

## Article

# Examining Front-Line Administrative Services in a Selected Public Higher Education Institution

Mthokozisi Luthuli \*, Ntando Nkomo and Smangele Moyane

Information and Corporate Management, Durban University of Technology, Durban 4001, South Africa; ntandon@dut.ac.za (N.N.); smangelem1@dut.ac.za (S.M.)

\* Correspondence: mthokozisil2@dut.ac.za

**Abstract:** The South African government's commitment to people-friendly public service since 1994 has influenced the quality of service provided by front-line administrative staff in public higher learning institutions. This study explores the experiences of front-line administrative staff at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), focusing on the challenges faced and their impact on teaching, learning, and overall academic activities. Against the backdrop of public higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, the study addresses the persistent challenges in service delivery and the crucial role of front-line administrative staff. Employing a post-positivist paradigm, the research adopts a hybrid methodological approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. A survey design is utilized to gather data from first-time entry students (FTENs) enrolled in the Business and Information Management program at DUT, employing convenience sampling and a self-administered questionnaire. The study's findings illuminate the inefficiencies in front-line administrative services, elucidating their impact on diverse stakeholders and emphasizing the pressing need for enhancement. The study found that the majority of students perceived the services positively, with only a small number expressing dissatisfaction and nearly all participants noted the institution's adherence to the Batho Pele Principles positively, though a few had contrasting experiences. The findings further revealed areas of improvement for the service. By focusing on the experiences of FTENs, the study contributes to the broader discourse on enhancing service delivery in public higher learning institutions. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the fulfilment of the core mission of HEIs providing quality education and fostering a positive learning environment.



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**Keywords:** first-time entry students; front-line administrative staff; hybrid methodological approach; public higher learning institutions; service delivery; public service and public servants

## 1. Introduction

Since 1994, the South African government has actively aimed to provide a people-friendly public service, significantly influencing the quality of service delivered by front-line administrative staff in public higher learning institutions. Organizational traditions impact service quality, shaping notions of what is right, fair, and just [1]. Public servants, as underscored by [2], play a pivotal role in service delivery efficacy, leading researchers to advocate for a professional, capable, ethical, and developmental government [3–5].

To enhance service delivery, the South African Department of Public Service and Administration introduced the Batho Pele Principles, aiming to instill a service-oriented approach among public servants [6,7]. Despite continuous revitalization efforts, persistent poor work ethics have resulted in unsatisfactory service delivery, marked by protests, vandalism, and police brutality [7–9]. The public sector, which serves a population without alternatives, includes general government, state-owned enterprises, and public universities within the social service cluster [10,11].

Public servants, including frontline front-line administrative staff, play a crucial role in public universities, directly interacting with service recipients [12,13]. Dissatisfaction

with public service delivery is evident in South African literature, with public institutions of higher learning facing challenges highlighted by nationwide student protests [14–16]. The inefficacy of front-line administrative staff, as noted in the literature [7,17], contributes to poor service delivery in public universities. Consequently, there is a pressing need for front-line administrative staff in public universities to adhere to high service standards, ensuring a superior and pleasurable service experience [14,15,18]. Recognizing their crucial role, this study emphasizes the significance of focusing on improving the service experience provided by front-line administrative staff in a public institution of higher learning [19–21].

The study unfolds within the context of public higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, encompassing 26 institutions dedicated to providing post-secondary education [22]. These institutions involve diverse stakeholders, including investors, the ministry, students, cooperation partners, and a crucial workforce [23]. The workforce in HEIs, vital for their mission, comprises academic staff responsible for education and research and support staff crucial for day-to-day operations [23]. Front-line administrative staff within this workforce serve as the face and backbone of administrative operations, being the initial point of contact for visitors, students, and faculty [23,24].

Front-line administrative staff at HEIs handle various responsibilities, including admissions, enrollment, registration, financial aid, and administrative tasks such as managing supplies and coordinating schedules [25]. Their role extends beyond routine tasks, directly impacting teaching and learning. Inefficiencies in departments like student housing, admissions, faculty offices, and finance can cause delays and disruptions in academic activities, affecting students and academic staff [25–27].

The study delves into the experiences of front-line administrative staff at Durban University of Technology (DUT), situated in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, encompassing multiple campuses in Durban and Pietermaritzburg [28]. Due to logistical and budgetary limitations, the investigation narrows its focus to one faculty at the Durban campus. This specific context facilitates a thorough exploration of the hurdles encountered by front-line administrative staff in providing crucial services and their repercussions on teaching, learning, and overall academic pursuits.

## 2. Problem Statement

Over the years, service delivery in public institutions has been a subject of extensive research and governmental interest, with various measures in place to enhance efficacy. However, despite efforts to revitalize these mechanisms, persistent challenges in service delivery have been documented [3,15,29–33]. Public institutions of higher learning, categorized within the social service cluster in the public sector, are not exempt from these challenges [3,15,29].

The inefficacy of front-line administrative services in these institutions has a direct impact on their core mission of teaching and learning [23,24]. Academic staff, responsible for ensuring quality teaching and learning, often find themselves burdened with excessive administrative tasks, compromising the educational process [34]. These inefficiencies affect all stakeholders of higher education institutions (HEIs), with first-time enrollees (FTENs) being particularly vulnerable as they navigate a new academic environment [29,35]. Consequently, the observed inefficacy justifies the imperative need to examine and address front-line administrative services in HEIs.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1. *Enhancing Client Perceptions in Public Service: A Comprehensive Exploration of Front-Line Administrative Factors*

The perceptions of clients regarding front-line administrative service in the public sector are intricate and influenced by various factors outlined in the literature, including but not limited to professionalism, competence, effective communication, empathy, timeliness, and personalization [36,37]. Addressing and comprehending these factors is essential for

public service agencies to enhance client satisfaction, build trust, and deliver services that cater to the diverse needs and expectations of clients [38,39].

### *3.2. Navigating the Terrain of Client Perceptions: Unraveling the Front-Line Administrative Dynamics*

Numerous studies have explored the impact of the professionalism and competence of front-line administrative staff on client perceptions [36–38,40]. Clients highly value staff members who exhibit strong professionalism, encompassing profound knowledge about services, clear communication, and efficient handling of administrative tasks [38,40]. Positive perceptions of staff competence significantly contribute to heightened trust in the organization and foster a sense of reliability in service delivery [36,37]. Skills such as effective communication and interpersonal skills play a pivotal role in shaping client perceptions. Clients greatly appreciate staff members who actively listen, provide clear explanations, and engage in respectful and courteous interactions [36,37]. Communicating effectively allows clients to feel understood, valued, and supported, thereby enhancing their overall experience and satisfaction [38,40].

### *3.3. Empathy, Timeliness, and Efficiency: Pillars of Client Satisfaction in Public Service*

Moreover, the display of empathy and emotional support by front-line administrative staff significantly impacts client perceptions. Clients highly value staff members who genuinely demonstrate concern, understanding, and empathy towards their needs and concerns [38,39]. Positive interactions foster trust, reassurance, and a perception of the organization as caring and customer-oriented [36,37,41]. This approach by front-line staff provides satisfactory services to clients, enhancing the positive affirmation of services by clients. The timeliness and efficiency of front-line administrative staff in handling client requests and inquiries are also crucial in shaping perceptions. Clients greatly appreciate prompt and efficient service delivery, including minimal wait times, timely responses, and streamlined processes [41,42]. Conversely, delays or inefficiencies in service provision can lead to frustration, decreased satisfaction, and negative perceptions of the organization's effectiveness [36,37,43,44]. This may adversely contribute to the organization's performance, resulting from negative perceptions that deter clients from soliciting the offerings provided by the organization.

### *3.4. Personalized Service: A Cornerstone of Client Satisfaction in Public Service Delivery*

The literature underscores the significance of personalized and individualized service in shaping client perceptions. Tailoring services to meet specific client needs and preferences enhances satisfaction and fosters a sense of being valued and respected [36,37,44]. Clients appreciate staff members who go beyond standard procedures to address their unique circumstances, thereby increasing their confidence and trust in the organization [41–43]. Taking this initiative to satisfy clients significantly impacts clients' perceptions and serves as a means of retaining old clients and attracting new ones.

### *3.5. Related Studies and Salient Issues*

Relevant studies underscore the need for further research on service delivery in higher education institutions (HEIs) to improve existing services and benchmark them against global standards [7,32]. The literature [45] emphasizes that achieving global standards in HEIs' service delivery requires a business-minded and innovative approach from management. It is essential for management to not only focus on improving teaching and research but also pay equal attention to enhancing the quality of service provided by administrative staff [46]. To meet students' expectations and deliver quality service, both academic and administrative staff need to be empowered, recognizing their crucial roles as key stakeholders in the institution [45].

A noteworthy study conducted at the University of Limpopo by Choeu [7] aimed to investigate factors affecting service delivery concerning administrative staff. Choeu

argues that for South African universities to compete globally, they must render quality service to stakeholders [7]. Furthermore, Choeu asserts that administrative staff should provide quality service to attract and retain the best students, uplifting the institution in the academic realm [7]. Consequently, recruiting the best administrative staff available in the market becomes essential. Ref. [47] affirms that in any public institution, the most indispensable assets are its employees. The effective utilization of resources and the delivery of quality service to students largely depend on the caliber of administrative staff employed by the university [7].

The Durban University of Technology (DUT) is also susceptible to instances of poor service delivery by administrative staff [30,48–50]. This phenomenon results in poor and stagnant service delivery, leading to numerous riots and strikes expressing students' grievances [51,52]. The factors motivating such behavior cannot be overlooked, as these unhealthy protests result in vandalism, disruptions of teaching and learning, and sometimes even deadly incidents [53,54]. The February 2019 DUT fatal protest and subsequent temporary closures of campuses due to student protests are a manifestation of students expressing their dissatisfaction with poor service delivery, disrupting the smooth progression of teaching and learning [55,56].

After a thorough review of the literature, we came across various studies on administration services and service delivery in the context of a public university. Particularly noteworthy were the studies conducted by Professor Green at DUT [29–32]. The findings of these studies are as follows:

Green suggests that for DUT to improve service experiences and gain a competitive advantage, it needs to modernize its facilities, such as libraries, laboratories, and lobbies [29,30]. One key finding is that students were dissatisfied with the administrative staff's lack of commitment to providing quality service [29]. The findings further state that students were very dissatisfied with the stagnant services the institution renders through its administrative staff [29]. Participating students also indicated dissatisfaction with the administrative staff's lack of interest in solving their queries and the failure to provide timely and accurate information. Although these studies were conducted almost a decade ago, the theories posited are still relevant today, emphasizing the crucial role of administrative staff and their direct interaction with students [29–32]. This study seeks to address the gaps in the existing literature, considering the advancements and changes that have taken place, such as changes in management, staff, the vision of the institution, renovations, and newly built infrastructures.

### 3.6. Framework

When evaluating service delivery performance, the incorporation of theoretical and conceptual frameworks is a crucial aspect with profound implications for research studies. The application of a theoretical framework holds paramount importance as it serves as the foundation for defining the study's purpose, articulating the problem, justifying the research, and formulating research questions [57,58]. Absent a theoretical framework, a study's structure and vision become ambiguous, akin to a building lacking blueprint [59,60]. Grant [61] emphasizes that a research plan fortified by a theoretical framework facilitates a well-organized study, ensuring a coherent progression from one chapter to the next. In addition to the adopted framework, several commonly utilized frameworks for examining experiences with front-line administrative services in relevant studies include:

Service quality has piqued the interest of both the private and public sectors, as it impacts consumer satisfaction, which in turn determines earnings and market dominance. Therefore, measuring the quality of customer service is necessary to guarantee customer satisfaction [62]. One of the often-used techniques to gauge service quality and gain a deeper understanding of customers' demands and opinions of the services provided is the service quality method (SERVQUAL) [63–65]. The method essentially involves calculating the discrepancy between the customer's impression of the services and their level of expectation satisfaction [64]. A group of authors created this technique in the middle of the

1980s as a means of evaluating how well a company provides for the needs of its clients in terms of quality of service [66]. In the private sector, the SERVQUAL technique is a widely utilized, user-friendly, and ubiquitous model. The SERVQUAL approach has been criticized by the research community for having issues with discriminant validity, convergent validity, and reliability. As a result, this model was not favorable for this research [63,65].

ISO 9001, established by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), is widely recognized as an authoritative standard for service quality [67]. It is acknowledged as an effective benchmark for quality management, with research showcasing its positive impact on organizations, addressing critical factors such as cost, time, and quality [68–70]. While its implementation allows continuous improvement, its resource-intensive nature, involving substantial time, money, and effort for training, documentation, audits, and compliance, renders it unsuitable for this study due to resource constraints [67–69].

Six Sigma, initially employed by Motorola Inc. in the 1980s, began as a methodology to reduce defects in manufacturing [71–73]. Evolving to encompass various sectors, including marketing, supply chain, finance, and sales, Six Sigma aims to eliminate waste and enhance customer satisfaction [72–74]. Comprising five data-driven stages—Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, and Control (DMAIC)—it has demonstrated success but is criticized for its inflexibility, predefined methodology, limited applicability, narrow focus, and substantial time and resource requirements, making it unfavorable for this study [75,76].

To guide the investigation into the service experiences of FTEN students with front-line administrative staff, the study employed the Batho Pele Principles as a guiding framework. Introduced as a governmental initiative in South Africa on 9 November 1997, under President Nelson Mandela, Batho Pele, meaning “People First” in Sotho, aimed to rejuvenate public service provision by emphasizing values such as effectiveness, responsibility, openness, and a dedicated commitment to meeting the requirements and aspirations of the populace [7,9,44].

The Batho Pele Principles consist of eight principles, namely [7,9,77,78]:

- Consultation—involving stakeholders in decision-making processes and seeking their input.
- Service standards—establishing clear expectations for the quality and efficiency of services provided.
- Courtesy—treating clients and stakeholders with politeness, respect, and professionalism.
- Access—ensuring that services are easily accessible to all, without discrimination or unnecessary barriers.
- Information—providing clear, accurate, and timely information to clients and stakeholders.
- Openness and transparency—conducting operations and decision-making processes in a clear, accountable, and transparent manner.
- Redress—offering mechanisms for addressing complaints, disputes, or concerns from clients.
- Value for money—ensuring that resources are used efficiently and effectively, providing optimal value for the services delivered.

These principles provide a framework governing the interaction between public servants and the public, defining their customer base [9]. Implementation of these principles not only institutionalizes successful service delivery but also enhances internal responsibility within public institutions [6]. They affirm stakeholders’ entitlement to be treated with decency and kindness and to receive high-quality, long-term service [15,19,78].

Unlike internationally used frameworks like SERVQUAL, ISO 9001, and Six Sigma, commonly applied in studies globally, the Batho Pele Principles find their primary application in studies conducted by public institutions in South Africa [15,19,78]. Given that the study was conducted in the South African context within a public institution of higher learning, the Batho Pele Principles were preferred over other frameworks. The chosen university, being semi-autonomous within a cluster of higher education institutions, makes this framework particularly pertinent to the research. This aligns with the use of the Batho

Pele Principles by Choeu in a similar study at the University of Limpopo, reinforcing their applicability to the present study [7].

#### 4. Materials and Methods

This study utilized post-positivism as its guiding paradigm, enabling a thorough critical examination through multiple approaches, to gauge the perspectives of various participants [79–82]. To address the complexity of the research topic, a hybrid methodological pluralism combining qualitative and quantitative methods was employed, enhancing the study's scope and compensating for the limitations of each approach [83,84]. Given the need to collect data from a diverse student population, a survey design was deemed suitable, efficiently gathering both qualitative and quantitative data across a large population [85–87].

The study was conducted at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), specifically focusing on the Faculty of Accounting and Informatics, Department of Information and Corporate Management. The targeted population comprised FTENs enrolled in the Bachelor of Information Management (BIM) program, totaling 288 students in 2022 as per DUT MIS Data 2022. Following literature guidance on sample size determination, a sample of 160 participants was deemed adequate to represent the entire population [88].

Convenience sampling was adopted due to practical constraints, despite the initial intention of employing probability sampling. This decision aimed to enhance the response rate by selecting participants readily available during the data collection period. A self-administered questionnaire served as the research instrument for its cost-efficiency, distribution versatility, and advantages of lower administration costs and shorter data collection times [88,89]. Table 1 below presents Cronbach's alpha scores for the collected data.

**Table 1.** Reliability statistics.

Variables	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Service delivery principles that were met	2	0.879
Overall service experience	5	1.031

To ensure reliability, a pilot test was conducted, and Cronbach's alpha was employed to estimate internal consistency in the responses. The reliability scores exceeded the recommended 0.70, indicating a high level of consistency and acceptability in the study's variables [90–92].

For validity, pre-testing of the questionnaire was carried out with a small group of 5 participants from the targeted population, allowing for adjustments based on participants' perspectives. The study adhered to ethical considerations outlined in DUT's research guidelines, aligning with the philosophical examination of right and wrong in research ethics [93].

#### 5. Results

The analysis of the content data unfolded across three thematic dimensions aligned with the study's objectives. Firstly, it sought to determine the perceptions of first-time entry students regarding front-line administrative services. Secondly, the evaluation utilized the Batho Pele Principles to gauge the impact of front-line administrative services on the service experience of FTENs. Thirdly, it aimed to ascertain the implications of front-line administrative services on the overall experience of FTENs. Analyzing the content data holds significance in this study as it facilitates replication, evaluation, and comparison, enhancing the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings [94].

To gather data, a semi-structured questionnaire was employed, collecting both quantitative and qualitative information. The data collection involved the use of hard copies and Google Forms, with subsequent organization and compilation of content data. Descriptive data were documented in Microsoft Word 365, and quantitative data were input into

Microsoft Excel 365 [95]. This process was followed by meticulous filtering and organization, systematically eliminating irrelevant data, outliers, or elements misaligned with the research question [96].

The quantitative data underwent coding, aligning with established literature practices. Analytic questions were posed, and segments of data were labeled with brief names (codes), employing these codes to categorize and glean insights into the investigated social environment [97,98]. Descriptive statistical analysis ensued, utilizing Microsoft Excel 365 for techniques such as percentiles and frequency distributions, summarizing key dataset characteristics [97,99]. The presentation of results included tables and graphs, complemented by a narrative explanation [98,100].

Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, following established academic guidelines. Researchers immersed themselves in the data, generated preliminary codes, identified potential themes, and meticulously evaluated and defined these themes, ultimately presenting the findings in alignment with established qualitative data analysis procedures [101–103]. This study adhered to the same process and steps outlined in the literature for qualitative data analysis [101,102,104].

### 5.1. Determining the Perceptions of First-Time Entry Students on the Service of Front-Line Administrative Staff

It is crucial to understand the perceptions of first-time entry students regarding the service provided by front-line administrative staff. This knowledge is essential for obtaining valuable feedback that can guide improvements in the service experience and facilitate positive institutional changes, particularly in instances of negative feedback [105–107]. In light of these considerations, this research sought to assess the perceptions of first-time entry students regarding the service of front-line administrative staff by posing specific questions. The subsequent sections analyze the findings related to this objective.

After assessing whether the FTENs sought assistance from the front-line administrative staff in the service department(s), all participants in the group confirmed having needed such services in the past. This affirmation substantiates that first-time entry students exhibit a higher demand for student services, particularly as they familiarize themselves with the new university environment. Figure 1 below shows the most prevalent service departments students indicated that they required service from the academic department, faculty office, department of finance, and student housing.

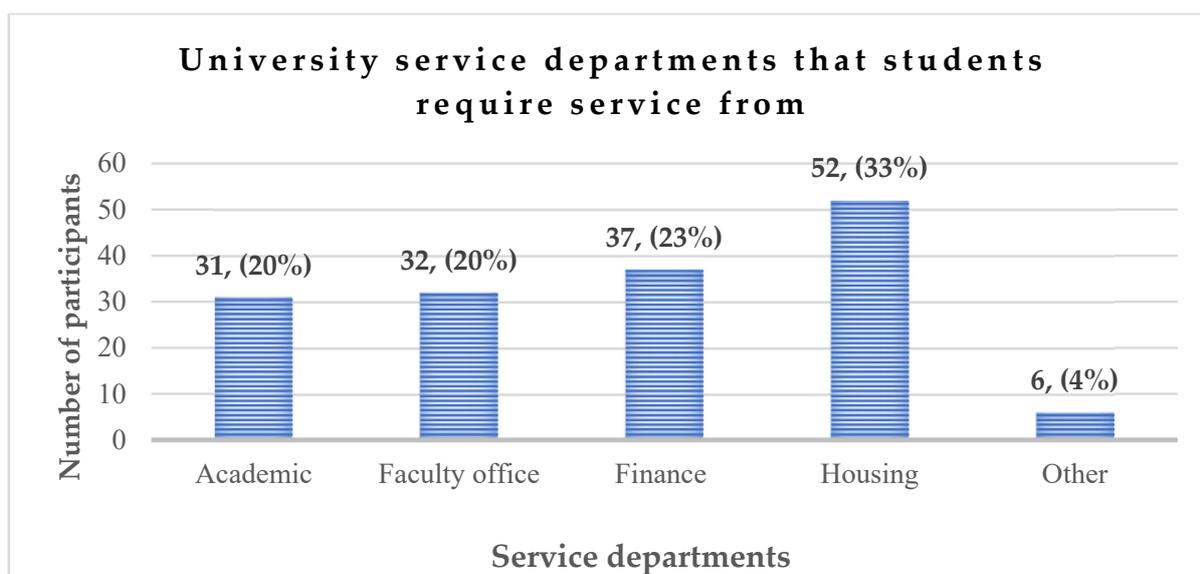
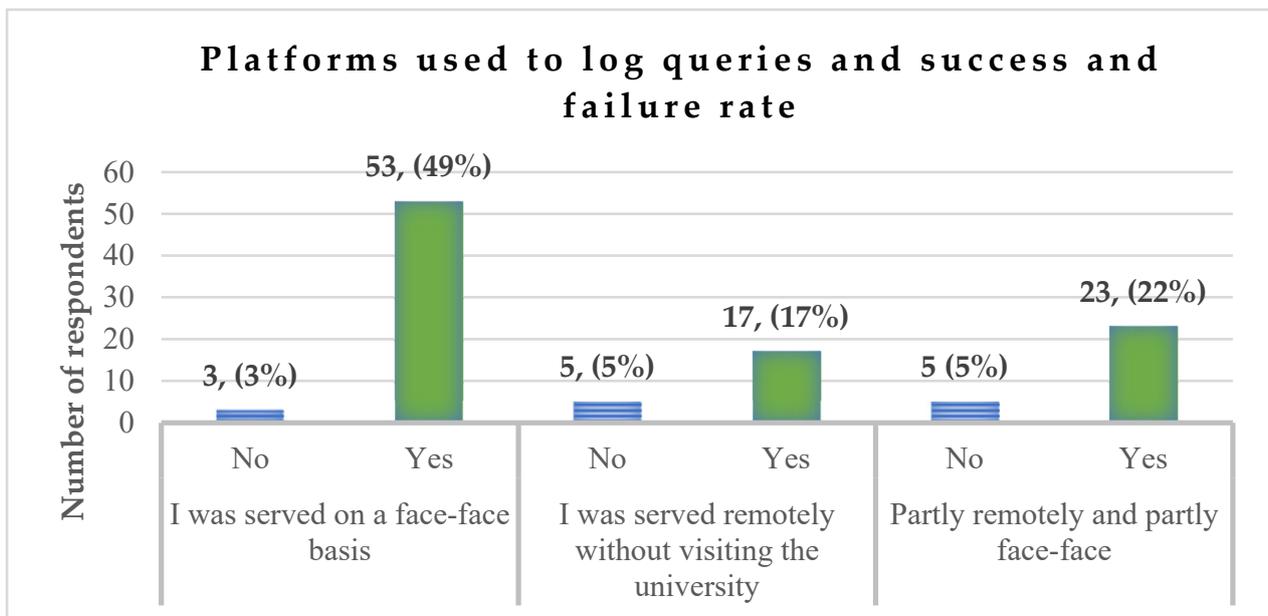


Figure 1. University service departments that students require service from.

The outcome presented in Figure 1 indicates that 52 (33%) respondents sought services from the student housing department, closely followed by the finance department with 37 (23%) respondents. The faculty office and academic departments both had 32 (20%) respondents each. These findings underscore that first-time entry students predominantly require services related to student residence and registration. Consequently, these departments should prioritize providing enhanced services compared to others, given their role as the students' initial point of contact after their initial registration. Elevating student services in these departments can contribute to positive learning experiences, improved academic success, reduced dropout rates, and increased attraction of diverse students [108,109].

### 5.2. Platforms Used by First-Time Entry Students to Log Their Queries

To comprehend the accessibility, efficiency, and effectiveness of the services required by students, it was crucial to identify the platforms through which students logged their queries. Figure 2 below illustrates the platforms students employed to log their queries and whether they received successful assistance on those platforms or not. The platforms used to log queries are face-to-face basis, remotely without visiting the university, and partly remotely and partly face-to-face. The success rate and failure rate for each platform are presented by a "Yes" and a "No".



**Figure 2.** Platforms used to log queries and success and failure rate.

Among the three platforms students utilized to log their queries, the traditional "face-to-face" method, as depicted in Figure 2, was the predominant choice, with 56 (52%) participants favoring this approach. The second most utilized platform was the "partly remotely and partly face-to-face," chosen by 28 (27%) participants, while the least preferred was "remotely without visiting the university," selected by 22 (23%). Figure 2 also illustrates that the "face-to-face" platform had the highest success rate at 53 (49%) and the lowest failure rate at 3 (3%). The success rates of "partly remotely and partly face-to-face" (22%) and "remotely without visiting the university" (17%) exhibited minimal differences. Similarly, the failure rates for these two platforms were identical, both standing at 5 (5%).

The results depicted in Figure 2 are corroborated by the research conducted by [110]. Their study, conducted at a different site, also revealed student dissatisfaction with the distribution of services, their availability, and the platforms employed to access these services. Additionally, ref. [110] found that students faced limitations in accessing services due to the platforms used, and there were inconsistencies in service quality across these

platforms. Despite the temporal gap of a decade between these two studies, both underscore the imperative to enhance the effectiveness of platforms utilized for logging student queries.

Ensuring consistent service satisfaction, both remotely and in-person, is paramount, as numerous factors are prompting organizations to adopt remote work arrangements and eventually transition to hybrid work models [111]. The study's findings regarding satisfaction with the quality of service provided by front-line administrative staff when working remotely compared to working in the office are presented below.

### 5.3. Satisfaction with the Quality of Service Rendered Remotely and/or Face-to-Face

Among 107 student respondents, 82 (77%) expressed satisfaction with the quality of service provided by front-line administrative staff, regardless of whether they work remotely or in the office. Conversely, 25 (23%) of the respondents disagreed with this statement, indicating a perceived difference in the quality of service provided by front-line administrative staff when working remotely compared to working in the office. Here are some of the responses from the students:

*"If you are visiting them face to face, they are really helpful, I would like them to be active as they are if you are communicating with them via emails."*

*"They should respond to emails especially housing department at the beginning of the year because not all students can come to housing for residence."*

*"Patience, we're not all the same, sometimes they need to clearly explain in a slow manner making sure that the student seeking help understands what is being said."*

The lower service satisfaction ratings provided by 25 (23%) students echo the findings of [112], who observed a general preference for face-to-face services due to inconsistencies across different platforms. Conversely, ref. [113] reported that students at their study site expressed greater satisfaction with remote services compared to other platforms. This divergence in findings could be attributed to the distinct demographic profiles of the study populations [112,113]. Previous research suggests that participant demographics can significantly influence study outcomes [114,115].

### 5.4. Issues That Students Were Not Satisfied with Regarding the Service They Received

In line with the Batho Pele Principles, it was essential for this study to identify the issues that students (16) were not satisfied with concerning the service they received. This question was also important for service feedback and to gain insights into the specific areas where students experienced problems or challenges with the service that was provided to them [7,14]. This was also important for prioritizing the efforts to improve the quality of service.

Apart from the 90 (85%) students who were serviced to their satisfaction, only 16 (15%) rated the service they received as unsatisfactory. The findings below provide highlights of the implications of a failed front-line administrative service. Like previous studies, the dissatisfaction expressed by 16 (15%) students suggests that their academic performance is affected [116,117]. This dissatisfaction further escalates the need for elevating the service. Presented below are the issues raised by students; they are thematically grouped into three categories: responsiveness, attention, and treatment/communication.

Responsiveness: students' responses are as follows:

*"They were not responding to my emails; I was even thinking of giving up and looking for another university."*

*"Their line is always busy, or ring without being answered."*

*"The emails sent to get the application form for the registration fee were not answered after I sent one form there was no response."*

*"My registration fee that I paid did not come back and I still need it to cover my debt. I took it as a loan."*

*“Some of them are very rude and they make it seem like the students are at fault.”*

The students' (7) complaints highlight the lack of responsiveness from the administrative staff to emails and phone calls, which can delay the resolution of academic queries. The inability to access academic support and guidance can negatively impact students' academic performance and overall experience.

Attention: students' responses are as follows:

*“I felt like I was not given full attention at first and it takes a lot of time before you are attended.”*

*“I was not satisfied with their way of response when addressing students. They normally leave you with unattended questions.”*

The students' (5) complaints suggest that students feel like they are not being given enough attention by the administrative staff and that it takes a long time for them to receive assistance. This can also delay the resolution of academic queries, which may lead to students missing out on crucial academic opportunities, such as registering for courses, submitting assignments on time, and getting feedback.

Treatment/communication: students' responses are as follows:

*“I went to the Faculty Office during the first semester, and they said I should write them the proof of payment that I paid for at Finance via an email requesting an academic transcript. Till today they never responded.”*

*“I went there early in the morning around 7:30, they open at 8 am. While others and I were standing outside, the Nurse came and said ‘Did you all read the instruction by the door? I hope you all booked online.’ The Nurse never greeted us.”*

*“They gave me non-satisfying accommodation.”*

The respondents' (4) complaints suggest that some students are not satisfied with the way they are being treated or communicated with by the administrative staff, which may lead to frustration and disengagement. Disengagement from academic activities and support can lead to lower academic performance and reduced motivation to achieve academic success.

The failure of administrative staff to effectively resolve student queries can have significant academic implications for students, including lower academic performance, frustration, disengagement, and limited opportunities for career development. These findings are in line with findings from previous studies, which indicate that students commonly complain about inadequate facilities, poor communication, lack of responsiveness, and lack of student engagement or involvement [118,119]. The institution needs to ensure that front-line administrative staff are trained and supported to provide effective academic support and communication to students.

##### *5.5. Assessing Using the Batho Pele Principles the Degree to Which Front-Line Administrative Staff Service Influences the Service Experience of First-Time Entry Students*

Evaluating the impact of front-line administrative staff services on the experience of FTENs through the lens of the Batho Pele Principles was crucial. This evaluation holds significance as it can aid pertinent stakeholders in cultivating a people-centric strategy, leading to heightened student satisfaction, enhanced retention, and an improved educational experience [7,14]. In summary, appraising the extent to which front-line administrative staff align with Batho Pele Principles can empower the institution to establish strong service standards that prioritize student-centric operations, fostering optimization and excellence.

Institutions prioritizing the evaluation of students' service experiences can obtain valuable insights into service quality and implement corrective measures for improved delivery [120]. This involves gathering student ratings on various service aspects to gauge satisfaction levels.

The ratings were assessed using a scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represents “Very Unsatisfied” and 5 corresponds to “Very Satisfied.” The evaluation of various facets of

the service experience was conducted in accordance with the Batho Pele Principles. These principles highlight the importance of delivering quality services to recipients within South African public institutions. The results of this evaluation are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Participants’ service experience with front-line administrative staff’s adherence to the Batho Pele Principles, N = 107.

The Students’ Service Experience N = 106	Very Unsatisfied		Unsatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very Satisfied	
	1		2		3		4		5	
Batho Pele Principles	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Consultation	12	11	4	4	34	32	46	43	11	10
Service standard	11	10	7	7	31	29	43	40	15	14
Courtesy	10	9	9	8	28	26	40	37	20	17
Access	11	10	14	13	28	26	32	30	22	21
Information	8	7	10	9	28	26	38	36	23	22
Openness	9	8	11	10	30	28	43	40	13	12
Responsiveness	9	8	8	7	34	32	41	38	15	14
Value for money	12	11	5	5	36	34	37	35	15	14

The outcomes outlined in Table 2 above reveal a diverse range of experiences concerning participants’ interactions with front-line administrative staff and their commitment to the Batho Pele Principles. Notably, certain principles, such as Information, garnered relatively more positive responses, with 61 (58%) participants expressing satisfaction or high satisfaction. Conversely, principles like Value for money received the least positive responses, with 52 (49%) participants indicating satisfaction or high satisfaction. Analyzing the data further, it is evident that all eight principles, when combined, were predominantly rated as neutral by 64 (43%) of the participants. This implies that if the service’s effectiveness were to decline, the adherence of front-line administrative staff to the Batho Pele Principles would likely be assessed negatively.

*5.6. Ascertaining the Implications of Front-Line Administrative Staff’s Service on the Service Experience of First-Time Entry Students*

Understanding the ramifications of front-line administrative staff service on the service experience of FTENs is crucial. This understanding can aid in addressing current service challenges, soliciting feedback, and enabling the institution to mitigate student attrition while discouraging negative publicity [6,107,121]. The findings below provide insights from participants regarding the implications of front-line administrative staff service on the service experience of FTENs.

Among the 69 (68%) participants, positive implications were reflected in their responses regarding the service of front-line administrative staff. These students conveyed that their service experience had positive implications for word-of-mouth recommendations about the institution. They described the staff as helpful, patient, and accommodating. Additionally, this group emphasized that they perceived DUT as a university prioritizing student need and offering excellent educational services. They praised the professionalism, kindness, and willingness of DUT staff to assist students with any issues. Some students specifically noted the staff’s helpfulness during in-person interactions, citing patience and understanding in response to their queries. They expressed gratitude for the staff’s commitment to delivering exceptional service and dedicating time to resolve their problems. Selected responses are provided below:

*“They made me feel more positive and excited about being part of the DUT family.”*

*"I would confidently encourage them to enroll at DUT because the service provided by frontline administrative staff is perfect."*

*"I am going to encourage my siblings to also apply at DUT next, because it is a great institution."*

*"On the next career guidance in my high school, I am going to speak highly about DUT due to swift service received for the past few months as a first-year student."*

How students articulate their perceptions of the institution to potential future students, based on their service encounters, holds substantial influence over the institution's reputation and student enrolment [15]. These insights carry significant weight in the ongoing effort to enhance services and cultivate a positive service experience, offering valuable material for testimonials and marketing endeavors aimed at attracting a larger student body [122–124].

While a compelling majority of 69 (68%) participants reported positive experiences with the service provided by front-line administrative staff, a noteworthy 34 (32%) expressed dissenting experiences, leading to unfavorable implications. The negative service encounters were linked to consequences such as student attrition, satisfaction issues, and challenges related to diversity and inclusion. Selected responses are outlined below:

*"The institution doesn't care about your concerns, for example, due to receiving failed service at the faculty department, I pleaded a transfer from my department to another at ML Sultan, they said they'll answer me within a month about my request but now it's been 4 months without their response."*

*"I was not satisfied with how they handled my query, I felt like they get frustrated about hearing a lot of queries and they end up declining every query."*

*"I am felt like they did not want to assist me because of my ethnicity."*

Overall, these results underscore the imperative for DUT to conduct a thorough evaluation of its administrative service delivery, emphasizing enhancements in response times, communication, and staff attitudes. While this study concentrated solely on DUT, FTENs, and front-line services, it is worth noting that the factors studied and the conclusions drawn may extend beyond DUT's context. This limitation underscores the importance of future research exploring this phenomenon in similar institutions and with other student demographics. Potential measures to address these issues may include investing in innovative technology and systems to facilitate remote service provision, offering training and support to staff for improved interaction with students across diverse ethnic groups, and establishing explicit policies and procedures for addressing student concerns. By implementing these initiatives, DUT can progress toward delivering a more uniform, efficient, and student-focused service to its student body.

## 6. Conclusions

This research explored perceptions, evaluations, and implications of front-line administrative service for first-time entry students (FTENs) at Durban University of Technology (DUT). The analysis unfolded across three key dimensions, aligning with the study's objectives. Firstly, it investigated FTENs' perceptions of front-line administrative services. Secondly, it utilized Batho Pele Principles to assess their impact on the overall FTEN experience. Lastly, it aimed to ascertain the implications of front-line administrative services on FTENs' service experience. The findings revealed that FTENs exhibit a considerable demand for student services, with academic departments, faculty offices, finance departments, and student housing being the most frequently accessed service departments. Assessing the adherence of front-line administrative staff to the Batho Pele Principles uncovered diverse experiences among participants. While certain principles, such as Information, received positive responses, others, like Value for money, faced challenges. The overall neutral ratings for all principles underscored the importance of maintaining effective service delivery to avoid negative assessments in the event of service deterioration.

Understanding the implications of front-line administrative service experiences on FTENs was a critical aspect of the study. Positive implications were highlighted by a significant majority of participants, expressing satisfaction with the helpful, patient, and accommodating nature of the staff. However, a noteworthy portion of respondents reported negative experiences, indicating potential consequences such as student attrition, satisfaction issues, and challenges related to diversity and inclusion.

The study's outcomes underscore the need for DUT to critically evaluate and enhance its administrative service delivery. Recommendations include improvements in response times, communication, and staff attitudes. Investing in technology for remote service provision, providing training for staff to engage effectively with students of diverse backgrounds, and establishing clear policies and procedures for addressing student concerns are essential steps toward achieving a more consistent, efficient, and student-centered service delivery at DUT. Therefore, it is recommended that the institution invests in technologies such as chatbots and online self-help portals to provide students with quick and efficient assistance. Additionally, more mandatory and advanced student feedback mechanisms are needed to monitor the effectiveness of these programs.

By addressing these challenges, DUT can not only enhance the satisfaction and retention of its student body but also strengthen its reputation and appeal to prospective students. The study's insights contribute valuable knowledge for institutions seeking to optimize their administrative services in a dynamic and diverse higher education landscape.

Further research can be conducted on other student groups, even if they are not as vulnerable to insufficient treatment as FTENs, and can also focus on front-line administrators' impressions of the services they provide to students.

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