

# Student Satisfaction with Private Tertiary Education Provision in South Africa in the Times of #FeesMustFall

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of a growing population and increased demand for tertiary education, South Africa's private higher education sector has grown considerably since 1994. However, it has long been beset by perceptions of poor quality. This study surveyed private university students to gauge their satisfaction with their institutions. It also explored whether, as posited by some scholars, the disruptions caused by the #FeesMustFall movement across South African public universities may result in greater private tertiary education enrolment. The students who participated in the online survey expressed moderate satisfaction with their universities. Their biggest concern was the high cost of private tuition. Moreover, they were sympathetic to the #FeesMustFall movement, expressing a willingness to enrol in public education in the future. Nonetheless, concerns regarding safety and security in public universities loomed large, whereas they were confident that their private institutions fully met their safety and security needs.

**Key words:** Private higher education; South Africa; student satisfaction; voice exit loyalty; higher education studies

Le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur privé en Afrique du Sud s'est considérablement développé depuis 1994 dans le contexte d'une population croissante et d'une demande accrue d'enseignement supérieur. Cependant, il a également été assailli par des perceptions de mauvaise qualité. Cette étude a interrogé les étudiants des universités privées pour évaluer leur satisfaction à l'égard de leurs établissements. Il a également exploré si,

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comme l'affirment certains universitaires, les perturbations causées par le mouvement #FeesMustFall (Les frais de scolarité doivent baisser) dans les universités publiques sud-africaines pourraient entraîner une augmentation des inscriptions dans l'enseignement privé. Les étudiants qui ont participé à l'enquête en ligne ont exprimé une satisfaction modérée à l'égard de leurs universités, leur plus grande préoccupation étant le coût élevé des cours particuliers. De plus, ils étaient favorables au mouvement #FeesMustFall dans les universités publiques et ont exprimé leur volonté de s'inscrire dans l'enseignement public à l'avenir. Néanmoins, les préoccupations concernant la sûreté et la sécurité dans les universités publiques étaient importantes, alors qu'ils étaient convaincus que leurs établissements privés répondaient à leurs besoins de sûreté et de sécurité.

**Mots clés :** enseignement supérieur privé ; Afrique du Sud; la satisfaction des étudiants ; fidélité de sortie vocale ; études supérieures

## 1 Background and Introduction

South Africa has a well-developed higher education system with 26 public universities, five of which are in the Shanghai Top 500 rankings (Davids and Waghid, 2016; Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2017). Almost a million students are enrolled in these institutions. In addition, the country is home to more than 94 registered private universities and colleges, with roughly 90 000 enrolled students (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016; Tjønneland, 2017). Various corporates have come to view the higher education sector as one that offers significant revenue potential and have, therefore, entered the market. The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) publicly argues that private universities complement public university offerings. Despite this, Kruss and Kraak (2005) suggest that private universities play a dual role: complementing and competing with the public sector. The latter mainly takes the form of competing for students whose parents can fund their tertiary education, enabling them to opt for private education providers (Levy, 2003; Callender and Jackson, 2008; Richardson, Evans and Gbadamosi, 2009; Govender, 2016). On the one hand, with the Black middle class growing in South Africa, more parents may have the necessary disposable income. The private sector is also banking on population growth to drive demand for private education. This is not surprising given that South Africa's population increased by

almost 20 million (roughly 33%) between 1996 and 2019 (StatsSA, 2019). There is also a significant shortfall in available spaces and opportunities for post-school education due to limited capacity and stringent capping of student enrolment in public universities (Naidoo and Singh, 2007; DHET, 2015). As a result, each year, more than 75% of learners who complete high school are declined an opportunity to study further at a public university (Motsepe and Sher, 2017).

On the other hand, in light of the economic stress South Africa is under, combined with the provision of state funding for the so-called 'missing middle' university students, the extent to which these private institutions will thrive – or even survive – depends on how many students they attract and the fees they are willing to pay. Simultaneously, it has been argued that the rise in demand for private universities is linked to a decline in satisfaction with the quality of public tertiary education (Govender, 2016). In this regard, Froneman (2002) and Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris (2019) assert that state pressure on public universities to massify has resulted in significant quality compromises, especially as massification was not accompanied by aligned increases in state subsidies or academic staffing numbers. Furthermore, demand for bursaries and other types of funding, alongside bad debt, has imposed considerable financial constraints on universities (Lindeque, 2021). Consequently, public universities often suffer from overcrowded lecture halls, poor staff to student ratios, and a general lack of learning resources (such as an insufficient number of tutors, writing support consultants and library resources). As a result, Levy (2003) is of the view that perceptions of poor quality have resulted in a shift to private education providers. This could also be the result of the impact of the recent #FeesMustFall movement<sup>4</sup> (for an engaging, detailed and critical overview of this movement, see Hodes, 2017).

Our study draws on the work of Albert Hirschman (1970), whose model of an organisation's quality of product was developed to explain behaviour in marketing and political science. This model was applied to determine if a perceived decline in the quality of public higher education (due to constrained funding and the #FeesMustFall movement, for example), has resulted in an 'exit' into private education. The study explored the views of students enrolled in private tertiary institutions in South Africa with respect to (1) their levels of satisfaction with their private institutions, and (2) their perceptions of public higher education and the #FeesMustFall movement. The aim was to establish the extent to which private higher education institutions' ability to attract and

retain students is a result of 'exit' from public institutions (possibly because of #FeesMustFall), or a result of perceptions of enhanced service quality in the private sector.

The study is unique in that while several studies have been conducted on the interaction between quality and customer retention in business, very little work has been done in this regard in the tertiary education sector (Tamrat, 2017). Tertiary education in South Africa has largely been a 'closed' system, with very little competition for the public sector (Varghese, 2004). Given the rise of private entrants into the higher education market, it is important to unpack the drivers of private tertiary enrolment, as 'exit' from public institutions becomes more likely in the future (Levy, 2003).

## 2 Voice, Loyalty and Exit: A Theoretical Perspective

Hirschman (1970) maintains that organisations are perpetually subject to decay and loss of efficiency and quality, regardless of how well established they may be. During this process feedback to the organisation in the form of customers' 'voice' or 'exit' takes place. That is, Hirschman (1970) argues that when the quality of an organisation's output declines, customers can elect to either exit (purchase from elsewhere) or voice their concerns. In some cases, exit is more prevalent than voice while, in others, voice may be more prevalent. Taking both exit and voice into consideration can provide constructive feedback to the organisation which, if heeded, can act to remedy the decay.

It is important to note, as Warren (2011) does, that exit and voice are not opposites; rather, they are two ways of enacting power. 'Exit' relates to power in terms of decision making. Individuals who exit an organisation do so in order not to be tied to an entity that is underperforming. Correspondingly, 'voice' is enacted by clients who feel empowered to air their grievances to the organisation in order to effect change. At the same time, individual personalities matter, with some more likely to be vocal and others more likely to quietly exit. In addition to 'voice' and 'exit', customers can exercise 'loyalty'. Loyalty is an internal response whereby people display high levels of tolerance of deteriorating quality (Wilson, 2009). Hirschman (1970) argues that it can stem from acknowledgement that exiting will cause the organisation's quality to decline further. Thus, some remain in order to support the organisation in the hope that things will change without them having to act. Others remain because they have no other option.

Despite the usefulness of Hirschman's (1970) theory, like many others we are loathe to refer to university students as 'customers' and university curricula as 'products', as this subscribes to a corporatised notion of higher education that views universities as operating within market logics (for a convincing discussion of the corporatisation of higher education, see Giroux, 2014). Nonetheless, the 'voice/exit/loyalty' framework offers a useful means by which to conceptualise the relationship between private and public higher education, given that both, in their own ways, struggle with public perceptions of quality. It allows us, as researchers, to conceptualise protest action such as #FeesMustFall as an exercise of 'voice' and to characterise individuals' decisions to seek private higher education as, potentially a conscious 'exit' from the public sector. As such, although the framework developed by Hirschman is beset with 'marketing-speak', it is nonetheless useful here as it provides a vocabulary with which to engage with the outcomes of students' perceptions of – and satisfaction with – higher education, both public and private. Finally, it is important to note that we conceive of 'exit' not just as a decision to deregister from a public higher education institution, but as including both a decision to not register at such an institution and to not register at one in the future.

### Private Tertiary Education in South Africa: A Brief Overview

Globally, the private university sector is growing at a fast pace; however, Africa lags behind as many African governments are unsupportive of private provision of higher education (Froneman, 2002; Teferra and Altbach, 2004; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Thaver, 2008). South Africa is arguably worse off in this regard than many other African countries, as most of the country's private tertiary education providers are small and either commercial institutions, or theological institutions (Levy, 2003). That said, there are a few larger private enterprises, such as Advtech Ltd and Stadio, both of which are listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (Thaver, 2008). South Africa's stunted private tertiary education sector is, in part, due to the government's fears that it will draw fee-paying students away from public universities, which will limit the ability of public universities to use income from such students to cross-subsidise poorer students. The state, therefore, regards private operators as a threat (Levy, 2003; Fehnel, 2004; Mabizela, 2004) and tightly regulates this sub-sector (Fehnel, 2004; Khatle, Grobler and Moloji, 2014). The government exerts control over the private tertiary sector in numerous ways. All private

institutions must register (and regularly re-register) with the DHET to be accredited (Swartz et al., 2019). While this helps to protect students from dubious providers, some argue that legitimate providers are not always fairly dealt with (DHET, 2019). The regulations also ban private providers from partnering with public institutions and strictly limit international satellite campuses (Froneman, 2002; Mabizela, 2004). Moreover, until recently, private tertiary institutions were prevented from calling themselves universities. Although it is not clear to what extent these restrictions have slowed the growth of the sector, both Levy (2003) and Kraak (2012) argue that the undeserved costly and inconsistent regulatory framework has had a negative impact on the sector.

Another factor limiting the growth of private institutions is perceptions of inferiority (Teferra and Altbach, 2004). Private providers do not appear to hire strong academics, with few academic publications emanating from these institutions (Levy, 2003; Naidoo, Singh and Lange, 2007). Their libraries are often under resourced, they lack teaching facilities and their teaching staff are often inexperienced, under-qualified and part-time (Mabizela, 2004; Varghese, 2004; Thaver, 2008). As such, when interrogating private higher education in South Africa, perceptions of quality play an important role. Given this, a theoretical framework such as that of Hirschman (1970) that allows for engagement with such perceptions is useful.

### 3 Factors that Determine Student Satisfaction: A Review of the Literature

Private universities depend almost entirely on tuition fees. If they do not enrol enough students to cover their fixed costs, the institution may struggle to survive. Financial management is, therefore, an important function in private universities, many of which have failed because of poor financial controls (Altbach, 1999). To increase or maintain enrolment, the institution must ensure that students are satisfied with the quality and type of education on offer. Notably, satisfaction requires that core student needs are addressed. Nevertheless, there is considerable debate in the literature on the needs or factors that are most important in terms of student satisfaction. *Inter alia*, the chief factors seem to be physical resources, location, human resources and reputation. Physical facilities and infrastructure are amongst the most debated issues in this regard. These include library facilities, classrooms, student residences, campus security, and recreational facilities. Library facilities and resources are regarded as important determinants of both student satisfaction

and academic success (Soria, Fransen and Nackerud, 2013; Watjatrakul, 2014). Bezuidenhout, De Jager and Naidoo (2013) also found that campus security and classroom facilities impact university choice. Tsinidou Gerogiannis and Fitsilis (2010) argue that students are particularly concerned with access to catering and accommodation.

In contrast, Chin Wei and Sri Ramalu (2011) assert that tangibles such as university buildings are not a strong predictor of student satisfaction. Similarly, Gruber, Fub, Voss, and Zikuda-Glaeser (2010) found that cafeteria services, library facilities and student atmosphere are relatively insignificant determinants of student dissatisfaction. Interestingly, however, Joseph, Mullen and Spake (2012) concluded that such facilities are less important for students at private universities than for those attending public institutions, a finding corroborated by Yusoff, McLeay and Woodruffe-Burton (2015) who conducted their student satisfaction study at a private higher education institution.

A further point of debate is the role played by access to modern technology and equipment in determining student satisfaction. On the one hand, functional equipment and reliable Internet connections have been identified as important components of quality education (Watjatrakul, 2014). Conard and Conard (2000) also identify up-to-date technology as an important consideration for students. Similarly, Bezuidenhout et al. (2013) found well-equipped computer facilities to be important. Minh (2020) argues that a private higher education institution's learning management system has a positive impact on student satisfaction, while Lai, Lau, Yusof and Chew (2015) assert that access to information technology facilities and services are amongst the most important determinants of student satisfaction. In light of the move to online learning due to COVID-19 and the associated lockdown, this aspect is likely to become more important. Thus, scholars such as Tsinidou et al. (2010) who argue that access to good Internet services is not particularly important for students, and Gruber et al. (2010) who maintain that computer equipment is a relatively insignificant factor in determining student satisfaction, may be context bound. That is, what was true for 2010 is not so for 2020 onwards. However, it could be because students have their own personal Internet connections, computers, laptops, smartphones or tablets. Hence, Joseph et al. (2012) argue that technology is a more important consideration for students in public institutions than for those in private institutions, as the former are less likely to afford such technology. Nevertheless, while infrastructural facilities and resources play an important role in fostering connectedness with the

institution, on their own they are insufficient to ensure student engagement and satisfaction.

It has also been posited that another significant factor is the location of the university, a subject that has produced mixed findings in the literature. Gruber et al. (2010) for example, identify the surrounding city as insignificant in determining levels of student satisfaction, whereas Joseph et al. (2012) identify location as a contributing factor to satisfaction, albeit more so for students enrolled in public institutions than at private ones. Conard and Conard (2000) found that the campus setting is moderately important in influencing students' choice of university.

Most of the literature suggests that academic staff play an important role in fostering student satisfaction although, again, this view is not unanimous. For example, Gruber et al. (2010) found lecturer support to be a relatively insignificant determinant of student satisfaction. Even so, most of the literature appears to agree that staff are an important part of students' experience of higher education. What is less clear is the role that academic staff are meant to play. The focus of such research varies from staff proficiency (Watjatrakul, 2014), to teaching expertise (Conard and Conard, 2000), relevant professional experience (Al-Alak, 2006), and high levels of educational quality (Joseph et al., 2012). That said, it is generally accepted that a lecturer's performance has a significant impact on educational performance, and that academic staff influence how students perceive the quality of a university (Anggraeni, 2014).

Indeed, academic staff play various roles and, as Anggraeni (2014) argues, are expected to demonstrate competence in diverse areas, including thought processes, teaching processes, professionalism, and attitude. However, some scholars argue that it is particularly important for students to enjoy good rapport with lecturers, and that students report greater levels of satisfaction when academic staff adopt a friendly attitude or approach (Tsinidou et al., 2010). This is because such an approach breeds trust, which has a positive impact on satisfaction (Anil and Icli, 2013). It is, thus, evident that academic staff are a significant factor at higher education institutions (Bezuidenhout et al., 2013). Given this, teaching resources constitute an important consideration in terms of students' levels of satisfaction at private universities (Okai and Zafer, 2015).

One factor that is somewhat undisputed in the literature is the importance of the reputation of the institution. Reputation is a particularly influential consideration in enrolment decisions (Joseph et al., 2012; Bezuidenhout

et al., 2013). This includes the impact reputation has on the perceptions of parents and friends, whose views have a significant bearing on university choice (Wajtrakul, 2014; Okai and Zafer, 2015). Of course, reputation is also measured by accreditation, an important consideration in university selection and recognition of qualifications by potential employers and industry authorities (Joseph et al., 2012). Institutional reputation is crucial in determining perceptions of potential employability (Conard and Conard, 2000; Bezuidenhout et al., 2013). Okai and Zafer (2015) found that reputation was amongst the most important factors determining enrolment in private higher education. Hwang and Choi (2019) noted that perceived institutional image in private higher education had a significantly positive influence on student satisfaction.

Other, less commonly described factors also impact student satisfaction. These include access to financial aid (Joseph et al., 2012), flexibility of curriculum (Kruss, 2002), tuition fees and ease of acceptance (Conard and Conard, 2000). The literature on private higher education identifies class size as a strong determinant of student satisfaction (Okai and Zafer, 2015; Yusoff et al., 2015). As Garwe (2016) argues, students make choices on where to study based on myriad factors, including the views of friends and relatives, academic staff, financial considerations, employability and even, as Okai and Zafer (2015) note, language of instruction.

As a result, researchers have sought to understand what constitutes service quality in higher education. Joseph et al. (2010) set out seven criteria for measuring such service quality, namely, academic staff, administration, library services, structure of the curriculum, location, infrastructure, and career prospects. Green (2014) applied the SERVQUAL model (which examines five service factors: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness) to the Durban University of Technology, a public institution, and concluded that it is important to have modern equipment, to promptly solve student challenges, and to provide accurate and timely information. Hwang and Choi (2019) applied the SERVQUAL model to private higher education institutions. They found that physical facilities, curricula and academic and administrative staff were the most significant factors that shape perceptions of service quality in such institutions. Hwang and Choi (2019) argue that service quality has a positive correlation with both student satisfaction and behavioural intention. As such, service quality, while distinct from student satisfaction, can be considered a useful proxy for satisfaction.

#### 4 Methodology

This study explored several of the above-mentioned service quality factors with a view to understanding the perceptions of students enrolled in private higher education in South Africa regarding both their own institutions and public universities. The aim was to determine the extent to which students are 'loyal' to their institutions, as well as, the extent to which the decision to enter private higher education is a conscious 'exit' from the public sector. One of the specific factors we explored was the role of the #FeesMustFall movement, and the disruptions it caused within public higher education.

Data was collected using an online, self-administered questionnaire. The target population was students enrolled in private universities. Snowball sampling was used as all the private institutions we approached chose not to grant us direct access to their students (a symptom, possibly, of the fraught relationship these institutions have with research, and with their public image) (Saunders and Lewis, 2012). A link to the online survey instrument was initially sent to a small set of people known to the authors as students at private institutions. They were asked to participate and then forward the link to friends, colleagues and acquaintances similarly registered at a private tertiary institution in South Africa. The online survey interface was prefaced with an overview of the purpose of the research that also explained the target population for the survey. Potential participants were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were asked to confirm that they voluntarily consented to participate in the study and that they were currently registered at a private tertiary institution.

We obtained 72 completed questionnaires representing 20 institutions across South Africa. These are the largest and most prominent private higher education institutions in the country. As snowball sampling was used, where participants referred other participants by sending the link out independent of the researchers, we were unable to determine the number of potential participants that declined to participate and therefore, unable to determine the response rate. Despite this limitation, the methodology enabled us to collect relevant data, helping to fill a gap in the literature on the student experience of private universities in South Africa.

The questionnaire comprised largely of closed-ended questions, although a minority were open-ended. The closed-ended questions were analysed using several statistical techniques. As many of these questions used a five-point Likert scale, an average score for the sample was obtained. The open-ended

questions pertained to the participants' views on the private institutions at which they were registered. The responses were analysed using frequency of response counts, as well as a free-to-use online word cloud generator (<https://worditout.com/>). Common short words such as 'a' and 'the' were removed prior to processing.

Overall student satisfaction was determined through a composite of two factors: students' likelihood to: (a) return to the university in the following year, and (b) to recommend the university to a family member or friend. These two factors were combined to form the 'retain and attract' factor. Correlation analysis and multivariate regression were undertaken in order to understand the relationship between this satisfaction factor and the quality factors of physical infrastructure (including library and technological resources), teaching (human) resources, and reputation (recognition of qualifications, academic standards, personal safety and security, and disruption of classes).

## 5 Results

### *Who is the Private University Student in South Africa?*

In this section, only a brief overview of the respondents' demographic characteristics is provided, as the focus of this article is student satisfaction with private higher education. All demographic data is self-reported. Slightly more than half (54%) of the respondents were male. The average age was 28.1 years, with most (90%) under the age of 35. The majority (71%) were Black African, while 16% were White, 5% Asian and 6% self-identified as mixed-race. Most (85%) were South African and 14% were from other Southern African countries. About half (47%) of the students were full time students, and a small percentage (3%) were studying part time but unemployed. Of the remaining half a third (34%) were studying part time whilst employed part time and 16% were working full time and studying part time.

Thirty-four per cent of the respondents were studying for a bachelor's degree, with smaller percentages of students studying toward a diploma (23%), masters (19%), or honours degree (15%). The sample included one doctoral candidate and 7% of the participants were studying towards a national certificate. Over a third (35%) of the respondents reported that neither of their parents had obtained a tertiary qualification, while an additional 15% declined to provide this information. As such, almost half of the participants were at least second-generation students.

With respect to fees, the bulk of the participants (76%) reported paying between R20 000 and R100 000 per year in student fees (approximately 1 350 to 6 600 USD). A few reported paying less than R20 000 per year (12%) and more than R100 000 per year (12%). The respondents indicated that their fees were paid either from family funds or own funds. Student loans were the chief source of funding for less than 10% of the participants.

### *Perceptions of Public Higher Education in South Africa*

To ascertain if the #FeesMustFall protests may have driven the respondents away from public universities, respondents were asked to share their thoughts on the protests. Standard deviation (SD) was used to rank the responses. Overall, the respondents were in strong sympathy with the protests. Some 40% felt that the #FeesMustFall concerns were valid, and a further 20% said they would join the protests given the opportunity. These two views were two and one units above the mean, respectively (see Table 1). The respondents were also asked if they would consider enrolling in a public university. Only 10% said that there was a very low to low possibility of them doing so. Some 29% said there was a moderate possibility, 25% a good possibility and 37% a strong possibility of enrolling in a public higher education institution. It is, therefore, evident that the participants were not opposed to registering at a public higher education institution, suggesting that these institutions continue to enjoy a positive reputation. Given this, and the support expressed for the #FeesMustFall protests, enrolment at a private institution does not appear to constitute a conscious 'exit' from the public higher education sector.

**Table 1:** Sentiments regarding #FeesMustFall protests

Thoughts on #Fees Must Fall	Response Count	Standard Deviation
They are raising valid concerns	45	+2 SD Units
I would join them	22	+1 SD Unit
There are other ways to voice concerns	15	-1 SD Unit
The demands are unrealistic	14	-1 SD Unit
It is a waste of time	9	-1 SD Unit
There is a 3 <sup>rd</sup> force behind this (ulterior motives)	6	-1 SD Unit
I do not know about it	2	-1 SD Unit
<b>Total</b>	<b>113*</b>	
*Respondents were able to select more than one response		

However, the participants did express some concern regarding the reputation of public institutions. They were asked to indicate their level of concern regarding fees, the impact of non-payment of fees, staff quality, access to technology, availability of accommodation, recognition of qualifications (by potential employers and industry authorities), academic standards, personal safety and security, and disruption of classes. The range of responses was ranked from no concern (1) to extreme concern (5). A high score indicates a negative attitude or perception about that aspect of the institution. As shown in Table 2, out of a score of 5, the respondents felt that public universities were less likely to meet their needs with respect to technology (3) and safety (3.13) and were the most concerned about disruptions (3.23).

**Table 2:** Concerns raised by the respondents concerning public universities (max score = 5)

Recognition of qualification	Academic standards	Accommodation	Staff	Fees	Technology	Safety	Disruptions
2.2877	2.3836	2.7123	2.8630	2.9041	3.0000	3.1370	3.2329

**Perceptions of Private Higher Education in South Africa**

The study also sought to establish students’ levels of satisfaction with the private institutions they were enrolled in (see Table 3). Out of a score of 5, they were least concerned with disruptions to classes (2.11), academic standards

(2.3) and personal safety and security (2.34). This could indicate that they were satisfied with the reputation of their institutions as safe, and that they have a strong culture of teaching and learning as well as high academic standards. There is a significant difference in the respondents’ perceptions of safety and disruption of learning at private and public universities (at the 95% level of confidence on the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, 0.000).

**Table 3:** Respondents’ concerns relating to their private university

Disruptions	Recognition of qualification	Academic standards	Safety	Accommodation	Technology	Staff	Non/late payment of fees	Fees
2.1096	2.2877	2.3014	2.3425	2.3836	2.6575	2.7808	2.9315	3.1781

Table 3 shows that the respondents were most concerned about fees at their private institutions, which obtained a score of 3.18 out of 5, as well as the impact of non- or late-payment of fees (an average score of 2.93). Staff quality was their third biggest concern, with a score of 2.78, although less of a concern than their perceptions of staff quality in public institutions.

These findings were augmented by the responses to an open-ended question that asked participants to list three improvements they would like to see at their institution (see Table 4). Using standard deviation (SD) to rank the data, the most common comment related to fees and funding (3 SD units above the mean). The second most frequent comment related to academic staff (2 SD units), specifically the need for competent staff. Access to technology, and the quality of learning and library facilities also featured among the top suggestions for improvement.

A word cloud (see Figure 1) was created from the responses to capture the words most frequently used by the respondents. In alignment with Table 4, the figure illustrates that fees are the most prominent issue, while accommodation, resources, technology and administration, amongst others, also featured.

**Table 4:** Student concerns relating to their private institution

Theme	No. of Comments	Standard Deviation
Fees and Funding	28	+3 SD Units
Academic Staff	17	+2 SD Units
Other	13	+1 SD Unit
Technology	12	+1 SD Unit
Learning Facilities	12	+1 SD Unit
Library	12	+1 SD Unit
Accommodation	9	-1 SD Unit
Transformation and Diversity	9	-1 SD Unit
Extra-Curricular	8	-1 SD Unit
Administration	8	-1 SD Unit
Tutoring and Other Academic Support	7	-1 SD Unit
Communication	7	-1 SD Unit
Qualification Quality and Recognition	4	-1 SD Unit
Safety and Security	4	-1 SD Unit
No concerns	3	-1 SD Unit
Catering	3	-1 SD Unit
Parking	1	-1 SD Unit
<b>Total</b>	<b>157*</b>	
*Respondents were able to select more than one response		

Overall, the respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with their private tertiary institutions. The responses were captured on a Likert scale, with one being the lowest and five being the highest level of satisfaction. Satisfaction extended across all four factors: availability of learning resources (3.68), availability of human resources (teaching and support staff) at 3.73, availability of technological resources (computers and Wi-Fi) at 3.88, and availability of library resources (3.66). The highest levels of satisfaction were with technological resources and the lowest with library resources. This could be due to the high cost of academic books and journals, resulting in their institutions not being able to purchase adequate supplies for their students (Milaras and McKay, 2019).

**Figure 1:** Word cloud based on suggestions for improvements by students at private higher education institutions



Furthermore, the respondents were asked the following questions pertaining to the ability of their private tertiary institution to retain and attract students: (a) will you return to study at the university next year, and (b) will you recommend your university to a friend or family member? Correlation analysis was conducted to determine whether satisfaction with university facilities is related to retention of current students and attraction of prospective students (see Table 5). The results show that satisfaction with learning resources and human resources are strongly correlated with the likelihood of retaining and attracting students; whereas satisfaction with technology and library resources are only moderately correlated.

**Table 5:** Correlation analysis of the quality metrics and the composite variable ‘retain/attract’

Correlations	Retain / Attract factor	Satisfaction with ...			
		Learning resources	Human resources (teaching and support staff)	Technology resources	Library resources
All values' significance (1-tailed) = 0.000					
Pearson Correlation					
Retain / Attract factor	1.000	0.561	0.526	0.381	0.494
Satisfaction with learning resources	0.561	1.000	0.754	0.503	0.639
Satisfaction with human resources (teaching and support staff)	0.526	0.754	1.000	0.443	0.619
Satisfaction with technology resources	0.381	0.503	0.443	1.000	0.633
Satisfaction with library resources	0.494	0.639	0.619	0.633	1.000

In line with the notions of exit, voice, and loyalty, respondents were asked how they would react to deterioration in quality at their private higher education institutions. They were able to select multiple responses from the six possible options (see Table 6). Most (91 respondents) said they would exercise ‘voice’ options, such as writing a complaint, phoning someone to help, or visiting a responsible person. Exit was only selected by a small proportion of participants. More were likely to exercise loyalty than exit.

**Table 6:** Response to quality deterioration

Possible response to decline in quality	Response type	Number of responses
Written a complaint	Voice	37
Phoned someone who can help	Voice	24
Visited the responsible person	Voice	23
Stayed and hoped things would get better	Loyalty	9
Sought an alternative institution	Exit	7
Protested the situation	Voice	2
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>102*</b>
*Respondents were able to select more than one response		

## 6 Discussion

The students that participated in this study were generally satisfied with their private higher education institutions, believing that their education providers have good reputations and that the qualifications on offer are as widely recognised as those of public institutions. Moreover, the respondents were generally satisfied with their teaching and support staff, although there was variation across institutions, programme offerings and individual students, something which warrants further investigation. This was to be expected given the concerns raised in the literature about poorly resourced libraries and weak academic staff in some private institutions (Mabizela, 2004; Varghese, 2004; Thaver, 2008; Segabutla and Evans, 2019). As previous studies have shown, the student-faculty relationship is important for persistence, defined as the likelihood of a student continuing towards an educational qualification (Roberts and Styron, 2011; Tinto, 2017). Persistence is therefore akin to Hirschman’s (1970) notion of ‘loyalty’ used in this study. Thus, if students are satisfied, particularly with their lecturers, it is likely that they will display high levels of ‘loyalty’. This appears to be the case with these students, with most electing to use their voice to express concerns and remain loyal to their institution (see Table 6). Such institutions show a strong ability to retain their students.

Interestingly, the respondents expressed greater concern for public higher education. This included staffing issues and academic standards. They were also concerned about personal safety, security and disruption of classes

in public universities. This could be due to the #FeesMustFall movement, which was, at times marked by extensive violence and destruction of property (Paterson, 2019). However, given that the respondents supported this movement, it is unlikely that student activism (and the associated disruption of the academic programme) on public university campuses would directly result in students 'exiting' the public university system. Safety concerns may be due to more generalised feelings of inadequate safety on public university campuses, as a report on gender-based violence in higher education highlights (SaferSpaces, 2020). Management of public universities, therefore, have some cause for concern. In the future, perceptions pertaining to a lack of safety and disruptions may impact on prospective students' decisions on where to apply. Extensive violence and disruption of the registration process, as well as delays to the start of the academic year at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Zama, 2020), the disruptive protest action at UNISA and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, amongst others in 2020, are a case in point. Thus, it is possible that there may be 'exit' from public to private institutions in the future if the respondents' safety concerns become more widespread amongst the general student body. Although things changed during the 2020-2022 period due to COVID-19, when regular face-to-face tuition returns, the protests may do so as well. These issues need further examination if private university enrolment in South Africa is to be more fully understood.

As noted previously, in this study, 'exit' was defined not just as a decision to deregister, but also as the intention to not enrol in the future. On that basis, the results of this study seem to suggest that individuals' decision to enrol in private higher education institutions is not a conscious 'exit' from the public sector; despite generally positive levels of satisfaction with their private institutions, the respondents indicated a seemingly paradoxical willingness to enrol in public universities in the future. This may be because private universities are expensive vis-à-vis public universities. Notably, tuition fees, and payment thereof, were the most significant challenge for the respondents. Such affordability issues are in line with international studies that found that fees are amongst the most important issues at private universities (Joseph et al., 2012; Schoen, 2015; Abdul, Uddin, Sahabuddin, Rahman and Rahaman, 2016). No private university in South Africa receives any state funding; thus, they rely on student fees. Private university students are also unable to access state-funded bursaries or loans such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). As a result, average tuition fees for the participants were

R58 700 per year (around 4 000 USD; significant in South African terms) and students must source own funds to pay. It is, thus, likely that there is a tension between seeking safety and security in private universities and the affordability thereof. If the private sector can grow significantly, economies of scale may lead to reduced costs. However, for the time being, high tuition fees will remain. The recent announcement that Educor, owner of several private tertiary education providers in South Africa, will retrench 752 staff due to declining student numbers and growing student debt is an indicator that, in a weak economy, such a possibility is a remote one (Child, 2020). At the time of writing, it was unclear what effect COVID-19 has had on the private education sector. It may have worsened the situation, or the move to online learning may help these institutions to reduce costs and increase enrolment. For example, Stadio Holdings posted good share value growth in 2021, but overall earnings declined year-on-year over the past five years.

## 7 Conclusion

The study's limitations included the use of convenience snowball sampling and a relatively small sample size due to the researchers being unable to formally access private higher education institutions. As a result, we primarily relied on word of mouth to obtain usable responses to our survey instrument. In addition, the study was largely limited to quantitative data. Its findings will thus need to be augmented by both wider quantitative data collection and deeper qualitative analyses. For example, the reasons for the participants' various (and sometimes contradictory) perceptions of public and private higher education institutions need to be explored through follow-up qualitative interviews.

Despite these limitations, the study found that the sampled students from private higher education institutions were, in general, moderately satisfied with their institutions. That said, they were concerned about high tuition fees and how to fund their studies. This suggests that the popular notion that private universities serve a relatively well-off, middle-class student may require deeper interrogation. In terms of satisfaction, the participants indicated that they would exercise 'voice', rather than 'exit', thereby showing high levels of 'loyalty' to their chosen private institution, as well as a strong personal sense of persistence.

The study also aimed to establish if enrolling at a private higher education institution constituted a conscious 'exit' from the public higher education

system. The results were mixed, pointing to the need for further investigation. On the one hand, the participants were both sympathetic towards the #FeesMustFall<sup>1</sup> protests and expressed a willingness to enrol in public institutions in the future, suggesting that private higher education enrolment is not a conscious 'exit' from public higher education. On the other, issues pertaining to safety and security may make some students hesitant to enrol in South Africa's public institutions.

It is clear that the interaction between – and the complementarity of – the public and private higher education sectors in South Africa requires nuanced understanding. What is certain is that the South African public university system does not have the capacity to accommodate all who wish to obtain a tertiary qualification. It may be of value, therefore, for the government to reconsider how the private higher education sector is regulated such that it can grow to cater for those who are currently not accommodated in South Africa's public universities.

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<sup>1</sup> The #FeesMustFall movement was a series of student-led protests across universities in South Africa in 2015 and 2016. The protests were aimed, in the first instance, at eliminating higher education tuition fees and, in the second, at 'decolonising' higher education curricula, that is, developing curricula that value and acknowledge the knowledges of South Africans and Africans.

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