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IMPROVED STUDENT ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON ACADEMIC RETENTION: A CASE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of enhanced student administrative services on academic retention in South African higher education. Using SERVQUAL and Tinto's Student Integration Theory, 648 students from a comprehensive university in the Eastern Cape completed structured questionnaires assessing administrative service quality, satisfaction, and intentions to remain enrolled. The SERVQUAL instrument was adapted for the local context. Results showed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.05$) between administrative service quality and student satisfaction. Gender and campus location significantly influenced satisfaction, while residential status and funding source did not. The findings highlight that efficient, empathetic, and responsive administrative services are critical to student satisfaction and retention. Although limited to one institution and relying on self-reported data, the study shows that non-academic support services are integral to student persistence. It recommends staff training and process improvements to support student-centred institutional changes. Immediate actions for administrators include conducting needs assessments to identify service delivery gaps and initiating pilot training programmes for frontline staff to implement findings promptly.

KEYWORDS: Administrative Services, Student Retention, Service Quality, Higher Education, And Student Satisfaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Student retention remains a significant challenge for higher education institutions, especially as competition for enrollment and accountability pressures intensify amid global changes and evolving student expectations (Umendu et al., 2026; Student Academic Experience Survey, 2025). While academic quality is fundamental to student success, there is growing recognition that non-academic services, including administrative support, student advising, enrollment processes, and communication, substantially shape the student experience and retention outcomes (Al Shamsi, Al Hawari, Aderibigbe & Omar, 2023; Govender & David, 2023). Administrative services often serve as the primary means for students to access essential resources and meet institutional requirements. Inefficiencies, delays, or deficiencies in these services can reduce student satisfaction, weaken their sense of belonging, and lower the likelihood of continued enrollment (Luthuli, Nkomo & Moyane, 2024; National Student Involvement Report, 2025).

Contemporary service quality models in higher education increasingly view students as informed “customers,” with their satisfaction indicating institutional effectiveness and responsiveness (Malik & Danish, 2010; Stodnick & Rogers, 2008). In the competitive and globalised educational landscape, institutions that prioritise responsiveness, empathy, dependability, and reassurance are more successful in attracting, supporting, and retaining a diverse student body (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; cited in Stodnick & Rogers, 2008; Umendu et al., 2026). Empirical evidence shows that high service quality, in both academic and non-academic domains, enhances student satisfaction, bolsters institutional reputation, and increases the likelihood of persistence and graduation (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022; Sivili & Baysah, 2024).

Retention remains a persistent challenge in South African higher education, as evidenced by national reports documenting low graduation rates and high dropout rates attributable to academic, socio-economic, and administrative factors (Council on Higher Education, 2013; Letseka & Maile, 2008). Regional studies indicate that support services, including efficient administration, academic advising, and professional assistance, are critical for student satisfaction and retention (Stofile & Enwereji, 2025; Johannes & Lalendle, 2024). Nevertheless, limited research has specifically examined the impact of administrative service quality on retention within South African universities, a gap this study seeks to address.

2. BACKGROUND

Research on student retention in higher education now includes many factors, drawing on student involvement, organisational behaviour, and service quality. Early models focused on academic readiness and institutional selectivity. Newer studies highlight the importance of overall support, including administrative services, academic advising, and learner support in helping students stay and succeed (Stodnick & Rogers, 2008; Umendu et al., 2026). Studies show that when students perceive institutional services as reliable, transparent, empathetic, and responsive, they are more satisfied and more likely to remain enrolled (Bwachele, Chong & Krishnapillai, 2023; Govender & David, 2023).

In South Africa, structural and systemic factors, along with institutional operations, affect student retention. National and regional reports show many students face administrative delays, inconsistent support, and resource shortages, which harm their academic involvement and motivation to continue (Council on Higher Education, 2013; National Student Involvement Report, 2025). Recent local studies highlight that professional and administrative support is especially important for student success, particularly in online postgraduate programs where timely and effective service closely relates to retention (Johannes & Lalendle, 2024).

Although global evidence shows service quality affects retention, few South African studies examine how administrative service quality impacts student satisfaction and retention at comprehensive universities. By exploring how responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and dependability in administrative services relate to satisfaction and students’ decisions to stay, this study addresses a gap. It broadens the understanding of what drives students to success beyond academics.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Student retention in higher education remains a serious global problem, with non-academic factors, especially administrative services, increasingly recognised as key determinants of satisfaction and persistence (Umendu, Adewale & Chukwuma, 2026; Al Shamsi, Al Hawari, Aderibigbe & Omar, 2023). Despite this, limited empirical evidence directly links administrative service quality to academic retention outcomes, particularly in African contexts (Osman, Yusoof, Ali & Aziz, 2024). Most retention research still focuses on academic factors like curriculum design and instructional quality, overlooking how students’ interactions with administrative processes affect their engagement and persistence decisions.

(Bwachele, Chong & Krishnapillai, 2023; Luthuli, Nkomo & Moyane, 2024).

Existing studies suggest that administrative inefficiencies such as unclear registration procedures, poor communication, and slow responses frustrate students, contribute to disengagement, and increase withdrawal risk (Ghadamosi & De Jager, 2009; Govender & David, 2023). When students face socioeconomic and academic barriers, these challenges may worsen retention problems. However, few studies have quantitatively examined how students' perceptions of administrative service quality relate to satisfaction and retention decisions, leaving institutions without clear evidence to guide improvements (Stodnick & Rogers, 2008; Johannes & Lalendle, 2024).

In South Africa, where dropout and extended time-to-degree rates are high, understanding the impact of administrative services is especially important. Only about one in four students complete their studies within the minimum period, with many leaving due to non-academic challenges like financial strain or insufficient institutional support (Council on Higher Education, 2013; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Stofile & Enwereji, 2025). Students from diverse socio-economic and demographic backgrounds may perceive and experience administrative services differently, highlighting the need to investigate how service quality affects satisfaction and retention across groups (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022; Luthuli et al., 2024). This study examines how administrative service quality affects student satisfaction and retention in higher education, focusing on variations across demographic and socio-economic groups in South Africa. Addressing this gap will provide institutions with actionable insights to enhance satisfaction, retention, and timely graduation.

3.1 Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate the impact of student administrative services on student satisfaction and academic retention in higher education institutions, with a focus on understanding how administrative service quality, efficiency, and responsiveness influence students' decisions to persist and graduate.

To achieve this aim, the study was guided by four specific objectives:

Research Objectives

1. To assess students' perceptions of administrative services in higher education institutions, including responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy, and tangibles.

2. To examine the relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction.

3. To determine the impact of demographic factors (gender, campus location, residential status, and source of funding) on students' satisfaction with administrative services.

4. To explore the influence of student satisfaction with administrative services on retention decisions, including students' intentions to continue and complete their studies.

5. To provide recommendations for enhancing administrative service quality to improve student satisfaction and retention.

Research Questions

1. What are students' perceptions of administrative service quality in higher education institutions?

2. Is there a significant relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction?

3. How do demographic factors (gender, campus, residential status, source of funding) influence students' satisfaction with administrative services?

4. To what extent does student satisfaction with administrative services influence their retention and continuation decisions?

5. What strategies can higher education institutions implement to improve administrative service quality and enhance student satisfaction and retention?

Research Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction in higher education institutions.

Demographic Variables Hypotheses

H2: Gender significantly influences students' satisfaction with administrative services.

H3: Campus location significantly influences students' satisfaction with administrative services.

H4: Residential status (on-campus vs off-campus) has a significant influence on students' satisfaction with administrative services.

H5: Source of funding significantly influences students' satisfaction with administrative services.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study provides quantitative evidence that administrative services are closely associated with student satisfaction and retention. The results indicate that non-academic support is essential for student persistence and success. By focusing on a South African university, the research applies global

models such as SERVQUAL and Tinto's interactionist model in an underexplored context.

The findings offer practical guidance for university administrators and policymakers aiming to enhance administrative efficiency, responsiveness, and empathy. These insights inform staff training, process improvements, and communication strategies to strengthen the student experience and increase retention.

From an academic perspective, the study demonstrates that non-academic interactions significantly influence student engagement, loyalty, and persistence. The results underscore the necessity for universities to adopt a holistic, student-centred approach in which both administrative and academic services contribute to student success.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW.

This literature review examines research on student administrative services and their effects on satisfaction and retention, with a focus on South African higher education. It covers key ideas such as service quality and the role of administration in supporting students and explores how satisfaction relates to retention. By comparing global and South African studies, the review identifies key challenges and research gaps, underscoring the need for this study.

5.1 Concept of Student Administrative Services

Student administrative services refer to the processes and interactions students experience with their institutions outside of the classroom, including registration, enrollment, examination processing, financial aid, and graduation procedures (Cuthbert, 1996; Green, 2014). These services are critical because students are treated as primary customers, and their satisfaction with these interactions significantly affects their overall perception of the institution (Zeithaml, 1988; Malik & Danish, 2010). Administrative services are not limited to operational efficiency but also encompass interpersonal interactions, including staff cooperation, empathy, and responsiveness.

The significance of administrative services in higher education has grown in recent years as institutions adopt more student-centred, customer-oriented approaches (Kotler & Fox, 1995; DeShields, Kar & Kaynak, 2005). Efficient administration ensures smooth academic processes and enhances students' perception of institutional reliability and professionalism (Keyte & Locher, 2004). Non-academic support services, including administrative functions, serve as extensions of the student

experience and contribute to personal growth, professional development, and academic success (Roland, 2009; Prinsloo, 2013).

5.2 Importance of Administrative Services for Satisfaction and Retention

Administrative services are vital for fostering both student satisfaction and retention. When students perceive that administrative staff is efficient, transparent, and supportive, they are more likely to experience positive institutional engagement (Spooren, Mortelmans & Denekens, 2007). Administrative efficiency complements academic motivation by ensuring that students' academic progress is supported through timely and effective services. Poor administrative services, such as delays in registration or inadequate support, can demotivate students, reduce satisfaction, and increase the risk of attrition (Ghadamosi & De Jager, 2009).

The link between administrative services and retention is supported by empirical studies indicating that satisfied students are more loyal and more likely to persist in their studies (Alves & Raposa, 2007). Universities that prioritise administrative quality can reduce student dropout, improve institutional reputation, and strengthen long-term student engagement (Kelso, 2008; Wirtz, Chew & Lovelock, 2012). In essence, administrative services are not merely support functions; they are critical elements that influence students' decisions to continue their education within the institution.

5.3 Service Quality in Higher Education

Service quality is a multidimensional construct encompassing both the technical and functional aspects of service delivery (Gronroos, 1984, 2007). Technical quality refers to what is delivered during administrative processes, such as accurate registration, provision of study materials, and timely processing of examination results. Functional quality, on the other hand, refers to how services are delivered, including staff attitudes, empathy, responsiveness, and interpersonal interactions with students. Both dimensions influence students' overall perceptions of service quality and satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Stodnick & Rogers, 2008).

Students often prioritise functional quality in administrative interactions, seeking staff who are cooperative, empathetic, and supportive (Hasan, Ilias, Rahman & Raza, 2008). Studies have shown that gaps between expected and perceived service quality negatively impact satisfaction, highlighting the importance of staff training and service monitoring

(Gronroos, 2007). Higher education institutions that focus on enhancing both the technical and functional quality of administrative services can maximise student satisfaction, loyalty, and retention.

5.4 Global Perspectives on Administrative Services and Retention

Research from developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia highlight the importance of institutional support and administrative efficiency in improving student retention and success. Studies indicate that social integration, academic advising, support services, and administrative responsiveness collectively contribute to students' decisions to persist at their institutions (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot & Associates, 2005; Georg, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Hovdhaugen, Frolich & Arndt, 2013). Effective administration enhances the student experience by ensuring smooth academic processes,

access to learning resources, and responsive support services.

In Australia, student retention is a key performance indicator that influences both institutional evaluation and government funding (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2008). Similarly, in European contexts, institutional culture and the quality of non-academic services play an important role in retention outcomes (Yorke & Longden, 2004; Ulriksen, Madsen & Holmegaard, 2010). These findings demonstrate that administrative services are universally recognised as a critical factor for student satisfaction, loyalty, and retention across diverse higher education systems.

5.5 Challenges Facing Higher Education

Higher education institutions worldwide face multiple challenges affecting student success and retention. A comparison between the United States and South Africa highlights key issues:

Table 1.1: Challenges Facing Higher Education.

Challenges	United States of America	South Africa
Low pass rates	Low pass rates	Very low pass rates (around 15% graduate on time)
Low enrolment of minority group students	Minority students underrepresented	Participation rates of previously excluded Black African students are ~12%
Lower pass rates among low-income/minority students	Lower pass rates in low-income/minority groups	Only 1 in 3 Black African students graduate on time; <5% obtain a degree
Students are not adequately prepared in high school	Common issue	Common issue
Increased demand for graduates in the knowledge economy	Expanding student body, high diversity	Expanding student body, high diversity, many first-generation students

SOURCE: (Strydom et al. 2010:3).

The table shows that while South Africa faces some of the same higher education challenges as countries like the United States, such as low graduation rates and diverse student populations, it also faces unique challenges. These include more severe financial barriers, limited guidance, and deep socio-economic inequalities, which together increase the risk of students dropping out compared to many developed countries (Eduloan, 2009; Letseka & Maile, 2008). These specific challenges mean that strong administrative and support services are especially important in South Africa to help students stay and graduate.

5.6 Gaps in Research and Justification for the Study

Despite evidence supporting the link between administrative services and student retention, research specifically examining this relationship in South African higher education remains limited. Studies indicate that administrative quality, responsiveness, and student-centred approaches are

crucial for enhancing satisfaction and reducing attrition (Viljoen & Deacon, 2013; Manik, 2014). Furthermore, administrative efficiency interacts with academic support, social integration, and student engagement to influence overall student outcomes.

The current study seeks to fill this gap by investigating students' perceptions of administrative services and examining how service quality impacts retention in a South African comprehensive university. By focusing on both technical and functional dimensions of administrative service delivery, the study aims to provide insights into how institutional processes and staff interactions contribute to students' satisfaction, loyalty, and academic persistence.

5.7 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: the SERVQUAL model and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how administrative service quality

influences student satisfaction and retention in higher education.

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), conceptualises service quality as a multidimensional construct consisting of five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. In higher education, these dimensions are used to evaluate students' perceptions of administrative services. Reliability refers to the ability of administrative systems to perform services accurately and consistently, while responsiveness captures the willingness of staff to assist students promptly. Assurance relates to staff competence and professionalism, and empathy reflects the degree of care and individual attention provided to students. Tangibles include the physical and digital infrastructure supporting administrative processes. Within this study, SERVQUAL provides the conceptual basis for measuring administrative service quality and examining its influence on student satisfaction.

Complementing this, Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1993; 2017) explains student retention as a function of students' academic and social integration within an institution. The theory posits that students are more likely to persist when they feel connected to the institutional environment and experience supportive interactions. While traditionally applied to academic and social domains, this study extends Tinto's framework to include administrative interactions as a critical component of institutional integration. Efficient, responsive, and empathetic administrative services contribute to students' sense of belonging and institutional commitment, thereby influencing their decision to remain enrolled.

The integration of these two frameworks provides a robust conceptual foundation for the study. SERVQUAL explains how students evaluate the quality of administrative services, while Tinto's theory explains how these evaluations translate into satisfaction and retention outcomes. Together, they inform the study's research objectives, hypotheses, and interpretation of findings, offering a holistic understanding of the role of non-academic services in student success.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section explains the research methods used to study how student administrative services affect satisfaction and retention at a comprehensive university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. It describes the research design, how participants were chosen, how data were collected, and the analysis

methods. Ethical steps included obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and obtaining university approval. Sharing these details helps ensure the results are valid, reliable, and reproducible.

This study used a quantitative research design with descriptive and correlational approaches to investigate how student administrative services influence satisfaction and retention at a comprehensive university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The quantitative approach collected numerical data to identify patterns, relationships, and trends. The descriptive aspect captured students' satisfaction levels with administrative services. The correlational component assessed the strength and direction of the relationship between administrative service quality and retention. The study is grounded in Tinto's Student Integration Theory and the SERVQUAL model, which guided the formulation of hypotheses and the analysis of how service quality dimensions influence students' perceptions and commitment to remain at the institution (Gronroos, 2007; Malik & Danish, 2010).

The study population encompassed all registered students across the university's multiple campuses, representing diversity in gender, residential status, and funding sources. A total of 648 students were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring proportional representation from each campus and major demographic group. This stratification aimed to capture a sample reflective of the university's student body. All 648 distributed questionnaires were completed and returned, resulting in a 100% usable response rate. This exceptionally high response rate increases the reliability and generalisability of the findings, allowing robust analysis of the relationships between administrative services, student satisfaction, and demographic influences. The structured self-administered questionnaire had three main sections: demographic information; perceptions of administrative services using SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy); and measures of student satisfaction and retention intentions (Alves & Raposa, 2007; Hasan, Ilias, Rahman & Raza, 2008). To ensure validity in the South African higher education context, the questionnaire was adapted through a rigorous process: university administrative procedures were reviewed, and local higher education administration experts were consulted to refine the wording and relevance of the items. For example, responsiveness was assessed by items such as "Administrative staff respond promptly to student

enquiries"; reliability by "Administrative procedures are consistently accurate and free from errors"; and empathy by "Staff show genuine concern for my academic needs." All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.'

The validation process involved several steps. The questionnaire underwent content and face validity review by a panel of academic experts in higher education administration and measurement. To further assess its effectiveness, a pilot test was conducted, inviting 40 undergraduate and postgraduate students from various faculties and campuses to complete the questionnaire and provide feedback. This approach was intended to ensure the instrument's clarity and relevance across a representative student cohort. Feedback from pilot participants primarily addressed the clarity of the questions, the relevance of the items to the local academic administration context, and the precise wording. Based on this input, minor revisions were

undertaken, including rephrasing ambiguous terms and modifying items to reflect local administrative processes. Reliability analysis of the pilot data produced satisfactory results, with Cronbach's alpha exceeding 0.7 for all SERVQUAL and satisfaction constructs. Following these steps, the final version of the questionnaire was considered ready for full-scale data collection.

7. RESULTS

7.1 Findings

This section presents the quantitative findings on the relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction, as well as the influence of demographic variables (gender, campus location, residential status, and funding sources). Statistical analyses included Pearson's correlation, independent samples t-tests, and ANOVA.

- Demographics

Table 1.2: Participant Profile.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	257	39.7
	Female	391	60.3
Campus	Buffalo City	167	—
	Butterworth	125	—
	NMD	330	—
	Queenstown	26	—
Residence	On campus	323	49.8
	Off campus	324	50.0
Funding	NSFAS	470	—
	Scholarship	81	—
	Parent/Family	42	—
	Self-funded	21	—
	Loan	19	—

	Other	15	—
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The table above presents the demographic profile of the participants to provide context for interpreting the study findings. A total of 648 students participated in the study, representing diverse backgrounds across the university's multiple campuses. The sample comprised 257 male students (39.7%) and 391 female students (60.3%), indicating a higher representation of female participants. In terms of campus distribution, students were drawn from four campuses: Buffalo City (n = 167), Butterworth (n = 125), Nelson Mandela Drive (n = 330), and Queenstown (n = 26), ensuring broad institutional representation.

Regarding residential status, 323 students (49.8%) resided on campus, while 324 (50.0%) lived off campus, resulting in a balanced distribution. In terms of funding sources, the majority of students were funded through NSFAS (n = 470), followed by scholarships (n = 81), parental or family support (n = 42), self-financing (n = 21), personal loans (n = 19), and other sources (n = 15). These demographic characteristics indicate that the sample is diverse and broadly representative of the student population across campuses and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity enhances the reliability of the findings and supports meaningful analysis of how administrative service quality is experienced across different student groups.

• *Presentation of the main findings*

This section starts with a summary of the main quantitative findings. The analysis showed that students' views of administrative service quality are strongly linked to overall satisfaction ($r = 0.80$; $p <$

0.05). Gender and campus location had a significant effect, with female students and those at the Buffalo City campus reporting the highest satisfaction. Residential status and funding sources did not have a significant impact. These results came from Pearson's correlation, t-tests, and ANOVA.

The findings on the relationship between student administrative services and satisfaction, as well as demographic effects, including gender, campus location, residential status, and funding source. Results are organised by statistical analyses and referenced alongside summary tables below for clarity. Table 1.2 shows the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between perceptions of administrative service quality and satisfaction. Demographic influences are detailed in the subsequent tables: Table 1.3 also shows t-test results for gender differences; Table 1.4 reports ANOVA results for campus location; Table 1.5 examines residential status via t-test; and Table 1.6 evaluates funding source via ANOVA. These references guide the interpretation of findings in relation to the research objectives and hypotheses.

The tables below summarise findings on the relationship between student administrative services and satisfaction, along with demographic influences such as gender, campus location, residential status, and funding source. The analysis used Pearson's correlation, t-tests, and ANOVA to test hypotheses. The tables highlight mean scores, standard deviations, statistical values, significance levels, and hypothesis outcomes. These findings provide an overview of how administrative service quality and demographics affect satisfaction and help identify areas for improvement in student support services.

Table 1.2. Summary of Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Showing the Relationship between Students' Administrative Services and Students' Satisfaction.

Variables	N	Mean	Std. D	r	Sig.	Remark
Student Admin. Services	648	26.827	7.625	.796	.000	Significant
Students' Satisfaction	648	167.849	33.689			

Table 1.2 shows a significant positive relationship between students' perceptions of administrative service quality and their satisfaction ($r = 0.80$; $p <$

0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0), which posited no significant relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction, is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis (H_1). The positive correlation observed

here indicates that improvements in administrative services are associated with increased levels of student satisfaction.

A t-test was performed on demographic variables, gender, campus, residential status, and funding sources to assess their relationship with student

administration services. Results are presented in Tables 1.2.12a to 1.3.

Table 1.3 below presents findings on gender and students' level of satisfaction with student administration services.

Table 1.3: Difference between Male and Female Students' Satisfaction with Student Administration Services.

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. D	T	Df	Sig.	Remark
Satisfaction with students' admin services.	Male	257	26.1012	7.12044	-1.969	648	.049	Sig.
Satisfaction with students' admin services.	Female	391	27.3043	7.91247				

Table 1.3 shows that gender has a significant effect on satisfaction with administrative services ($t = 1.97$; $df = 648$; $p < 0.05$). Female students had a higher average score (27.30) than male students (26.10), suggesting that female students value the institution's services more.

Table 1.4 presents the t-test results showing the impact of campus on student satisfaction with student administration services.

Table 1.4: Influence of Campus on satisfaction with student administration services.

Campus	N	Mean	Std. D	F	Df	Sig.	Remark
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Buffalo city	167	27.5749	8.26767			
					6.217	3, 646	.000
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Butterworth	125	24.3040	6.87823			
					6.217	3, 646	.000
Satisfaction with students' admin services	NMD	330	27.4848	7.32453			
					6.217	3, 646	.000
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Queestown	26	25.8077	8.24145			
					6.217	3, 646	.000
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Total	648	26.8272	7.62537			
					6.217	3, 646	.000

Table 1.4 shows that campus location has a significant effect on satisfaction with administrative services ($F(3, 646) = 6.22$; $p < 0.05$). Buffalo City had the highest average score (27.58), followed by Nelson Mandela Drive (27.49), Queenstown (25.81), and Butterworth (24.30). Satisfaction levels differ by campus.

Table 1.5 below presents the t-test results showing the impact of residential status on student satisfaction with administrative services.

Table 1.5: Influence of Residential Status on Student Administration Services.

Res. Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig.	Remark
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Satisfaction with the study's administrative services.	on campus	323	26.8978	7.48905	.251	645	.802	NS
Satisfaction with the study's administrative services.	off campus	324	26.7469	7.77932	.251	645	.802	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	personal loan	19	25.6842	6.77457	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Scholarship	81	28.9877	5.61581	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	NSFAS	470	26.5191	7.75110	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	self-financed	21	29.0476	8.55264	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	parent/relatives	42	26.2619	8.46243	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Others	15	24.7333	8.72162	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Total	648	26.8272	7.62537	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS

Table 1.5 shows that residential status does not have a significant effect on satisfaction with administrative services ($t = 0.25$; $df = 647$; $p > 0.05$). This means that whether students live on or off campus does not impact their satisfaction. The results for funding sources are shown in Table 1.6.

Table 1.6: Influence of Source of Funding on Student Administration Services.

Table 11: Influence of Source of Funding on Student Administration Services.									
N	Mean	Std. D	F	Df	Sig.	Remark			
Satisfaction with students' admin services	personal loan	19	25.6842	6.77457	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS	
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Scholarship	81	28.9877	5.61581	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS	
Satisfaction with students' admin services	NSFAS	470	26.5191	7.75110	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS	
Satisfaction with students' admin services	self-financed	21	29.0476	8.55264	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS	

Satisfaction with students' admin services	parent/relatives	42	26.2619	8.46243	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS
Satisfaction with students' admin services	Others	15	24.7333	8.72162	2.188	5, 642	.054	NS

Table 1.6 shows that the funding source does not have a significant effect on satisfaction with administrative services ($F(5, 642) = 2.19$; $p > 0.05$). This means that satisfaction does not depend on how students are funded.

7.2 Discussion of findings

This section discusses the study's findings in relation to the objectives, hypotheses, and theoretical frameworks of the SERVQUAL model and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. The results revealed that key dimensions of administrative service quality, including responsiveness, reliability, empathy, assurance, and tangibles, significantly influenced student satisfaction and retention intentions, supporting the SERVQUAL proposition that service quality shapes user perceptions and experiences. Through the lens of Tinto's theory, the findings further demonstrated that efficient and empathetic administrative services strengthen students' sense of institutional belonging and integration, thereby enhancing their commitment to persist with their studies. Discussion of findings in relation to the objectives, hypotheses, and theoretical frameworks of the SERVQUAL model and Tinto's Student Integration Theory are presented below:

• Objective 1 & Hypothesis 1

This study first aimed to assess students' perceptions of administrative services, including responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction. The results confirmed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.80$; $p < 0.05$), indicating that higher-quality administrative services are associated with greater student satisfaction. Female students reported higher satisfaction scores than male students, reflecting their greater sensitivity to interpersonal aspects of service. This finding aligns with Sultan and Wong (2010), who argue that service quality is contextual and dependent on students' perceptions, as well as recent research emphasising that administrative efficiency, empathetic staff, and timely responses directly influence student satisfaction and engagement (Abubakar et al., 2021;

Chinyamurindi, 2022). These results also resonate with the SERVQUAL model, which identifies both functional and technical quality as key determinants of perceived service outcomes (Parasuraman et al., 2018).

• Objective 2 & Hypothesis 1 (continued)

The study also examined the relationship between administrative service quality and overall student satisfaction. Findings revealed that satisfaction with administration strongly shapes students' perception of the institution. Non-academic services such as administration, advising, and support services are critical determinants of student satisfaction and indirectly affect retention (Rambau & Ngcobo, 2020; Bester et al., 2021). This supports Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory, which emphasises that engagement with institutional systems, including administrative processes, is essential for student persistence. Plank and Chiagouris (1997) further confirm that students' perceptions of services influence decisions to continue enrollment. Similarly, financial and non-academic considerations, as noted by Astin and Oseguera (2005), Yorke (1999), and Davies & Elias (2003), significantly affect retention decisions, particularly where administrative services intersect with funding and support systems.

• Objective 3 & Hypotheses 2-5

The study explored the impact of demographic factors on administrative service satisfaction. Gender (H2) and campus location (H3) were significant, while residential status (H4) and source of funding (H5) were not. Female students reported higher satisfaction, consistent with research showing women respond more positively to interpersonal quality in service delivery (Maphosa & Zinyemba, 2019). Campus differences highlighted the influence of resource allocation, staff availability, and responsiveness on student satisfaction (Mabaso et al., 2020). Conversely, residential status and funding sources had minimal effects, suggesting that quality-of-service delivery is a stronger determinant of satisfaction than external factors. These findings align with the notion that effective support services extend the student experience beyond academics and

foster personal growth (Roland, 2009; Schreiber, 2013; Pascarella et al., 2005).

- **Objective 4**

The influence of student satisfaction with administrative services on retention decisions was confirmed. Students who experienced efficient, empathetic, and supportive administrative services reported stronger intentions to persist. For example, at the University of Cape Town, the streamlining of online registration and the implementation of a dedicated student helpdesk led to a measurable increase in student satisfaction and a subsequent reduction in early withdrawal rates, as highlighted in recent institutional reports. This aligns with recent studies showing that satisfaction with non-academic services significantly contributes to retention and academic persistence (Mashau & Netshandama, 2021; Moyo & Ndlovu, 2022). Engagement with administration fosters a sense of belonging and trust in the institution, supporting students' decision to continue their studies (Tinto, 2017). Langbein and Snider (1999) similarly found that reliable and empathetic services, including financial and administrative support, increase the likelihood that students remain enrolled.

- **Objective 5**

Finally, the study proposed strategies to enhance administrative service quality. These include clear communication, timely feedback, empathetic interactions, and transparency in all processes. Establishing structured student administration cycles covering enquiry, application, enrolment, and candidature management ensures accessible, consistent, and responsive services (Student Management Services Review Report, 2010). Adopting Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems can further improve student engagement (Abubakar et al., 2021; Chinyamurindi, 2022). Overall, findings emphasise that high-quality administrative services are critical non-academic factors influencing satisfaction, engagement, and retention. Institutions prioritising service quality are more likely to retain students and improve academic outcomes, consistent with evidence from Tinto (1993), Sultan and Wong (2010), and other seminal studies.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section prioritises and summarises key recommendations based on the study's findings, followed by the main policy implications for higher education institutions seeking to enhance student

satisfaction and retention through improved administrative services.

Most urgently, institutions should develop and implement comprehensive staff training programmes that focus on responsiveness, reliability, empathy, assurance, and clear communication. To facilitate effective implementation, administrators should begin by conducting a needs assessment to identify current service delivery gaps and areas requiring immediate attention. Based on the assessment findings, a pilot training programme can be launched for a representative group of frontline staff, allowing for adjustments before full-scale rollout. Simultaneously, administrators should draft and review standardised administrative protocols to ensure consistent, equitable service delivery across all campuses. Regular workshops, targeted coaching, and systematic performance evaluations are foundational actions for addressing immediate service gaps and improving frontline student interactions. Alongside training, establishing clear, standardised administrative protocols across campuses should be prioritised to ensure consistent, equitable service delivery.

After establishing these foundational improvements, universities should invest in digital solutions, such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems, and implement structured administrative cycles for enquiry, application, enrolment, and candidature management. Examples of CRM platforms suitable for higher education include Salesforce Education Cloud, Microsoft Dynamics 365 Education Accelerator, and Ellucian CRM Recruit, which can help manage student interactions, automate communications, and track key administrative processes. Other digital tools, such as student portals and workflow automation systems, can further enhance efficiency and ensure timely, transparent service delivery.

However, implementing digital systems is not without challenges. Common barriers include the high upfront costs of software and infrastructure, resistance to change or lack of digital skills among staff, and the need for ongoing maintenance and support. To address these obstacles, institutions can pursue phased or modular implementation strategies that spread costs over time and allow for gradual adaptation. Providing targeted staff training, appointing digital champions within teams, and piloting new systems on a small scale before full rollout can help ease the transition and build digital competence. Seeking out vendor support, user communities, and partnerships with other

institutions can further reduce knowledge gaps and support sustainable implementation. These interventions, when tailored to the local context, can yield substantial long-term improvements in efficiency and transparency.

Institutions should also enhance inclusivity by periodically reviewing procedures to address gender-related needs and by employing gender-sensitive practices, such as anonymous help desks and flexible support channels. Inclusivity efforts should further extend to tailoring administrative services for underrepresented student groups, such as students with disabilities, international students, and first-generation university attendees. This includes ensuring the accessibility of all administrative platforms and communications, providing alternative formats where needed, and actively seeking input from these groups to identify and address unique barriers they may face. Ongoing improvements should include appointing service champions or dedicated support teams to oversee non-academic services, and systematically institutionalising regular feedback mechanisms such as online surveys and annual service reviews. To ensure effective feedback collection and monitoring, institutions should schedule student surveys at least once per academic term and offer additional opportunities for feedback through suggestion boxes and digital platforms. Responsibility for collecting and analysing feedback should be assigned to the student administration office or a designated service quality team, which should regularly compile reports for senior management. Survey results and other input should be reviewed in structured meetings each term, and clear actions based on feedback should be documented and communicated to students. By closing the feedback loop with transparent reporting and follow-up actions, institutions can support ongoing improvement and accountability in administrative service delivery.

Collectively, these recommendations establish a clear sequential framework for improving administrative service quality and student outcomes. Institutions should first ensure the integration of service quality benchmarks into institutional policies, followed by prioritising comprehensive staff development initiatives. Once foundational staff capacity is addressed, standardisation of administrative processes should be implemented to ensure consistency across campuses. Building on these elements, institutions can then invest in appropriate digital solutions to advance student-centred service delivery. Adhering to this stepwise prioritisation will enhance student satisfaction,

retention, and institutional reputation.

9. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that high-quality administrative services are central to student satisfaction and academic retention in higher education. There is a strong positive association between administrative service quality and students' satisfaction and intention to persist, particularly when services are responsive, reliable, empathetic, and clearly communicated. Gender and campus location significantly influenced satisfaction, while residential status and funding sources were less impactful. These findings underscore the crucial role of non-academic support services in fostering students' sense of belonging and institutional trust. The policy implication is clear: higher education institutions must set explicit standards for administrative quality and build service improvements into institutional policy. Prioritising staff development, standardised procedures, and digital solutions will ensure consistent, student-focused service across all campuses. By addressing service gaps and pursuing targeted improvements, institutions can enhance student experience, increase retention, and strengthen their academic reputation. In sum, improving administrative services is vital not only for student satisfaction but also for institutional success and student persistence.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should focus on expanding the understanding of how administrative service quality influences student satisfaction and retention. Studies should investigate the role of non-academic support services such as counselling, career guidance, and mentorship programmes, while also using longitudinal approaches to examine changes in student experiences over time. Comparative research across different institutional contexts, including urban and rural universities, is needed to better understand contextual influences on service quality. Further attention should also be given to the effectiveness of digital administrative platforms and the inclusion of broader demographic and socioeconomic variables to identify possible inequalities in student experiences. In addition, future studies should test and validate the proposed framework for improving student satisfaction across multiple universities using experimental or quasi-experimental methods. A particularly important direction would be a multi-institutional longitudinal study examining how administrative service

improvements affect student satisfaction and retention over several academic years, thereby providing stronger evidence of the long-term effectiveness and scalability of such interventions.

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Date: 2026-05-30

To: Regina Stofile

Title of the manuscript: Improved student administrative services and their impact on academic retention: a case study of higher education institutions

You are hereby requested to address the following comments provided by the editor

Editor's Comments

Topic	Improved student administrative services and their impact on academic retention: a case study of higher education institutions
Abstract	The abstract provides a concise overview of the study by clearly stating the purpose, theoretical foundations, methodology, sample size, and principal findings. The inclusion of both the SERVQUAL model and Tinto's Student Integration Theory provides an appropriate conceptual foundation for the investigation of administrative services and student retention. The statistical results are clearly reported, particularly the strong positive relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.05$), which immediately communicates the study's main contribution. However, the abstract could be strengthened by explicitly stating the research gap and highlighting the originality of examining administrative services as predictors of retention in a South African higher education context. Additionally, the abstract focuses heavily on satisfaction while giving limited attention to retention outcomes, despite retention being a central component of the study. The practical implications should also be stated more prominently. Overall,

	the abstract is well structured and informative but would benefit from greater emphasis on the study's contribution, retention outcomes, and policy relevance.
Introduction	The introduction effectively contextualises student retention as a critical challenge facing higher education institutions globally and within South Africa. The authors successfully demonstrate the importance of non-academic services, particularly administrative support, in shaping student experiences and persistence decisions. The discussion is supported by contemporary literature and presents a convincing rationale for examining administrative service quality. The South African context is appropriately introduced through references to high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and challenges associated with institutional support systems. However, the introduction could be improved by reducing repetition between the introduction, background, and problem statement sections. While the problem is identified, the specific research gap should be articulated more forcefully and earlier in the discussion. The introduction would also benefit from a stronger argument explaining why administrative services deserve equal attention alongside academic factors in retention research. Nevertheless, the section establishes a solid foundation for the study and clearly justifies its relevance within higher education research.
Literature	The literature review is comprehensive and demonstrates a broad engagement with both international and South African scholarship on service quality, student satisfaction, and retention. The discussion systematically covers administrative services, service quality theory, retention literature, global perspectives, and contextual challenges facing South African higher education. The integration of SERVQUAL and Tinto's Student Integration Theory is a major strength, as it provides both a service-quality perspective and a student-retention perspective. The theoretical framework clearly explains how service quality dimensions such as responsiveness, reliability, empathy, assurance, and tangibles contribute to satisfaction and retention outcomes. However, the review remains largely descriptive rather than critical. Greater synthesis of the literature is required to identify contradictions, unresolved debates, and theoretical tensions. Additionally, several sections read more like summaries of previous studies rather than analytical discussions. The authors should strengthen the justification for combining SERVQUAL and Tinto's theory and explain more explicitly how these frameworks complement one another in the proposed conceptual model. Despite these limitations, the literature review provides a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for the study.
Methodology	The methodology section is clearly written and provides a detailed explanation of the research design, sampling procedures, instrument development, validity assessment, and reliability testing. The choice of a quantitative, descriptive, and correlational design is appropriate for investigating the relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction. The use of stratified random sampling enhances representativeness, while the sample size of 648 students provides substantial statistical power. The adaptation of the SERVQUAL instrument to the South African context demonstrates methodological sensitivity and contextual relevance. The inclusion of pilot testing and expert validation further strengthens the credibility of the instrument. However, the claim of a 100% response rate raises concerns regarding realism and should be explained more thoroughly. The section would also benefit from additional information regarding ethical approval procedures, data collection timelines, and potential sources of response bias. Furthermore, the authors should report the actual Cronbach's alpha values rather than simply stating that they exceeded the acceptable threshold. The methodology is rigorous but requires clarification of a few methodological issues to enhance transparency and replicability..
Findings and Discussion	The findings are clearly presented and directly address the research objectives and hypotheses. The strong positive relationship between administrative service quality and student satisfaction provides compelling evidence of the importance of non-academic support services in higher education. The identification of gender and campus location as significant predictors of satisfaction contributes valuable insights into demographic variations in service experiences. The finding that residential status and funding source do not significantly influence satisfaction is equally important, as it suggests that service quality may be a more universal determinant of satisfaction than socio-economic circumstances. The discussion effectively links the findings to both SERVQUAL and Tinto's Student Integration Theory, demonstrating how administrative services contribute to institutional integration and student persistence. However, the discussion tends to confirm existing literature rather than critically engage with unexpected findings. More attention should be given to explaining why gender and campus differences emerged and why funding source and residential status were insignificant. Additionally, the study measures retention intentions rather than actual retention behaviour, a limitation that should be discussed more explicitly. Nevertheless, the findings make a meaningful contribution to understanding the role of administrative services in student success and retention.

Recommendations and conclusions	The recommendations are practical, detailed, and directly aligned with the study findings. The emphasis on staff development, responsiveness, communication, and standardisation of administrative procedures is appropriate given the importance of service quality dimensions identified in the analysis. The recommendation to implement customer relationship management (CRM) systems and digital administrative platforms reflects contemporary developments in higher education administration and demonstrates forward-thinking policy relevance. The discussion of implementation barriers, including costs, staff resistance, and technological readiness, enhances the practicality of the recommendations. The proposal for regular feedback mechanisms and service quality assessments is particularly valuable because it promotes continuous improvement and accountability. However, the recommendations could be strengthened by prioritising interventions according to feasibility and expected impact. Additional discussion of resource implications and implementation timelines would also enhance their usefulness to university managers. Overall, the recommendations are comprehensive, actionable, and likely to contribute positively to student satisfaction and retention if effectively implemented.
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