

Stakeholder Perceptions and Uptake of Private Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Globally, private higher education offers access to higher education, especially where public provision cannot cope with demand. However, South Africa does not mirror this trend. This article reports on a survey of stakeholders' understanding of private higher education in South Africa that aimed to determine why it has not grown to complement public higher education in mitigating the access gap. The findings point to limited knowledge of private higher education, especially amongst parents. Furthermore, there are perceptions that it is expensive with low returns on investment, as well as a lack of trust in the value of the qualifications and quality of the tuition offered. However, the respondents also acknowledged the advantages of private higher education and graduate success. Based on these results, addressing perceptions of costs and more effective communication should be priorities for both this sub-sector as well as the national authorities. This is important as South Africa will be unable to reach the National Development Plan's target of 1.62 million students in higher education without the private higher education sub-sector complementing public universities.

Key words: Private higher education, reasons to select private HEIs, teaching and learning quality, private higher education cost, graduate employability, contribution to the HE sector

Globalement, l'enseignement supérieur privé offre un accès à l'enseignement supérieur, en particulier là où l'offre publique ne peut pas faire face à la demande. Cependant, la réalité en Afrique du Sud ne reflète pas cette tendance. Cet article rend compte d'une enquête sur la compréhension des parties prenantes de l'enseignement supérieur privé en Afrique du Sud qui visait à déterminer pourquoi il ne s'est pas développé pour compléter

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l'enseignement supérieur public en atténuant l'écart d'accès. Les résultats indiquent une connaissance limitée de l'enseignement supérieur privé, en particulier parmi les parents. En outre, il y a des perceptions qu'il est coûteux avec de faibles retours sur investissement, ainsi qu'un manque de confiance dans la valeur des qualifications professionnelles et la qualité des leçons offertes. Cependant, les répondants ont également reconnu les avantages de l'enseignement supérieur privé et de la réussite des diplômés. Sur la base de ces résultats, le traitement des perceptions des coûts et une communication plus efficace devraient être des priorités tant pour ce sous-secteur que pour les autorités nationales. Ceci est important car l'Afrique du Sud ne sera pas en mesure d'atteindre l'objectif du Plan national de développement de 1,62 million d'étudiants dans les universités publiques sans le soutien du sous-secteur privé dans le domaine.

Mots clés : enseignement supérieur privé, les raisons du choix des IES privées, qualité de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage, coût de l'enseignement supérieur privé, employabilité des diplômés, contribution au secteur de l'enseignement supérieur

1 Introduction

Higher education's pivotal function in the pursuit of equality, democracy, and social justice is well-documented (DHET Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy, 2001). This vision is especially apposite in South Africa with its legacy of apartheid, colonialism, and discrimination, which has resulted in the country being rated the most unequal in the world with a Gini coefficient of 0.639 (World Bank, 2018). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Statistics South Africa (2019a) reported the national unemployment rate for Q3/2019 as "slightly up to 29.1%" from the second quarter of 2019, when it stood at 29%. Smit (2020) notes that of the 6.7 million unemployed in Q2/2019, only 2.2% were graduates, while 6.9% had other tertiary qualifications. The vast majority (57%) had an educational level below Grade 12, followed by 33.4% with Grade 12.

Acknowledging the importance of higher education for South Africa's growth and development, the National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 (NDP), sets a target of 1.62 million students in higher education by 2030 (NDP 2012). In keeping with global trends, and consistent with sustained policy and planning at the national level, with ambitious targets in place, demand for

higher education in South Africa has increased with the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) growing from 983 703 in 2010 to 1 143 245 in 2016 (DHET, 2018). However, overall growth between 2015 and 2016 was only 10 823 students or a paltry 1.0%, which does not bode well for achieving the NDP 2030 goal. Furthermore, the gap between the number of students qualifying to enter higher education and the number of places available at public universities continues to grow, emphasising the potential of the private higher education (PHE) sub-sector.

In 2016, only 167 408 students were registered in the 123 private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa, a 14.60% participation rate (DHET, 2018). Against this backdrop, Levy (2018) notes that in 2010, the participation rate in PHE in sub-Saharan Africa was 17.8%, with a global average of 32.9%. Disaggregating the participation rates through another lens, Bothwell (2018) points out that globally, PHE plays a much more significant role, accommodating approximately 37.8% of enrolments in the developing world (three times higher than South Africa) and 25.2% in developed countries (just less than double the South African participation rate). Levy (2018) notes that, in Latin America and Asia, participation rates significantly exceeded the global average, reaching 48.8% and 42.1%, respectively. Other developing countries like Brazil and Chile report total enrolment in PHE as closer to 71% (2012) and 84% (2013), respectively (Bothwell, 2018). If South Africa is to achieve the NDP 2030 target, something radical needs to be done to increase its higher education participation rate over the next ten years. Given the resource and infrastructure constraints confronting the higher education sector and the dire national fiscal forecasts post the COVID-19 pandemic, the public higher education system alone will not achieve this target.

Globally, PHE has been the avenue through which the access constraints confronting public higher education provision are mitigated, especially where there is evidence of greater demand than can be met by public institutions. However, contrary to the NDP's claim of the "significant role" played by PHE in this sector, it remains a relatively small component.

This research study was undertaken in 2017 among a sample of key stakeholders. It sought to gauge stakeholder perceptions and understanding of PHE in South Africa, acknowledging that especially for PHE, market perceptions are crucial as brand and reputation directly influence its growth. The study targeted university students, school learners, school career councillors, parents, employees, and regulators (the 'research population'). Its objectives

were to investigate the factors that informed institutional choices when stakeholders consider higher education and to better understand why PHE has not been more effective in complementing public higher education to address the higher education access gap in South Africa.

2 Methodology

Paper-based and web-based questionnaires designed for self-completion were used to gather information from the research subjects; as well as computer-aided telephone interviews (CATI) with school-learners, parents, career counsellors, and employers. Research ethics were upheld, and consent was obtained from the respondents to participate in the survey. The introductory letter explained the study's purpose and guaranteed anonymity and confidential treatment of information, and the statistically sound sampling plan secured a representative balance in both the gender and population group sample quotas. A multi-sampling design was applied to select learners, career counsellors and parents. It included plotting the geographic location of all public and private schools across South Africa, then matching each school with the density of the population based on the 2011 Statistics South Africa Census data. By comparing the densest population areas with schools' geographic location across the nine provinces, schools located in the most densely populated areas were selected as the survey sampling units. This approach ensured that the sample was distributed across all nine provinces and included public and private schools in urban and rural areas. The final sampling plan comprised of 90 rural and 225 urban learners in public schools and 45 private schools across the provinces. The survey also targeted 60 parents and ten career counsellors from the sampled public and private schools for supplementary CATI interviews.

The principals of the sampled schools were contacted telephonically to explain the reason and purpose of the survey and obtain permission for a quota sample of learners to participate. Schools were offered two options: (i) for learners to be interviewed telephonically by the researchers, or (ii) to self-administer the paper-based version of the questionnaire. In the latter instance, the school distributed the questionnaire to five randomly sampled male and female learners and scanned the completed questionnaires to the research team via email.

Simultaneously, participating schools were requested to provide the contact details of career counsellors who accepted the invitation to be

interviewed. Eleven career counsellors across the nine provinces agreed to participate. Finally, the researchers sampled the parents of the learners who were part of the survey. Sixty-four parents consented to participate in the study. The parent sample distribution covered all provinces and included respondents from rural and urban areas. Most (53.1%) parents were between the ages of 40 and 49, while approximately a third (35.9%) were older than 50.

Besides the learners, career counsellors and parents, the research team conducted CATI interviews with employers, most of which were medium to large enterprises with an average of at least 50 employees. The researchers engaged with human resources and training managers. Key regulatory/higher education specialist organisations including the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and Universities South Africa (USAf) made up the final group of respondents. They were required to complete a web-based survey, distributed via an email invitation.

Table 1 below displays the participation rate per sector of the targeted research population. While the sample sizes for the university student and school learner samples are sufficient for generalisation purposes, the small sample sizes raise an inherent limitation when interpreting the outcomes of the findings emerging from the career counsellor and regulatory/education specialist clusters. Nonetheless, they contribute to the overall stakeholder perceptions, which was the purpose of the study.

Table 1: Participation rate by sector of the research population

Sector	N	%
University student	245	33.7
School learner	372	51.2
Career Counsellors	11	1.5
Parents	64	8.8
Employers	30	4.1
Regulators/Education specialists	5	0.7
Total (Research Population)	727	100

Research Instrument

The research instrument contained 65 statements organised into five research subject categories:

- (i) Study preferences
- (ii) Quality of PHE
- (iii) Familiarity with PHE
- (iv) Probability of enrolling at a PHEI
- (v) Key factors considered when choosing a higher education institution

These five categories were standard for all the study participants. The research subject framework (Annexure 1) provides an overview of the survey instrument's composition and focus areas. In addition to the five categories, a sixth research subject category comprised open-ended qualitative response formats. The purpose was to identify key factors most likely to drive prospective students' preferences to register with a PHEI. For the employers' survey, the sixth research subject category was expanded to determine critical factors that would convince companies to enrol staff at PHEIs for upskilling, training, and development. Besides these core research categories, the research questionnaire included sections on respondents' demographic characteristics (gender, age, population group and geographic location) that were used to control for desired sample quotas. Where relevant, respondents were requested to indicate the highest qualification obtained and the current and preferred location for their studies.

Data Reliability

As part of the data credibility process, the study measured the reliability of the response scales used in the research model. A reliability test was conducted to establish whether the measurement scale used consistently reflected the construct's relevance. A measurement is reliable or consistent if it can produce similar results when used again in similar circumstances. The reliability of the self-report measures and questionnaires was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) method, the most common standard of scale reliability. This reliability analysis yielded the results shown in the table below for the five universal research subjects used to measure public opinion regarding PHEIs in South Africa.

Table 2: Cronbach alpha (α) reliability analysis

Construct	A
Research subject group I	.651
Research subject group II	.821
Research subject group III	.897
Research subject group IV	.685
Research subject group V	.823
Overall	0.860

Based on the outcome of the Cronbach's alpha (α) analysis, the scale used to measure public opinion regarding PHE is reliable, as the overall values are above or very close to the critical point of 0.70, which is the generally accepted cut-off point for reliability judgement. The survey instrument is thus valid and the sample unit groups' responses are considered credible.

3 Findings

(i) Study Preferences

There was a high degree of consensus among the respondents that a post-school education is desirable and that, if the enabling circumstances were in place, they would register at the higher education institution of their choice. The general opinion (except for the employer sector) was that most people would choose to study at a public university or college. From the biographical information provided, it was noted that notwithstanding the fact that they subscribed to this point of view (see Table 3), almost a fifth (18.2%) of the 11 school career counsellors who participated in the survey had obtained higher education qualifications from PHEIs. However, none had studied in South Africa. The biographical data further indicated that slightly more than half of the participating career counsellors were currently studying, and 45.5% planned to further their studies. Again, none intended to register at a South African PHEI. The two main reasons advanced were firstly, a lack of information about PHE in South Africa and secondly, the belief that it is too expensive. The latter is confirmed in Table 6, where their mean score was 3.83 (out of a maximum score of 5) in response to the statement 'Private higher

education is very expensive’. The table also shows that career counsellors scored a mean score of 3.45 for the statement ‘I don’t know much about private higher education’. Interestingly, these responses are contradicted in Table 5 where the overall mean score regarding their ‘familiarity with private higher education’ was a reasonable 3.34.

Based on the biographical information obtained from the parent respondents, about a quarter (23.4%) had not reached Grade 12; 29.7% had completed Grade 12; one in five (18.8%) had an undergraduate certificate, diploma, or degree; and 14.0% held a postgraduate qualification. Of the parents who achieved a post-school qualification, 16.7% had studied at a PHEI and 20.3% stated that they were planning to study further; however, only 7.7% indicated a preference to study at a PHEI.

Again, when citing reasons for not considering PHE as a future study destination, these respondents highlighted insufficient information about PHEIs, a perception of high tuition fees, and the lack of bursaries or other funding. In response to the question on what would encourage them to consider PHE, factors such as affordability and the availability of bursaries and financial support were the most cited. A third driver that would encourage parents to consider PHE was guaranteed employment. This was a more generalised opinion evident in the results in Table 3 that show that, overall, there were significantly higher levels of agreement among the respondents that people interested in higher education would more readily consider paying a premium (that is, a higher price) to participate in PHE if employment were to be guaranteed (a mean score of 3.99). Besides these factors, parents also highlighted international recognition or accreditation of PHEIs as important considerations.

Interestingly, in the interviews with the employer respondents, key considerations when identifying higher education institutions for purposes of staff development and training did not include cost. Instead, they raised constraints such as international accreditation/recognition, the quality of tuition, and the value of the qualifications. Employers that responded to the survey added the need for PHEIs to prioritise work-integrated learning and to introduce a greater variety of courses.

On a more positive note, parents, regulators/industry experts and career counsellors all believed that graduates from PHEIs had a better chance of obtaining employment than their counterparts from public universities/colleges (the underlying reasons for this opinion were, unfortunately, not

tested). However, school learners and employers were less sure of this outcome – see Table 3. Most of the respondents (except for the school leavers) agreed that the chances of successfully completing one’s studies were higher at PHEIs than at a public university/college. This correlates with the findings in Table 4 where respondents expressed the belief that PHEIs are ‘less disrupted by student protests and other activities than public universities/colleges’. Notwithstanding some positive feedback, it is evident from the results that respondents still believed that ‘people prefer studying at a public university/college’ and ‘people are generally cautious of enrolling at private higher education institutions’ (see Table 3). The results in Table 6 confirm this conclusion, particularly the responses to the statement ‘Private higher education institutions are only considered after a student fails to find place at a public university’ (overall mean score of 3.40).

Table 3: Consolidated mean score analysis# of Category I (“study preference”)

Statement	University Students	School learners	Career Counsellors	Parents	Employers	Regulators	Total
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Average Mean
People want to advance their learning and development after school by attendance of a higher education institution.	4.45	4.27	4.45	4.33	4.30	4.60	4.40
People prefer studying at a public university/college	3.88	3.94	4.36	3.98	3.96	4.40	4.09
People prefer studying at a private higher education institution	2.91	2.74	2.45	3.16	3.16	2.80	2.87
Private higher education institutions are poorly marketed and less known than the public universities/colleges	3.41	3.34	3.45	3.53	2.97	3.75	3.41

The chance of people being admitted to a private higher education institution is higher than to a public university/college	3.23	2.97	2.55	3.39	2.80	3.60	3.09
The chance of people successfully completing their studies at a private higher institution is higher than at a public university/college	3.13	2.96	3.33	3.37	3.46	4.00	3.38
The chance of people obtaining employment after finishing their studies at a private higher education institution is higher than that of people completing their studies at a public university/college	2.93	2.95	2.45	3.42	2.90	3.50	3.03
Private higher education institutions are the future of higher education in South Africa	2.75	2.74	3.22	3.18	2.87	3.40	3.03
People are generally cautious of enrolling at private higher education institutions	3.42	3.38	3.36	3.47	3.14	3.50	3.38
The management of private higher education institutions is of a better quality than that of public universities/colleges	3.40	3.22	3.44	3.41	3.12	3.20	3.30
Private higher education institutions have stronger brand names than public universities/colleges	2.67	2.82	2.55	3.33	2.71	1.33	2.57

People will pay a premium (i.e. higher price) to participate in private higher education if it is able to guarantee employment success	4.04	3.87	3.64	3.71	3.90	4.80	3.99
<p># mean scores represent the average scores on the scale of the 5-point agreement where mean values closer to '1' display lower levels of agreement. In turn, mean score values closer to '5' show higher agreement levels with the listed statements. Regarding the colour-coded analysis, a robot-coding model (green-orange-red) has been applied. The intensity of green shading increases for cases where the mean agreement scores reach levels closer to '5' (strongly agree). Likewise, the intensity of red colouring increases when the mean agreement scores come levels closer to '1' (strongly agree).</p>							

(ii) Quality of Private Higher Education

Notwithstanding the mean deviation by the parent sample group, all other respondents agreed that graduates from PHEIs perform just as well as their peers from top public universities/colleges, with employers scoring the highest (4.03 out of 5) in a range from 3.45 (career counsellors) to 4.03 (employers). There was also consensus that PHEIs are more effective in bridging the gap between school and higher education, as well as more innovative in their curricula and product design than public universities. However, except for the parents and regulators/industry experts, all other respondents did not believe that the 'career value of educational attainment from a private higher education institution is greater than a public university/college qualification' – Table 4. Furthermore, despite the more positive opinion expressed by respondents of the employability chances of graduates from PHEIs, all respondent groups indicated low levels of agreement that these institutions offer better value for money than public universities/colleges.

However, there was a high level of agreement amongst respondents that PHEIs experienced less disruption from student protests and other activities than the public university/college sector. Employers and regulators/education specialists also agreed that the chances of people completing their studies at a PHEI were higher than in the case of students studying at a public university/college. Remarkably, university students, school learners and parents did not share this view and the questionnaire did not provide for them to give reasons for their responses.

Table 4: Consolidated mean score analysis# of Category II (“quality of private higher education”)

Statement	University Students	School learners	Career Counsellors	Parents	Employers	Regulators	Total
	MEAN SCORES						
Private higher education institutions, on average, provide the best tuition	3.13	3.34	3	3.80	2.59	3.00	3.14
Private higher education institutions, on average, conduct the best research	3.05	3.47	2.82	3.90	2.68	2.50	3.07
Private higher education institutions, generally produce the best graduates	3.13	3.37	2.78	3.86	2.78	3.00	3.15
Private higher education institutions provide excellent bridging education between school and the tertiary sector	3.50	3.55	3.36	4.00	3.21	3.50	3.52
The individual benefits (that is skills, earnings) gained from attending a private higher education institution are more than the time and money spend to attain a qualification	3.15	3.23	3.36	3.41	3.27	5.00	3.57
The individual benefits (that is skills, earnings) gained from attending a public university/college are more than the time and money spend to attain a qualification	3.46	3.36	3.18	3.27	3.14	5.00	3.57
Educational attainment from a private higher education secures higher personal earnings than a public university/college qualification	2.67	2.75	2.18	3.25	2.62	3.50	2.83

The career value of educational attainment from a private higher education is greater than a public university/college qualification	2.71	2.76	2.18	3.16	2.72	3.33	2.81
Educational attainment from a private higher education institution has more economic and societal benefits (that is higher labour force productivity, greater community participation, social cohesion) than educational attainment achieved from a public university	2.61	2.85	2.64	3.31	2.89	3.33	2.94
Private higher education institutions provide better value for money than public universities/colleges	2.78	2.92	2.45	3.28	2.86	3.33	2.94
Private higher education institutions are more innovative in their curriculum and product design than public universities/colleges	3.20	3.34	2.64	3.79	3.17	4.00	3.36
Private higher education institutions are less disrupted by student protests and other activities than public universities/colleges	4.21	3.93	4.09	4.05	4.07	5.00	4.22
Graduates from private higher education institutions will in all likelihood find employment when they graduate	3.20	3.32	3.09	3.77	3.18	5.00	3.59
Graduates from private higher education institutions perform just as well as their peers from top public universities/colleges	3.66	3.67	3.45	3.63	4.03	3.50	3.66

mean scores represent the average scores on the scale of the 5-point agreement where mean values closer to '1' display lower levels of agreement. In turn, mean score values closer to '5' show higher agreement levels with the listed statements. Regarding the colour-coded analysis, a robot-coding model (green-orange-red) has been applied. The intensity of green shading increases for cases where the mean agreement scores reach levels closer to '5' (strongly agree). Likewise, the intensity of red colouring increases when the mean agreement scores come levels closer to '1' (strongly agree).

(iii) Familiarity with Private Higher Education

Four sample groups - students, school guidance counsellors, employers, and regulators/industry experts - expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to name one or more registered PHEIs in South Africa, with the last-mentioned group claiming the greatest familiarity with a mean score of 4.2 out of 5. However, when asked to name the institutions with which they were familiar, very few could do so correctly, debunking this claim and reinforcing earlier acknowledgement of their limited knowledge of PHEIs in South Africa. That said, the various respondent groups, led by regulators/industry experts and career counsellors, indicated reasonably high levels of familiarity with the types of programmes – degrees, diplomas, and higher certificates – offered by PHEIs in South Africa. However, parents were the least informed sample group, with a mean score of 37.80%.

For the purposes of this study, low levels of awareness of existing PHE opportunities among school learners and parents are significant, given that these two categories of respondents would be critical decision-makers when choosing post-school study opportunities. Compared with the other sample groups, career counsellors showed higher levels of familiarity with registration processes at private institutions. In contrast, university students and school learners recorded average scores in relation to familiarity with the opportunities and operations at PHEIs. All sample groups were 'least familiar' with the nature of campus life at PHEIs, how they operate, and their teaching staff's calibre and quality. This is material given that the last-mentioned is one of the most critical drivers of a prospective student's choice of higher education provider.

Table 5: Consolidated mean score analysis# of category III ("familiarity with private higher education")

Statement	University Students	School learners	Career Counsellors	Parents	Employers	Regulators	Total
	MEAN SCORES						
The names of one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	3.62	2.82	3.55	2.58	3.93	4.20	3.45
The operations of one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	3.03	2.34	3.09	1.89	3.36	3.40	2.85
The location(s) of one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	3.45	2.74	3.64	2.34	3.97	4.20	3.39
The types of degrees, diplomas and/or higher certificates offered by one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	3.37	2.73	3.73	2.38	3.83	4.40	3.41
How to register for a degree, diploma or higher certificate at a private higher education institution in South Africa	3.29	2.66	3.80	2.50	3.80	3.80	3.31
The value of a qualification from a private higher education institution compared with that of a public university/college	2.99	2.63	3.09	2.45	3.52	3.00	2.95
The calibre and quality of teaching staff at private higher education institutions	2.95	2.52	3.09	2.49	3.10	3.40	2.93
The nature of campus life at private higher education institutions	2.89	2.4	2.82	2.24	3.14	3.00	2.75
The value of the degrees, diplomas and certificates offered by private higher education institutions	3.08	2.56	3.27	2.59	3.41	3.00	2.98

Mean scores represent the average scores on the scale of the 5-point agreement where mean values closer to '1' display lower levels of agreement. In turn, mean score values closer to '5' show higher agreement levels with the listed statements. Regarding the colour-coded analysis, a robot-coding model (green-orange-red) has been applied. The intensity of green shading increases for cases where the mean agreement scores reach levels closer to '5' (strongly agree). Likewise, the intensity of red colouring increases when the mean agreement scores come levels closer to '1' (strongly agree).

(iv) Probability of Enrolling at a Private Higher Education Institution

There was generally low acceptance of the statement that 'students will always be willing to consider studying at a private university/college'. The lowest mean scores among all sector groups were for the statement that PHEIs are usually the first choice of potential students (with mean scores from 1.64 to 2.95 out of 5). All sector groups believed that PHEIs would only be considered after a student failed to find a place at a public university. Negative perceptions of the quality of PHE are not unique to South Africa. Ilias, Rahman and Razak (2008) highlight similar attitudes in Malaysia, where they noted that when students failed to secure a place in public higher education institutions, "the perception is that he or she will have a bleak future."

Further undermining the choice of PHE in South Africa was the unanimous belief amongst the respondent groups that studying at a PHEI 'is very expensive'. All the groups, save for the regulators/industry experts, agreed with the statements that 'private higher education institutions are elitist (exclusive)' and 'private higher education institutions are only accessible to the affluent (wealthy) members of the community'.

Table 6: Consolidated mean score analysis# of Category IV ("probability of enrolling at a private higher education institution")

Statement	University Students	School learners	Career Counsellors	Parents	Employers	Regulators	Total
	MEAN SCORES						
Private higher education institutions are usually the first choice of potential students	2.34	2.53	1.64	2.95	2.37	2.00	2.30
Private higher education institutions are not chosen because the Department of Higher Education and Training does not characterise them as 'universities'	3.10	3.22	3.36	3.05	2.93	3.20	3.14
Private higher education institutions are only considered after a student fails to find place at a public university	3.36	3.23	3.55	3.5	3.17	3.60	3.40
Private higher education institutions are only accessible to the affluent (wealthy) members of the community	3.75	3.45	3.27	3.72	3.41	2.80	3.40
I don't know much about private higher education	2.99	3.37	3.45	3.17	2.67	3.00	3.11
Students will always be willing to consider studying at a private university/college	3.00	2.84	3.18	3.38	2.90	2.20	2.92
Private higher education institutions are elitist (exclusive)	3.26	3.47	3.36	4	3.14	2.80	3.34
Private higher education institutions are very expensive	4.17	4.13	3.82	4.25	3.90	3.80	4.01
People prefer studying at a residential higher education institution, whether it is public or private in nature	3.58	3.92	3.82	4.22	3.27	2.40	3.53
People prefer studying at an online higher education institution, whether it is public or private	2.56	2.65	2.09	3.33	2.93	2.60	2.69

People prefer studying at a higher education institution offering a mix of residential and online tuition	3.48	3.38	3.18	3.6	3.47	2.40	3.25
<p># mean scores represent the average scores on the scale of the 5-point agreement where mean values closer to '1' display lower levels of agreement. In turn, mean score values closer to '5' show higher agreement levels with the listed statements. Regarding the colour-coded analysis, a robot-coding model (green-orange-red) has been applied. The intensity of green shading increases for cases where the mean agreement scores reach levels closer to '5' (strongly agree). Likewise, the intensity of red colouring increases when the mean agreement scores come levels closer to '1' (strongly agree).</p>							

(v) Key Factors Considered when Choosing a Higher Education Institution

The respondents all agreed on the main drivers that influenced their selection of a higher education institution, whether public or private. In order of priority, they listed the following factors:

- (i) value of qualification,
- (ii) the quality of tuition,
- (iii) the type of qualification offered (diploma, higher certificate, bachelor, masters, doctoral),
- (iv) tuition costs,
- (v) student support services (for example, career advice, counselling, and health services), and
- (vi) superior technology infrastructure (computer labs and wireless devices).

The factors indicated as 'least considered' were:

- (a) the university where family or friends studied,
- (b) participation in sporting competitions, whether in a PHEI or public university/college, a vibrant campus life with sporting clubs, other student clubs, and other student societies,
- (c) the extent to which the university provides online tuition,
- (d) sport and recreational facilities, and
- (e) community engagement by staff and students.

Table 7: Consolidated mean score analysis# of Category V (“key factors considered when choosing a higher education institution”)

Statement	University Students	School learners	Career Counsellors	Parents	Employers	Regulators	Total
	MEAN SCORES						
Quality of tuition provided	4.60	4.61	5.00	4.64	4.63	5.00	4.75
Research output by staff	4.09	4.25	4.36	4.4	4.27	4.80	4.36
Community engagement by staff and students	3.88	4.06	3.64	4.00	3.62	4.60	3.97
The university where family or friends studied	3.00	2.84	3.91	3.44	3.45	4.40	3.51
The location of the university	4.10	3.81	4.09	4.03	4.00	4.60	4.11
The level to which the university provides online tuition	3.75	3.92	3.82	4.02	3.67	4.20	3.90
The value of qualifications	4.71	4.69	4.91	4.66	4.57	5.00	4.76
The type of qualification (diploma, higher certificate, bachelor, masters, doctoral) offered	4.69	4.67	4.91	4.68	4.63	4.60	4.70
Whether it is a private higher education institution or public university/college	3.57	3.74	4.00	4.06	3.77	3.40	3.76
Whether the institution has residence facilities	3.90	4.21	4.36	4.27	3.57	4.20	4.08
Tuition costs	4.49	4.33	4.82	4.59	4.57	4.60	4.57
Distance from my current location	3.95	3.49	4.18	3.9	3.90	5.00	4.07
Interactive classes	4.13	4.1	3.91	4.06	4.28	4.60	4.18
A vibrant campus life with sporting clubs, other student clubs, and other student societies	3.85	3.67	4.27	3.52	3.47	4.00	3.80
Sport and recreational facilities	3.91	3.72	4.36	3.83	3.28	4.20	3.88
Participation in sporting competitions	3.67	3.66	4.09	3.72	3.17	4.00	3.72

Superior technology infrastructure (computer labs and wireless devices)	4.43	4.36	4.73	4.48	4.00	4.60	4.43
Student support services (that is career advice, counselling and health services)	4.43	4.52	4.64	4.51	4.03	4.80	4.49
Cost as a determining factor in selecting a higher education institution	4.24	4.31	4.73	4.48	4.17	4.80	4.45
<p># Mean scores represent the average scores on the scale of the 5-point agreement where mean values closer to '1' display lower levels of agreement. In turn, mean score values closer to '5' show higher agreement levels with the listed statements. Regarding the colour-coded analysis, a robot-coding model (green-orange-red) has been applied. The intensity of green shading increases for cases where the mean agreement scores reach levels closer to '5' (strongly agree). Likewise, the intensity of red colouring increases when the mean agreement scores come levels closer to '1' (strongly agree).</p>							

Overall Perceptions of Private Higher Education

Table 8 below sets out the list of statements interrogated by the survey from categories I to V, with the consolidated mean scores of all sample groups ranked in order of priority. It provides a summary of the stakeholders' hierarchy of factors when contemplating the value, benefits, and concomitantly, choice of a higher education institution. Noteworthy in this regard is the last ranked statement – *private higher education institutions are usually the first choice of potential students* – with a low mean score of 2.30 (out of 5.00). In contrast, the statement '*People prefer studying at a public university/college*' is ranked thirteenth (with a mean score of 4.09).

Table 8: Mean ranking of consolidated findings

Statement	Overall Mean
1. The value of qualifications	4.76
2. Quality of tuition provided	4.75
3. The type of qualification (diploma, higher certificate, bachelor, masters, doctoral) offered	4.70
4. Tuition costs	4.57
5. Student support services (that is career advice, counselling, and health services)	4.49
6. Cost as a determining factor in selecting a higher education institution	4.45
7. Superior technology infrastructure (computer labs and wireless devices)	4.43

8. People want to advance their learning and development after school by attendance of a higher education institution	4.40
9. Research output by staff	4.36
10. Private higher education institutions are less disrupted by student protests and other activities than public universities/colleges	4.22
11. Interactive classes	4.18
12. The location of the university	4.11
13. People prefer studying at a public university/college	4.09
14. Whether the institution has residence facilities	4.08
15. Distance from my current location	4.07
16. Private higher education institutions are very expensive	4.01
17. People will pay a premium (that is, higher price) to participate in private higher education if it is able to guarantee employment success	3.99
18. Community engagement by staff and students	3.97
19. The level to which the university provides online tuition	3.90
20. Sport and recreational facilities	3.88
21. A vibrant campus life with sporting clubs, other student clubs, and other student societies	3.80
22. [Choosing a higher education institution]: Whether it is a private higher education institution or public university/college	3.76
23. Participation in sporting competitions	3.72
24. Graduates from private higher education institutions perform just as well as their peers from top public universities/colleges	3.66
25. Graduates from private higher education institutions will in all likelihood find employment when they graduate	3.59
26. The individual benefits (that is skills, earnings) gained from attending a private higher education institution are more than the time and money spend to attain a qualification	3.57
27. The individual benefits (that is skills, earnings) gained from attending a public university/college are more than the time and money spend to attain a qualification	3.57
28. People prefer studying at a residential higher education institution, whether it is public or private in nature	3.53
29. Private higher education institutions provide excellent bridging education between school and the tertiary sector	3.52
30. The university where family or friends studied	3.51
31. The names of one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	3.45
32. Private higher education institutions are poorly marketed and less known than the public universities/colleges	3.41

33. The types of degrees, diplomas and/or higher certificates offered by one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	3.41
34. Private higher education institutions are only considered after a student fails to find place at a public university	3.40
35. Private higher education institutions are only accessible to the affluent (wealthy) members of the community	3.40
36. The location(s) of one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	3.39
37. People are generally cautious of enrolling at private higher education institutions	3.38
38. The chance of people successfully completing their studies at a private higher institution is higher than at a public university/college	3.38
39. Private higher education institutions are more innovative in their curriculum and product design than public universities/colleges	3.36
40. Private higher education institutions are elitist (exclusive)	3.34
41. How to register for a degree, diploma or higher certificate at a private higher education institution in South Africa	3.31
42. The management of private higher education institutions is of a better quality than that of public universities/colleges	3.30
43. People prefer studying at a higher education institution offering a mix of residential and online tuition	3.25
44. Private higher education institutions, generally produce the best graduates	3.15
45. Private higher education institutions, on average, provide the best tuition	3.14
46. Private higher education institutions are not chosen because the Department of Higher Education and Training does not characterise them as 'universities'	3.14
47. I don't know much about private higher education	3.11
48. The chance of people being admitted to a private higher education institution is higher than to a public university/college	3.09
49. Private higher education institutions, on average, conduct the best research	3.07
50. Private higher education institutions are the future of higher education in South Africa	3.03
51. The chance of people obtaining employment after finishing their studies at a private higher education institution is higher than that of people completing their studies at a public university/college	3.03
52. The value of the degrees, diplomas and certificates offered by private higher education institutions	2.98
53. The value of a qualification from a private higher education institution compared with that of a public university/college	2.95
54. Educational attainment from a private higher education institution has more economic and societal benefits (i.e. higher labour force productivity, greater community participation, social cohesion) than educational attainment achieved from a public university	2.94

55. Private higher education institutions provide better value for money than public universities/colleges	2.94
56. The calibre and quality of teaching staff at private higher education institutions	2.93
57. Students will always be willing to consider studying at a private university/college	2.92
58. People prefer studying at a private higher education institution	2.87
59. The operations of one or more private higher education institutions in South Africa	2.85
60. Educational attainment from a private higher education secures higher personal earnings than a public university/college qualification	2.83
61. The career value of educational attainment from a private higher education is greater than a public university/college qualification	2.81
62. The nature of campus life at private higher education institutions	2.75
63. People prefer studying at an online higher education institution, whether it is public or private	2.69
64. Private higher education institutions have stronger brand names than public universities/colleges	2.57
65. Private higher education institutions are usually the first choice of potential students	2.30

4 Analysis and Discussion

As described in Table 9 below, the most crucial institutional pull factors included, in no order of priority, (i) the quality of tuition, (ii) the availability of student funding/bursaries, (iii) the quality of qualifications, (iv) a protest-free study environment, and (v) the cost of tuition. University students also advanced failure to obtain admission to a public higher education institution as a reason for choosing to register at a PHEI in South Africa. Table 10 below summarises the most important levers militating against selecting a PHEI.

Table 9: Most important institutional pull factors

Factor	School learner		School Counsellor		Parent		University student		Total	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Quality of tuition	1	20.30%			2	10.60%	2	10.60%	1	16.20%
Nothing	2	11.90%	1	20.00%	2	15.40%	3	9.70%	2	11.30%
Bursaries/student funding	3	8.60%	2	20.00%	1	30.80%	8	3.70%	3	7.40%
Quality of qualification	7	5.60%					4	8.30%	4	6.40%
Fewer student protests/disruptions	6	6.40%					9	2.80%	5	4.90%
Tuition cost							1	13.00%	6	4.70%
If not admitted by public institution	4	7.80%					0	0.00%	7	4.70%
Affordability	8	5.30%			3	15.40%	11	2.30%	8	4.40%
Guarantee employment	10	3.60%	4	20.00%	4	7.70%	7	4.60%	9	4.20%
Availability of qualification	5	6.40%	3	20.00%			25	0.50%	10	4.20%
International accreditation/recognition	12	2.50%			5	7.70%	5	6.50%	11	4.00%
High standards and rankings	9	4.20%					16	0.90%	12	2.90%
Value of qualification	13	2.50%			6	7.70%	12	1.90%	13	2.40%
Study fees							6	5.60%	14	2.00%
Good education	11	3.10%	5	20.00%			0	0.00%	15	2.00%

Table 10: Most important factors preventing studying at a private higher education institution

Factor	School learner		School Counsellor		Parent		University student		Total	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
High tuition fees/costs	1	67.50%	1	80.00%	1	69.20%	1	51.90%	1	62.00%
None	2	8.30%	2	20.00%	2	15.40%	3	4.60%	2	7.20%
Not internationally accredited/recognised	3	5.00%					4	4.60%	3	4.70%
Poor quality of qualifications	5	4.40%					5	4.60%	4	4.40%
Financial problems							2	9.30%	5	3.40%
Low Admission Point Score (APS)	4	4.70%							6	2.90%
Money							6	4.20%	7	1.50%
No student life							7	3.70%	8	1.30%
Lack of student funding/bursaries	8	1.40%			3	7.70%	15	0.50%	9	1.20%
Do not offer relevant degrees	6	1.70%					16	0.50%	10	1.20%

Cosser and Du Toit (2002) point out that lack of access to funding for study purposes has been identified as ‘one of the chief disincentives to entering higher education’ in South Africa. In 2019 Statistics South Africa (2019b), reported that 51% of the youth aged 18 to 24 claimed that they did not have the financial wherewithal to enter higher education. Our research study yielded similar findings, with high tuition costs emerging as one of the overwhelming considerations militating against pursuit of PHE. Exacerbating the situation is the lack of state support for students studying at PHEIs, and the respondents’ perceptions that PHEIs themselves do not provide financial support to prospective students. Given that most PHEIs are singularly dependent on student fee income to sustain their basic operations, it is unlikely that they will ever be able to take on this responsibility to any significant extent. However, there is some evidence of limited academic bursaries and partnership agreements with business and financial institutions to assist students with loans and other financial support to enable access.

Noting the generally held belief that PHE is expensive and that, despite this, it does not ‘secure higher personal earnings for its graduates’ (Table 4), coupled with the fact that it also does not guarantee employment following graduation, overall, the respondents were of the view that PHE in South Africa yields significantly low returns in terms of personal benefits and career value. However, PHE in South Africa is not asynchronous with the approach suggested in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on the *State of Higher Education 2015* (2017), namely:

[T]he greater contribution to the costs of education by industry or private enterprise may be justified, as long as there are ways to ensure that funding is available to students regardless of their economic background.

In the past three years, access to higher education in South Africa has been defined by the #FeesMustFall campaigns and protests. Acknowledging cost as a pivotal driver of access to higher education, McCowan (2004) notes that the introduction of PHE in Brazil has addressed the access gap, but it has not resolved equality issues. McCowan adds that the higher fees and costs attached to PHE perpetuate exclusion. This calls for the state and the private sector to work together to find creative solutions, especially if PHE is to become an integral and equal partner in the higher education sector in South Africa.

In terms of the quality of provision by PHEIs, this study (Table 5) revealed that key stakeholders, including university students, school leavers and parents did not have confidence in the calibre and quality of teaching staff. This was confirmed by the views set out in Table 6 that showed that PHE is not a first choice for students and is only considered when they do not gain access to public universities.

The perspectives on quality are interesting given the national quality norms set by the CHE and SAQA that apply equally to public and private HEIs. In addition, PHEIs are required to register with the national Department of Higher Education and Training. However, Stander and Herman (2017) note that the management of quality assurance, especially in PHE in South Africa remains deficient. They ascribe this to the tension between the bottom line, academic rigour, and the necessary quality of service in the PHE sub-sector. Bothwell (2018) also notes that resource and capacity constraints undermine the national quality assurance agencies’ ability to effectively monitor and assure overall teaching and learning quality across the sector. Highlighting the adverse consequences of not adequately resourcing state agencies, Bjarnason et al. (2009) caution that:

[T]he students will suffer if government is failing to effectively manage its regulatory and QA processes. Where the QA processes do work effectively, not only can they provide students and parents with the comfort they require, but they can also strengthen the public system, where the private providers have higher standards than their public counterparts.

Nukunah, Bezuidenhout and Furtak (2019) suggest that mistrust and scepticism regarding PHE “may rather be due to the lack of audited and reliable data representing the nature of the PHE [private higher education] sector.” Wait and Govender (2016) express a similar view, adding that, without

disagreeing with PHE's profit motive, making this the sole consideration ignores the significant "personal incentive" for this sub-sector to raise quality, namely, competition with other institutions.

In support of Nukunah et al.'s (2019) assertion, South Africa currently has no coherent management information system for PHE that can objectively monitor and manage its quality and contribution. Quality therefore remains a matter of contestation, often based on perceptions and generalised commentary. An example of such is the 2013 White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013), which highlights the Ministry's concerns regarding quality among PHE providers, and reinforces public apprehension with the assertion that "the state has meagre capacity for quality assurance among private institutions". The statement (DHET, 2013) makes reference to "some unscrupulous private providers" utilising gaps and weaknesses in the system to pass off unaccredited programmes to unsuspecting students; and to "some private providers, including large and apparently reputable ones, [that] openly advertise unaccredited courses in the knowledge that the authorities do not have the capacity to deal with their transgressions". In the absence of real data to the contrary, such statements perpetuate and give credence to uninformed public perceptions of the 'general' lack of quality at PHEIs. Nukunah et al. (2019) conclude that perceptions of high fees and poor quality have contributed to low demand amongst prospective students for PHE programmes.

Except for the employer group, the respondents believed that PHEIs are not chosen because the Department of Higher Education and Training does not characterise them as 'universities'. The Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997 (the "Act") expressly prohibits PHEIs from using the appellation 'university' or 'college', or any derivative thereof. The Act was amended in 2016 and now provides that:

"... no other private education institution may call itself a university, university college or higher education college, or use such wording in its name, unless it is registered –

- (a) in terms of Chapter 7 [which covers PHEIs and registration provisions]; and
- (b) in the particular category of institutions which, **in accordance with the Regulations**, may call themselves universities, university colleges or higher education colleges, as the case may be." (Section 54(7)) [our emphasis]

Four years later, the Regulations are still outstanding with no clarity on a due date.

Section 54(8) of the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997 also prohibits PHEIs from appointing academics to the ranks of the professoriate. Given the value placed on "Quality of tuition provided" and "Research output by staff" by the respondents in this study (Table 7), this could explain public perceptions that the quality of the academic staff and teaching at public universities is superior to that offered by PHEIs.

Furthermore, PHEIs do not qualify for state funding for research published in accredited publications. The rationale is not clear, but the effect has been limited prioritisation and focus on research output among most PHEIs. As these institutions strive to gain stakeholder acceptance, this is cause for concern given that the respondents' ranked "Staff research output" – with its underpinning ethos of thought leadership and new knowledge production – in 9th in Table 8 "Mean Ranking of Consolidated Findings", with a high mean score of 4.36 out of 5.00.

Except for the employers, all the respondents believed that PHEIs are poorly marketed and less known than public universities/colleges (Table 3). The responses noted in Table 5 also highlighted lower levels of familiarity with PHE specifically amongst the school learner and parent respondent groups. This is significant given that Cosser and Du Toit (2002) highlight the positive influence of parent-learner discussions in decision-making regarding entry into higher education. More specifically, they describe parental encouragement as "the best influencer of post-secondary educational aspiration." The career counsellors' negative views on PHE as a destination choice (personally and generally) exacerbate this concern given that they offer advice to prospective students.

5 Conclusion

There is clearly a need for PHE to play a more prominent role to complement public HEIs in achieving aspirations for the growth and expansion of higher education in South Africa. This study aimed to understand stakeholder perceptions of and attitudes towards PHE in the country and to identify strategies that would better position the sub-sector in the South African market. A positive outcome of this research was stakeholder views that:

- (i) Graduates from PHEIs perform just as well as their peers from

top public universities/colleges,

- (ii) Graduates from PHEIs will in all likelihood find employment when they graduate (Table 4), and
- (iii) The chances of people successfully completing their studies at a PHEI are higher than at a public university/college (Table 3).

However, PHE is currently not perceived as an equivalent option to public higher education for the reasons discussed above. The study showed that, given the choice, respondents would opt for public higher education institutions. Levy (2018) suggests that this may also be a result of the:

[P]ersistent normative dominance of the notion that higher education is rightfully a public good [and therefore] overwhelming responsibility for provision and supervision [is] lodged with the State, which in turn makes acceptance of PHE begrudging [and] legitimacy an abiding challenge.

Notwithstanding the constraints and challenges discussed in this article, PHE is a growing sub-sector in South Africa and globally. It is, however, imperative that the issues highlighted as perceptual limitations be interrogated and addressed at both the national level and by the sub-sector if PHE is to continue to contribute to bridging the higher education access gap and play the role that has become the norm in other developing countries. Engaging with the access crisis in higher education and emphasising the function of government as an enabler of growth in the PHE sector – and concurrently, access and socio-economic equity – the World Bank (1999, 62) points out that:

Constraints on government finance and the need for a broader range of higher education institutions mean that the private sector should be encouraged to play a bigger role in both financing and providing higher education in LAC [Latin American and the Caribbean].

This view is also apposite for South Africa.

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ANNEXURE 1

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Research instrument framework

Category	Number of statements	Research focus areas /statements	Scale anchors
I	12	Study preferences for public and private higher education Marketing efforts, brand power, familiarity regarding public/private higher education institutions Ease of admission to public/private higher education institutions Likelihood of successfully completing studies at public/private higher education institutions Likelihood of obtaining employment after studying at public/private higher education institutions Private higher education as a prospect of higher education in South Africa Courage to enrol at private higher education institutions Quality of management/governance of public/private higher education institutions Willingness to pay a premium to study at a private higher education institution if employment is guaranteed	1 = 'Strongly disagree'; 5 = 'Strongly agree'
II	14	The superiority of tuition, research and graduates produced by private higher education institutions The ability of private higher education institutions to provide excellent bridging education Individual, economic and societal benefits gained from attending private versus public higher education institutions Career and economic values of attending private versus public higher education institutions Curriculum and product design innovation grades of private versus public higher education institutions Study disruptions at private versus public higher education institutions Likelihood of obtaining employment after graduating from a private higher education institution	1 = 'never'; 5 = 'always'

		The superiority of student achievements when studying at public/private higher education institutions	
III	9	Awareness of private higher education institutions (brand names) and knowledge regarding the operations, location, type and value of qualifications, registration procedures, quality of teaching staff and nature of campus life.	1 = 'not at all familiar'; 5 = 'very familiar'
IV	11	Key selection preferences regarding private/public higher education institutions (first choice, registration status) Key considerations and willingness to choose private/public higher education institutions Associations/images regarding private higher education institutions (expensive, elitist) General knowledge of private higher education institutions Preferences for residential, online or blended tuition models	1 = 'not at all how I feel'; 5 = 'exactly how I feel'