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Sustainable Higher Education

From Ivory Tower to Responsive Leadership

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Keywords

Sustainable higher education, responsiveness, stakeholder engagement, employability, institutional sustainability, student voice, industry expectations

Abstract

In the context of rapid socio-economic and technological change, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly required to move beyond traditional "Ivory Tower" models towards more responsive and sustainable approaches. This study examines the relationship between institutional responsiveness and sustainability, emphasising stakeholder engagement as a critical driver of relevance and resilience in twenty-first century higher education. Historically, HEIs contributed significantly to research, economic development, and social mobility. However, evolving labour market demands and societal expectations have intensified calls for universities to become more agile, socially accountable, and aligned with stakeholder needs. Drawing on a literature review and findings from three stakeholder surveys, the study explores the expectations of students, parents, employers, and communities regarding the role of HEIs.

This article develops a stakeholder-responsive sustainability framework for higher education through the synthesis of two empirical studies and a targeted review of the literature. The first study explored student motivations and expectations when selecting a higher education institution, while the second examined employer expectations regarding graduate employability and workplace readiness. Findings from these studies were analysed alongside literature on stakeholder engagement, responsiveness, employability, and institutional sustainability to identify recurring themes and relationships. The analysis demonstrates that stakeholder perceptions of value, particularly regarding employability, institutional relevance, service quality, belonging, and workplace preparedness, play a critical role in shaping institutional responsiveness. Building on these findings, the article proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how stakeholder voices can be systematically integrated into institutional strategy, curriculum development, and student experience design to promote long-term sustainability.

The article offers a conceptual model that links stakeholder engagement, institutional responsiveness, relevance and sustainability, and provides a tool for higher education leaders seeking to balance educational purpose, employability expectations, and institutional resilience in a rapidly changing environment.

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1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is an era of socio-economic and technological transformation, characterised by a rapidly evolving labour market. In this context, higher education institutions (HEIs) face the strategic challenge of defining what it means to be relevant and responsive, ensuring institutional sustainability. Historically, universities derived legitimacy from their roles as creators and custodians of knowledge. Today, HEIs are being challenged to reimagine their roles beyond the traditional confines of the "Ivory Tower" and to contribute directly to economic development, social mobility, employability, innovation, and community advancement. Stakeholder engagement, a key driver of relevance and responsiveness, has gained significant traction as organisations recognise that listening to and understanding stakeholder voices ensures their efforts are meaningful, effective, and aligned with the needs and expectations of the people they serve (Kujala, 2022; Singh, 2025). Key stakeholder groups include students, parents, employers, communities, regulators, and societies at large. Among these groups, students and employers occupy particularly influential positions because they shape both demand for educational services and perceptions of graduate success.

Although extensive literature exists on student motivations for accessing higher education and employer expectations regarding graduate employability, these bodies of knowledge are frequently examined independently. As a result, limited guidance exists regarding how institutions might integrate these stakeholder perspectives into a coherent strategy for long-term sustainability. The gap provides the basis for the framework developed in this article.

This article is presented as a conceptual framework paper informed by a secondary synthesis of two empirical research projects and a targeted review of relevant literature. Rather than reporting the findings of the original studies again, the article integrates their insights to develop a stakeholder-responsive sustainability framework for higher education. The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it synthesises student and employer perspectives, which are often treated separately in higher education

scholarship. Second, it proposes a conceptual explanation of the relationship between stakeholder engagement, institutional responsiveness, relevance, and sustainability. Third, it offers a practical framework that can guide higher education leaders in embedding stakeholder voices into institutional planning, curriculum development, and student experience design.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student Motivations for Higher Education

Stakeholder theory holds that organisations achieve legitimacy and long-term success by recognising and responding to the needs and expectations of those affected by their activities. In higher education, responsiveness is the capacity of institutions to identify, understand, and adapt to stakeholder expectations while remaining faithful to their academic mission.

Over the years, numerous studies have examined student choice and expectations of HEIs (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Yet, as Conti reflects, this remains a topical issue as the higher education landscape continues to evolve. In this context, institutions seek to distinguish themselves from competitors, and institutional sustainability is gaining traction in Council discussions (Conti, 2022, p. 4). Institutional sustainability extends beyond financial viability. Sustainable HEIs are characterised by their ability to remain relevant, adaptive, resilient, and impactful over time. As HEIs compete for enrolments, it is imperative that HEI leaders engage in in-depth studies of how prospective students choose their higher education institution (Hutt, 2019, p. 1; Mubarok, 2020, p. 1). The importance of understanding a student's choice and motivation is also linked to concomitant expectations, the recognition of value and satisfaction, and the alignment between expectations and actual experiences. All these factors, in turn, strongly correlate with students' retention and success, another high-priority consideration for higher education (Jackson et al., 2023; Sallai et al., 2023; Hawthorne, 2021; Nowell, 2017; Sogunro, 2014). Edgar et al. (2019:111) make the critical point that by

understanding why students enter higher education, educators and institutions will have a sound guide to influence student outcomes, including sustainable solutions for retaining students in the future.

Every day, consumers make purchasing decisions, and many criteria influence these choices (Qazzafi, 2020, p. 1205). Deciding where to enrol for higher education is not a unique "buying" experience, and various factors – internal, external, or in combination - influence the decision. Literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that motivate students' choices. However, as emphasised by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020:27), choice is seldom unidimensional. Instead, expectations are multidimensional and complex, as students' perceptions of the value of university education and of success are often both subjective and objective, influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including values, backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and goals (Urbancova & Fajcokova, 2020, p. 27).

Prospective students are ordinary people accustomed to engaging in various activities, which leads to making choices daily. All of them have different needs and wants, and some needs are more pressing than others. A need becomes a motive when it is more pressing, meaning it must be satisfied (Ajzen, 2014, p. 526). The Cambridge Dictionary (Online) defines motivation as the enthusiasm for doing something. In the context of higher education, Hawthorne (2021) and Duta (2015) emphasise the importance of motivation as a driver that helps young adults focus on the key outcome and maintain their attention for extended periods. Motivation may often be the driving force that keeps students going (Hawthorne, 2021; Duta, 2015: 54).

According to Godara and Dua (2021:84), internal and psychological factors that can play a role in buying into higher education include the prospective student's motivation to study, future career aspirations, specific interest in the institution or qualification, preferences, the perception of the value of the qualification or institution of choice, and where they feel they will fit in. The individual characteristics of a prospective student also play a crucial role in determining where to study.

This can include demographic variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, geographic location, personality, and lifestyle (Qazzafi, 2020, p. 1205). Cote and Levine (1997:229) identified five critical factors that motivate students to attend higher education: (i) wanting financial success driven by a good job, (ii) meeting the expectations of others, (iii) self-development, (iv) a desire to be a good citizen through helping others, including family and community, and (v) avoiding other less desirable options. The list has since been expanded to include socioeconomic status, parental educational level, first-generation status, race, gender, future income, career aspirations, and the desire to make the family proud as crucial motivations for students entering university (Singh, 2025). Cheng et al. (2021:21-22), however, reinforce Cote and Levine's findings that students see improved job prospects as the most important motivation for undertaking a university degree, and concomitantly call for HEIs to redesign their academic programmes with a greater focus on skills and attributes associated with graduate employability.

Family and social influence: Rani and Reddy (2019:233) and Stalinska (2020: 259) both identify the significant role played by parents in their children's pursuit of higher education, especially in how children are socialised to understand the importance of transitioning into higher education (Xu, Shim, Lotz & Almeida, 2004:92; Yaacob et al., 2014, p. 242; Siah, Ong, Tan, Sim & Thoo, 2017:7). Additionally, Aguado et al. (2015:231) and Proboyo and Soedarsono (2015:2) point out that parental influence can be significant in decision-making, as parents are often the fee-payers for further study. The studies presented by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020:27) and Zsigmond and Machova (2020) also highlight students' strong desire to meet family expectations as a key motivator for enrolling in higher education, with much less emphasis on impressing friends and educators. That said, the influence of peers, teachers, and community members, especially for prospective students who are first-generation university entrants, cannot be overstated (Alekam et al., 2018, p. 309; Sharif et al., 2019, p. 33; Singh, 2025, pp. 9-10).

Gender: Student gender is also a consideration when evaluating motivation for higher education (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014, p. 391).

According to Baharun et al. (2011:4704), females are much more likely to make choices based on the information they receive from both social connections and institutions. Women also prefer smaller classes, which is not necessarily a priority for men. Regarding the choice of a qualification, Liu and Morgan (2020:177) found that family responsibility and a qualification that would lead to a career enabling them to provide for their families were significantly greater motivators for male student respondents to obtain higher education qualifications. Jansen, Williams, and Latief (2024:33) reported a similar finding in their focused study of students registered for a B.Com in Accounting. Their results showed that while male students were more motivated and guided by the career prospects associated with a B.Com in Accounting qualification, female students enrolled in the B.Com in Accounting programme to broaden their horizons and develop a better understanding of themselves.

Race, Ethnicity, and Socio-Economic Mobility: Montoya and Scott (2013) identified ethnicity as a significant factor in consumer behaviour. Slobodin et al. (2021:12) reported that, among Ethiopian students, respondents' parents and families had materially higher expectations for their children to attend university, especially when higher education qualifications are linked to better social mobility. This finding aligns with the results reported by Jackson et al. (2023: 565) in another study from South Africa. Fongwa (2019:564) provides further context for the South African study, speaking of the so-called "black tax", which refers to the financial obligation placed on Black graduates to support members of their immediate and sometimes extended families.

Another South African study conducted by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020:27), which deliberately segmented respondents into racial groupings to identify whether race and ethnicality informed decision-making when selecting a higher education institution, found that Black students were more socially conscious and that their motivation for entering higher education was strongly influenced by how it could be applied to give back to their communities and families.

However, limiting motivations to study to race and ethnicity may be short-sighted. The opportunity for socio-economic mobility is a recognised motivator for pursuing higher education. Poverty, social class, economic climate, and family income are all factors that can influence a prospective student's decision to pursue a career path that will improve their long-term prospects, notes Borchert (2002:2).

Lifestyle: Lifestyle also affects the buying behaviours of prospective students. Lifestyle refers to the way of living within a society. It can be expressed by the things in his/her surroundings (Utama, 2021, p. 19). Lifestyle can include activities, hobbies, and patterns that an individual lives by, and can be expressed through opinions, interests, and activities (Utama, 2021, p. 19). It can further include the status groups to which they belong, past experiences, their values, where they live, their social class and social standing in the community, as well as their appearance (Utama, 2021, p. 19). As one respondent in the current study noted, "It was important for us to look for the best, a reputable institution that fits in with the social class of my family" – Participant 3. Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides (2011:89) reported that social class strongly affects the decision-making process when choosing an institution to study at (Azzone & Soncin, 2019:1). When prospective students are looking for a higher education institution, they will consider whether the institution suits their lifestyle and personality (Godara & Dua, 2021:84). Another lifestyle-linked factor that impacts choice is the student's financial position, specifically whether they can afford to study. It is, therefore, crucial to understand the communities in the vicinity of the institution, as well as the expectations of students and parents.

Institutional location and brand: The location of the higher education institution plays a significant role in deciding where to study, as many parents and prospective students for whom financial wherewithal is a material consideration will look for a "local" institution (Siah, Ong, Tan, Sim & Thoo, 2017:1). Understanding students' motivations will enable the institution to develop its brand and strategy in response to students' demands and expectations, building meaningful stakeholder connections in the vicinity of the institution. For parents and students to be fully

invested as "consumers" and to consider the institution, they also want confirmation that the institutional brand is reliable and can be trusted to meet their needs and interests (Fetscherin & Heilmann, 2015, p. 10).

Perception of value: Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005:213) state that perceived value can be understood as what is received versus what is given (Pham et al., 2018, p. 3). Perceived value is a key driver of purchase decisions. Analogously, the institutional brand and reputation of the academic programme will always be a strong motivating factor, as students invest in their future by deciding to study at a specific institution. They are paying for the curriculum, the student journey, and the advantages they believe will be associated with enrolling in the institution of their choice (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 711). Prospective students have a perception of the value they will receive when they enroll in a particular institution; however, the actual value for money will only be evident later, after they have commenced the student journey. Institutions must be mindful of the mantra of promises made and promises kept, as material reputational damage can result from students who believe they have been misled. In higher education, one of the most significant marketing tools is word of mouth. Corroborating this, Saleem et al. (2017:237) and Weerasinghe and Fernando (2017:533) point out that student satisfaction is singularly dependent on the overlap between student expectations and the realisation of their needs.

2.2 Understanding Industry Expectations in the Context of Value and Employability

Expectations of higher education have undergone seismic shifts, and the debate about its purpose continues, especially as the global higher education sectoral agenda increasingly emphasises the need to prepare graduates for the workplace. Summarising the evolving landscape, Tight (2023:551) positions higher education today as only a means to an end (gainful employment). This contrasts with earlier conceptions of higher education, when tertiary study was an end in itself, with the sole focus on preparing intellectually well-rounded individuals. Historically, as

described by Newman (1852), the university was a communal, residential home for teaching and advancing universal knowledge. It served as a "kind of finishing school for young gentlemen" (Tight, 2023, p. 552; Cheng, 2021, p. 17). The responsibility for developing workplace skills lay with the employer.

Debates about the changing legitimation of higher education gained traction in the latter part of the twentieth century, as the goals of enhancing employability and graduates' personal and professional development throughout their careers were increasingly foregrounded. Re-envisioning the higher education complex for future-proofing was robustly discussed at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998), when the Promethean change of integrating the world of work and skills into tertiary curricula was advocated and adopted. In the 21st century, the unequivocal expectation is that HEIs become more than places of knowledge creation and dissemination. "Employability has become a key concept in higher education globally" (Cheng et al., 2021, p. 16).

Worldwide, HEIs are being called upon to redefine themselves because an academic qualification alone is no longer sufficient to access a job in the competitive workplace (Richardt et al., 2024). Confirming this view, Muurlink et al. (2024:953), in their study of doctoral graduates and employability success, found that while doctoral graduates "appear on the surface to offer a natural fit to industry jobs … their employment may not be commensurate with the length, quality or nature of their educational training." Muurlink et al. (2024:959) attribute this discrepancy to the fact that, while graduates highlighted research skills and technical knowledge as the top-ranked requirements for employability, industry stated that teamwork and collaboration are the most valued skills.

Cogently linking graduate employability to perceptions of value, O'Neill and Short (2025:24) describe employability in today's world as "a moral duty for higher education providers", arguing that students invest time and money in their studies, with most anticipating that their qualification will lead to enhanced workplace success. In this context, Bakare (2017:14) notes that it is generally accepted that the role of a higher education

institution is to prepare work-ready graduates, helping individuals develop their knowledge and skills through education, thereby enabling them to contribute to the economy and ultimately create a prosperous and diverse nation. It has thus become increasingly common for HEIs to integrate skills and employability competencies, particularly at the undergraduate level, note Cheng et al. (2021:16). "This is a deliberate shift in focus from producing an intellectual class of higher-level thinkers to one of professional training for diverse employment opportunities," state Richardt et al. (2024:562).

"To thrive in today's innovation-driven economy, workers require a different set of skills compared with those in the past. In addition to foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy, they need competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving, and character qualities such as persistence, curiosity, and initiative. Changes in the labour market have heightened the need for all individuals, not just a few, to have these skills (World Economic Forum, 2015). In addition, other key employability skills and workplace competencies explicitly highlighted by employers include time management, critical thinking, adaptability, resilience, and innovation (Richardt et al., 2024, p. 566; Bhardwa, 2021; Allden et al., 2018).

The same or similar skill sets and rankings as presented in the World Economic Forum (2016) list are repeated across the literature. While the World Economic Forum has sought to define some of the skills and competencies (World Economic Forum, 2016), the academic dilemma remains the absence of a clear, shared, precise definition for each of the skills, raising questions about whether employer surveys and responses refer to the same activities (Hinchcliffe, 2007; Muurlink et al., 2024, p. 961). Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly challenging to specify what HEIs should include in their curriculum development. Confirming this challenge, the study by Khoo et al. (2020) highlighted a significant dissonance between what academic staff consider the most critical skills for graduates and what employers deem critical. This was also identified by Allden et al (2018:1), who reflect on the "mismatch between what employers expect from graduates and what is provided by

university education." Outcomes like this reinforce the need for more explicit, shared definitions and reaffirm the absolute necessity for HEIs to continually engage with employer voices in curriculum development and programme review processes, as institutions respond to the employability discourse generally, and industry cultures specifically (Muurlink, 2024, p. 961; Chen et al., 2020).

While the emphasis on workplace readiness in the expressed curriculum continues to grow, a further challenge confronting HEIs is the recognition that something will be lost, "mostly the discipline or subject being studied, or at least the scope and depth of it that can be studied: …" (Tight, 2023, p. 562). As identified by Speight et al. (2013:112), academics and students are already raising concerns that the contemporary focus on learning for employment negatively affects the transfer of essential discipline knowledge. Institutional responsiveness must, therefore, always include the following considerations:

(i) What are the necessary skills that employers expect from graduates?

(ii) What are the personal attributes that employers expect?

(iii) What specific knowledge does the industry expect?

Furthermore, addressing the triad of relevance, responsiveness, and sustainability, higher education institutions must still strike a balance in fostering the values essential to holistic student development, including social responsibility and responsible citizenship.

3. Research Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual framework development approach informed by a secondary synthesis of two previously completed empirical studies and a targeted review of literature. The purpose is not to re-analyse primary data but to integrate findings from complementary stakeholder groups to develop a broader explanatory framework. Both informing studies focused on the views of strategically identified higher education stakeholders – students and

employers. The two studies were selected because they examined stakeholder groups central to institutional sustainability.

The first study engaged with prospective and first-year students ("the student voice research project"), while the second focused on industry as an employer and investigated employer expectations regarding graduate employability and workplace readiness ("the industry stakeholder research project"). Both studies examined factors critical to the responsiveness and sustainability of HEIs. The student voice research project focused on students' (and their parents') motivations for accessing a higher education institution and their expectations once enrolled. In contrast, the second study examined industry views on the competency expectations for graduate employability.

3.1 The student voice research project

According to Creswell (2017:61), research design refers to the approach used to conduct the research and answer the research questions. It serves as a link between the research questions and the study's implementation. With specific reference to qualitative research, Flick (2018:6-8) explains that it focuses on participants in their natural settings, where their values, beliefs, behaviours, and interpretations are systematically observed to produce reliable and trustworthy information. According to Mohajan (2018:23), qualitative research is the most suitable approach for investigating these variables. This study, therefore, employed a qualitative approach to examine the motivations of South African students to pursue higher education. The qualitative research method enabled the collection of information on the experiences and perceptions of participants in their natural settings (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022:13), focusing on the 'how' and 'why' rather than on the numbers. The qualitative approach to the study allowed for the development of themes and created a space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

The study centred on exploring the factors that contribute to the decision-making process regarding the choice of a higher education institution for tertiary studies. The intention was to identify the key choice factors, assess their importance, and determine how institutions can utilise this information

to become the first-choice institution when students need to decide where to study. Structured interviews were used to gather information from the participants. The research utilised primary data generated by the participants, adding trustworthiness and quality to the study. The findings reflect the respondents' unadulterated responses. The respondent sample was representative of the target population. The researcher used non-probability, convenience sampling for the study. The participants included fourteen Grade 12 students currently in the process of choosing their HEI, and ten participants who had completed the decision-making process and were currently studying at their preferred institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis using Microsoft Teams. The same set of questions was used in all the interviews. Students' participation in the study was anonymous and entirely voluntary, and the necessary consent was obtained in all cases. The research process involved collecting and analysing data to answer the research questions. Interviews were audio-recorded using Microsoft Teams and the researcher's mobile phone. Handwritten notes were taken to ensure further compliance with the norms for data integrity, security, and preservation outlined by Akinyode and Khan (2018: 166).

3.2 The Industry Stakeholder Research Project

The study gathered the views of industry respondents using a web-based online survey questionnaire. Industry participants were asked to rate specific factors and then identify the drivers that would ensure the relevance of a qualification for employability. The study aimed to identify the factors on which the industry, as a primary-category stakeholder, focuses when evaluating the suitability of graduates for the workplace. The findings reflect the input of 53 respondents (n = 53) who finally participated in the study.

This study was a more systematic investigation designed to quantify data, enabling the researchers to test their hypotheses, identify patterns, and determine relationships between variables using statistical tools. Consequently, this study employed a quantitative research method. Creswell and Creswell (2018) confirm the appropriateness of this approach, highlighting that the primary value of quantitative research lies in its ability to generate generalisable findings from large sample sizes, offering

objectivity, replicability, and precision in data analysis. In this context, Lim (2023:1) points out, "Quantitative research serves as the cornerstone of evidence-based decision-making. Its importance cannot be overstated: quantitative methods provide empirical rigor, enabling [researchers] to derive actionable insights from data."

Once a sufficient (saturated) sample was collected, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted, and tabular summaries of the survey data were prepared. Each rating in the survey was treated as a dependent variable to draw conclusions about respondents' views on the drivers that would contribute to the continued relevance of the presented curricula and qualifications. Data quality was ensured through analyses of reliability, validity, and structural integrity.

3.3 This Study

By conducting a comprehensive literature review and consolidating empirical findings from two stakeholder studies, this paper examines the views of critical stakeholders in the higher education community regarding the motivations for and expectations of higher education institutions in the 21st century. The blended approach enabled a more holistic and integrated understanding of the issues and, concomitantly, more valuable recommendations. Both informing studies received the necessary organisational ethics clearance.

3.4 Framework Development Process

The Framework was developed in a 5-stage process:

- Stage 1: Identification of key concepts in literature, including stakeholder engagement, responsiveness, employability, relevance, and sustainability.
- Stage 2: Reviewing the findings from the student voice study, which highlighted employability, affordability, reputation, service quality, belonging, and perceived value.

- Stage 3: Reviewing the findings from the employer study, which highlighted workplace readiness, digital proficiency, adaptability, communication skills, and critical thinking.
- Stage 4: Thematic synthesis of recurring concepts across both studies and literature.
- Stage 5: Integration of themes into a conceptual framework explaining relationships between stakeholder engagement, responsiveness, relevance, and sustainability.

4. Study Findings and Discussion

The higher education landscape in South Africa has become increasingly competitive, with more institutions entering the market each year. Institutions compete by seeking to add value for their target market and ultimately attract more students. Institutions must identify market needs by understanding their target market's buying behaviour (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014, p. 392; Wiese, 2008, p. 3). As discussed in the literature, prospective students can be viewed as consumers, individuals who purchase products or services offered to them. The decision to buy is often complex, with several stages in the decision-making process. These stages should be understood by both prospective students and institutions (Zain et al., 2013, p. 75; Wiese et al., 2010, p. 150; Manoku, 2015, p. 253), as they enable institutions to develop responsive strategies and understand the possibilities of future repurchasing (Chopra, 2020, p. 3). During the interviews, it was interesting to see how participants progressed through the different stages of the decision-making process and employed various methods and sources to guide them. Chopra (2020:3) classifies the consumer decision process into the following five stages:

Problem recognition: This is when the consumer realises there is a need or desire. In this study, the prospective student aims to pursue further education to obtain a qualification they believe is crucial for future employment (Rees, 2020, p. 12).

Search for information: The prospective student begins gathering information about tertiary institutions and the qualifications they offer, ultimately to resolve the problem at hand. Without this research, a decision

could not be made. They utilise various information sources to gather data that informs their decision-making.

Evaluation of alternatives: After completing the research, the prospective student evaluated all available options. This involved comparing institutions to identify the best alternative. Various factors were considered, and the main goal was to find the best place that would fulfil their needs.

Final decision: The student then made the decision once all the information had been gathered and evaluated. Students had certain expectations, and once they felt that these expectations could be met, they could proceed with enrolment at the institution.

Post-purchase decisions: Once the student "bought into" the institution of choice, they experienced varying levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. They evaluated their choice and considered what the outcome would have been if they had chosen a different institution. It is therefore vital that the student's expectations ("value") are met to ensure a positive educational journey.

Research study 1: Understanding students' motivations in selecting a higher education institution

This study examines the factors that motivate prospective students' decisions when selecting a higher education institution, which is critical to understanding the student market. By understanding who is interested in the institution and why, the institution can not only improve its recruitment efforts but also enhance its curriculum and student journeys to better respond to students' expectations (Dame: 2020:280; Haslerig, 2021:171). The research focused on personal factors, internal/psychological factors, social influences, and cultural influences, and the responses reported were linked to three critical questions discussed with the participants:

1. What made an institution your first choice HEI?
2. Did you consider the factor of value that would be derived from the institution?
3. Did you experience any pressure from family or friends to choose this institution?

1. What made an institution your first choice HEI?

Eight respondents stated that their choice of institution was based on whether the institution offered what they wanted to study.

> Participant 24 said that his choice was predicated on a desire to follow in his mother's footsteps, and the institution allowed him to do this.
>
> Participants 3, 7, 8, 17, 21, 22, and 23 said the choice was made because of geographic location and proximity to home. The location made it very convenient for them to consider the institution their top choice. Participant 21 did not attend his first-choice institution because he would have had to relocate and the cost would have been too high. He settled on his second choice and was very excited to be closer to home while still getting the same qualification. He also stated, "I did my research, and I attended the open day on campus. I could then see that the institution has a good reputation, and I enjoyed the culture on campus."
>
> Participant 2 said the following: "As a student from abroad, I looked at multiple institutions. Even though I had the option to pick and choose, I chose this institution due to the personal service that I got as well as their affordable fees."
>
> Participant 12 indicated that she revised her first-choice institution after attending their open day. She was unimpressed with the service she received and selected another institution.

Approximately 42% of respondents indicated that campus life, including its social activities, was a significant factor in their decision to attend a particular institution. Studies by Hawthorne (2021) and Cengage (2023) also identified the emphasis students place on a cohesive culture, a sense of community, and opportunities for personal interactions, particularly those that occur outside the classroom. Discussing the campus experience as a motivating factor, Doan (2021:251) states that higher education is viewed as a service to

students. Therefore, it is crucial to provide them with quality education, user-friendly facilities, and a positive student environment that makes them happy and comfortable. Additionally, Green (2014:947) emphasises the importance of service quality as a key factor in the campus experience, both before and during the student journey, in recruiting and retaining students, especially in a competitive market.

> "The welcoming feeling I experienced during a consultation at one of their campuses influenced my decision to study at this institution. The billboards around the campus also convinced me to take a look, but it was the personalised service that sold it to me." – Participant 3

> "I went to an open day at another institution, and I was not impressed. I then changed my mind and decided to attend another institution where I felt I belonged. … I realised at the open day that it is where I want to be. They promised value, and I also got positive feedback from students studying at the institution." – Participant 12

> "The qualifications on offer played a role as well as the open day attended. It made me feel welcome, and the staff were really friendly." – Participant 14

Financial wherewithal and affordability were also considerations in determining institutional choice, but the impact of price on the final decision varied.

> "As a student from abroad, I looked at multiple institutions. Even though I had the option to pick and choose, I chose this institution due to the personal service that I got as well as their affordable fees." – Participant 2

> "I chose the institution and qualification without having the fees impact my decision." – Participant 4

> "The financial considerations did play a role in my decision because if the fees were unreasonable, I would have decided otherwise." – Participant 5

> "I see this as an investment in my future." – Participant 16

> "My family could afford to send me anywhere, but I chose this institution as it was cheaper, closer, and offered bursaries." – Participant 21

2. Did you consider the factor of value that would be derived from the institution?

Most participants considered the institution's value before enrolling. They stated that they had done their research beforehand. Their choices were based on whether they felt comfortable with the institution and its qualifications, and on whether they thought they would get value for their money.

The quality of service received from the institution was a significant factor in all respondents' decision-making.

> Participant 3 said that he was impressed during his initial visit to the campus of choice, which gave him the impression that it was an institution that strives to deliver high-value services and qualifications.

> "I saw the billboards around the institution's one campus and decided to go and have a look. I attended an interview with a student advisor on campus, and it was very impressive. I knew that this was where I wanted to be." – Participant 3

92% of the Participants defined value through an employability lens.

> Participant 3 said that the qualifications at his institution were well regarded by industry and that he knew that he would not struggle with employment once he had obtained his qualification. "I am excited to know that I can step into the world of work one day, as the industry recognises this qualification." – Participant 3

Participant 6 stated that she was seeking an institution with a more practical approach, and she chose her institution for this reason. She needed to gain practical experience and skills to apply in her industry one day. "I researched the institution's website and saw that this institution offered the qualification in a practical way, where I can learn the necessary skills to implement in the industry. That is what I wanted. I was also referred by a friend of mine, who attended the institution." – Participant 6

"I was very happy that the qualification combines modules that I can apply in my work one day. This made my choice an easy one as I felt like I would get value for my money." – Participant 15

Participant 16 indicated that she was happy to hear that the institution she chose has practical hours built into the qualification. In her opinion, this would add value, as she would gain work experience while still a student and it would also help her with future work opportunities.

Participant 8 also noted that she was looking for an institution that offered contact learning. "I wanted to study Architecture only, and this institution is world-recognised for its Architecture qualification."

Participant 11 was impressed by the institution's statistics and growth, and she knew she would find value in future career opportunities.

Participant 23 stated that she was especially impressed to hear that the qualifications at her preferred institution are internationally recognised. She was excited to learn that she would be able to continue working or pursue further studies overseas. The international linkage was reiterated by Participants 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20, who stated that once they completed their research, it was reassuring to know that

> their institutions were legitimate and accredited and also offered international opportunities upon completion of their qualifications.

The literature on intrinsic motivation in HEI choice confirms that ambition and career prospects are significant motivators in students' decisions (Singh, 2025; Cengage, 2023). In Singh's (2025) research, 100% of respondents from the 2024 cohort sample ranked ambition and future goals as their first driver when choosing a HEI, and in this context, almost 80% noted an expectation that the HEI would provide opportunities and prepare them for the world of work. Those respondents who had not applied an institutional value to their deliberations believed that the value of attending a specific institution would only become evident once they were enrolled and had started classes there.

From the respondents who have already enrolled in higher education studies:

> Participant 2 emphasised the skills taught at this institution, which he believed would be helpful in industry.
>
> Participant 9 stated the following: "The lecturers prepare you for the industry, and they show you the various industry opportunities." He also felt confident knowing that he would be employed once he completed his course.
>
> Participant 12 believed that the practical element of her qualification would one day help her find a job and achieve success.

3. Social influences: Did you experience any pressure from family or friends to choose this institution?

Human beings aggregate in social groups, and the groups to which people belong often influence their choices, perceptions, and decisions (Qazzafi, 2020, p. 1207). Pressure from peers, family, and friends can be challenging for students making decisions about higher education and can affect their perceptions, dreams, and career paths. On the other hand, being part of a caring social network can support the transition from high school to tertiary studies. Factors relevant to this grouping include community and peer influence, as well as parental influence. For example, parents may attend

specific institutions and want their child to attend them as well, or they may want their child to study something they themselves wanted to study, even though it might not be the student's first choice (Stalinska, 2020, p. 359). In the current study, just more than one-third of respondents (9) answered this question affirmatively, and most attributed the pressure to family influences.

> Participant 5 was rejected by her first-choice institution and was given the option to either enrol with this institution or not pursue any tertiary studies. She felt pressured to enrol at the institution to continue studying.
>
> Participants 8, 11, and 22 felt pressure to study, but not necessarily about where to study. Participant 22 commented: "Everyone in my family studied, and I felt pressure as most of them are in an engineering career, which in itself is already pressure."
>
> Participants 17 and 18 felt pressured by people in their immediate environment, who were constantly talking about the institution, which affected their choice.
>
> "People in my surroundings were always having something to say about this institution, and I felt pressured to choose this institution. Luckily, the qualification that I wanted to do was offered here, so the choice was still my own." – Participant 18

Several participants who answered negatively, while acknowledging the freedom to choose, also recognised the influence of social factors. For example, Participants 4 and 6 stated that although their institutional choice was their own, they knew people who had attended the institution, which made their choice easier. Other respondents stated:

> "I heard people talking about the institution. They were so passionate about the brand that it sucked me in". – Participant 10
>
> "The good reputation of the institution and good referrals did play a role in my decision." – Participant 19

Participant responses were mixed regarding students' knowledge and understanding of higher education. All students agreed they wanted to study, but while some knew where they wanted to study, others were uncertain about what they wanted to study, and others knew what they wanted to study but were unsure about where to go. They were therefore more dependent on recommendations from their social network (word of mouth).

Research Project 2: Industry voices engaging with graduate employability and workplace readiness

The second research project relevant to this discussion examined industry responses to students' work readiness, including expectations of higher education. For this study, work readiness describes a graduate's preparedness, in terms of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours, to transition into and perform effectively in the workplace. It encompasses technical competencies relevant to a specific job and essential soft skills. Work readiness reflects an individual's ability to meet employers' expectations and to contribute meaningfully to the workplace.

Table 1 summarises the top five recommendations from employer respondents to enhance graduate workplace readiness, based on their experiences and the challenges identified in practice.

Table 1: Graduate Workplace Readiness

Challenges Identified	**Recommendations**
Lack of hands-on experience and practical workplace preparation.	Expand real-world experience and industry exposure.
Gaps in critical thinking and the ability to address complex, real-world challenges.	Enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
Limited proficiency in current and emerging workplace technologies.	Strengthen digital and technological proficiency.
Weak professional communication skills are unsuitable for workplace interactions.	Develop workplace communication skills.

Mixed feedback on meeting technical knowledge requirements while addressing workplace readiness skills.	Maintain discipline-specific knowledge while addressing skill gaps.

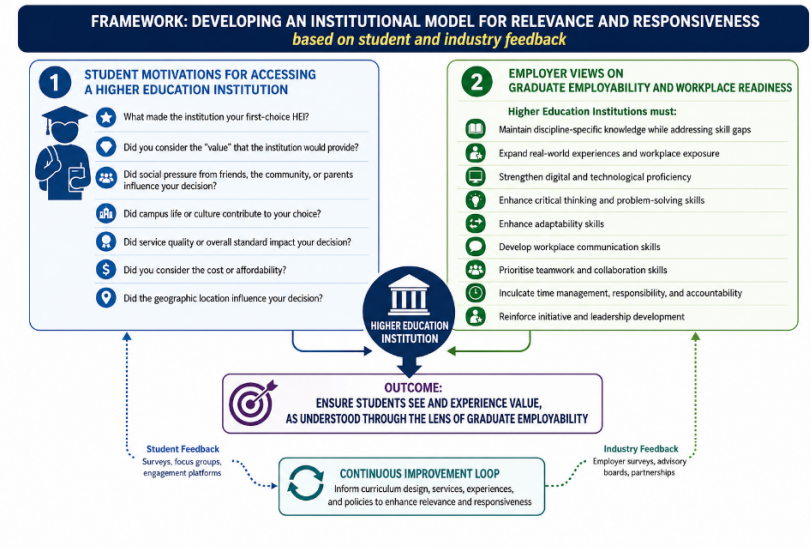
Data subjects were also asked to rank the top 5 curriculum improvement areas that would enhance graduates' employability and preparedness for the demands of modern careers, with 1 being the highest ranking. Digital and technological proficiency was ranked as the top area for curriculum improvement.

Table 2: Curriculum improvement areas to promote graduate employability

Curriculum improvement areas	Index
Cultural awareness and global mindset: Offer courses or modules focused on global and cultural competence to prepare students for diverse work environments.	5.10
Ethics and professionalism: Build ethical decision-making and professionalism into coursework.	15.29
Leadership and initiative: Include leadership development courses or modules that emphasise initiative-taking, decision-making, and responsibility	29.30
Soft skills development: Emphasise communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills through group projects, presentations, and peer evaluations.	29.94
Time management and resilience under pressure: Implement exercises or assignments with tight deadlines and project constraints, simulating workplace pressures	31.85
Workplace adaptability and flexibility: Foster adaptability through courses that address navigating change, agile thinking, and project management	32.48

Receptiveness to feedback and continuous improvement: Include feedback-oriented assignments where students are assessed and given opportunities to improve and resubmit work	33.12
Entrepreneurial skills and innovation: Incorporate modules on entrepreneurship, design thinking, and innovation to encourage creativity and out-of-the-box thinking.	38.22
Industry-specific certifications: Offer optional or integrated certifications in relevant industry areas (e.g., project management, data analytics, digital marketing)	47.77
Real-world experience and industry exposure: Expand internship programs, cooperative education, and project-based learning with industry partners	56.05
Critical thinking and problem-solving: Embed case studies, simulations, and scenario-based learning to help students tackle complex, real-world challenges.	87.26
Digital and technological proficiency: Strengthen training on current industry-standard software, digital tools, and emerging technologies (e.g., data analytics, AI, project management software)	100.00

Drawing together the data from the student survey, which engaged with feedback on student motivations for accessing higher education generally and higher education institutions specifically, and the express finding that respondents expected to see value linked to employability; and the industry survey, which summarises employers' opinions on the factors that enhance workplace readiness and, by extension, employability, a framework for relevance and responsiveness in higher education is presented below. In line with the notion of a framework, it does not provide a comprehensive solution (this should be clear from the study limitation, namely that only intrinsic factors were assessed) but instead offers a basis of reusable components upon which HEIs can build, rather than always starting from scratch.



[Diagram developed with the assistance of ChatGPT]

This study holds significant strategic value for higher education institutions seeking to ensure their relevance and sustainability by recognising the need for responsiveness. Analysis revealed a strong convergence between student and employer expectations. Although the stakeholder groups differed in focus, both emphasised value creation through meaningful educational experiences and successful graduate outcomes. Students largely defined value in terms of employability, career advancement, service quality, institutional reputation, and belonging. Employers emphasised workplace readiness, practical experience, communication skills, technological competence, and adaptability. By understanding the perspectives of key stakeholders, institutions can design informed, targeted interventions that support and respond to the needs of students, their parents, and the expectations of what constitutes good value in higher education. Stakeholder voices shape perceptions of value, which should influence institutional responsiveness. Responsive HEIs will align curricula and student experiences with the stakeholder expectations, thereby enhancing graduate employability. Enhanced employability strengthens institutional relevance, which contributes to long-term institutional sustainability. Sustainability is

reinforced through continuous stakeholder engagement and feedback, creating an iterative cycle of improvement and adaptation. Effectively responding to stakeholder (student) expectations functions as a mediating mechanism between their expectations and their satisfaction. Additionally, the study provides a sound foundation for developing a robust curriculum framework that ensures value is achieved through graduate employability. The framework further highlights the pivotal role of employability as a contemporary expression of value. While employability should not displace broader educational purposes, the findings indicate that students and employers increasingly regard graduate outcomes as an important measure of institutional effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

Although demand for higher education has grown in recent years, so too has the number of institutions (Bakare, 2017, p. 14). The industry has become increasingly competitive. Students accessing higher education have certain expectations, and institutions can only be responsive to stakeholder expectations once they understand them. Probably the only unequivocal statement about higher education is that nothing about it remains static. That said, institutions cannot be expected to respond to every change. To be relevant and sustainable, institutions must strategically identify and prioritise actions that will have the greatest influence on their primary stakeholders and respond directly to them. Acknowledging the caution raised by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020) about institutions being led solely by stakeholder voices, understanding stakeholder expectations, preferences for participation, and drivers of engagement must be key considerations in laying the foundation for institutional sustainability. Supporting this principle, Ham et al. (2021:62) and Polas et al. (2020:1050) note that a satisfied student will have a positive attitude towards their institution and will complete their studies there, thereby positively influencing retention and success. For example, aligning the student journey with workplace relevance and facilitating skills development for an effective transition into the workplace are undoubtedly among the expectations gaining emphasis among students.

Engagements with industry and the integration of skills into the tertiary curriculum constitute a paradigm shift for higher education, which some argue changes the legitimating idea of higher education from "a social institution aimed at the related notion of education and knowledge as a public good, to an industry with the related notion of a private good …" (Nokkala, 2007, p. 255). Similarly, Cheng et al. (2021:25) caution that an overemphasis on employability promotes a culture of consumerism, in which economic return becomes the primary driver of how students perceive the value of higher education, with diminishing recognition of the values of social responsibility and active citizenship. Balancing these competing interests in the contemporary competitive higher education landscape and ensuring relevance and responsiveness (or "value") will be critical for the sustainability of HEIs.

Stakeholder voices are a critical input to future strategies and planning for any higher education institution, as well as to the development of marketing tools to attract and retain students. By ensuring positive student experiences, we are more likely to retain them. Long-term loyalty will be a definite outcome (Omoregie et al., 2018, p. 7). This positive perception will make students more likely to spread the word and influence those around them, thereby increasing the institution's reputation, market potential, and, consequently, organisational sustainability. Achieving organisational sustainability in a HEI requires a strategic balance between economic viability, customer needs, and stakeholder expectations. It involves careful consideration of priorities and decisions that ensure long-term resilience and relevance. By aligning purpose with practice, HEIs can innovate responsibly, adapt to evolving challenges, and contribute meaningfully to a more sustainable future.

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