the degree.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to assess the students' perceptions of themselves (as customers of HE) and their perception of the attitude of academic and administrative staff toward them. The findings show a good association between the perceptions by students of both public and private HEIs of the attitude of academic and administrative staff toward them and their service experience as customers. As the economy has become more service-oriented, viewing students as customers has changed the history of higher education. Thus, it can be beneficial for HEIs to adopt a business perspective of HE by applying business principles to improve higher education services.

HEIs must also create a customer-centered culture that encourages employees to provide excellent customer service through their attitude, behavior, processes, and working methods. As such, HEIs must orientate their staff on the importance of developing and maintaining a positive relationship with students since they are the primary customers of the institutions.

Because of the financial and time constraints, only one private and one public HEI located within the geographical area of KwaZulu-Natal were included in this survey. Future research could include HEIs from across all provinces in SA to see if their views differ. It is also recommended that similar studies be done at other public and private higher education institutions since more comprehensive samples could produce more generalizable and useful insights.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Krishna K. Govender, Sanjay Soni, Estelle David.
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Investigation: Estelle David.
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