

Portfolio of Evidence: Research report

Perceptions of students on student advisors in target driven sales processes within a Private Higher Education Institution in South Africa
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I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the B.Com Honours Management degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify certain variables which students perceive to be important and/or their experiences when engaging with a consultant at Boston City Campus and Business College. This study's intention was to find out if student advisors or consultants have a higher focus on reaching the institutions' targeted number of new students and/or if they also take into consideration the future career goals of the prospective student and advising them based on their strengths and not set the student up for failure.

The research strategy made use of a quantitative approach and a descriptive research design so the current position of a variable could be described (Centre for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2017). Participants were requested to complete a survey in the form of a five-point Likert Scale survey on the institutions premises. The responses had following options: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree. Cross tabulation of variables was then produced and the results reported on. The most significant findings were that students perceived consultants or student advisors to be incremental in their decision making when selecting a qualification and always allowing sufficient time for academic advising.

Contents

Abstract.....	2
1.Introduction.....	4
2.Literature Review.....	5
Psychosocial Theories	7
Cognitive Development Theories	7
Typology Theories.....	8
Career Development Theories	8
Ethical Principles for Advising	9
Student Perceptions of Academic Advising	12
Characteristics of Service.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
3. Methodology.....	15
Research Paradigm	15
Population.....	16
Sampling.....	17
Data Collection	17
Data Analysis.....	18
Reliability and Validity.....	18
4. Anticipated Contribution	19
5. Findings and Interpretation of Findings	20
6. Discussion	27
Reliability and Validity.....	29
7.Conclusion.....	30
Ethical Considerations.....	31
Limitations of the study	32
9. References.....	34
10. Annexures.....	38
Example of consent form.....	38
Example of measurement instrument	38
Permission letter	38
Ethical clearance letter.....	38
Originality Report	38
Final Research Report Summary Document.....	42

1.Introduction

This research will be important to identify if sales consultants or student advisors are focused more on achieving targets during the sales process of student recruitment and therefore conforming to the perceptions which people have of consultants or salesman. The ethicality of a student advisor or consultant can be identified by investigating if they have provided sound academic advice and guidance to a prospective student regarding their future career path, and not manipulating the prospective student to pursue studies in an area they have no interest in for the sake of achieving their predetermined sales target or new student number target. When student advisors conduct their recruitment in an unethical manner, it can affect both the student's career path and the reputation of the institution. By allowing a sample of students within the identified Private Higher Education Institution to complete a survey, the research has determined the students' perceptions of student advisors.

The findings from this research will assist management in Private Higher Education Institutions to accurately assess student perceptions of their student advisors during student recruitment, which could have an impact on future marketing strategies/interventions and customer service offerings.

There is an observation that in many Private Higher Education Institutions in South Africa, they are first and foremost businesses, they must maintain and/or increase profitability to stay afloat and appease the shareholders (Coan, 2017).

Student dropout rates are a huge concern in South Africa as it could possibly affect the profitability of a private higher education institution. With an institution experiencing a decrease in student numbers it will have a direct impact on the amount of fees it can collect (African News Agency, 2015).

This research aims to identify if student advisors have a higher focus on reaching the institutions' targeted number of new students and/or if they also take into consideration the future career goals of the prospective student and advising them based on their strengths and not set the student up for failure.

The aim of this research will be to determine the perceptions of students on student advisors in student recruitment in a target driven process by prospective students in a Private Higher Education Institution(PHEI).

Recruiting of students to attend a specific institution and selling a service is important, however, it could often be done just to meet predetermined sales targets. Advising with the students' best interest at heart can sometimes become the second key performance indicator.

Many Families with middle and lower incomes tend to make disproportionate financial sacrifices for the children to attend Private Education Institutions (Gobiga, 2017).

The existence of PHEI's are on the rise in South Africa and with so many 'fly-by-night' private colleges which are not registered and accredited, one cannot blame certain parents for being weary or wanting to investigate before parting with their hard-earned money (Independent Institute of Education, 2014). The three most expensive purchases humans make are; buying a house, buying a vehicle and paying for education. All three purchases need someone to inform you of the features, advantages and benefits of your purchase and this is done by a salesperson or consultant. Many people do not trust salesman as they have a perception that they are just working for the commission of the sale. Selling education during student recruitment is especially important as the decision the student makes will affect them for the rest of their lives or have a negative effect on their selected career path. The question here is; do prospective students, parents and lecturers perceive target driven student advisors to be ethical? The research will aim to answer this question.

The research will also be aimed to focus on Private Higher Institutions (PHI's) in South Africa, but, more specifically within the city of Pietermaritzburg. The focus will be on one of the five PHEI's in the city.

2.Literature Review

The aim of this research will be to determine the perceptions of students on student advisors during student recruitment in target driven processes in a Private Higher Education Institution in Pietermaritzburg. Many private higher education institutions are target driven as they need students in classes for them to be operational and profitable.

Recruiting of students to attend a specific institution and selling a service is important, it could often be done just to meet predetermined sales targets. Advising with the students' best interest at heart can sometimes become the second key performance indicator.

Selling education during student recruitment is very important as the decision the student makes will affect them for the rest of their lives or have a negative effect on their chosen career path. The question here is; how do students perceive target driven student advisors? The research will aim to answer this question.

The aim of the research was to focus on a Private Higher Institution (PHI) in South Africa, but, more specifically at the Boston City Campus & Business College within the city of Pietermaritzburg.

Various ethical theories in academic advising and sales processes will be discussed to assist in finding a solution to the research problem.

Academic advising is very important as effective and supportive advising assists in student success. On the other hand, bad advising increases the chances of students failing in academic life and thus having a negative impact on the future career options. In private higher education institutions, it is the student advisors who provide the academic advice which directly affects the student's study options or qualification choice. Students believe that the advice provided to them by the student advisor is credible and make use of the information given to them to decide. It is here where the relationship between advisor and advisee begins. A student advisor is responsible for helping a prospective student select the right qualification, make an informed decision on a career path, always be available to answer any questions a student may have and assist in a student succeeding and graduating amongst other supporting roles (Xue, 2016). This is the case in many higher education institutions, however, in a private setting a student advisor also needs to reach a predetermined sales target for student recruitment and possibly student retention. This is where the problem often lies.

In a target driven process, the student advisors or sales staff in a Private Higher Education Institution must undergo training processes to be effective and efficient in their position. A requirement for the role of a student advisor is formal three-year diploma or a bachelor degree and sales experience. Training which is provided by private higher education institutions are based around knowledge of the qualifications and services which the institution offers. Student advisors are meant to abide by the institutions code of ethics when dealing with customers and other stakeholders in this case, the students (Reddy, 2015).

The research will aim to investigate the perceptions of students on student advisors in target driven processes within a private higher education institution where advisors are target driven and sales orientated. While there is sufficient literature on ethics of academic advising and in sales processes, the gap identified is that of the academic advisor or student advisor in a private (for-profit) higher education institutions. Do students believe there is a thin line between advising and sales? Are student advisors perceived to be responsible for assisting students in making an informed decision on their career paths or are they merely advising for the sake of reaching the institutions predetermined targeted number of new students?

Theories of importance in academic advising are psychosocial theories, typological theories and cognitive development theories (Creamer & Scott, 2000).

Psychosocial Theories

Psychosocial theories of development are ones which are applied to the development of identity in prospective students. They describe how an individual's development is dependent on them resolving certain developmental tasks throughout their life (Creamer & Creamer, 1994). As individuals progress through life from infancy to adulthood, so too do their intellectual and physical powers develop all stemming from life experiences and impacts from certain events which occurred during the progression of life (Creamer & Scott, 2000).

Student advisors engage psychosocial theories often when a situation requires a student to resolve conflict with others and to develop personal independence. Psychosocial theories are also used around discussions of identity, gender, race and ethnicity (Long, 2012).

Psychosocial identity development theories need to be applied in academic advising. It is of extreme importance that a student advisor has a certain level of understanding with regards to the different theories. In this way, a student advisor will be able to establish at what stage a prospective student is in and aid in developing that stage and beyond.

Cognitive Development Theories

These theories refer to the way people think, reason and make sense of the experiences they encounter (Evans, 2003). (Creamer & Scott, 2000) suggest that the cognitive structure of a student is changed when development occurs, and it can have different effects on everyone, therefore, individual will have different views of a certain event. When prospective

students are interviewed by a student advisor at a higher education institution, they are provided with an array of information and advice during this event thus allowing them to make their own judgement of the experience and make an informed decision on their career choice.

Typology Theories

These are theories which relate to personality types and the way in which individuals adjust to educational environment (Evans, 2003). These theories are important for consultants/ student advisors to make use of when interacting with prospective students and they will need to ascertain the type of personality the student has and advise them accordingly regarding their career paths. It is important that students select an option which is linked with their personality as they need to be content in their career one day, for example, someone who scores higher for sociable on a personality test might not want to or should rather not go into a career like accounting as they may find it boring. Accounting is more for a prospective student who scores higher in the conventional personality (University of Hawaii Community College, 2015).

Career Development Theories

This is very important to a student advisor as it relates to the selection of the correct or most appropriate career choice while being cognisant to the many variables such as a prospective student's age, their experiences, personal and family values, personality and their personal goals (Creamer & Scott, 2000). Holland's vocational personality type suggests that an individual's personality type is close fit for satisfaction and growth within the selected career choice (Creamer & Scott, 2000).

As mentioned in the above literature, it is important for student advisors to make use of these theories or for private higher education institutions to include them in the training of the student advisors. Student advisors need to be cognisant of cultural and social, and gender biases when dealing with prospective students.

The literature mentioned above makes mention to the theories which academic advisors need to understand and how to implement these theories when advising prospective students and how to maintain ethicality in terms of biases, developmental stages and cognitive development, however, there is little or no mention on how to maintain ethical

behaviour when student advisors are faced with achieving sales targets during student recruitment.

Ethical Principles for Advising

There are eight ethical principles for advising which have been identified by (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993) in the (NACADA Journal, 1993).

Seeking the best possible education for the prospective student is derived from the utilitarian principle and refers to the good which we hope to maximise is the student's education and the benefits thereof. It is the responsibility of the student advisor to provide the best information possible so that it will not only benefit the student but all those they encounter (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). (UMHB, 2017) agrees that student advisor is responsible for the student's well-being while reducing the risk of harm to them, the advisors main concern should be the student's education (learning) and that it is the student advisors' ethical concern to maximize that learning. This includes advising students to select the correct courses which will allow them to progress towards their career objectives while taking their abilities into consideration.

Treating all prospective students equally is a principle follows from the ideal of justice where all individuals should be treated equally. Student advisors should not have 'favourites' and attention must be given to a student's background, whether it be socio-economic or cultural. All prospective students should be treated the same and advised the same (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993).

A Student advisor also has the responsibility to provide justice and fairness to all prospective students and current students. Student Advisors must not provide more assistance to those whom they are fonder of, or to those whose values or beliefs are like their own. All students are entitled to quality service from the student advisors at a Private Higher Education Institution (UMHB, 2017).

Enhancement of a prospective student's ability to make decisions refers to providing valid information to the student to enable them to make an informed decision on their future career paths and study options. The student advisor can only assist to a certain extent by providing recommendations, however, the final decision is up to the student and in some cases made with their parents (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). A student advisor must treat a student as

an independent agent by assisting the student to make an autonomous decision. Pressure should not be placed on the student to make them feel that they should select a qualification which the advisor feels they should choose, instead, they need to make the decision themselves (UMHB, 2017).

The concern here is that in a case of a target driven student advisor, will they behave ethically by allowing the student to decide on their own or sway them to a qualification which is currently lacking in student numbers to assist in achieving their sales target?

Advocating for the student with other offices is a principle come from fidelity as student advisors make promises to prospective students on what to expect from the chosen qualification, the institution's services and support and academic processes. Student need to be aware of all the different departments in an institution and which department will assist with whichever issue they may encounter (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). According to (UMHB, 2017) the student advisor will not only serve as an agent for the student when they are available, but also try their best to assist when the student needs it. This includes directing the student through any situation that may come up and require the student to work with other university offices.

A student's circumstances or issues need to be kept confidential and respect for their privacy must be maintained. All offices or staff in an institution needs to be aware of this. This also stems from the fidelity ideal and the commitment a student advisor makes to a prospective student (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). Student advisors should always tell the truth to prospective students and current students. In a case where a student is making his or her informed decision, there should not be any information withheld which may affect their decision-making process. Student advisors should also be forthcoming with truth to other staff members within the institution as a time may arise where certain information on the student may be required for other departments to make decisions about the student. (UMHB, 2017).

Support of the institution's educational philosophy and its policies is important as it may not be the nature of student advisors who think for themselves and those who have their own understanding of educational principles. This is another form of fidelity as the student advisor made a commitment when accepting the job that it will abide by the ethical code of conducts within the institution (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). Student advisors have responsibility to

keep their promises to keep all interactions with the students confidential, especially when a student believes the student advisor will do so (UMHB, 2017).

Student advisors must follow the advising program and understand it as providing information and advice that is coherent, relevant to college policy and upheld when questioned by others (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). Student advisors need to uphold policy and the credibility of the institution; therefore, all student advisors need to be trained by the institution so that all involved are working to one common goal.

An advisor must enforce and comply with the policies that the Private Higher Education Institution has set out. These policies include communication with students when a matter arises regarding the policies and philosophy of the PHEI.

Respect and professional courtesy for all colleagues needs to be adhered to as a student advisor should never encourage students to believe negative things of their colleagues or institution. It does not only refer to respect and being polite but rather to reaffirm the integrity of one's colleague or the institution (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). (UMHB, 2017) Agrees that student advisors should not only observe the good behaviour of students, but should not also express any negative opinions they might have on the institution.

These principles allow for student advisors to apply them and if done so in a thoughtful and honest way allow them to act ethically. The abovementioned principles assist in explaining what is wrong in some private higher education institutions, especially target driven institutions, where practices or behaviours in advising are unethical (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993).

The literature once again points to the theories of academic advising in an ideal situation and how a student advisor should make use of them. The literature is also based on academic advising in public higher education institutions where an advisors' sole responsibility is to provide a service to the student for the duration of their studies, however, in many private higher education institutions in South Africa it is the responsibility of the student advisor not only to advise each prospective student accordingly but also to ensure the student recruitment target or sales target is achieved. It is here where there can be an issue worth investigating as the student advisor needs to be ethical and at the same time be

reminded of the pressure to recruit more students. The perceptions of student advisors by current students will need to be investigated.

Student Perceptions of Academic Advising

Academic advising is service which an institution offers to its prospective and current students to assist them in making an informed decision on their career paths and therefore, like in any service industry there is level of customer service which is expected by the customer. In the case of private higher education institutions, it is the student who is the primary customer and there needs to be a relationship which must be established. This relationship could and should last for the duration of the student's time with the institution and as alumni. Services can be defined as behavioural entities instead of physical one and described as deeds, performances or efforts (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2008).

Characteristics of Service

Parasuraman (1986) infers that service characteristics differ between services and goods. The five characteristics are: Intangibility, Inseparability, Inconsistency, Inventory and Inability to own.

A unique characteristic which can distinguish a service from goods is the source from which other services come from (Hoffman & Bateson, 1997). A service is intangible as it based on a key performance area and not on a specific object (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2008). In a higher education institution setting, the service will stem from the interaction a prospective student has with the student advisor. Student advisors in a target driven position will need to maintain a predetermined level of customer service to build a rapport with a prospective student to facilitate a sale of a qualification.

This refers to the connect a service provider has with the service being offered and the customer's involvement in the service process (Hoffman & Bateson, 1997). The encounter between student advisor and prospective student results in roles being taken on which enables the quality of service to be determined. It is the **perception** of quality which is established during the service delivery process (Ong, 2013).

This refers to the differences in consistency between service interactions (Hoffman & Bateson, 1997), as performance in customer service may vary between student advisors and between prospective students. It is often difficult to ensure consistency in service

behaviour from student advisors as what the institutions intends on offering may be very different to what the prospective student receives during first contact, and there could also be differences in between student advisors' attitudes and behaviours (Ong, 2013).

A service is something which cannot be saved, service experiences will differ from person to person (Ong, 2013). A person is not able to count service; however, an organisation is able to measure levels of customer service by use of surveys, 'ghost calls' where an internal or external employee poses as a customer and rates the level of customer service after the interaction and provides feedback to the organisation. It can be used as way to understand how customers or prospective student perceive the quality of services.

Purchasing a service does not mean there will be a change of ownership (Kasper, et al., 2006). Services can perish and do not lead to possession of something tangible. The service a student advisor offers is expected to last until the student graduates.

Private higher education is often looked at as service product which has primary outputs namely; knowledge, skills, mental development and graduation instead of owning an object like a qualification certificate which is merely tangible evidence that there was some sort of service encounter (Dann, 2008).

Offering education, especially, private higher education is a service offering which is essential to student success, however, it can be very expensive, so the consumer needs to be assured that parting with their hard-earned money will pay off in the end.

The quality of services offered by or experiences of student's university settings have been covered. Students expect their advisors to have their best interests at heart and to provide them with sound information for their career path to ensure their success or at least assist.

Conclusion

The literature described the definition of ethics, discussed ethical theories and principles in academic advising, and the importance of academic advising. These are all important aspects when one looks at the broader picture of academic advising and the implications it can have for prospective and current students. Student advisors have the responsibility to follow an institutions ethical code of conduct, so they do not bring the organisation into disrepute. They also need to understand and follow the ethical theories and principles to be

successful advisors and at the same time assist students in making informed decision on their career paths. In much of the research it has been noted that academic advisors are responsible for advising or been available to the students at any time, however, in most private higher education institutions in South Africa, the student advisor or salesman will only have contact with the student a few times until the prospective student has completed the registration process and is added as 'sale'. It must be noted, however, that although this may be the case with minimal interaction throughout the duration of a student's studies, many private higher education institutions do have different departments who serve as student support (IIE Varsity College, 2018). So, the student advisor essentially hands the student over to the next department once registration is complete, similarly, when purchasing a new vehicle, you might never see the salesman again once delivery has been completed but you will be visiting the workshop for maintenance.

While many private higher education institutions have salesman/student advisors to increase student numbers, it is imperative that the advisors provide a high level of customer service as it will not only assist in building a relationship with the student but also in creating a strong image for the institution and all at the same time working towards a predetermined sales target.

What is important to try to identify is the student's perception of the interaction with the student advisor and relationship and service from first contact through to the registration process. Something else which is worth researching, as little or no evidence was found, is the perceptions of the lecturers on the student advisors within the identified private higher education institution.

In many private higher education institutions, the student advisors are required to be qualified by means of a tertiary education, but this does not mean that every student advisor is qualified to advise prospective and current students. Once again, private higher education institutions need to be profitable to be operational and to expand due to the lack of or no financial assistance from the government, therefore many of the job specifications for positions of student advisor require the candidate to have sales experience.

Literature constantly refers to the importance of academic advising and the relevant theories, however, there are no readings on whether students perceive advisors to be ethical

during the recruitment process. The aim of this research topic will be to identify the perceptions of students on student advisors who are in a target driven setting.

3. Methodology

Research Paradigm

A positivist stance has been identified as the most appropriate paradigm for the research as the knowledge drawn from it can result in hard, real and objective; and could be transmitted into a tangible form (Jansen, 2016).

The research strategy which will be used in this study will be a quantitative approach as it is deemed to be better suited to address the purpose of the research and its objectives.

A descriptive research design has been selected as this design sets out to describe the current position of a variable or phenomenon. (Centre for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2017). This will allow for the findings to be deductively explained in solving the research problem.

The research will make use of the Likert Scale Survey as it is the most universal way of survey collection and they are easy to understand. Responses from the Likert Scale are easily measured and are subjective to computation and mathematical scrutiny. These surveys allow the participant to respond in degree of agreement and does not force a yes or no answer (LaMarca, 2011).

Likert Scale Surveys do not require the respondent to provide an actual yes or no answer and does not coerce the respondent to provide his or her view on a topic, instead, it allows for them to answer with a certain level of agreement; which in turn allows for easier answering. Another advantage of this type of questionnaire is that the responses provided can allow for neutral or undecided feeling of the respondent, making it easier to code when collecting data because a single number will represent a response (LaMarca, 2011). Quantitative data is obtained and can be analysed relatively easy (McLeod, 2008). Likert surveys are quick, efficient and cost-effective methods for data collection. They can be sent out through postal mail, e-mail, internet or given to a participant in person (LaMarca, 2011).

By offering anonymity on self-administered questionnaires such as the Likert survey, it assists in reducing social pressure and social desirability bias (McLeod, 2008). Paulhus

(1984) found that often desirable personality characteristics were observed when people were asked to write their personal details on their questionnaire than when they told not to put any information which can be used to identify them (Paulhus, 1984).

(LaMarca, 2011) suggests some of the disadvantages of the Likert scale are that it is uni-dimensional and only provides 5-7 options to select from. The space between each option cannot be equal and it fails to measure the true attitudes of the participants. People do not often select “extremes” on the scale as they believe there are negative implications related to “extremists” and sometimes the extreme choice would actually be the most accurate.

The intention of this research is to collect and analyse data collected from the sample to determine the perceptions which students have on student advisors in a target driven process within a Private Higher Education Institution. The unit of analysis for this study is therefore the student's perceptions.

Population

A research population is often referred to as well-defined group of individuals or objects which share similar characteristics (Explorable, 2009).

The research population for the intended research will comprise of students currently registered for studies in 2018 at a Private Higher Education Institution in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. The identified institution is the Boston City Campus & Business College in Pietermaritzburg. The population comprises of 62 which are all first-year students at the institution. The population consists of first year students who are studying towards different qualifications. The Boston City Campus & Business College Pietermaritzburg campus offers tertiary qualifications in the form of Higher Certificates, Diploma's and Bachelor's degrees (Boston City Campus and Business College, 2018).

The research site has been identified at the Boston City Campus & Business College Pietermaritzburg campus and a request for research on the site has been submitted and permission has been granted by the branch manager of the site to conduct the research among the students.

Sampling

Probability sampling has been used in this research as it provides each element an equal chance of being selected in the research (Maree & Pietersen, 2016). Since the research concerns the perceptions of the students at this institution, they all have an equal chance of being selected.

Simple random sampling was used to divide the population into strata (Maree & Pietersen, 2016). There were 120 first-year students, of which 62 are full-time students (attend class daily). The 62 students were presented the study and those who were willing to participate made an indication to the campus manager. Twenty-eight students opted to participate in the study. Respondents or participants were both male and female.

Data Collection

For the research to be successful, the participants needed to be recruited. The intended recruitment method will be for the participants to complete a survey in the form of a five-point Likert Scale survey. The responses will have the following options: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree. Permission was granted by the identified Private Higher Education Institution to send the survey to all current students. Gaining access to the student's email addresses was a breach of the institutions policy, therefore, it was agreed that all first year, full-time students would be asked if they would be interested in taking part in the research. The purpose of the research was explained and that anonymity will be upheld. The participants were also given the option to opt out at any time. A letter of consent was signed and dated by each participant. There was no need to incentivise the students to participate. There was no indication that an incentive was to be expected.

The advantages of administering Likert scale questionnaires through email surveys is that they are cheap and easy to design and administer, a participant is allowed to complete the questionnaire at a time which is convenient to them, participants also have the time to make use of their personal records to answer a question if the need arises and the respondent is more comfortable and at ease because there is no interviewer present (Maree & Pietersen, 2016).

The disadvantages of this type of data collection is that there are typically low response rates, the conditions where respondents complete the survey or questionnaire is uncontrollable, there is no assistance by the interviewer should a participant encounter a

possible issue with a question and the participant could easily ask someone else to complete the on their behalf. Respondents should also be literate, and in this case where the research is based on student at a higher education institution, this should not pose as a disadvantage.

Data Analysis

Likert survey items are mainly used as a measure of a respondents' attitudes to a question or statement. Analysis of the data is coded as; 1 = Strongly disagree • 2 = Disagree • 3 = Neutral • 4 = Agree • 5 = Strongly agree. Likert-type data is ordinal in nature; therefore, one can only describe it as one score being higher than another score and not to measure the distance between the points. Data from the Likert scale cannot use the mean to measure central tendency because it does not have a meaning. This means that one cannot establish the average between Strongly Agree and Disagree. The mode of the most frequent responses will be used as the most appropriate measure. The research will make use of a bar to display the distribution of the responses. It will indicate the percentage of respondents who agree, disagree, neutral etc. for each question.

Cross-tabulation is used to analyse the collected data and to identify certain relationships between the variables. Cross-tabulation is a two-dimensional table which records the frequency of participants or respondents which have the specific characteristics in table. It can provide a lot of information on the relationships between variables. The analysis is often referred to as crosstab, chi-square and data tabulation (Qualtrics, 2018).

The Likert scale is made up of a five-point Likert-type items which will represent a group of similar questions in a single composite score. It will be analysed as interval data as the mean will be the best measure of central tendency. By providing the participants with a series of Likert-type questions to describe their perceptions, the research will make use of means and standard deviations to describe the scale. (University of St. Andrews, 2018).

The data was then entered in Microsoft Excel and the cross tabulations was formulated for the 16 variables in the questionnaire. Relationships between the different variables were looked at and common themes were interpreted to discuss the findings.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, internal consistency will be used. The reason for this is the time constraints for the research. Internal consistency refers to several items

which are created to measure a specific construct, there should be a high level of consistency or similarity between them as the aim is to measure the same construct. This measure of similarity indicates internal consistency or reliability of an instrument (Pietersen & Maree, 2016).

Cronbach's alpha measures internal consistency, by describing how closely related a set of items are as a group. It is a measure of scale reliability. A "high" alpha value does not imply that the measure is unidimensional. Should one wish to provide additional evidence that the scale is unidimensional, the researcher or analyst can perform additional analyses. Exploratory factor analysis is one way of checking dimensionality. Cronbach's alpha is not really a statistical test, instead, it is a coefficient of reliability (or consistency). With a high internal reliability, the research will be able to accurately measure the student's perceptions of student advisors and not something else (UCLA, 2018).

Face validity will be used in the research as the instrument, Likert Scale, will be measuring perceptions, it will need to consider that each respondent or participant has a different personality, socio-economic background and have graduated from different high schools. These factors will be addressed and taken into consideration when formulating the questionnaire (Pietersen & Maree, 2016).

The questionnaire was developed in a way which does not infer item bias. The language will be plain and simple making it easy for all participants to understand as the population consists of students from different provinces, countries and many where English is not their first language. Emphasis will be placed on the fact that the answers will be kept anonymous and honest answers will be appreciated.

4. Anticipated Contribution

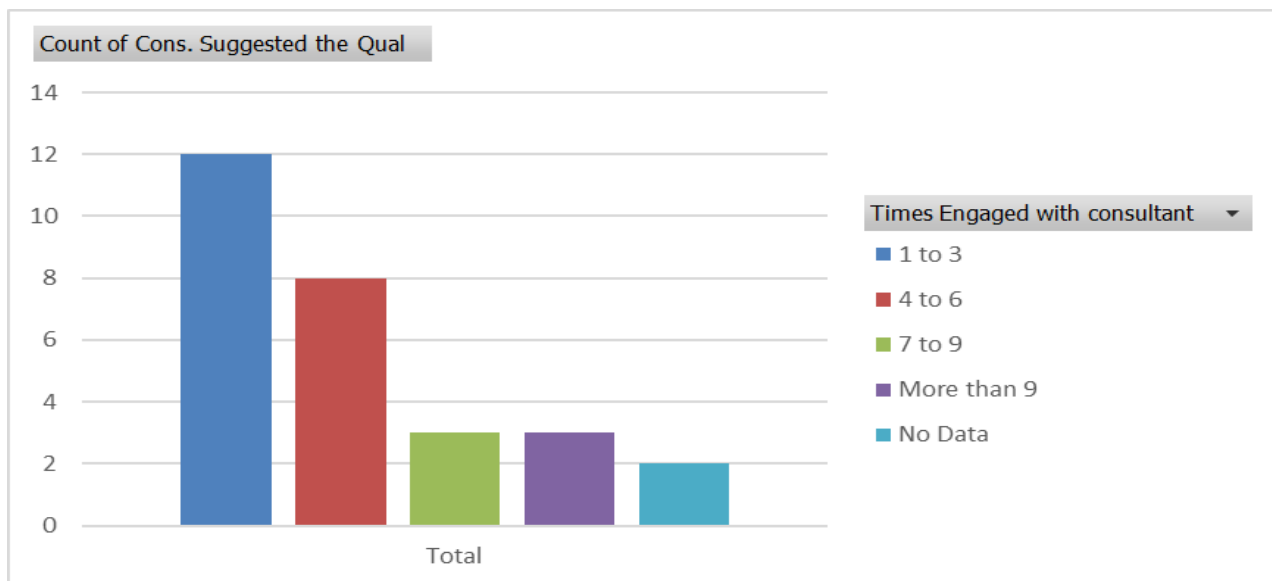
The research aims to contribute to the effectiveness of Private Higher Education Institutions by allowing them to accurately assess student's perceptions of their student advisors during student recruitment and through the duration of the student's time at the institutions. Student advisors have an important role to play as the advice they provide could have a positive or negative impact on the student's future career goals. For the institution, the feedback from the research will also be able to assist in future marketing activities and/ or projects. The results will add value in that the short-comings, if any, of the student advisors and the institution can be addressed and therefore provide an improved customer service

experience for their students. The research will also aim to be used as a base for the Boston City Campus & Business College to use at the other campuses around the country.

5. Findings and Interpretation of Findings

- Cross tabulation between: How many time has a student engaged with a consultant at Boston City Campus and Business College and if the consultant suggested that the student select their current qualification.**

	1 to 3	4 to 6	7 to 9	More than 9	No Data	Grand Total
Count of Cons. Suggested the Qual	12	8	3	3	2	28

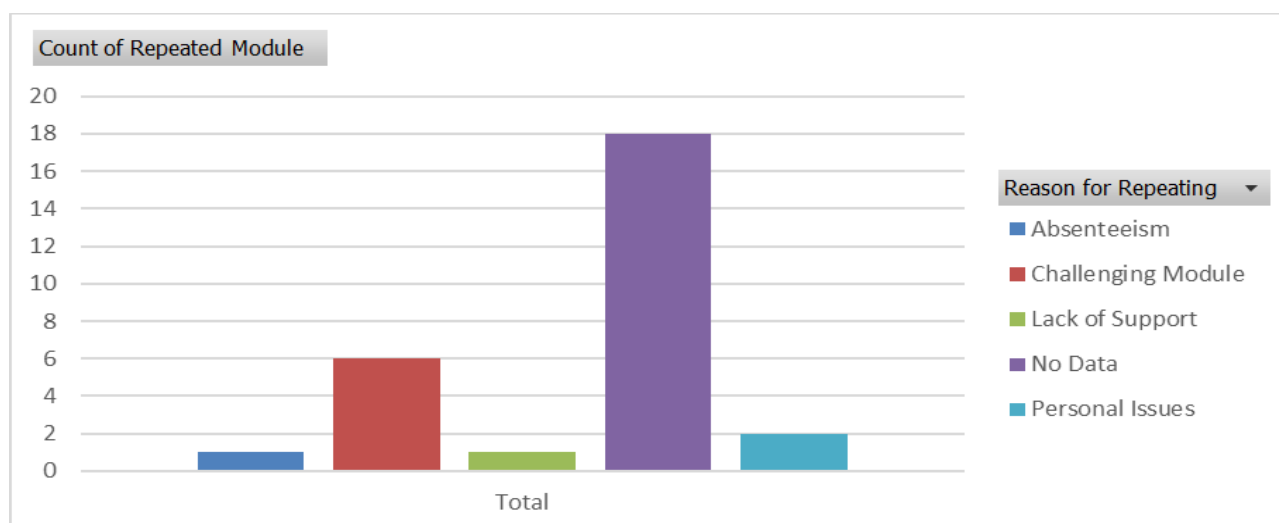


The results from this cross tabulation indicate that twelve of the respondents who engaged with a consultant between 1 and 3 times agree that the consultant suggested they register for their current qualification. These results could be interpreted as follows:

Those who agree that the consultant suggested their qualification were unsure of what to study and that after engaging with a consultant the student then took the advice of a consultant and registered for the suggested qualification without taking much time to think about their decision. The balance of the respondents could have had an idea of which qualification they wanted to study towards and engaged with a consultant between 4-6 times to gather more information to make an informed decision, therefore making the decision on their own.

2. Cross tabulation between: students who have repeated/failed a module during their tertiary studies and, if yes, what was the reason for this occurrence.

	Absenteeism	Challenging Module	Lack of Support	No Data	Personal Issues	Grand Total
Count of Repeated Module	1	6	1	18	2	28



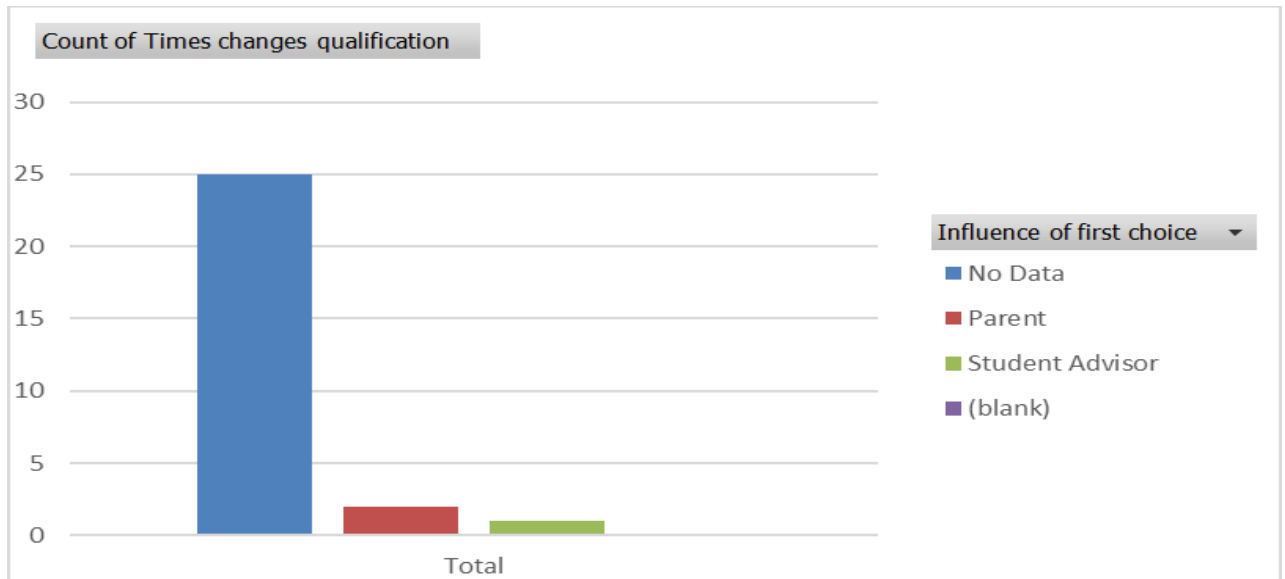
The above data indicates a lack of support from the institution was cited as a reason for failure of a module by one respondent. The main reason cited was there was one or many challenging modules within the qualification. In total, seventeen of the twenty-eight respondents indicated that they have failed or repeated a module, however, just 10 cited the reasons.

The table above indicates that following:

- Six respondents indicated the reason for repeat or failure was that there was a challenging module.
- Two respondents cited personal issues
- Absenteeism and lack of support was cited once respectively

3. Cross tabulation between: Number to times qualification were changes and what influenced the decision of the first choice of qualification

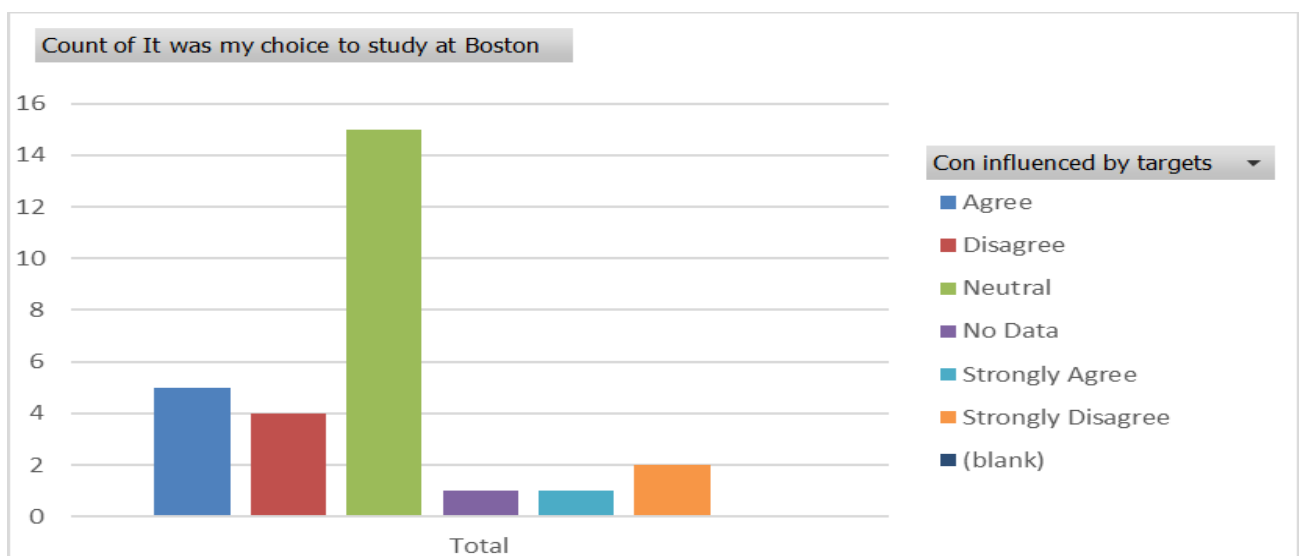
	No Data	Parent	Student Advisor	(blank)	Grand Total
Count of Times changes qualification	25	2	1		28



Out of the 28 respondents, 3 students indicated that they have changed their qualification in the second semester to what they had originally registered for. Two of the 3 cited that their parents influenced the decision for them selecting their initial qualification and in one case the student advisor influenced their decision.

4. Cross tabulation between: It was my choice to study at Boston College and do they believe the consultants are influenced by student numbers targets.

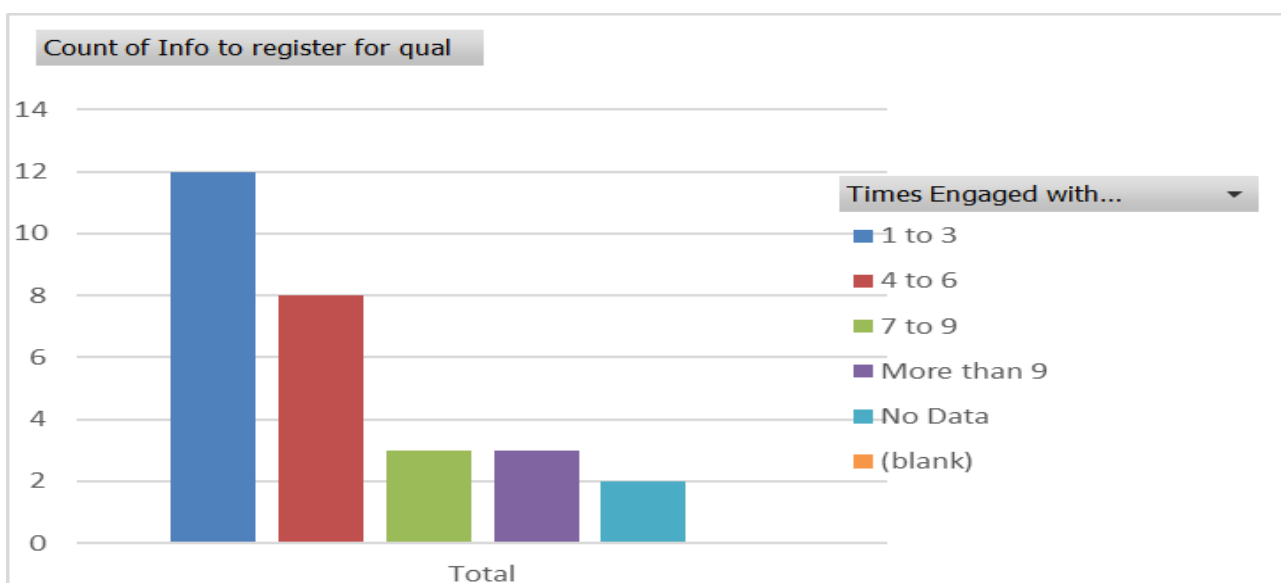
	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	No Data	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	(blank)	Grand Total
Count of It was my choice to study at Boston	5	4	15	1	1	2		28



Five respondents indicated that it was their own choice to study at Boston College and believe that consultants are influenced by student number targets. The consultant/s are believed to be registering students to achieve their student intake target. Fifteen respondents chose to select neutral and 4 respondents disagree that consultants are influenced by student number targets. A student advisor or consultant is responsible for helping a prospective student select the right qualification, make an informed decision on a career path, always be available to answer any questions a student may have and assist in a student succeeding and graduating amongst other supporting roles (Xue, 2016). This is the case in many higher education institutions, however, in a private setting a student advisor also needs to reach a predetermined sales target for student recruitment and possibly student retention. We can deduct from the above data provided that those respondents who agree that consultants are influenced by student number targets could have meant that the consultant was 'pushy' or persuasive in getting the student to register. (Creamer & Scott, 2000) suggest that consultants are meant to be cognisant of variables such a student age, experiences, personal and family values and their personal goals. With that said, the consult in a PHEI will also need to adhere to the organisations requirements and his or her own key performance areas (Gobey, 2018).

5. Cross tabulation between: The consultant provided information which helped the student register for the qualification they need and the amount of times a student has engaged with a consultant.

	1 to 3	4 to 6	7 to 9	More than 9	No Data	(blank)	Grand Total
Count of Info to register for qual	12	8	3	3	2		28

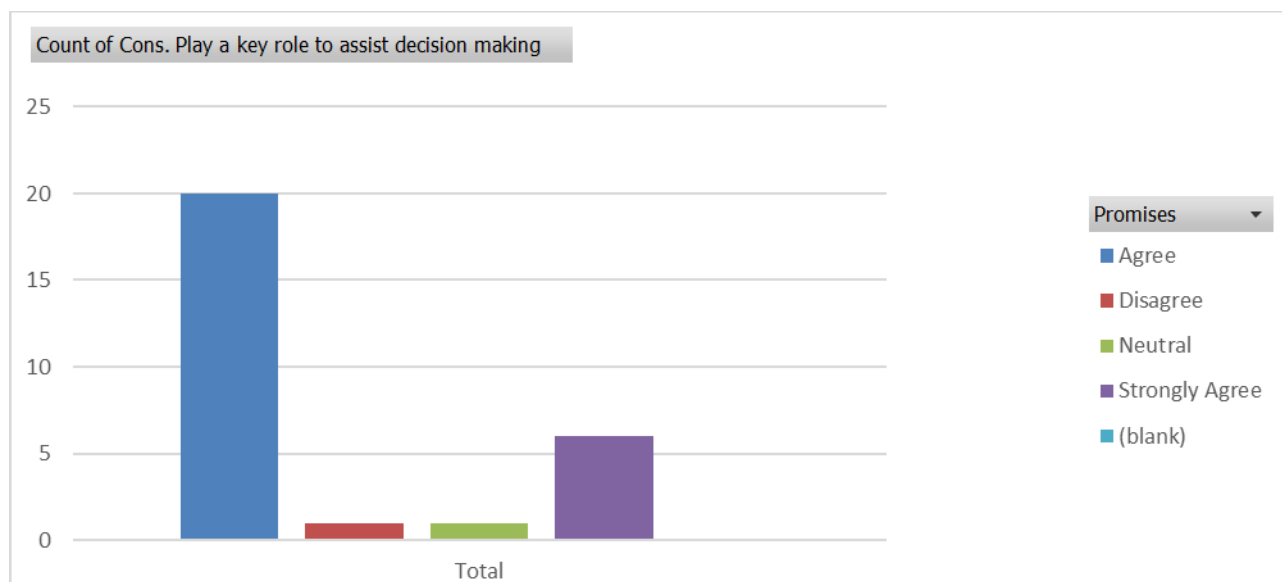


From this cross tabulation, it is evident that most of the sample (12 respondents) indicated that when meeting with a consultant between 1 and 3 times, they had received sufficient information to register for the qualification they need based on their career goals. These students are those who already knew which career path they would like to embark on and possibly needed the information in one to three sessions to make an informed decision. On the other side of the spectrum three respondents indicated that they met with a consultant between 4 and 6 times and 3 others met with a consultant on more than 9 occasions. Pressure should not be placed on the student to make them feel that they should select a qualification which the advisor feels they should choose, instead, they need to make the decision themselves (University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, 2017).

This could be a result of a student not been sure of which qualification to choose due to a lack of guidance from his or her personal background or secondary schooling career. It could also mean that students had a few options to pursue as career paths and were still unsure on which path to take, therefore, needing more time with a consultant to assist with additional information. On the other hand, meeting with a consultant so many times can be because the student had visited the campus on more than one occasion from the time they were in high school (Gobey, 2018).

6. Cross tabulation between: Does Boston and/or consultants deliver on their promises to the students and if so, in their opinion, do consultants play a key role in assisting students to make an informed decision on their future career option (qualifications)

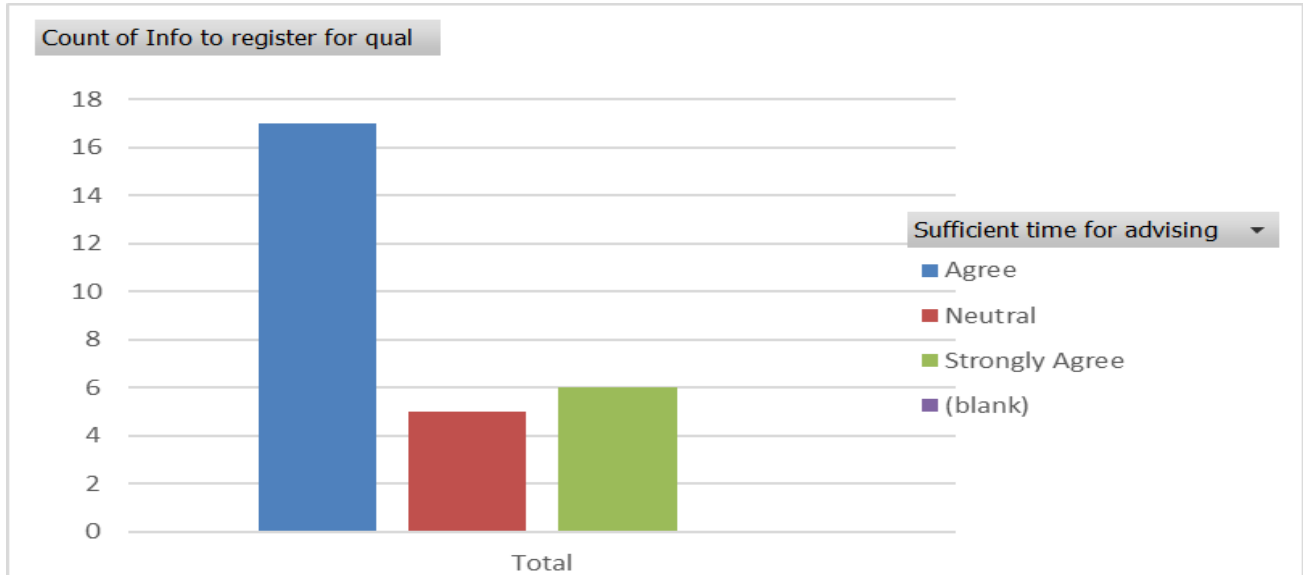
	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	(blank)	Grand Total
Count of Cons. Play a key role to assist decision making	20	1	1	6		28



It is evident that most of the respondents who participated agree and strongly agree, 20 and 6 respectively, that Boston College as an institution has delivered on their promises and/or to the students. These promises or offerings to the students are the following : *‘As one of South Africa’s premier tertiary education institutions, Boston’s success lies with its approach to see each student as an individual with a rich personal story needing tailored assistance, support and advice for navigating the pathways to reaching their dreams’* (Gobey, 2018).

7. Cross tabulation between: My consultant allows for sufficient time for effective advising and the consultant provided me with information that helped me register for the qualification I need.

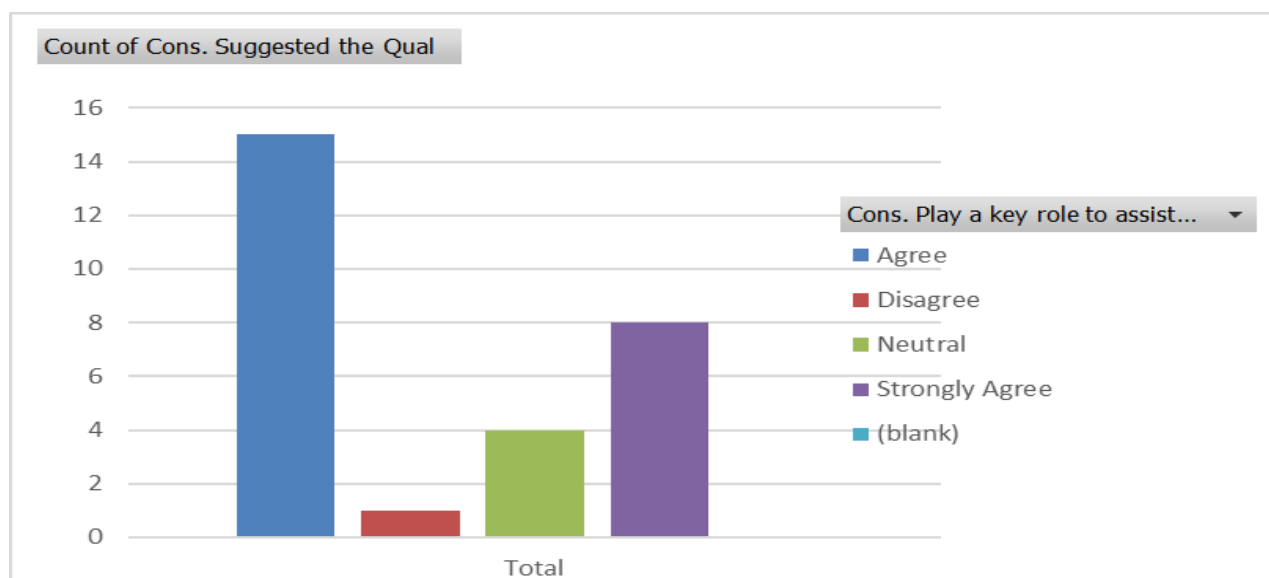
	Agree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	(blank)	Grand Total
Count of Info to register for qual	17	5	6		28



Many of the respondents, seventeen in this case, agree that in their interaction with a consult that sufficient time was given to them and a rushed approach was not provided. The seventeen respondents indicated that through the time allowed to receive effective advising that sufficient information was given to assist them in registering for a qualification they need and is aligned with their career goals. Six respondents strong agreed with the above and five respondents indicated they are neutral.

8. Cross tabulation between: The consultant suggested I should select my current qualification and, in their opinion, do they think the consults plays a key role in assisting students to make an informed decision on their future career options.

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	(blank)	Grand Total
Count of Cons. Suggested the Qual	15	1	4	8		28



From this cross tabulation, it can be noticed that 15 (54%) of the respondents agree that a consultant plays a key role in assisting students to make an informed decision on their future career options and suggest a qualification which is in line with the students' goals. This means that the students are not 'forced' into a qualification by a consultant, instead, they are assisted in an informed decision. 8 Strongly agreed with above and just 1 disagreed.

6. Discussion

The research presented some interesting findings and insights into the experiences and perceptions of students at Boston City Campus and Business College.

It was interesting to note that twelve respondents indicated the consultant suggested the qualification they are currently registered for and that fifteen respondents agreed that the consultant played a key role in assisting them to make an informed decision on their future career goals/ options.

The main reason for failure or for repeating a module during was that the module was challenging. This can be expected as studying at a tertiary level is different from secondary schooling and some students need to adjust. Many scholars have added to issue of lacking college readiness to the lack of collaboration between secondary schools and tertiary

institutions. Many secondary institutions are concerned with getting the students to pass their grade 12 year by covering the necessary material, providing testing and expecting right and wrong answers, tertiary institutions require students to think critically and analytically (Wang, et al., 2009).

Among the 28 respondents from the study, fifteen of them remained neutral when asked to indicate if the institution was their first choice for their tertiary studies, however, those who agreed (5 respondents) also believed that the consultants at Boston City Campus and Business College are influenced by student number targets. The reason for this could be that the student perceived the consultant to be “pushy” or not paying much attentions to their needs and instead just interested in getting the student to register at the institution.

In terms of the amount of times a student engaged with a consultant, twelve respondents indicated that they have engaged with a consultant between 1 and 3 times, however, there are some who have engaged with a consultant between 4 and 9 times. This could be result of the respondents looking to the consultant for advice and/or information’s regarding their studies and current qualification from the time of first registration to the date the study took place. It might have taken a bit longer for a student to decide on their career path and therefore need to consult on numerous occasions. It is important that students select an option which is linked with their personality as they need to be content in their career one day, for example, someone who is scores higher for sociable on a personality test might not want to or should rather not go into a career like accounting as they may find it boring. Accounting is more for a prospective student who scores higher in the conventional personality (University of Hawaii Community College, 2015).

When asked if Boston City Campus and Business College and its consultants have delivered on their promises make to the students, 20 respondents agreed and 6 strongly agreed, which indicates that most of the students perceive the institution to be credible and therefore trustworthy. The encounter between student advisor and prospective student results in roles being taken on which enables the quality of service to be determined. It is the **perception** of quality which is established during the service delivery process (Ong, 2013). It provides them with sense of security that they made a right decision on the institution despite other factors like failing a module and/or the parent selecting the institution for the student. Since the promises or information about the institution come from both their marketing and branding, it is the consultant who physically explains the processes and offerings to the

prospective and existing students (Gobey, 2018). All students are entitled to quality service from the student advisors at a Private Higher Education Institution (UMHB, 2017).

The consultants at Boston City Campus and Business College were also said to have provided sufficient time for effective advising and therefore assisting the student with relevant and sufficient information to allow them to make an informed decision when selecting their qualification. Enhancement of a prospective student's ability to make decisions refers to providing valid information to the student to enable them to make an informed decision on their future career paths and study options. The student advisor can only assist to a certain extent by providing recommendations, however, the final decision is up to the student and in some cases made with their parents. Enhancement of a prospective student's ability to make decisions refers to providing valid information to the student to enable them to make an informed decision on their future career paths and study options. The student advisor can only assist to a certain extent by providing recommendations, however, the final decision is up to the student and in some cases made with their parents (Lowenstein & Gn'tes, 1993). It can be noted that the consultants have the students best interest at heart.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.708	16

The items in the scale were inputted into SPSS and a test for internal consistency was ran. The result indicated a Cronbach's Alpha of .708 which indicates an acceptable internal consistency of the items in the scale, therefore, deeming the questionnaire as reliable.

Face validity helps to give participants greater confidence in the measurement procedure and the results. It can also give greater confidence to administrators/sponsors of the study; not just participants. Face validity was used as the measures used would make sense to a person in an educational institution who is taking part in the research. The survey encouraged participants to respond as the measurement procedure is measuring something it should. It not measuring a construct which could bring about some sort of change to their

lives in any way and therefore increasing the possible dropout rate of potential participants (Laerd Dissertation, 2018).

7.Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the perceptions students have of student advisors or consultants in target driven processes in a Private Higher Education Institution. After much research and on the topic, it was found that there are many articles and research papers on the importance of academic advising and other relevant theories in the tertiary education space, however, very little or no research has been done in the Private Higher Education space. Furthermore, in public tertiary institutions, academic advising is just that... advising. There are separate student recruitments departments. In PHEI's, often the consultant is responsible for both recruitment and academic advising. It was found in the literature that there are a few key ethical principles for an academic advisor to follow to successfully assist a student in making an informed decision. The research findings reflected that at this PHEI in Pietermaritzburg, namely, Boston City Campus and Business College, the consultants do provide sufficient time for advising and provide the students with the relevant information to make an informed decision on their career path by selecting a qualification which is in line with the career opportunities. It was also indicated that the consultants are easily available to the students should they have any queries or in need of academic advice. A low number of respondents believe that the consultants are driven or influenced by student number targets but for the most part they agree that the institution and/ or the consultants have lived up to the promises and that the consultants played a role in the student's ability to make an informed decision on their qualification. The research study provided information which shows that the students at this institution have a positive perception of the consultants, regardless if they are driven by targets. The results show that in many of the instances for failure or repetition of a module, it was not because of the wrong qualification choice or that the consultant suggested the qualification. It was a result of one or more modules been challenging.

The research study shed a light on a few aspects or experiences of students in a PHEI and the results can be used to contribute to the effectiveness of the institution and to improve on certain aspects of customer service and identify any shortfalls in their recruitment process.

Possible future research could look at conducting a study on all students within the institution, which includes second and third year students and not just the first-year students. A broader study could then be undertaken to include all the 40 campuses. Another suggestion is for the institution to identify the challenging modules where students are having difficulty and provide additional support for those learners. Student who register come from diverse backgrounds, socio-economic situations, different languages and various types of schooling systems. The introduction of literacy programs and referencing workshops for example, could be offered to reduce the risk of a student failing a module or experiencing academic challenges.

Ethical Considerations

The research made use of survey research in the form the Likert Scale survey, therefore, the ethical principles with this method are based around the protection of the participants or respondents and following the “do no harm” principle (CIRT, 2017).

The research study will maintain respect for each participant by respecting their autonomy, dignity and decision making. There are minimal, if any, physical, psychological and social risks and if anything, the research will benefit the participants in the long run. The sample of participants will be selected from the group or population the research aims to benefit (CIRT, 2017).

Permission from the Independent Institute of Education’s ethics committee will be needed; therefore, the research will have to adhere to the policies and ethical guidelines of the Independent Institute of Education.

All first-year students at the Boston City Campus & Business College were provided with the option to participate voluntarily and they were given the opportunity provide informed consent. The letter to the students included an introductory statement which provided them with information on the purpose of the research and the use of the data and data collection methods. Also, the letter included or addressed any issues of confidentiality so that the participant knows before they complete the survey. They will be given the opportunity to complete the survey by their own free will and free from coercion (CIRT, 2017).

Harassment of participants in the sample to respond to the survey will not be done, instead participation will be encouraged in a positive way which does not come across as

threatening. Honesty was upheld with relevant parties regarding the aspects of the research project. There was not any collection of sensitive data. Respondents were fully informed in the introduction and the information was clear, contact details will be provided should they wish to ask any questions prior to completing the survey. Cultural and social differences have been noted among the possible respondents and/or population, therefore, the questionnaire will be designed for all to understand. For students who are currently under the age of 18, a letter of consent for their parents will be provided to get permission.

Limitations of the study

A few limitations which have been identified for the research are:

Sample size:

The identified institution has 62 full time students, the research aimed at randomly selecting 30 participants, however, only 28 completed surveys were collected. The students are not on the campus every day or if so, not the whole day. Data collection took place over 3 days to reach the number of 30 respondents.

Lack of available or reliable data:

There are certain items within the survey which required a yes or no answer and the following item had asked them to select a reason, some answered the first question or item and did not provide a reason for the second option, for example:

1. *I have failed or repeated a module (Yes/No)*
2. *Reason for failing or repeating (Personal Issues/Absenteeism/Lack of Support/challenging module)*

This could be attributed to a reason not been specified as an option on the survey or despite been told their answers will be confidential, the respondent chose not to specify.

Lack of prior research on the topic:

There is little or no research based on perceptions of students on consultant or student advisors in Private Higher Education Institutions.

Self-reported data:

The study must take the data which is collected at face value as it is based on what people or respondents have reported. The respondent could have had selective memory when answering a question such as; '*How many times have you engaged with a consultant?*'

Fluency in Language:

There may have been respondents who participated in the study who did not fully understand all the questions in the English language, therefore, they were unable to answer all the items accurately. In future studies, a recommendation can be made that the questionnaire be available in more than language and that the respondent can select a questionnaire in a language they are comfortable with.

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10. Annexures

Example of consent form

Example of measurement instrument

Permission letter

Ethical clearance letter

Originality Report

Likert Scale Questions

Please circle or underline your response with the statements below.

SECTION A

1. **Age**
- 16-19 [1] 20-23 [2] 24-27 [3] 28-31 [4] 32 or above [5]

2. **Gender**
- Male [1] Female [2]

3. **Did you receive career guidance from a counsellor at your high school?**
- Yes [1] No [2]

SECTION B

4. **What qualification are you currently registered for?**
- Bcom Mkt[1] Dip. Marketing [2] Dip. HR [3] Dip. Net Sys [4]
Dip. Syst Dev [5] Dip. Bus Man[6] Dip. Event Mgnt [7] HC Mark Prac [8]
Dip. Fin Acc [9] HC HRM [10] HC Bus Man [11]

5. **How many times have you engaged with a consultant Boston City Campus and Business College?**
- 1-3 [1] 4-6 [2] 7-9 [3] more than 9 [4]

6. **Have you repeated/failed a module during your tertiary studies?**

YES [1]

NO [2]

-
7. If Yes, what was the reason for this occurrence?

Absenteeism [1]

Challenging module [2]

Lack of Support [3]

Personal Issues[4]

SECTION C

8. Please tick the number of times you have changed your course/qualification: E.G.: 1st year= Bcom then changed to a different in 2nd year.

Never [1]

1 [2]

2 [3]

3[4]

more than 3 [5]

9. If you have changed, what influenced the decision of your first course.

Parent [1]

student advisor [2]

friends [3]

10. How many institutions did you apply to before registering Boston College?

0 [1]

1 [2]

2 [3]

3 [4]

4 [5]

more than 4 [6]

Did a Boston College Student Advisor present at your High School?

11.

Yes [1] No [2]

SECTION D

12. The consultant suggested I should select my current qualification

Strongly Disagree [1]

Disagree [2]

Neutral [3]

Agree [4]

Strongly Agree [5]

13. It was my choice to study at Boston College

Strongly Disagree [1]

Disagree [2]

Neutral [3]

Agree [4]

Strongly Agree [5]

Do you believe the consultants are influenced by student number targets?

14.

Strongly Disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly Agree [5]

15.

Does Boston and/or consultants deliver/delivered on their promises to the students?

Strongly Disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly Agree [5]

16.

Consultants are easily accessible to me

Strongly Disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly Agree [5]

17.

The consultants show an interest in me and my concerns

Strongly Disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly Agree [5]

18.

The consultant provided me with information that helped me register for the qualification I need.

Strongly Disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly Agree [5]

19.

My consultant allows sufficient time for effective advising

Strongly Disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly Agree [5]

20.

In your opinion, do you think the consultant play a key role in assisting students to make an informed decision on their future career options?

Strongly Disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly Agree [5]

Final Research Report Summary Document

Provisional Title-Private Higher Education Institutions: Perceptions of students on student advisors in target driven sales processes within a private higher education institution in Pietermaritzburg.

Research Rationale-This research will be important to identify if sales consultants or student advisors are focused more on achieving targets during the sales process of student recruitment and therefore conforming to the perceptions which people have of salesman and identifying how current students perceive the behaviours or attitudes of student advisors

Research Problem-The problem which has been identified is that in some cases, advisors or salesman merely convince students to attend a certain institution because they need to meet their monthly or annual sales targets. This research aims to identify if student advisors have a higher focus on reaching the institutions' targeted number of new students and/or if they also take into consideration the future career goals of the prospective student.

Key Theories-The research will make use of the following theories: Psychosocial theory, cognitive theory, typology theory, career development theory and ethical principles for advising theories.

Key Concepts-Perception, Sales processes, Student Advisor/Salesman, Private Higher Education Institutions, Pietermaritzburg.

Approach- Positivist, descriptive research approach through quantitative research design.

Population Parameters- First year students at the Boston City Campus & Business College (120) in Pietermaritzburg.

Sampling- Simple random sampling

Data Collection- Likert Scale survey

Data Analysis- Cronbach's Alpha and cross tabulation

Ethical Considerations- anonymity, no harm to participants, informed consent, permission from institution, equal opportunity to participate

Limitations - Sample size, Lack of available or reliable data, Lack of prior research on the topic, Self-reported data,

Fluency in Language

Key Contribution- effectiveness of advising, customer service, identification of shortcomings

Key Findings- students have a good perception of consultants

Recommendations- studies to include a sample from various years of study across other campuses, identify challenging modules for additional support