

Rethinking higher education: Toward student-centred learning and meaningful engagement

Tsepo Machela¹  & Sandile Mkhize² 

¹ Department of Business Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Central University of Technology, Free State – Welkom, South Africa.

² Department of Marketing and Retail Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the contrasting experiences of students in South African public and private higher education, examining how these shape their perceptions, loyalty, and advocacy for their institutions. A systematic literature review of 150 peer-reviewed publications (2010 -2024) revealed a consistent pattern of dissatisfaction among students in public institutions. This dissatisfaction is primarily driven by poor service delivery, bureaucratic administration, and a lack of student-centred engagement, leading to frustration, alienation, and disengagement. Conversely, students in private institutions generally report positive experiences, characterised by efficient administrative processes, accessible management, and inclusive, student-friendly environments. These factors foster higher satisfaction and institutional loyalty. The research highlights a critical need for higher education institutions to shift their approach, treating students as valued stakeholders rather than passive recipients. By adopting student-centred practices, institutions can improve satisfaction, enhance their reputation through positive word-of-mouth, and better align with their educational missions. This study offers original insights into the student-as-customer paradigm in South Africa, providing practical implications for institutional reform and policy development.

Keywords: Public Institutions of Higher Learning, Private Institutions of Higher Learning, Student Experiences

INTRODUCTION

The higher education landscape in South Africa is marked by structural complexity, governance asymmetries, and increasing marketisation pressures. Navigating and managing this ecosystem presents substantial challenges, particularly in aligning institutional practices with contemporary expectations of service delivery and stakeholder engagement. In marketing, perception is reality.¹ Within the field of marketing and organisational studies, it is widely acknowledged that institutions that adopt a holistic, relationship-oriented approach to customer service enjoy enhanced brand loyalty and benefit from positive word-of-mouth marketing.² This principle is increasingly relevant for educational institutions,

¹ R. Duggal, “The One Marketing Truism You Cannot Ignore: Perception Is Reality,” Forbes Communications Council, May 29, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2018/05/29/the-one-marketing-truism-you-cannot-ignore-perception-is-reality/>.

² Ajaya Kumar Khadka and Srijana Khadka, “Factors Affecting Customer Satisfaction in Fitness Clubs: Study from Kathmandu Valley,” *NCC Journal* 7, no. 1 (2022): 27–32.

CORRESPONDENCE – Tsepo Machela Email: tmachela@cut.ac.za

PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 9th September, 2025 | Accepted: 2nd February, 2026 | Published: 27th March, 2026.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Machela, Tsepo & Sandile Mkhize. “Rethinking higher education: Toward student-centred learning and meaningful engagement.” *Journal of Education and Learning Technology* 7, no.2 (2026): 297 - 309. <https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.20267219>

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.

This is an open access article under the CCBY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

especially in competitive environments where reputation and student satisfaction directly affect institutional sustainability.

In South Africa, a distinct bifurcation exists between Public Institutions of Higher Learning (PIHL), which receive governmental funding, and Private Institutions of Higher Learning, which operate independently of state subsidies.³ The operational paradigms of these two sectors often diverge in terms of administrative responsiveness, service delivery, and student engagement. A recurring criticism of public institutions is the apparent neglect of student-centered practices. The assumption that students are passive recipients of education, as opposed to primary stakeholders or clients, has led to systemic inefficiencies in service provision and dissatisfaction among the student population.⁴

Bezuidenhout proposes a more market-driven model of university administration, advocating for the conceptualization of students as clients who engage in transactional relationships with institutions by exchanging tuition fees for educational services.⁵ This market-oriented view challenges traditional perceptions of universities as solely public goods, an idea echoed by Swartz et al., who highlight the tension between the social mission of public universities and the increasing need to adopt business-like operational models.⁶ The push for expanded access to education has also catalyzed the growth of private higher education providers, which often promise more tailored, cost-effective offerings compared to their public counterparts.

The reclassification of higher education in the 1990s facilitated an influx of private providers into the sector, drawing significant student enrollments of almost one million between 1990 and 1998. This shift has had far-reaching implications for the governance, performance, and perception of higher education institutions in South Africa.

Public higher education institutions in South Africa face persistent student dissatisfaction, frequently escalating into protests, a common occurrence particularly in provinces like Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng. These recurring disruptions, as highlighted by Abdool et al., underscore systemic failures in institutional responsiveness and the absence of student-centred governance.⁷ These contrasts sharply with private institutions, which experience significantly fewer incidents of unrest, suggesting a fundamentally different student experience.

The core problem lies in understanding the divergent factors contributing to these distinct student experiences and their implications for institutional performance and student outcomes. While Singh and Singh emphasise the importance of effective grievance management for institutional goodwill and reputational capital,⁸ it appears public institutions are struggling in this regard. Furthermore, the differing approaches to expressing dissatisfaction, informal channels in private institutions potentially eroding legitimacy, versus the assertive and often militant protests in public institutions observed by Hussain and Maharvi, warrant critical investigation.⁹ This study, therefore, aims to investigate whether public institutions leverage student complaints as strategic opportunities for enhancing internal processes and long-term student outcomes, including alumni satisfaction and institutional advocacy, or if these issues remain unaddressed, perpetuating a cycle of dissatisfaction and unrest. This study seeks to address the following objectives:

- To identify the factors contributing to elevated levels of student dissatisfaction within public institutions of higher learning.

³ L. Meyer, "Taking a Seat at the Table: The Value of Private Higher Education in South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 39, no. 1 (2025): 255–77.

⁴ Susan J Deeley et al., "Exploring the 'Wicked' Problem of Student Dissatisfaction with Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education," *Higher Education Pedagogies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 385–405.

⁵ Marie Bezuidenhout, "Qualitative Data Collection," in *Research Matters*, ed. corner'Davis Franzel du Plooy-Celliers and Rose-Marie Bezuidenhout (Cape Town, SA: Juta, 2014), 173–94.

⁶ Sharlene Swartz et al., "Moral Eyes: Youth and Justice in Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and South Africa," 2018.

⁷ Sajida Abdool, Roger MASON, and Mandusha Maharaj, "Student Protests and the Brand Image of a South African University of Technology," *Expert Journal of Business and Management* 11, no. 2 (2023).

⁸ M. Singh and A. Singh, "A Study on Grievance-Handling Effectiveness and Identifying Determinants of Stakeholder Satisfaction in Higher Education," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Commerce, Management & Social Science* 7, no.3(2024):123–29.

⁹ Rao Mazhar Hussain and Muhammad Waqas Maharvi, "Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan," *Journal of Excellence in Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2024): 54–78.

- To explore the reasons for significantly lower levels of student dissatisfaction and protest activity in private institutions.
- To synthesise existing literature to identify prevailing patterns, highlight gaps, and examine strategic institutional responses to student feedback in the context of student satisfaction as a catalyst for institutional development and transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving landscape of higher education increasingly reflects the logic of market capitalism, wherein education is no longer universally regarded as a public good or fundamental right. Instead, it is progressively framed as a marketable commodity, something to be purchased, consumed, and evaluated based on individual return on investment. This commodification is fuelled by trends such as the escalation of tuition fees, the privatization of institutions, and curricula narrowly focused on marketable, employability-driven skills.¹⁰ These shifts raise pressing concerns about the erosion of educational equity, the dilution of academic purpose, and the redefinition of quality in education.

Higher education institutions tend to care about student satisfaction concerning the institution's potential impact on student motivation, retention, recruitment and academic success.¹¹ Increasing their good service quality results in an increase in student satisfaction, which leads to long-term benefits in terms of market share and profitability.¹² To reach a big market share, student satisfaction needs to be maximized, and one of the strategies is providing a high-quality student centric service.

Annamdevula and Bellamkonda identified positive correlations between service quality and student satisfaction, service quality and student loyalty, as well as student satisfaction and student loyalty.¹³ These findings are further supported by research conducted by Duarte et al. in the context of higher education in Portugal, and by Ng and Priyono in institutions in Riau, Indonesia.¹⁴ Students are satisfied whenever services provided are more than the price paid, and they are dissatisfied whenever services provided are less than the price paid. Additionally, customer satisfaction does not always relate to complaints, meaning that consumers who never complain do not necessarily mean that they are satisfied.¹⁵ In higher education, the studies on student satisfaction are few due to its complexity.

Customer loyalty is “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing effort shaving the potential to cause switching behaviour.”¹⁶ Loyalty of students in the context of higher education involves such behaviours as giving positive word-of-mouth toward the university, recommending the institution to others and choosing the same institution again in the future.¹⁷

According to Deeley et al., the future performance and sustainability of universities largely depend on student satisfaction, which has become a central concern for higher education institutions.¹⁸ The same authors further argue that engaging students in extracurricular activities significantly enhances their overall capabilities, skills that should be integrated into university infrastructure to support holistic development.¹⁹

¹⁰ European Students' Union, *2005 Policy Paper “Commodification of Education”* (Brussels: European Students' Union, 2011).

¹¹ Shahrukh Aman, Nosheen Aziz, and Mohsin Abbas, “Student Satisfaction in Higher Education: A Systematic Review Examining Its Impact on Institutional Growth and Comparative Dimensions,” *Journal of Applied Math* 1, no. 3 (2023).

¹² Martha-Martha Ng and Iyon Priyono, “The Effect of Service Quality on Student Satisfaction and Student Loyalty: An Empirical Study,” *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 9, no. 3 (2018): 109–31.

Subrahmanyam Annamdevula and Raja Shekhar Bellamkonda, “The Effects of Service Quality on Student Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Student Satisfaction,” *Journal of Modelling in Management* 11, no. 2 (2016): 446–62.

¹⁴ M Eduarda Duarte et al., “Career Adapt-Abilities Scale–Portugal Form: Psychometric Properties and Relationships to Employment Status,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 80, no. 3 (2012): 725–29; Ng and Priyono, “The Effect of Service Quality on Student Satisfaction and Student Loyalty: An Empirical Study.”

¹⁵ Olgun Kitapeci and Ibrahim Taylan Dortyol, “The Differences in Customer Complaint Behaviour between Loyal Customers and First Comers in the Retail Banking Industry The Case of Turkish Customers,” *Management Research News* 32, no. 10 (2009): 932–41.

¹⁶ Richard L Oliver, “Satisfaction: A Behavioral Perspective on the Consumer” (McGraw-Hill, 1997), 392.

¹⁷ Hussain and Maharvi, “Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan.”

¹⁸ Deeley et al., “Exploring the ‘Wicked’ Problem of Student Dissatisfaction with Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education.”

¹⁹ Deeley et al., “Exploring the ‘Wicked’ Problem of Student Dissatisfaction with Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education.”

Moreover, students can act as change agents, particularly in promoting campus sustainability.²⁰ Participation in sustainable initiatives not only contributes to environmental goals but also helps shape a positive institutional image among students and other stakeholders. Students' perceptions of their university's commitment to inclusivity, diversity and equity efforts play a crucial role in fostering a sense of ownership and advocacy for the institution's long-term success.²¹ A view by studies conducted by Hussain and Maharvi is that there are other aspects that impact student happiness, such as service quality, lecture quality, and the facilities for learning.²² In addition to the criteria of service quality, academic staff's teaching competence significantly impacts student satisfaction.²³

Historically, access to higher education in South Africa was reserved for a privileged minority, effectively transforming a public good into a private one in terms of both presentation and accessibility.²⁴ The democratic transition in 1994 marked a significant shift toward open access, yet this inclusivity introduced substantial financial challenges. Many of the previously excluded populations lacked the financial means to participate fully in public higher education, leading to widespread unrest, most notably the #FeesMustFall movement, which posed serious governance and operational challenges for university management. In response to these systemic issues, the South African government established the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), specifically designed to support students in public institutions and promote equitable access to higher education.

This historical context underscores the importance of institutional responsiveness to student needs and grievances. Singh and Singh emphasize that a comprehensive understanding of student grievance management and institutional response mechanisms is essential for effective governance and student satisfaction.²⁵ Timely and effective resolution of student complaints not only fosters institutional goodwill but also protects reputational capital.²⁶ In private institutions, students may express dissatisfaction informally, potentially undermining institutional legitimacy. In contrast, Hussain and Maharvi note that students in public institutions tend to be more assertive, often resorting to protests and disruptions to voice their concerns.²⁷

It is from this context that this paper draws on a marketing lens that foregrounds the axiom "perception is reality," emphasizing that student perceptions shaped by marketing narratives, rankings, and service encounters play a pivotal role in shaping their educational experiences and enrolment decisions. Within this framework, the educational encounter becomes transactional, influenced as much by symbolic capital and student satisfaction as by educational substance or critical inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to critically examine existing research on the integration of student experiences in public higher education institutions. The study was located in the interpretivist paradigm to interpret the dataset from different systematically selected literature reviews. It placed particular focus on how limited student-centric focus has influenced institutional offerings and the importance of shifting resources towards student initiatives that will assist graduates with skills and attributes valued by employers.

In the Italian higher education context, student satisfaction is a crucial indicator of university quality and significantly influences government funding decisions.²⁸ This emphasis on satisfaction

²⁰ K. Turnbull, "Perception vs Reality: When It Comes to Brands, Is There a Difference?," July 6, 2023, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/perception-vs-reality-when-comes-brands-difference-kristen-turnbull/>.

²¹ Shih-Tse Lin and Kao-Shan Chen, "ESG Strategies in Educational Quality Management: An Empirical Study on Fostering Student Loyalty and Sustainability," *Sustainability* 17, no. 8 (2025): 3723.

²² Hussain and Maharvi, "Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan."

²³ Hussain and Maharvi, "Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan."

²⁴ Arthur Reynolds and Vusani Moyo, "Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of South," in *Proceedings of the Focus Conference (TFC 2024)* (Springer Nature, 2024), 152.

²⁵ Singh and Singh, "A Study on Grievance-Handling Effectiveness and Identifying Determinants of Stakeholder Satisfaction in Higher Education."

²⁶ Deeley et al., "Exploring the 'Wicked' Problem of Student Dissatisfaction with Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education."

²⁷ Hussain and Maharvi, "Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan."

²⁸ Luca Petruzzellis, Angela Maria d'Ugento, and Salvatore Romanazzi, "Student Satisfaction and Quality of Service in Italian Universities," *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal* 16, no. 4 (2006): 349–64.

contributes to university rankings and enhances institutional reputation, making such universities more attractive to prospective students aiming to become alumni.

Universities are mandated to conduct regular surveys assessing student satisfaction with teaching quality and are increasingly tailoring their services to align with local labour market demands. Furthermore, student satisfaction data is being strategically used by institutions to enhance competitiveness in attracting and retaining students.

Student satisfaction is defined as a short-term attitude formed through the evaluation of educational experiences, services, and facilities provided by the institution.²⁹ In higher education, it reflects students' contentment with the quality of academic and support services. This concept is closely linked to user-generated participatory culture, which influences both business and consumer behaviour outcomes.

The purpose of this review was to address fragmentation in existing literature and propose a unified triangulated process model where smooth engagement and integration for a student learning environment with (private or public) university-centric environment and support staff-centric variables. To ensure the relevance and quality of the literature included, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied:

- **Inclusion Criteria:**

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2024.
- Studies focusing on student experiences and satisfaction within higher education institutions.
- Research that examines factors influencing student dissatisfaction or satisfaction, including, but not limited to, learning environment, university attractiveness, administrative services, and alumni advocacy.
- Studies explicitly comparing or discussing student experiences in public versus private higher education institutions.
- Research exploring the impact of institutional performance on student outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, engagement, advocacy).

- **Exclusion Criteria:**

- Non-peer-reviewed sources such as blogs, opinion pieces, and grey literature.
- Articles are not available in English unless a translated version is accessible.
- Studies lacking empirical evidence or theoretical analysis related to the study's variables.

²⁹ I M Salinda Weerasinghe and R Lalitha Fernando, "Students' Satisfaction in Higher Education," *American Journal of Educational Research* 5, no. 5 (2017): 533–39.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

The PRISMA flow diagram below illustrates the process of study selection for the Systematic Literature Review:

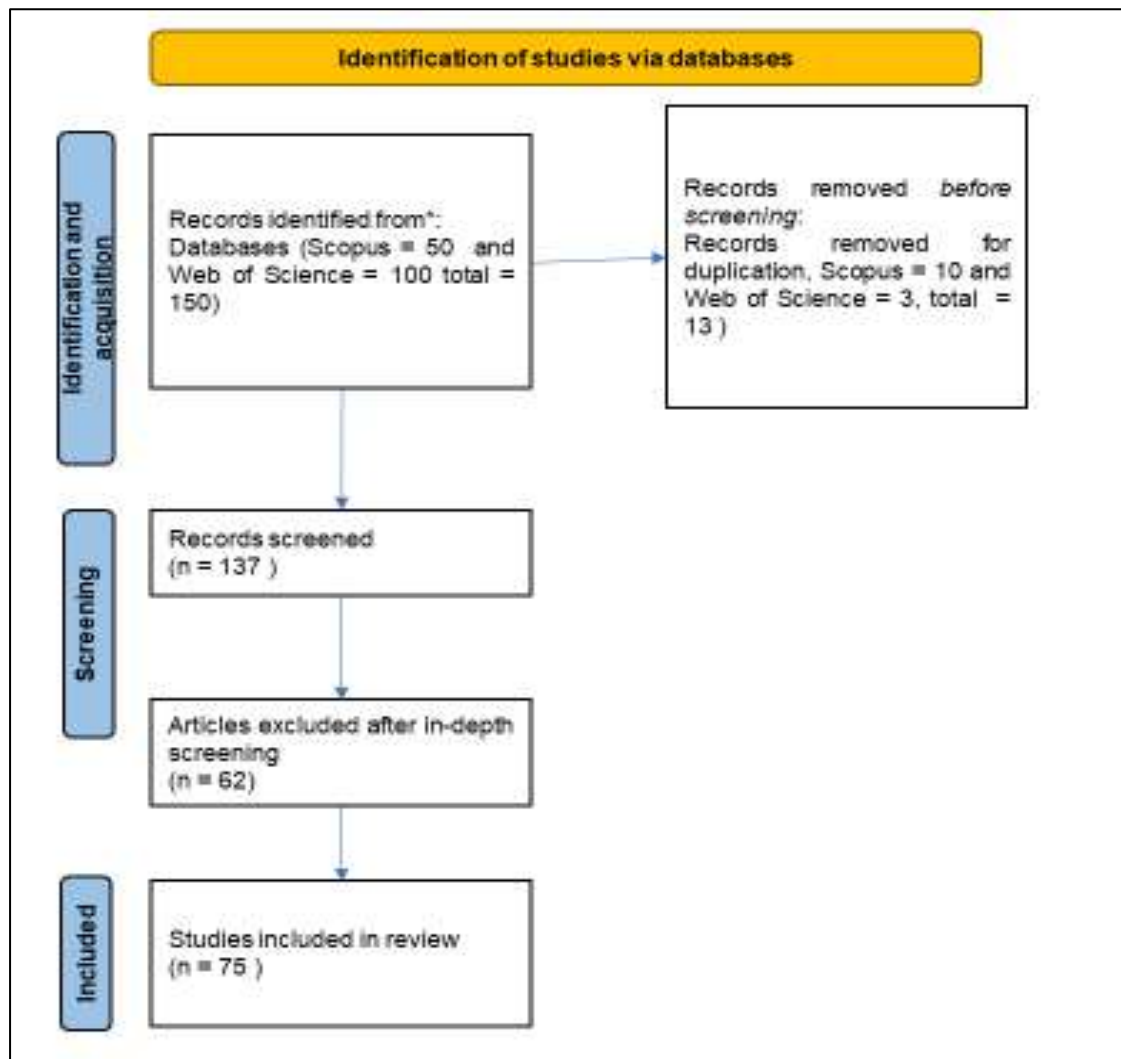


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

An initial search across academic databases, specifically Scopus (n=50) and Web of Science (n=100), yielded a total of 150 records. Following this, 13 duplicate records were removed (10 from Scopus and 3 from Web of Science), leaving 137 unique articles. In the subsequent screening phase, titles and abstracts of these 137 articles were reviewed against the predetermined inclusion criteria. This process led to the exclusion of 62 articles that were deemed irrelevant based on factors such as the wrong study type or not addressing the research topic. The following section presents the findings from the 75 articles reviewed.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

The Prisma flow diagram developed in Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic relationship between theoretical paradigms, institutional structures, and student outcomes in higher education. Drawing on neoliberalism and student engagement theory, the diagram illustrates how public and private institutions adopt different approaches to engage student support.³⁰ Public institutions are increasingly

³⁰ Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis, "The Impact of Neo-Liberal Frameworks on Student Mobility and Internationalisation in African Higher Education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 38, no. 6 (2024): 290–309.

implementing student-centered practices, while private institutions often prioritize market-driven strategies that treat education as a commodity.

These institutional approaches significantly influence outcomes such as student satisfaction and educational equity. The diagram illustrates the need to balance economic imperatives with inclusive, student-focused strategies to ensure that higher education remains both responsive and equitable.³¹ The analysis is based on a review of 150 peer-reviewed publications published between 2010 and 2024.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) conducted to explore the factors shaping student experiences in public and private higher education institutions in South Africa. The SLR approach provided a structured and transparent process for identifying, evaluating and synthesizing relevant studies, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the interactional, institutional and environmental factors that contribute to rising levels of student dissatisfaction and protest activity.³² Data extraction procedures, guided by established review protocols, informed the development of Tables 1 and 2, which summarise the reviewed literature and the conceptual questions underpinning the analysis.³³

The extracted studies highlight recurring concerns related to student perceptions of access, service quality and institutional responsiveness. Evidence from the literature shows that dissatisfaction is frequently linked to students' sense that their concerns are inadequately addressed by management and support structures. Through thematic analysis of the selected studies, three dominant themes emerged: Access to University Learning, Quality Service to Students, and A Student-Centric Learning Environment. These themes are presented below.

Access to University learning

Access to higher education remains a central factor shaping student expectations and experiences. The literature indicates that, for many South African students, higher education is closely associated with employability and opportunities for upward mobility. However, access to public universities is often constrained by financial barriers rather than academic ability. Students who are excluded on financial grounds perceive tuition costs as limiting their prospects, which contributes to dissatisfaction and, in some contexts, protest activity.

In contrast, students enrolled in private institutions are generally self-funded, as schemes such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) do not extend support to private providers. Private institutions, therefore, position themselves competitively by offering flexible learning options and more accessible administrative processes. For this group, affordability is not a barrier to entry, and access is experienced as an integrated part of the institutional offering. These contrasting experiences highlight the unequal landscape of higher education access in South Africa and reinforce the need for more equitable funding frameworks.

Quality Service to the Student Body

The literature consistently identifies service quality as a core determinant of student satisfaction and institutional credibility. Service quality extends beyond classroom instruction to include administrative efficiency, academic support, responsiveness to student needs and the broader campus environment.

Studies show that public institutions often face challenges linked to large enrolments, resource constraints and bureaucratic procedures, which can delay responses to grievances and reduce the quality

³¹ Nadia Zahoor et al., "International Entrepreneurial Behavior of Internationalizing African SMEs—Towards a New Research Agenda," *Journal of Business Research* 154 (2023): 113367.

³² Zahoor et al., "International Entrepreneurial Behavior of Internationalizing African SMEs—Towards a New Research Agenda."

³³ Ricardo Belinski et al., "Organizational Learning and Industry 4.0: Findings from a Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda," *Benchmarking: An International Journal* 27, no. 8 (2020): 2435–57; Lucyline Nkatha Murungi, "Inclusive Basic Education in South Africa: Issues in Its Conceptualisation and Implementation," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 18, no. 1 (2015): 3159–95; G. Vial, "Understanding Digital Transformation: A Review and a Research Agenda," *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 28, no. 2 (2019): 118–44.

of personalised support. These shortcomings increase the likelihood of dissatisfaction and may contribute to disruptions on campus.³⁴

Private institutions, shaped by market competition, tend to place greater emphasis on student-centred service models. Features such as smaller class sizes, accessible support units and simplified administrative procedures strengthen the student experience. However, these advantages remain tied to affordability, reinforcing socio-economic disparities between student groups.

Overall, the literature suggests that service quality should be regarded not only as an operational requirement but as a strategic priority that influences student retention, institutional reputation and long-term advocacy.

Student-Centric Learning Environment

The third theme emphasises the importance of creating learning environments that prioritise students' holistic needs—academic, social, financial and emotional. A student-centric approach is grounded in principles of inclusivity, belonging and empowerment.³⁵ Institutions that cultivate such environments tend to demonstrate stronger learning outcomes, improved engagement and higher levels of institutional loyalty.³⁶

In public institutions, financial limitations and administrative inefficiencies often constrain efforts to implement fully student-centred approaches. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that even within these constraints, institutions that actively incorporate student feedback, establish transparent grievance systems and adapt services to diverse student profiles tend to experience fewer disruptions and stronger learning communities.

Private institutions often achieve student-centricity through personalised academic support and flexible learning models, though these benefits remain accessible primarily to financially privileged students. The contrast underscores the need for public institutions to innovate within existing resources to remain both competitive and equitable.

Table 1: Emerging conceptual themes for Extraction and Analysis from Articles

Emerging Conceptual Theme	Sampled contributors	Objective	Methodology	Conclusions
Student satisfaction in higher education	Aman , S., Aziz , N. & Abbas, M., 2023.	To explore the role student satisfaction	Systematic literature review	Student satisfaction is a critical component of a thriving academic environment and plays a significant role in supporting student development and academic achievement. It reflects the quality of institutional services and directly influences student engagement, retention, and overall success.

³⁴ Ng and Priyono, "The Effect of Service Quality on Student Satisfaction and Student Loyalty: An Empirical Study"; Hussain and Maharvi, "Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan."

³⁵ Varsity College, "The Importance Of Inclusive Education In South Africa," October 24, 2023, <https://www.varsitycollege.co.za/>; [https://www.varsitycollege.co.za/about/articles/the-importance-of-inclusive-education-in-south-africa#:~:text=The Importance Of Inclusive Education In South Africa&text=Inclusive education is a philosophy,segregated learners base; Reynolds and Moyo, "Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of South."](https://www.varsitycollege.co.za/about/articles/the-importance-of-inclusive-education-in-south-africa#:~:text=The%20Importance%20Of%20Inclusive%20Education%20In%20South%20Africa&text=Inclusive%20education%20is%20a%20philosophy,segregated%20learners%20base;Reynolds%20and%20Moyo,Challenges%20and%20Opportunities%20in%20the%20Context%20of%20South.)

³⁶ Emerson Wagner Mainardes, Mário Raposo, and Helena Alves, "Universities Need a Market Orientation to Attract Non-Traditional Stakeholders as New Financing Sources," *Public Organization Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 159–71.

Organizational learning and Industry 4.0:	Belinski, R., Peixe, A. M., Frederico, G. F. & Garza-Reyes, J. A., 2020.	To assess the students' technology usage	Systematic literature review	Universities should align 4IR, universities initiatives that promote large-scale job creation, Large-scale job creation, rather than focusing mainly on small business development.
The Effect of Service Quality on Student Satisfaction and Student Loyalty:	Chandra, T., Ng, M., Chandra, S. & Priyono, 2018.	To analyse student satisfaction and loyalty toward institutions	Quantitative	Public institutions need to improve service quality to foster student attachment to the institution, enhancing satisfaction and advocacy.
The 'wicked' problem of student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback in higher education.	Deeley, S. J., Fischbacher-Smith, M., Karadzhev, D. & Koristashevskaya, E., 2019.		Qualitative	Dissatisfied students are found to care less or love the institution's infrastructure as they reflect a breakdown in mutual respect and engagement.
Social Responsibility in the Marketisation of Higher Education.	El-Kassar, A.-N. & Makki, D., 2021.	To study social responsibility in higher education	Qualitative analysis through interviews	Institutions of higher learning have a social responsibility to their stakeholders, particularly students, to provide supportive environments that promote academic success, personal development, and meaningful engagement.
Commodification of Education	European Students' Union, 2011.	To understand education as a commodity	Qualitative analysis through interviews	Commodified education models are perceived to be more responsive to stakeholder needs, offering improved care and service delivery.
Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan	Hussain, R. M. & Maharvi, M. W., 2024	To understand the correlations between service quality and student satisfaction	Quantitative	Poor service quality contributes to student dissatisfaction and increases the likelihood of protest disruptions.
Universities Need a Market Orientation to Attract Non-Traditional Stakeholders as	Mainardes, E. W., Raposo, M. & Alves, H., 2012.	To understand the role non-traditional stakeholders play in universities	Mixed-methods research involving interviews with students and	Student funding tends to favour institutions with lower levels of student dissatisfaction and fewer protest disruptions.

New Financing Sources			educators.	
The value of private higher education in South Africa	Meyer, L., 2025	To identify gaps between private and public institutions in South Africa	Quantitative	Private institutions take an active role in social responsibility while carefully managing student retention and advocacy.
Student satisfaction and quality of service in Italian universities.	Petruzzellis, L., D'Uggento, A. M. & Romanazzi, S., 2006	To examine the theoretical underpinnings of quality service in universities	Case study	Student satisfaction enhances the institution's appeal and boosts its social index.

Table 2 substantiates this need by presenting empirical evidence across multiple studies that link student satisfaction to institutional performance, service quality, and long-term student loyalty. The literature consistently emphasizes that student satisfaction is not merely a passive outcome but a strategic driver of institutional success. For instance, studies by Ng and Priyono and Hussain & Maharvi demonstrate that poor service quality in public institutions correlates with increased student dissatisfaction and protest activity,³⁷ while private institutions, as noted by Meyer, actively manage student retention and advocacy through enhanced service delivery and social responsibility.³⁸

Table 2: Conceptual questions derived from the research study

Aspect	Question
Factors in play	
Trends taking place at the University	What is taking place in universities between students and the universities?
Technological trends	What technological dimensions are universities bringing on board to equip students?
Educational trends in students' activities	What are students' interests at universities?
University Industry at large	

Findings from Table 1 show that student satisfaction is strongly associated with institutional service quality, responsiveness, organisational culture and the perceived value of the educational experience. Table 2 further highlights the need for institutions to examine trends in student–university relations, adopt relevant technological enhancements and respond to evolving student interests. Together, these insights point to the need for institutions to consider learning as a process that occurs in both formal and informal spaces, shaped by social, environmental and technological factors.

The synthesis of the literature demonstrates that access, service quality and student-centric institutional practices are central to shaping student satisfaction and stability within higher education institutions. By prioritising high-quality service delivery, responsive grievance mechanisms and inclusive academic support systems, universities strengthen student engagement and contribute to the broader role of higher education as a transformative public good. Such an approach not only enhances individual learning outcomes but also supports institutional resilience and national development.

³⁷ Ng and Priyono, “The Effect of Service Quality on Student Satisfaction and Student Loyalty: An Empirical Study”; Hussain and Maharvi, “Impact of Service Quality on Students’ Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan.”

³⁸ Meyer, “Taking a Seat at the Table: The Value of Private Higher Education in South Africa.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study shows that higher education institutions need to improve access, enhance service quality and strengthen student-centred practices. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthening Access

- Broaden financial support options beyond NSFAS.
- Introduce flexible and hybrid learning models.
- Develop academic readiness and outreach programmes.

Improving Service Quality

- Streamline administrative and support processes.
- Train staff on effective student engagement.
- Implement service standards and performance monitoring.
- Enhance digital tools for student services.

Building Student-Centric Learning Environments

- Establish responsive feedback and grievance systems.
- Integrate academic, psychosocial and financial support.
- Promote belonging through mentoring and inclusive activities.
- Provide learning spaces that accommodate diverse needs.

Strengthening Governance and Communication

- Improve communication between management and students.
- Create structured consultation platforms.
- Use data and analytics to guide institutional decisions.

Promoting Equity Across the Sector

- Encourage public–private sharing of effective practices.
- Strengthen regulatory measures that protect fairness and access.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the multifaceted nature of student dissatisfaction within higher education, particularly in the South African context. Evidence from the systematic literature review and thematic analysis reveals that dissatisfaction is often rooted not in academic capability but in institutional shortcomings, most notably financial exclusion, poor service quality, and ineffective grievance mechanisms. Public institutions, while serving a broader demographic, frequently struggle with resource constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies that hinder their ability to provide responsive and student-centred services. These limitations contribute to student unrest and disengagement, as seen in movements such as #FeesMustFall.

In contrast, private institutions, though more agile and service-oriented, remain inaccessible to many due to financial barriers. Their ability to deliver personalized support and maintain student satisfaction underscores the importance of institutional responsiveness, but also highlights systemic inequities in access to quality education.

The findings affirm that fostering a student-centric learning environment is not merely a pedagogical ideal but a strategic necessity. Institutions must prioritize transparent grievance handling, inclusive support systems, and high-quality service delivery to enhance student satisfaction and institutional performance. By doing so, higher education can be repositioned as a transformative public good—capable of advancing social mobility, strengthening institutional resilience, and contributing meaningfully to national development.

Future Research

Future studies could build on this work by gathering primary data directly from students in both the public and private sectors to capture their lived experiences more accurately. It would also be useful to explore how academic and administrative staff understand the challenges facing their institutions, as their perspectives may reveal constraints not visible to students. In addition, researchers could look more closely at how digital transformation is shaping student satisfaction, particularly as institutions expand online and blended learning models.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdool, Sajida, Roger MASON, and Mandusha Maharaj. "Student Protests and the Brand Image of a South African University of Technology." *Expert Journal of Business and Management* 11, no. 2 (2023).
- Aman, Shahrukh, Nosheen Aziz, and Mohsin Abbas. "Student Satisfaction in Higher Education: A Systematic Review Examining Its Impact on Institutional Growth and Comparative Dimensions." *Journal of Applied Math* 1, no. 3 (2023).
- Annamdevula, Subrahmanyam, and Raja Shekhar Bellamkonda. "The Effects of Service Quality on Student Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Student Satisfaction." *Journal of Modelling in Management* 11, no. 2 (2016): 446–62.
- Belinski, Ricardo, Adriana M M Peixe, Guilherme F Frederico, and Jose Arturo Garza-Reyes. "Organizational Learning and Industry 4.0: Findings from a Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda." *Benchmarking: An International Journal* 27, no. 8 (2020): 2435–57.
- Bezuidenhout, Marie. "Qualitative Data Colletion." In *Research Matters*, edited by corner'Davis Franzel du Plooy-Celliers and Rose-Marie Bezuidenhout, 173–94. Cape Town, SA: Juta, 2014.
- Deeley, Susan J, Moira Fischbacher-Smith, Dimitar Karadzhov, and Elina Koristashevskaya. "Exploring the 'Wicked' Problem of Student Dissatisfaction with Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education." *Higher Education Pedagogies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 385–405.
- Duarte, M Eduarda, Maria C Soares, Sandra Fraga, Manuel Rafael, M Rosário Lima, I Paredes, R Agostinho, and A Djaló. "Career Adapt-Abilities Scale–Portugal Form: Psychometric Properties and Relationships to Employment Status." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 80, no. 3 (2012): 725–29.
- Duggal, R. "The One Marketing Truism You Cannot Ignore: Perception Is Reality." Forbes Communications Council, May 29, 2018.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2018/05/29/the-one-marketing-truism-you-cannot-ignore-perception-is-reality/>.
- European Students' Union. *2005 Policy Paper "Commodification of Education."* Brussels: European Students' Union, 2011.
- Hussain, Rao Mazhar, and Muhammad Waqas Maharvi. "Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Public Universities of Pakistan." *Journal of Excellence in Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2024): 54–78.
- Khadka, Ajaya Kumar, and Srijana Khadka. "Factors Affecting Customer Satisfaction in Fitness Clubs: Study from Kathmandu Valley." *NCC Journal* 7, no. 1 (2022): 27–32.
- Kitapci, Olgun, and Ibrahim Taylan Dortyol. "The Differences in Customer Complaint Behaviour between Loyal Customers and First Comers in the Retail Banking Industry The Case of Turkish Customers." *Management Research News* 32, no. 10 (2009): 932–41.
- Lin, Shih-Tse, and Kao-Shan Chen. "ESG Strategies in Educational Quality Management: An Empirical Study on Fostering Student Loyalty and Sustainability." *Sustainability* 17, no. 8 (2025): 3723.
- Mainardes, Emerson Wagner, Mário Raposo, and Helena Alves. "Universities Need a Market Orientation to Attract Non-Traditional Stakeholders as New Financing Sources." *Public Organization Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 159–71.
- Meyer, L. "Taking a Seat at the Table: The Value of Private Higher Education in South Africa." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 39, no. 1 (2025): 255–77.

- Murungi, Lucyline Nkatha. “Inclusive Basic Education in South Africa: Issues in Its Conceptualisation and Implementation.” *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 18, no. 1 (2015): 3159–95.
- Ng, Martha-Martha, and Iyon Priyono. “The Effect of Service Quality on Student Satisfaction and Student Loyalty: An Empirical Study.” *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 9, no. 3 (2018): 109–31.
- Oliver, Richard L. “Satisfaction: A Behavioral Perspective on the Consumer.” McGraw-Hill, 1997.
- Petruzzellis, Luca, Angela María d’Ugento, and Salvatore Romanazzi. “Student Satisfaction and Quality of Service in Italian Universities.” *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal* 16, no. 4 (2006): 349–64.
- Reynolds, Arthur, and Vusani Moyo. “Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of South.” In *Proceedings of the Focus Conference (TFC 2024)*, 152. Springer Nature, 2024.
- Singh, M., and A. Singh. “A Study on Grievance-Handling Effectiveness and Identifying Determinants of Stakeholder Satisfaction in Higher Education.” *International Journal of Advanced Research in Commerce, Management & Social Science* 7, no. 3 (2024): 123–29.
- Swartz, Sharlene, Anye Nyamnjoh, Emma Arogundade, Jessica Breakey, and Abioseh Bockarie. “Moral Eyes: Youth and Justice in Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and South Africa,” 2018.
- Turnbull, K. “Perception vs Reality: When It Comes to Brands, Is There a Difference? ,” July 6, 2023. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/perception-vs-reality-when-comes-brands-difference-kristen-turnbull/>.
- Varsity College. “The Importance Of Inclusive Education In South Africa,” October 24, 2023. <https://www.varsitycollege.co.za/about/articles/the-importance-of-inclusive-education-in-south-africa#:~:text=The Importance Of Inclusive Education In South Africa&text=Inclusive education is a philosophy,segregated learners base.>
- Vial, G. “Understanding Digital Transformation: A Review and a Research Agenda.” *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 28, no. 2 (2019): 118–44.
- Weerasinghe, I M Salinda, and R Lalitha Fernando. “Students’ Satisfaction in Higher Education.” *American Journal of Educational Research* 5, no. 5 (2017): 533–39.
- Woldegiorgis, Emnet Tadesse. “The Impact of Neo-Liberal Frameworks on Student Mobility and Internationalisation in African Higher Education.” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 38, no. 6 (2024): 290–309.
- Zahoor, Nadia, Zaheer Khan, Martin Meyer, and Benjamin Laker. “International Entrepreneurial Behavior of Internationalizing African SMEs–Towards a New Research Agenda.” *Journal of Business Research* 154 (2023): 113367.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Sandile Mkhize is a Lecturer in Marketing and Retail Management at the Durban University of Technology. His research interests focus on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), creativity in teaching and learning, sustainability in marketing aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), consumer behaviour, branding, and the application of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence in marketing practice.

Tsepo Machela is a Lecturer in the Department of Business Management at the Central University of Technology (CUT), where he teaches Marketing. His research interests are centred on entrepreneurial marketing, with a particular focus on how marketing principles can be applied to daily sustainability practices, especially within the context of digital marketing and micro-entrepreneurs operating in today’s rapidly evolving technological era. He is passionate about exploring the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancing sustainable marketing strategies that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). His work further examines how AI-driven tools influence marketing strategy, brand management, and the overall competitiveness of small enterprises.