



# PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION AND STUDENT COMMITMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SERVICE QUALITY

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## Abstract

*Perceived discrimination has been recognized as an important factor associated with students' educational experiences; however, the institutional mechanisms through which it relates to student commitment remain insufficiently understood. This study examined the mediating role of perceived service quality in the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment among 417 undergraduate students enrolled in faculties offering four-year degree programmes. Guided by Student Engagement Theory and Social Exchange Theory from an institutional perspective on higher education, a mediation model was tested in which perceived service quality mediated the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment. A cross-sectional correlational design was employed. Data were collected using validated scales, and the hypothesised mediation model was tested using PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with bootstrapping. Results indicated that perceived discrimination did not directly predict student commitment; however, it negatively predicted perceived service quality, which in turn positively predicted student commitment. Moreover, perceived discrimination exerted a significant indirect effect on student commitment through perceived service quality, supporting a full mediation model.*

**Keywords:** *perceived discrimination, student commitment, service quality in higher education, higher education students, mediation analysis*

## Introduction

Universities are expected not only to educate students but also to foster their long-term commitment to educational experience and the institution itself. Sustaining students' commitment throughout their higher education experience has become one of the major challenges facing contemporary universities. This is particularly important because student commitment is closely associated with academic success, persistence, well-being, and long-term educational trajectories (Astin, 1999; Hackman & Dysinger, 1970, Savage et al., 2019; Tinto, 1993, 2017). In the literature, student commitment is defined as the extent to which students develop commitment to the institution they attend (Tinto, 1993, p. 115). Brower (1992) has maintained that students' commitment to their university reflects the degree to which they internalize the institution's values and goals stemming from their experiences within the higher education environment. As universities operate within increasingly diverse and massified systems, understanding the factors that shape students' commitment has become a central concern for both researchers and institutional leaders. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that student commitment is not only an individual disposition, but rather a dynamic psychological outcome emerging from students' ongoing interactions with the institutional environment (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson,

2018). Because commitment is inherently reciprocal, a comprehensive understanding of this construct requires considering both students' dedication to their university and the institution's responsibility for supporting students through to graduation (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). In a relationship, each partner communicates their commitment to the other, and each partner's commitment is influenced by the other's commitment.

Within this framework, lived experiences of students on campus, particularly those related to fairness, inclusion, and recognition, contribute to the development of their attachment to the institution. Among these experiences, perceived discrimination has been identified as a salient psychosocial stressor that undermines students' feelings of belonging, trust, and engagement in higher education contexts (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). Discriminatory perceptions may stem from academic practices, administrative procedures, peer interactions, or broader institutional climate, and they signal to students whether they are valued and treated equitably within the university community. Teachers' discriminatory attitudes can diminish students' sense of belonging and reduce their engagement in classroom learning, ultimately undermining their educational experiences and behaviours (Somasundar, 2021). Furthermore, it can result in the form of students' alienation, social isolation, tokenism, and silence (Lincoln & Stanley, 2021).

Research demonstrates that perceived discrimination is associated with a range of adverse student outcomes, including lower academic engagement, reduced well-being, and weakened institutional attachment (Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus et al., 2017). However, empirical findings regarding the direct association between perceived discrimination and student commitment remain mixed. While some studies report a clear negative association, others suggest that the impact of discrimination may be contingent upon how students interpret and navigate institutional structures and processes (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 2017). These inconsistencies point to the need for more nuanced explanatory models that move beyond direct-effect assumptions.

Recent theoretical developments in higher education research increasingly underline the importance of institutional mechanisms in translating students' social experiences into psychological outcomes. From this perspective, students' evaluations of institutional functioning, such as academic services, administrative processes, and campus resources, serve as key cognitive appraisals through which broader social dynamics are interpreted (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012). Perceived service quality, in particular, captures students' assessments of how effectively and fairly universities deliver educational and support services, and has been consistently linked to satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment in higher education institutions (Clemes et al., 2013; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Sultan & Wong, 2019).

Importantly, in the context of higher education, service quality reflects students' evaluations of the services delivered by various institutional units, such as the registrar's office, library, faculty and school offices, the rectorate, dormitories, and sports and health centres. (Nadiri et al., 2009), cannot be understood solely in technical or operational terms. Emerging evidence suggests that students' perceptions of service quality are deeply embedded in the social and institutional climate of universities, including perceptions of equity, respect, inclusion, and diversity-related collaboration between academic and student support units on these initiatives (Hurtado et al., 2012; LePeau et al., 2018). When students perceive discriminatory dynamics within the institution, these experiences may contaminate their evaluations of academic and administrative services, leading them to view institutional processes as less responsive, less fair, or less legitimate.

Although perceived discrimination, perceived service quality, and student commitment have each been widely examined in the higher education literature, these constructs have largely been investigated in isolation or through simple direct relationships. Consequently, little is known about the institutional mechanisms through which experiences of discrimination are related to students' commitment to their university. This represents an important theoretical gap

because existing research has focused primarily on identifying whether discrimination affects student outcomes rather than explaining how these effects emerge within institutional settings.

Addressing this gap, this study suggests and tests a mediation model in which perceived service quality functions as an institutional mechanism linking perceived discrimination to student commitment in higher education. Drawing on Student Engagement Theory (Kahu, 2013), institutional perspectives on higher education (Tinto, 2017), and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), the study conceptualises discrimination as a psychosocial stressor, service quality as a cognitive appraisal of institutional functioning, and student commitment as a psychological outcome reflecting students' emotional and behavioural attachment to their university. These theoretical perspectives are complementary rather than competing. Student Engagement Theory explains how students' interactions with the institutional environment shape their commitment and educational experiences, whereas Social Exchange Theory explains why these experiences influence students' attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, Student Engagement Theory provides the contextual perspective by emphasizing the role of institutional experiences in fostering student commitment, while Social Exchange Theory explains the reciprocal mechanism through which students respond to these experiences. When students perceive discrimination, they evaluate institutional services less favourably, weakening the reciprocal relationship between the student and the institution (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Hurtado et al., 2012). Conversely, positive evaluations of service quality reinforce students' commitment through positive institutional experiences and reciprocal exchanges (Blau, 1986; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Together, these theories provide an integrated explanation of how institutional experiences are translated into student commitment.

The study enriches the existing literature by empirically examining this model using data from undergraduate students at a public university. It advances understanding of how perceived discrimination is translated into student commitment through institutional processes rather than direct pathways. Second, it extends service quality research by situating service evaluations within broader social and equity-related contexts. Moreover, it responds to recent calls for theory-driven research that bridges micro-level student experiences with meso-level institutional dynamics in higher education. In doing so, the study offers theoretical as well as practical insights into the role of institutional service experiences in fostering inclusive and commitment-enhancing university environments.

Beyond its national context, this study has broader international relevance. Higher education institutions worldwide are experiencing increasing cultural diversity, international student mobility, and growing demands for equity and inclusion. Understanding the institutional mechanisms through which perceived discrimination is linked to student commitment is therefore critical across different higher education systems. By identifying perceived service quality as a mediating institutional process, the present study contributes to international discussions on student engagement, institutional effectiveness, and inclusive university environments.

Upon background, the present study aims to examine how perceived discrimination is associated with student commitment in higher education through the mediating role of perceived service quality. In line with this aim, four hypotheses were developed and tested:

H1. Perceived discrimination is negatively related to student commitment.

H2. Perceived discrimination is negatively related to perceived service quality.

H3. Perceived service quality is positively related to student commitment.

H4. Perceived service quality mediates the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment.

## Research Methodology

### *Design*

A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was adopted to investigate the associations among perceived discrimination, perceived service quality, and student commitment within the higher education context. As no experimental intervention or manipulation of variables was involved, the study focused on identifying naturally occurring relationships among the variables (Cohen et al., 2000). To examine the proposed conceptual framework, a mediation model was estimated in which perceived service quality was specified as the intervening variable linking perceived discrimination to student commitment.

### *Population and Sample*

The study population comprised 21,878 undergraduate students studying at a public university located in Türkiye (Council of Higher Education [CoHE], 2025). The minimum sample size was estimated according to Cochran's (1977) formula for finite populations, assuming a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a population proportion of .50. Based on these parameters, at least 378 participants were required. Data were ultimately obtained from 417 undergraduate students enrolled in four-year academic programmes during the 2025–2026 academic year, exceeding the calculated minimum and providing adequate statistical power for the analyses. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Manisa Celal Bayar University (Decision No. 15, dated 16 October 2025) before the commencement of data collection.

Of the 417 participants, 322 (77.2%) were female and 95 (22.8%) were male. Most respondents were between 20 and 22 years of age (61.2%), followed by those aged 23 years or older (22.3%) and those aged 19 years or younger (16.5%). Regarding year of study, 50.6% of the participants were in their fourth year or above, whereas second-year students accounted for 25.4% of the sample. First- and third-year students each represented 12.0% of the participants.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

*Perceived Discrimination* was measured using the Perceived Discrimination Scale, which was developed by Gören et al. (2020). The instrument includes 16 items representing a single latent construct and employs a 5-point Likert response format. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed for construct validity. All factor loadings reached statistical significance at the .01 level. The fit statistics ( $\chi^2/df = 4.10$ , RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .03, GFI = .91, NNFI = .95, and CFI = .97) indicated an acceptable to excellent fit to the data. The chi-square statistics were significant, but this outcome was anticipated given its sensitivity to larger samples. Therefore, greater emphasis was placed on alternative goodness-of-fit indices, which consistently supported the fit of the measurement model.

*Student Commitment* was measured using the Higher Education Student Commitment Scale developed by Çinkır et al. (2021). The scale comprises 14 items loading on a single factor and uses a 5-point Likert response format. CFA results supported the proposed one-factor measurement model. The obtained fit indices ( $\chi^2/df = 2.74$ , RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .03, GFI = .93, NNFI = .95, and CFI = .96) demonstrated satisfactory construct validity. Although the chi-square value reached statistical significance, this finding was interpreted with caution because the statistic is sensitive to sample size. Overall, the combination of fit indices provided strong evidence for the adequacy of the measurement model.

*Perceived Service Quality* was evaluated using the Higher Education Service Quality Scale developed by Çinkır et al. (2021). The instrument contains 29 items forming three dimensions including academic and administrative services, and campus facilities. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. CFA findings confirmed the three-factor structure, with all factor loadings being statistically significant. Model fit statistics ( $\chi^2/df = 2.41$ , RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04, GFI = .87, NNFI = .91, and CFI = .91) indicated an acceptable level of fit. Although the GFI value fell slightly below the commonly recommended threshold, the remaining indices supported the validity of the measurement model. Taken together, these results confirmed that the scale demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties in the present study.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data collection was carried out online through Google Forms during the 2025–2026 academic year. Before testing the proposed hypotheses, the distributional properties of the data were assessed using skewness, kurtosis, mean, median, and mode values. Skewness and kurtosis coefficients for all study variables fell within the acceptable  $\pm 2$  range (George & Mallery, 2010), while the close correspondence among the mean, median, and mode further indicated that the assumption of normality was satisfied (Hair et al., 2011).

Because the variables were normally distributed, Pearson product–moment correlation analysis was performed to examine the bivariate relationships among the study variables. The proposed mediation model was subsequently evaluated using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Macro (Model 4). Indirect effects were estimated through a bootstrapping procedure based on 5,000 resamples.

A bootstrapping approach was selected instead of conventional mediation procedures (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986; Sobel test) because it provides greater statistical power and more robust estimates of indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2004; Zhao et al., 2010). An indirect effect was considered statistically significant when the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval excluded zero. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26, PROCESS Macro version 4, and AMOS 22, with statistical significance set at  $p < .05$ .

### **Research Results**

Prior to hypothesis testing, the internal consistency of the measurement instruments was evaluated. Cronbach's alpha coefficients indicated excellent reliability for the Perceived Discrimination Scale ( $\alpha = .97$ ), the Higher Education Service Quality Scale ( $\alpha = .94$ ), and the Higher Education Student Commitment Scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Item–total correlation coefficients ranged from .66 to .92 for the Perceived Discrimination Scale, from .61 to .81 for the Student Commitment Scale, and from .41 to .71 for the Service Quality Scale, suggesting satisfactory discrimination for all items included in the analyses.

#### *Descriptive Results and Correlations*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for the study variables.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Results and Correlations*

| Variables                                          | Descriptive Statistics |           | Correlation Coefficients |      |      |
|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|------|------|
|                                                    | <i>M</i>               | <i>SD</i> | PD                       | SC   | SQ   |
| Perceived Discrimination (PD)                      | 1.79                   | 0.81      | ---                      | -.09 | -.03 |
| Student Commitment (SC)                            | 3.45                   | 0.73      |                          | ---  | .59* |
| Perceived Service Quality in Higher Education (SQ) | 3.49                   | 0.63      |                          |      | ---  |

\* $p < .01$

As shown in Table 1, the participants reported a high level of student commitment ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) and perceived service quality in higher education ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ), whereas perceived discrimination was reported at a relatively low level ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ).

Analyses showed a positive, moderate, and statistically significant correlation between perceived service quality and student commitment (H3) ( $r = .59$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, the correlations between perceived discrimination and student commitment (H1) ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p > .01$ ), as well as between perceived discrimination and perceived service quality (H2) ( $r = -.03$ ,  $p > .01$ ), were negative but weak and not statistically significant. These results suggest that while service quality is strongly associated with student commitment, perceived discrimination does not exhibit a direct bivariate relationship with either outcome variable.

#### *Mediation Analysis*

To test the proposed mediating role of perceived service quality in the association between perceived discrimination and student commitment, mediation analyses were performed using PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with a bootstrap resampling procedure. The results of the regression and mediation analyses are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Regression Analysis Results for the Mediation Test*

|                                     | Estimate | SE  | LLCI <sup>a</sup> | ULCI <sup>a</sup> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-----|-------------------|-------------------|----------|
| Direct Effects                      |          |     |                   |                   |          |
| PD-SC (without the mediation of SQ) | -.05     | .04 | -.13              | .03               | .21      |
| PD-SQ                               | -.15     | .03 | -.23              | -.07              | .00**    |
| SQ-SC                               | .58      | .05 | .48               | .68               | .00**    |
| Indirect Effect                     |          |     |                   |                   |          |
| PD-SC (with the mediation of SQ)    | -.08     | .02 | -.14              | -.03              | ---      |
| Total Effect                        |          |     |                   |                   |          |
| PD-SC                               | -.14     | .04 | -.23              | -.04              | .00**    |

Note: \*\* $p < .001$ ; <sup>a</sup>LLCI, lower-level confidence interval; <sup>a</sup>ULCI, upper-level confidence interval.

Regarding the direct effect of perceived discrimination on student commitment (H1), the findings revealed a negative but non-significant relationship when perceived service quality was not included in the model ( $b = -.05$ ,  $SE = .04$ , 95% CI  $[-.13, .03]$ ,  $p > .01$ ). As the confidence interval included zero, this result indicates that perceived discrimination did not directly predict student commitment. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

With respect to H2, perceived discrimination was found to be a significant and negative predictor of perceived service quality ( $b = -.15$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI  $[-.23, -.07]$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This finding suggests that higher levels of perceived discrimination are related to lower perceptions of service quality in higher education, thus supporting H2.

In line with H3, perceived service quality was a strong and positive predictor of student commitment ( $b = .58$ ,  $SE = .05$ , 95% CI  $[.48, .68]$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This result indicates that students who report higher levels of perceived service quality, reflected in its three dimensions (academic services, administrative services, and campus facilities) tend to report stronger emotional and behavioural commitment to their university. Accordingly, H3 was supported.

The indirect effect of perceived discrimination on student commitment through perceived service quality (H4) was examined using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. The results demonstrated a statistically significant indirect effect ( $b = -.08$ , Boot  $SE = .02$ , 95% CI  $[-.14, -.03]$ ). As the confidence interval didn't include zero, the mediating role of perceived service quality was confirmed. This finding indicates that perceived discrimination is associated with student commitment indirectly by undermining students' perceptions of service quality.

Taken together, the results provide evidence for a full mediation model (Hayes, 2018). Although perceived discrimination did not have a significant direct effect on student commitment, it exerted a significant indirect effect through perceived service quality. In other words, higher levels of perceived discrimination reduce students' evaluations of academic and administrative services, and campus facilities, which in turn weakens student commitment. Thus, H4 was supported, confirming that perceived service quality fully mediates the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment.

## Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment in higher education, with a particular focus on the mediating role of perceived service quality. The findings indicated that perceived service quality fully mediated the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment. These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how structural and experiential factors within universities shape student commitment, moving beyond direct-effect explanations and highlighting the central role of institutional processes.

### *Interpretation of the Main Findings*

Perceived discrimination was negatively related to student commitment at the bivariate level; this association did not reach statistical significance when tested as a direct effect in the mediation model. One of the most notable findings of this study is the absence of a significant direct relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment. This observation is in line with earlier research suggesting that students' commitment to their institution is not solely determined by isolated negative experiences, but rather by how these experiences are filtered through broader institutional structures and daily interactions (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 2017). Empirical findings suggest that perceived discrimination may have complex and context-dependent effects on student outcomes, reinforcing the need to examine the mechanisms through which such experiences are translated into educational engagement and motivation (Slobodin et al., 2021). In other words, discriminatory perceptions may not automatically translate into disengagement unless they systematically undermine students' evaluations of the university environment.

Importantly, this result is consistent with prior research indicating that students often tolerate or normalize certain forms of unfairness or exclusion when institutional support

mechanisms remain intact (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). In such cases, commitment may be sustained despite negative perceptions, particularly when students perceive the institution as academically credible or administratively functional. This finding challenges overly linear models that assume a direct and inevitable erosion of commitment in response to perceived discrimination and underscores the need for more complex explanatory frameworks.

In contrast, perceived discrimination was found to have a significant and negative effect on perceived service quality. This result supports a growing body of literature emphasizing that discrimination operates not only as an interpersonal phenomenon but also as a structural experience that shapes how students evaluate academic services, administrative procedures, and campus facilities (Hurtado et al., 2012; LePeau et al., 2018). When students perceive discriminatory practices or attitudes, they are more likely to interpret institutional processes as unfair, unresponsive, or exclusionary, thereby lowering their overall assessment of service quality.

The strong and positive association between perceived service quality and student commitment represents another key finding of this study. Consistent with previous research, students who perceive higher levels of quality in academic instruction, administrative services, and campus resources are more likely to develop stronger emotional and behavioural ties to their institution (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012). From a social exchange perspective, high-quality services signal institutional care and investment, which students reciprocate through increased commitment and persistence (Blau, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

### *The Mediating Role of Service Quality*

The most substantial contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that perceived service quality fully mediates the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment. The significant indirect effect, together with the non-significant direct effect, suggests a pattern of full mediation. This finding suggests that the association between perceived discrimination and student commitment operates indirectly through perceived service quality. However, given the cross-sectional design, this statistical mediation should not be interpreted as evidence of a causal process.

This result resonates with service quality and student engagement literature, which emphasizes that students' loyalty and commitment are shaped primarily by their cumulative service experiences rather than by single adverse events (Clemes et al., 2013; Parasuraman et al., 1988). In this context, discrimination functions as a contextual stressor that contaminates students' perceptions of service encounters, leading them to interpret academic advising, assessment practices, or administrative interactions as less fair or less supportive.

Furthermore, this mediating mechanism aligns with theoretical models of student persistence and engagement, which posit that institutional commitment emerges through ongoing interactions between students and the organizational environment (Kahu, 2013; Tinto, 1993). When discriminatory perceptions weaken trust in institutional services, students' sense of belonging and identification with the university is undermined, ultimately reducing their commitment. Thus, the findings suggest that service quality operates as a critical institutional conduit through which broader social dynamics translate into student outcomes.

### *Theoretical Implications*

This study makes an important theoretical contribution that is particularly relevant to institutional and organizational perspectives in higher education. First, the findings extend dominant theories of student commitment and engagement by demonstrating that the effects

of perceived discrimination are indirect and institutionally mediated rather than direct and deterministic. This supports theoretical models that conceptualise student outcomes as the product of ongoing interactions between individuals and organizational structures, routines, and norms (Astin, 1999; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tinto, 2017).

More specifically, the results resonate strongly with institutional theory, which emphasises that individuals' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by formal rules, shared meanings, and taken-for-granted practices embedded within organizations (Scott, 2014). Perceived service quality, in this study, functions as a cognitive appraisal of institutional functioning, reflecting how students experience academic regulations, administrative procedures, and campus infrastructures as coherent, fair, and legitimate or otherwise. From this perspective, discrimination does not operate merely as an interpersonal phenomenon, but as an indicator of perceived institutional misalignment that weakens students' evaluations of organizational legitimacy and fairness.

Second, the findings advance service quality theory in higher education by positioning discrimination as a contextual antecedent of service quality perceptions. While prior research has predominantly conceptualised service quality in technical or functional terms (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Sultan & Wong, 2019), the present study highlights its socially embedded and institutionally situated nature. Students' evaluations of academic and administrative services are shaped not only by efficiency or accessibility, but also by broader perceptions of inclusion, equity, and respect, suggesting that service quality should be understood as an institutional experience rather than a purely operational construct.

Third, drawing on Social Exchange Theory, the findings indicate that student commitment represents a reciprocal psychological response to perceived institutional treatment (Blau, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When discriminatory perceptions signal a breach in the implicit exchange relationship between students and the institution, students respond by reassessing the value and fairness of institutional services, which in turn undermines their commitment. This mechanism highlights the pivotal role of higher education institutions as active agents in shaping student outcomes through their organizational practices and symbolic actions.

Finally, by integrating perceived discrimination, service quality, and student commitment into a single mediation model, this study bridges micro-level psychological processes with meso-level institutional dynamics. This integrated framework responds to recent calls in higher education research for theory-driven models that explicitly link student experiences to organizational conditions, thereby offering a more comprehensive explanation of commitment, engagement, and persistence in higher education contexts.

Taken together, the principal contribution of this study is not merely demonstrating that perceived discrimination, perceived service quality, and student commitment are related, but identifying the institutional mechanism through which these relationships operate. By demonstrating that perceived service quality fully mediates the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment, this study advances the higher education literature beyond direct-effect explanations and highlights the role of institutional processes in shaping students' commitment. Beyond the Turkish higher education context, these findings have broader international relevance, as universities worldwide are addressing common challenges related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and student engagement. Accordingly, the proposed mediation model offers a theoretically grounded and transferable framework for understanding how institutional practices are associated with student commitment across diverse higher education systems.

### *Practical and Policy Implications*

The present findings have important practical implications for higher education leaders and policymakers. First, efforts to enhance student commitment should not focus solely on

reducing discriminatory behaviours at the interpersonal level, but also on strengthening the quality, transparency, and inclusiveness of institutional services. High-quality academic and administrative services may buffer the negative effects of perceived discrimination by reinforcing students' trust in the institution.

Second, universities should recognize service quality as a strategic lever for promoting equity and inclusion. Ensuring fairness in assessment, accessibility in administrative processes, and inclusivity in campus facilities may mitigate the adverse consequences of discrimination perceptions and support sustained student commitment (OECD, 2022; Thomas, 2012).

Finally, these findings suggest that institutional monitoring systems should integrate equity indicators into service quality evaluations. By systematically assessing how different student groups experience academic and administrative services, universities can identify hidden forms of structural exclusion and address them proactively.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study provides important theoretical and practical insights, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, although the mediation model was theoretically specified, the cross-sectional design does not permit temporal ordering or causal inferences among the study variables. Accordingly, the observed mediation should be interpreted as a statistical representation of the relationships among the variables rather than evidence of a causal mechanism. Future longitudinal, experimental, or cross-lagged panel studies are needed to examine the temporal sequence and causal pathways proposed in the present model.

Second, the findings were based exclusively on self-reported data, which may have increased the risk of common method bias despite the procedural and statistical precautions implemented during data collection and analysis. Future research could incorporate multiple data sources and longitudinal designs to enhance the robustness of the findings.

Finally, future research should examine whether the proposed mediation model is consistent across different higher education contexts and student populations, such as first-generation students, international students, and students from historically marginalized groups. Investigating additional contextual variables, including institutional trust, sense of belonging, and organizational climate, may further enhance understanding of the institutional processes associated with student commitment.

### Conclusions

This study investigated the relationship between perceived discrimination and student commitment through the mediating role of perceived service quality in higher education. The findings demonstrated that perceived discrimination was not directly associated with student commitment but was indirectly associated with it through perceived service quality. These findings highlight the importance of students' evaluations of institutional services as a key mechanism linking experiences of discrimination with student commitment.

The study contributes to higher education literature by integrating perceived discrimination, perceived service quality, and student commitment into a theoretically grounded mediation model informed by Student Engagement Theory and Social Exchange Theory. By identifying perceived service quality as the institutional mechanism through which perceived discrimination is associated with student commitment, the study extends current understanding of the institutional processes underlying student commitment in higher education.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that universities should complement efforts to reduce discrimination with strategies aimed at strengthening the quality, fairness,

and inclusiveness of academic, administrative, and campus services. Creating supportive institutional environments may help foster stronger student commitment and promote more equitable and inclusive higher education experiences.

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