



Initial Survey Report – 05/04/2026

Access to South African Home Affairs Services Abroad

This report presents the initial findings of an independent survey conducted between 13 March and 31 March 2026, examining access to South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA) services for citizens living abroad.

The survey forms part of an ongoing civil society monitoring initiative designed to track the performance, accessibility, and effectiveness of Home Affairs services delivered through South African foreign missions and VFS Global service centres. A total of 289 responses were received within the first few weeks of launch.

This is not a one-off report. The survey will remain open, and results will be published monthly to track whether services are improving, stagnating, or deteriorating over time. The findings presented here represent an early but highly consistent signal of systemic dysfunction across multiple stages of the service process — from booking appointments to receiving documents.

Key Findings

Booking systems are insufficient

Many respondents were unable to secure appointments at all.

Communication is unreliable

Emails and calls often go unanswered, with little to no updates after applying.

Information is unclear or inconsistent

Applicants struggle to understand where and how to apply. Inconsistent, often minimal or incomplete information available on all mission websites.

Delays are common and unpredictable

Appointment and processing times are long, with limited visibility on progress.

Costs are high

Travel, accommodation, and outsourced service fees create a significant financial burden that many cannot sustain.

Services are under-resourced

Evidence of understaffing and limited appointment availability.

Overall, respondents experience a system that is hard to access and difficult to navigate.

Recommendations

To address these issues, the following actions are recommended:

1. Fix appointment booking systems immediately

- Implement a functional, centralised booking system at missions
- Ensure transparency of appointment availability
- Ensure capacity to amend bookings (Missions)
- Introduce waiting lists or queue systems

2. Enforce communication standards

- Establish mandatory response timeframes for missions & DHA
- Provide automated confirmations and updates



- Introduce a centralised escalation channel
- Publish staff names, job titles and direct email addresses for relevant mission, VFS and DHA staff to improve accessibility to customer service

3. Standardise and simplify information

- Align all official platforms
- Provide clear, step-by-step guidance
- Regularly audit and update content

4. Improve processing transparency and timelines

- Enable full end-to-end tracking
- Publish realistic processing timelines
- Reduce avoidable delays by ensuring backend administrative ‘triggers’ on cases not progressing
- Allocate dedicated DHA staff and helpline/email to assist overseas queries and cases rather than applicants relying on ineffective missions who do not have access to internal DHA systems or VFS channels for updates and issues.

5. Address cost and accessibility barriers

- Review cumulative cost burden, especially in locations where both mission and VFS exist e.g. London where applicants are forced to pay VFS service fees rather than apply via SA House.
- Expand access points and reduce travel requirements
- Reconsider mail-in or remote service options across all missions

- Issue directive to DIRCO for all honorary consuls to facilitate checking of documentation for applicants who need assistance within reasonable distance to their area to help reduce problems at or after application.
- Alternatively hold online application clinics for people to check they have correct information and documentation with a qualified member of staff to reduce administrative issues and delays.
- Allow applicants requiring other services to also submit passport applications via missions at the same time (as was always the case but has recently been changed)

6. Increase capacity where demand is highest

- Allocate additional staff to high-volume missions
- Expand appointment availability
- Monitor demand and adjust resources dynamically

Closing Remarks

Access to Home Affairs services is not optional — it is a fundamental requirement for citizens to maintain legal identity, mobility, and access to rights.

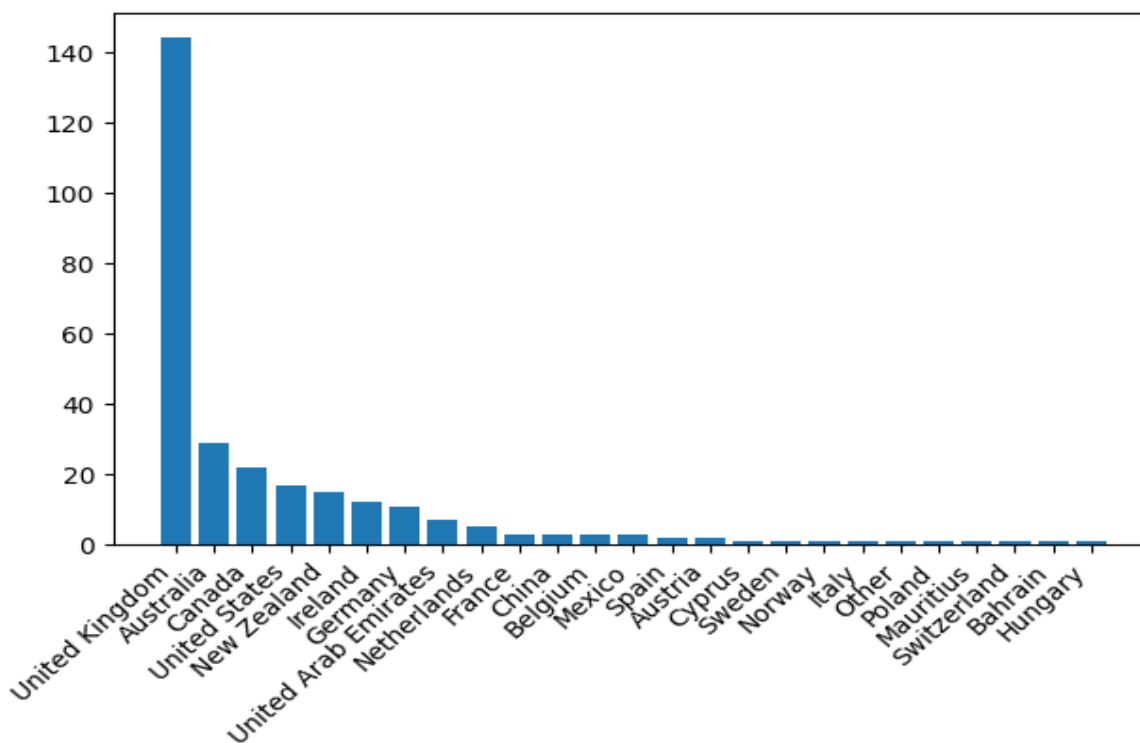
The findings from this survey indicate that the current system is **not meeting this obligation for South Africans abroad.**

This report provides an evidence base for immediate intervention.

The next phase will determine whether meaningful improvements are made — or whether systemic failures persist.

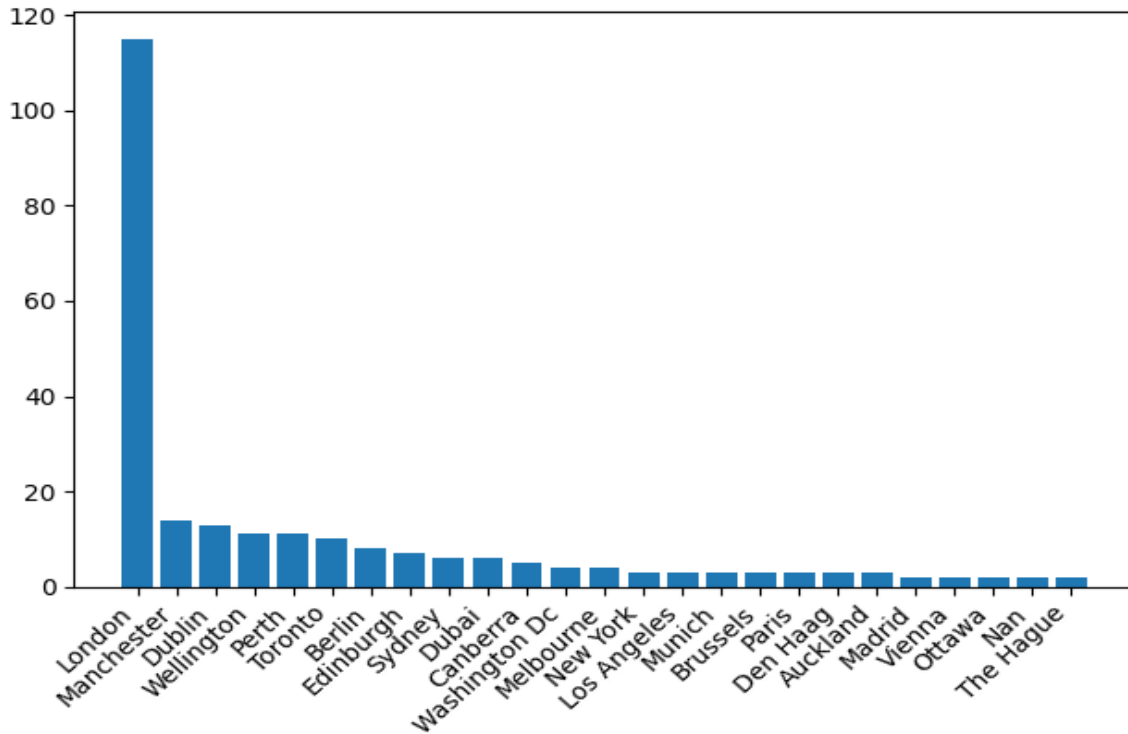
SECTION ONE - DEMOGRAPHICS

Q1. Country of Application – number of responses: 288



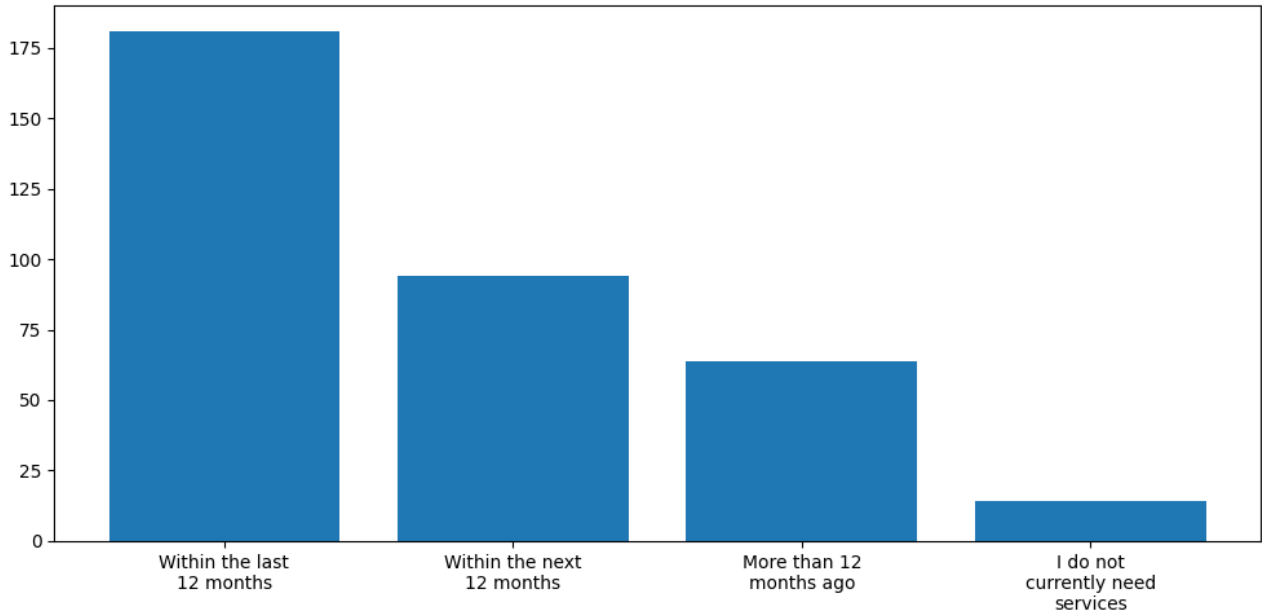
Respondents were concentrated in a relatively small number of countries, with the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States accounting for the largest share. This geographic clustering highlights key regions where demand for Home Affairs services abroad is most significant. The top 10 countries where respondents reside are: United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, USA, New Zealand, Ireland, Germany, UAE, Netherlands and France.

Q2. City of Application (Top 25) - – number of responses: 287



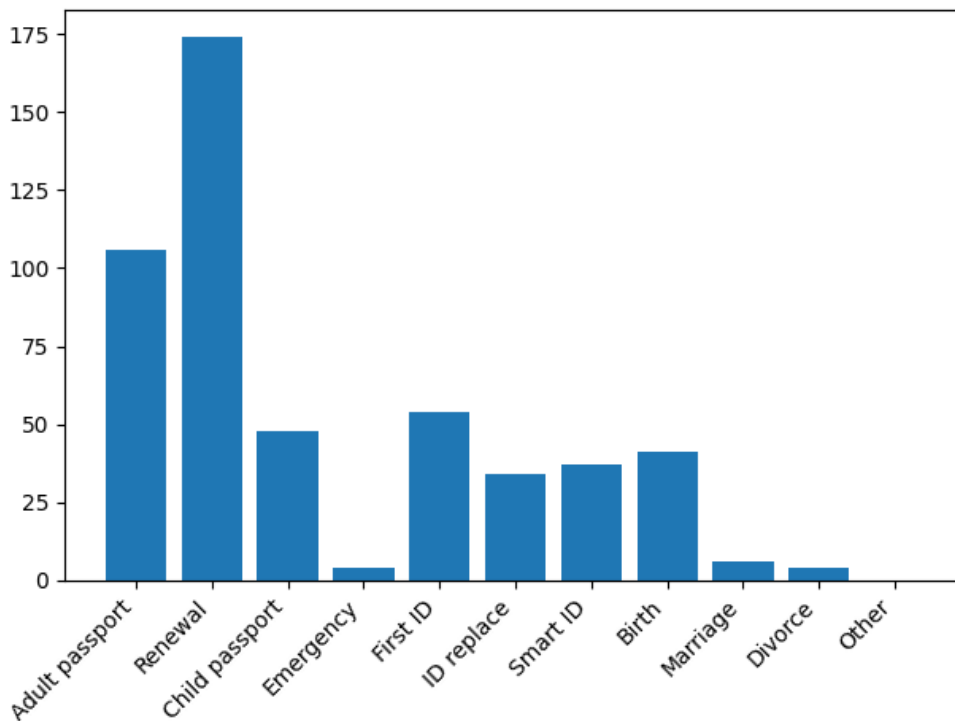
Responses were primarily concentrated in major global cities hosting South African missions or VFS Global centres. The data does not, however, highlight the challenges faced by individuals living outside these cities, many of whom are required to travel significant distances to access services. The findings therefore point to a system that is urban-centric, with service availability aligned to major cities but not necessarily to the broader geographic spread of the South African diaspora, contributing to access inequalities.

Q3. When services were needed— number of responses: 289



Demand for services is ongoing and predictable, and when considered alongside an estimated one million South Africans abroad—equating to an average of around 8,000 new passport applications per month—it highlights the need for consistently accessible and well-resourced service provision.

Q4. Services required– number of responses: 289

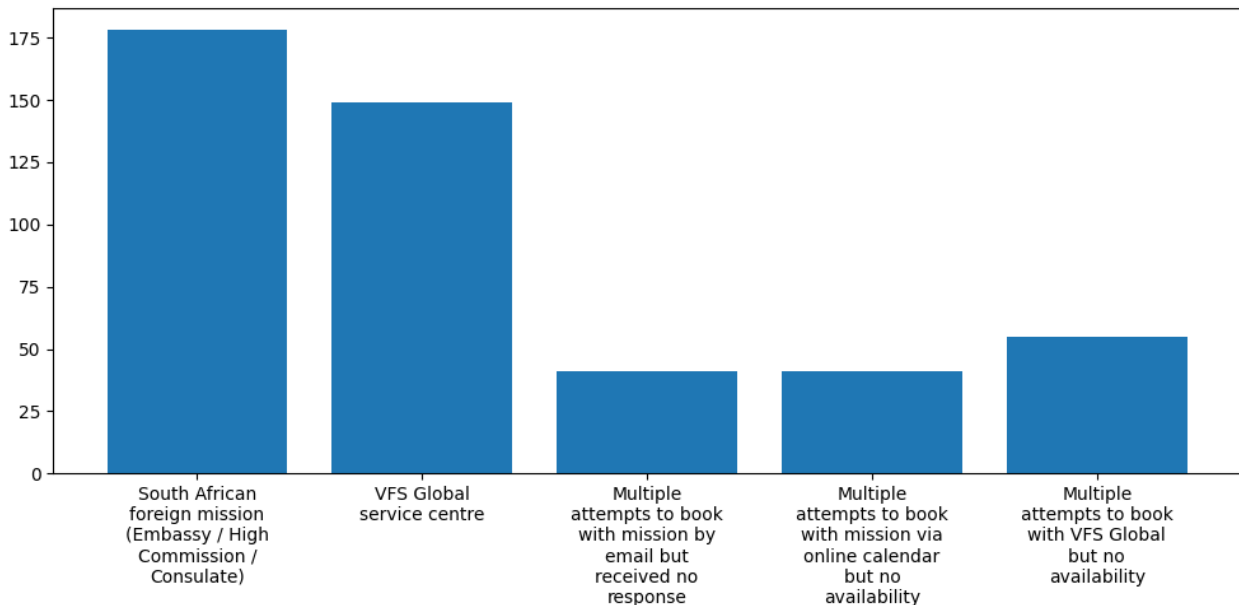


Other responses included:

Permanent residency permit, Amendment to or change of name , Death registration, Determination of Citizenship, Legalisation of documents, Police Clearance Certificate, Spousal visa, Drivers' licence, Firearm licence renewal

The data shows that demand is heavily concentrated around core identity services, particularly passport applications, which accounts for the majority of responses. Additional demand for ID-related services (**including Smart ID cards and replacements – not currently available abroad**) and civil registrations (birth, marriage, and divorce) further highlights the breadth of reliance on Home Affairs services abroad. The diversity of services required underscores the need for a comprehensive and accessible service offering, rather than a narrowly focused system.

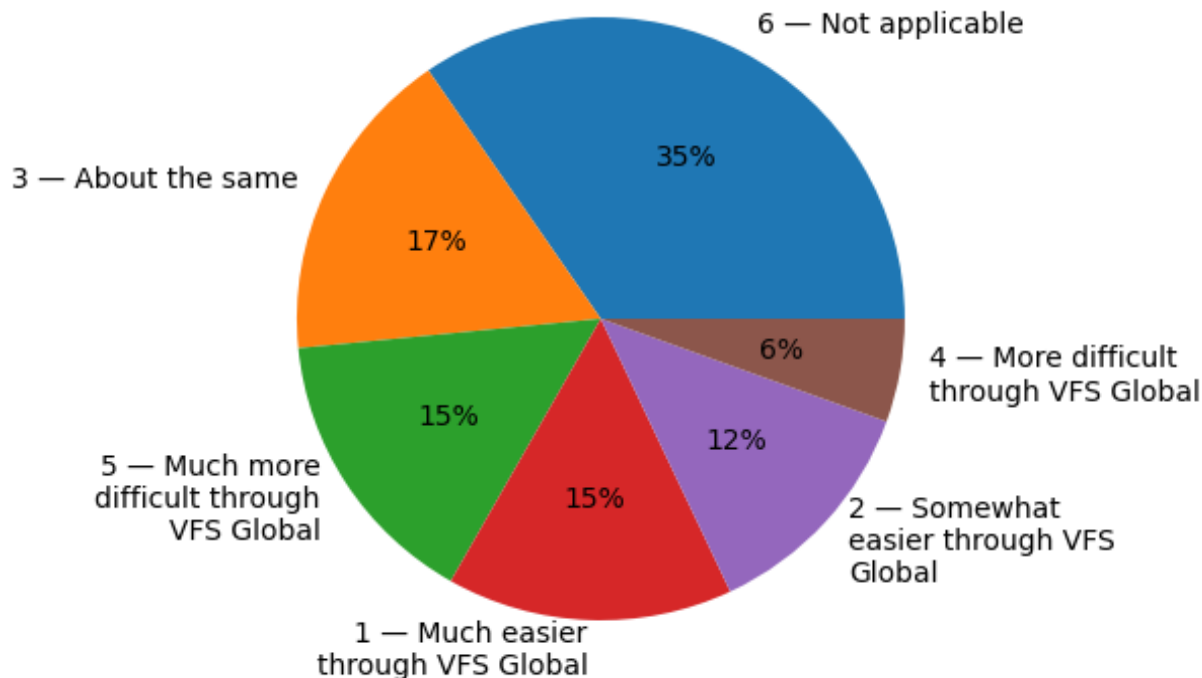
Q5. Where did you attempt to apply or book your appointment? – number of responses: 289



A significant proportion of respondents reported multiple unsuccessful attempts to access services, including repeated failures to secure appointments via both foreign missions and VFS Global platforms. Many indicated no response to email requests or lack of availability through online booking systems. This demonstrates that access barriers occur at the very first stage, preventing applicants from even initiating the process and creating compounding delays.

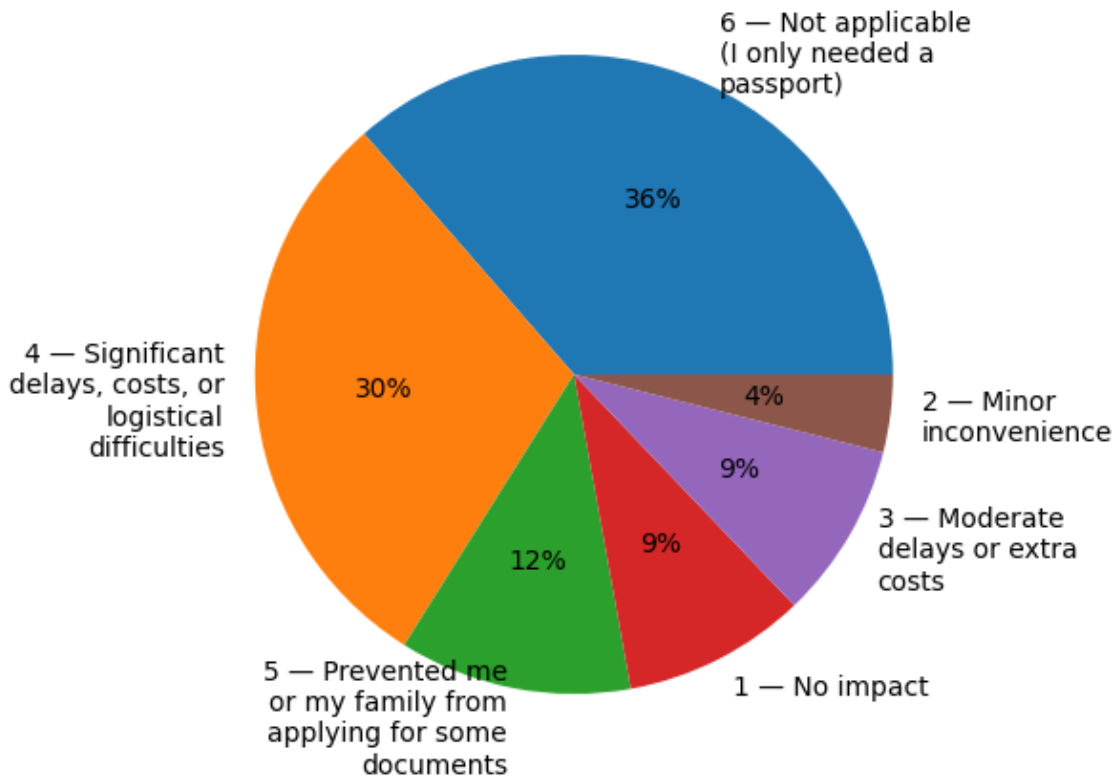
SECTION TWO – ACCESS TO SERVICES VIA FOREIGN MISSIONS AND VFS GLOBAL

Q6. VFS vs Mission access ease – number of responses: 289



Responses to this question indicate that applicants experience inconsistent and often challenging access across both South African missions and VFS Global service centres, with no clear preference emerging between the two. While some respondents reported marginally easier access through one channel, many indicated that both systems present similar barriers, including difficulty securing appointments, unclear processes, and limited responsiveness. The absence of a clearly more effective access point suggests that challenges are not isolated to a single provider but instead reflect systemic weaknesses across both in-house and outsourced service delivery models. This reinforces the finding that the current hybrid approach has not simplified access, and in many cases may be contributing to increased complexity for applicants.

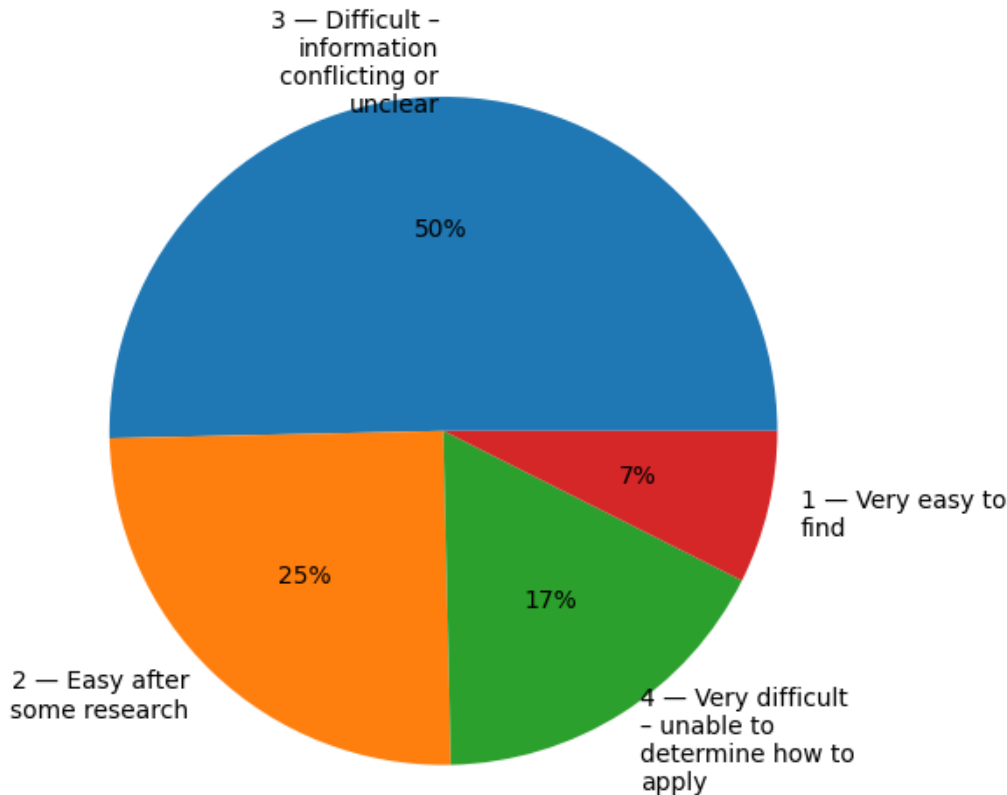
Q7. Impact of service separation (VFS vs missions) – number of responses: 280



More than half of respondents reported a moderate to severe negative impact resulting from the outsourcing of services to VFS Global. Respondents described increased complexity, additional costs, and confusion about processes. This suggests that the current hybrid model has introduced structural inefficiencies rather than improving access.

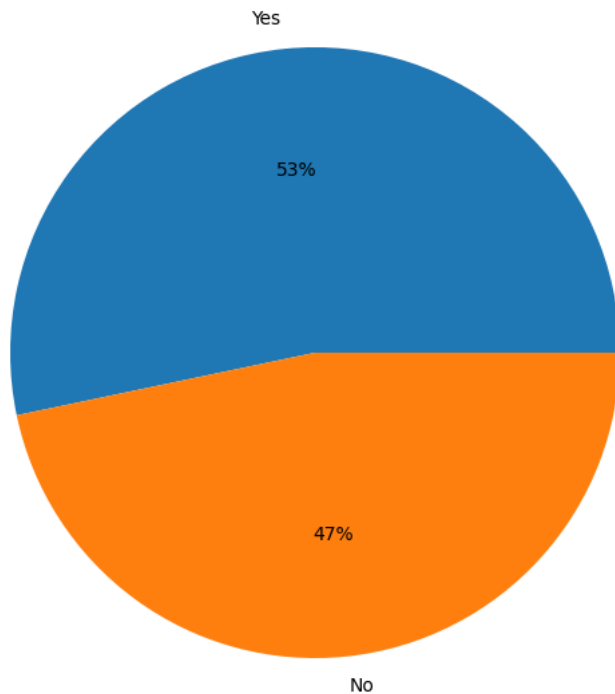
SECTION THREE – BEFORE YOUR APPOINTMENT

Q8. Ease of finding information on official sources – number of responses: 284



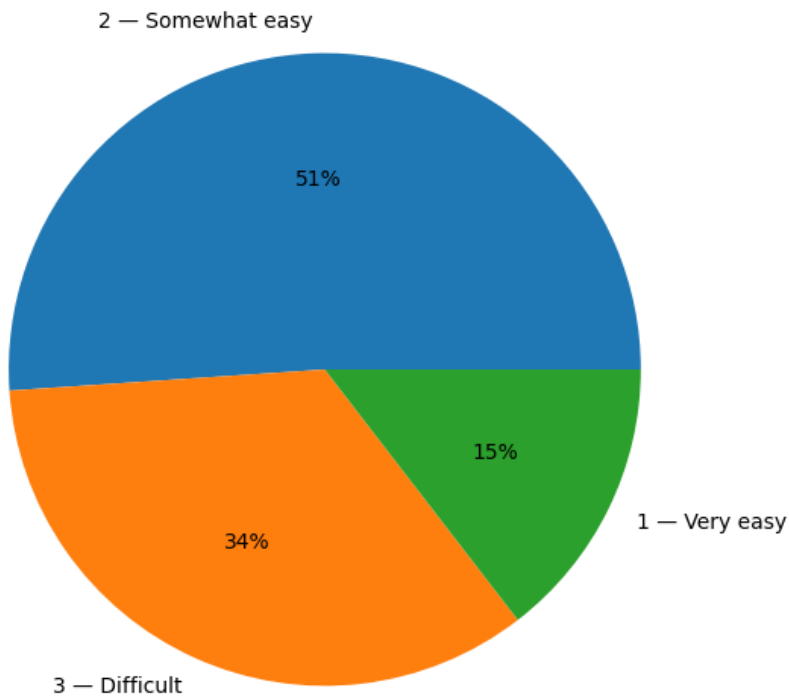
Respondents consistently reported difficulty accessing clear, reliable, and up-to-date official information, with many relying on informal networks, online forums and advice from other South Africans abroad. This reliance on unofficial sources indicates a failure of official communication channels, increasing the likelihood of misinformation, application errors, and repeat visits.

**Q9. Clarity on whether to use mission vs VFS depending on service required. –
number of responses: 289**



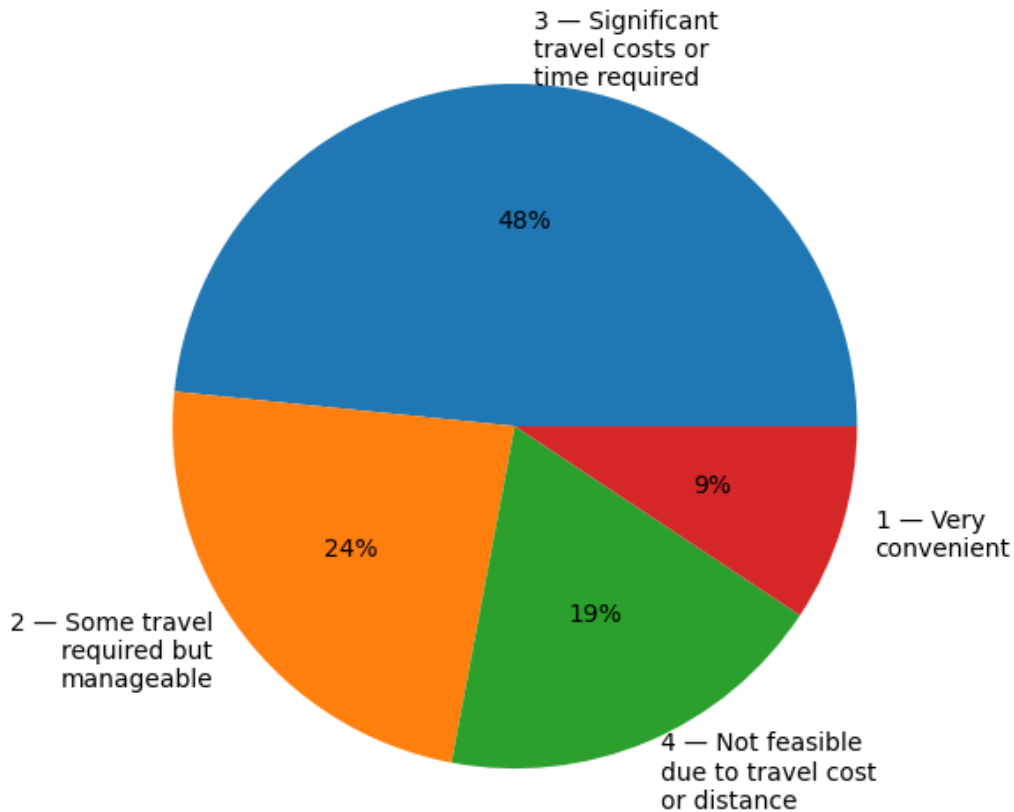
Many respondents reported confusion about whether to apply through a South African mission or a VFS Global centre. This reflects a lack of clear information, communication and service pathways which contributes directly to delays and incorrect applications.

Q10. Ease of finding/downloading forms – number of responses: 282



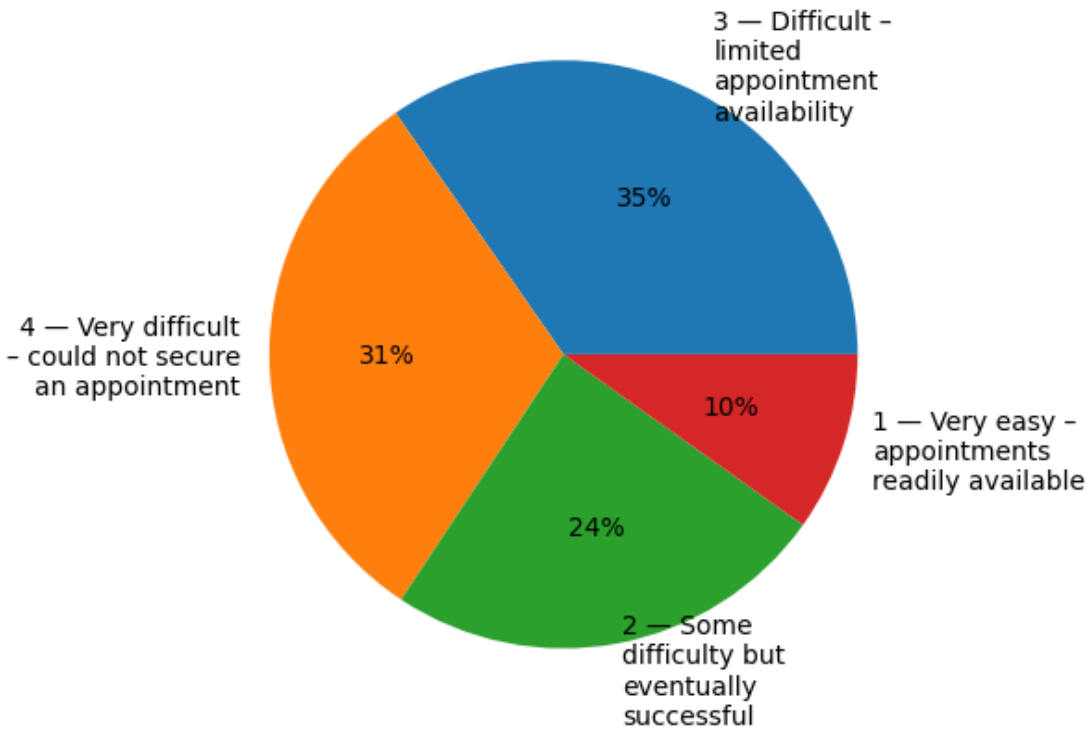
Respondents reported difficulty accessing or identifying the correct application forms, suggesting that document access is not clearly structured or user-friendly. This contributes to inefficiencies and repeat interactions.

Q11. Convenience/affordability of locations – number of responses: 279



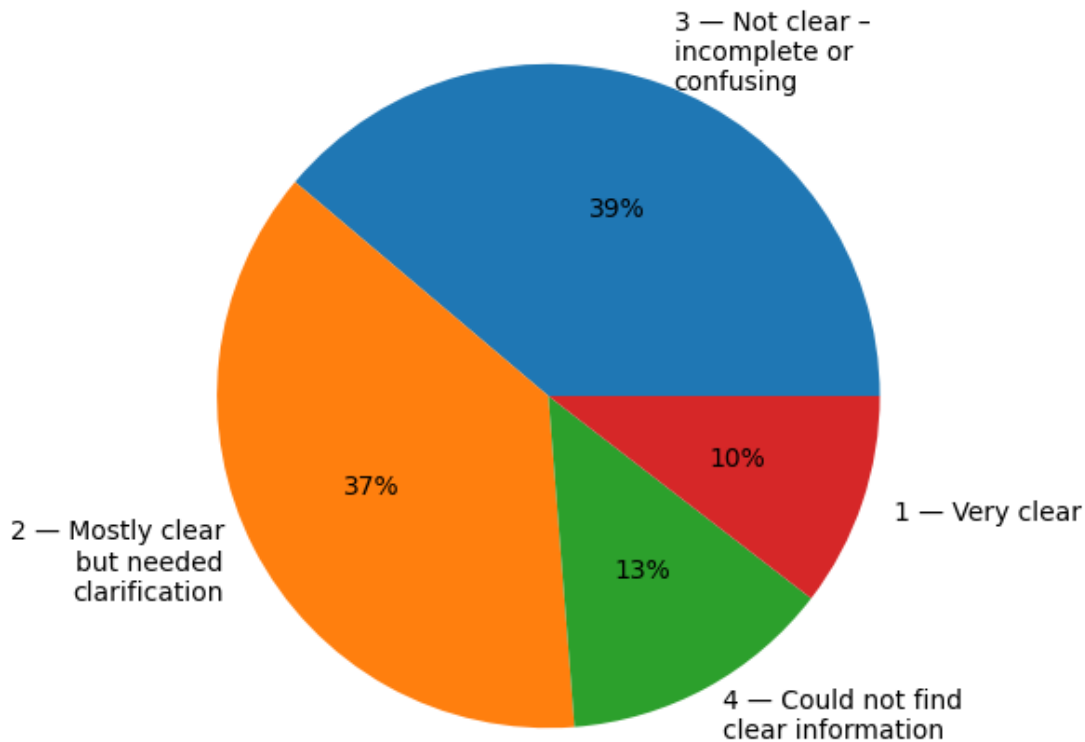
A significant proportion of respondents indicated that service locations were not easily accessible, with many required to travel long distances. This highlights geographic inequality in service provision, particularly in regions with limited physical access points.

Q12. Ease of booking an appointment – number of responses: 274



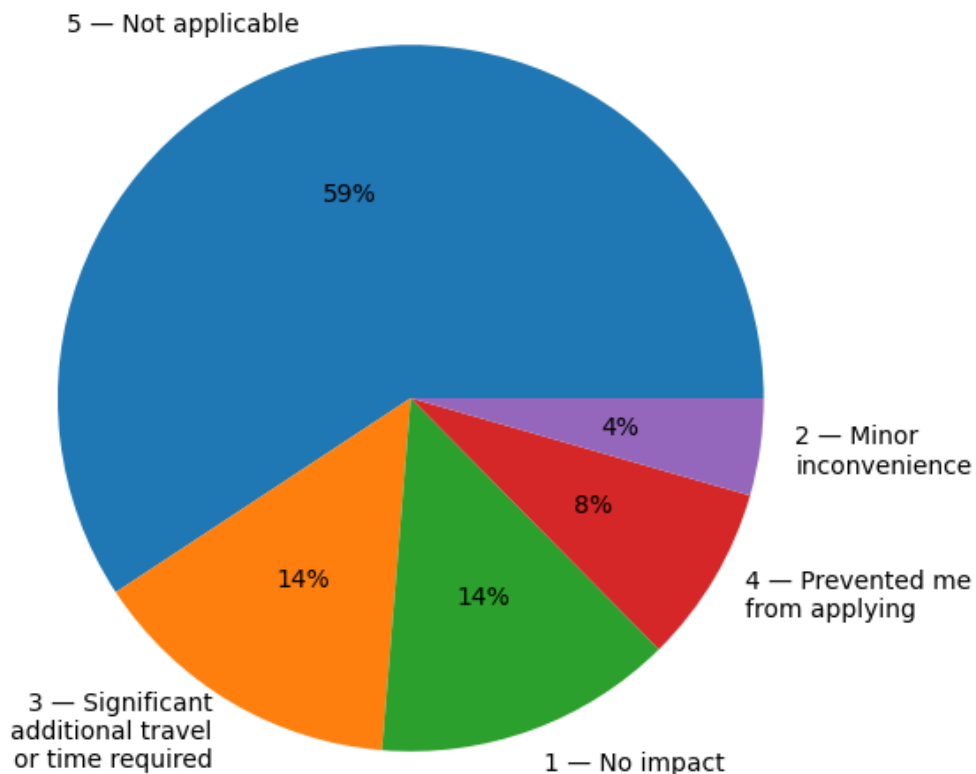
Securing an appointment remains one of the most critical challenges identified in the survey. A large proportion of respondents reported no availability, system failures, or repeated unsuccessful booking attempts, indicating that current capacity does not meet demand.

Q13. Clarity of required documents – number of responses: 278



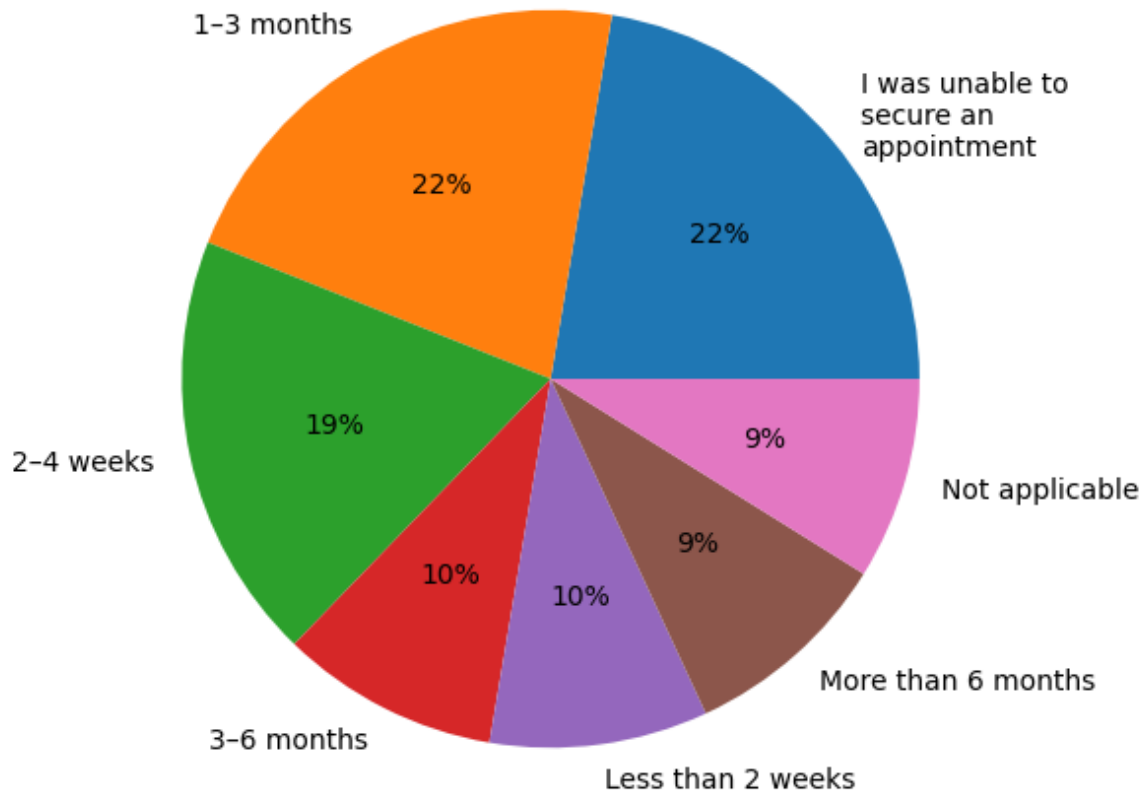
Many respondents reported unclear, inconsistent, or incomplete information regarding application requirements. This often resulted in applicants being asked to return with additional documentation, leading to repeat visits, increased costs, and delays.

Q14. Impact of removal of mail-in options – number of responses: 270



Responses indicate that the limited and inconsistent availability of mail-in application options has increased the burden on applicants abroad. Mail-in services have only been offered in a small number of countries, such as the United States and Canada, and are not consistently available globally. As a result, many applicants are required to attend in-person appointments, often involving long-distance or international travel. This creates unequal access between regions and places additional financial and logistical strain on applicants. It also disproportionately affects individuals with disabilities, medical conditions, or other constraints, raising concerns about accessibility and inclusiveness in service delivery.

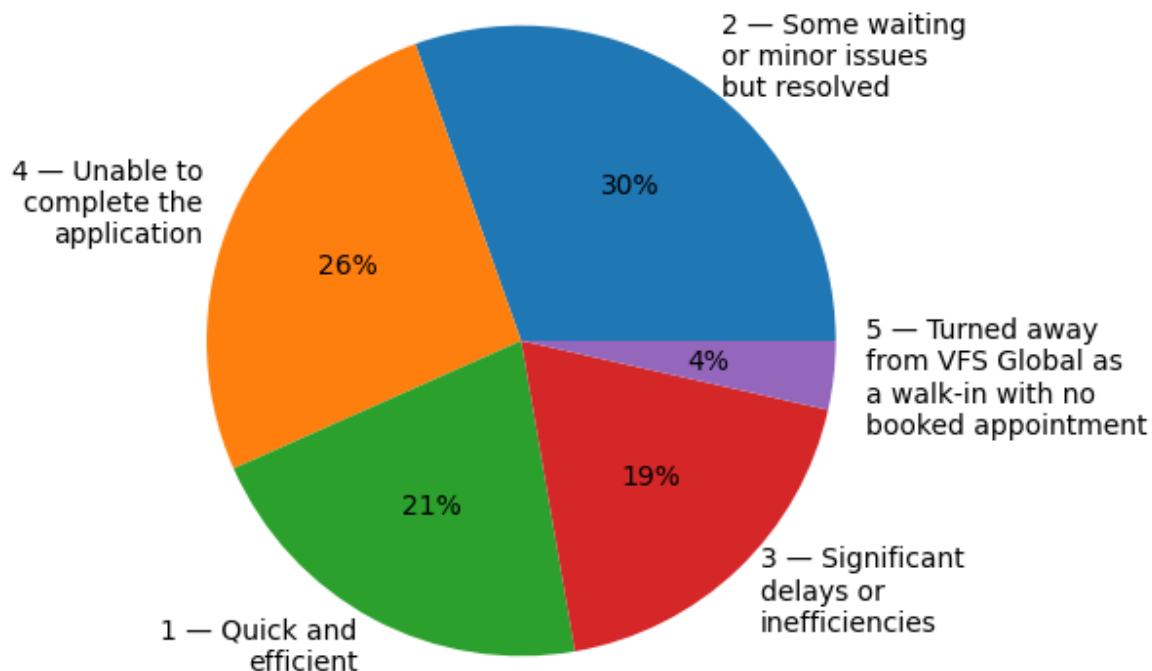
Q15. How long it took to secure appointment – number of responses: 282



A large share of respondents reported waiting extended periods before securing an appointment, confirming that delays begin at the point of entry into the system and not only during processing.

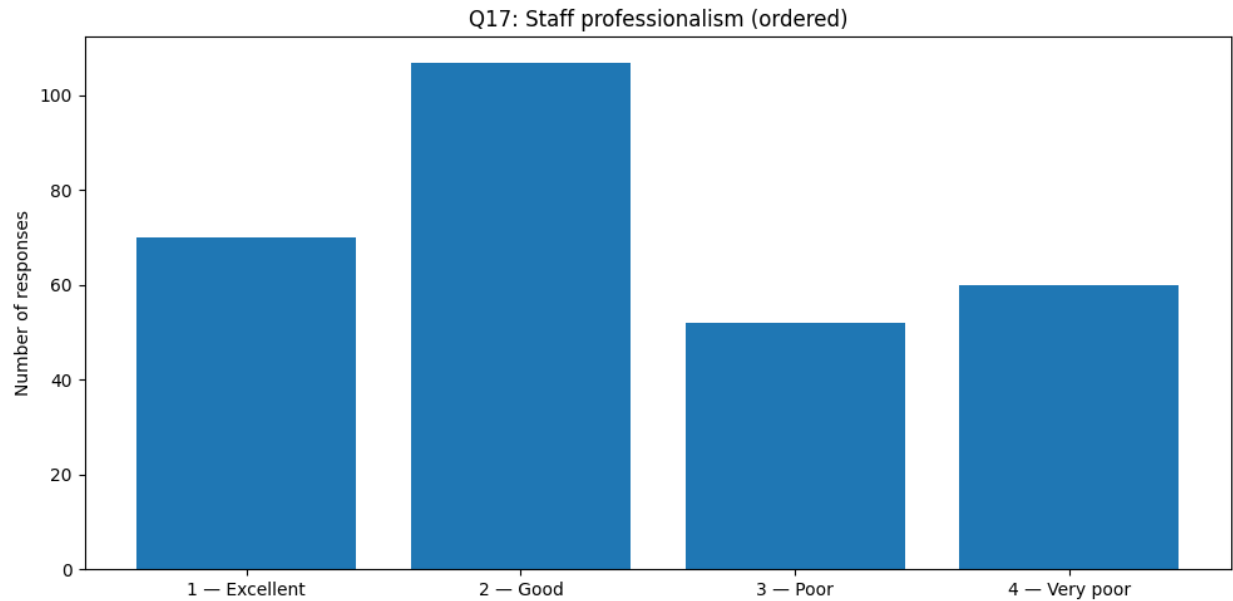
SECTION FOUR – AT THE APPOINTMENT

Q16. Was your appointment handled effectively? – number of responses: 256



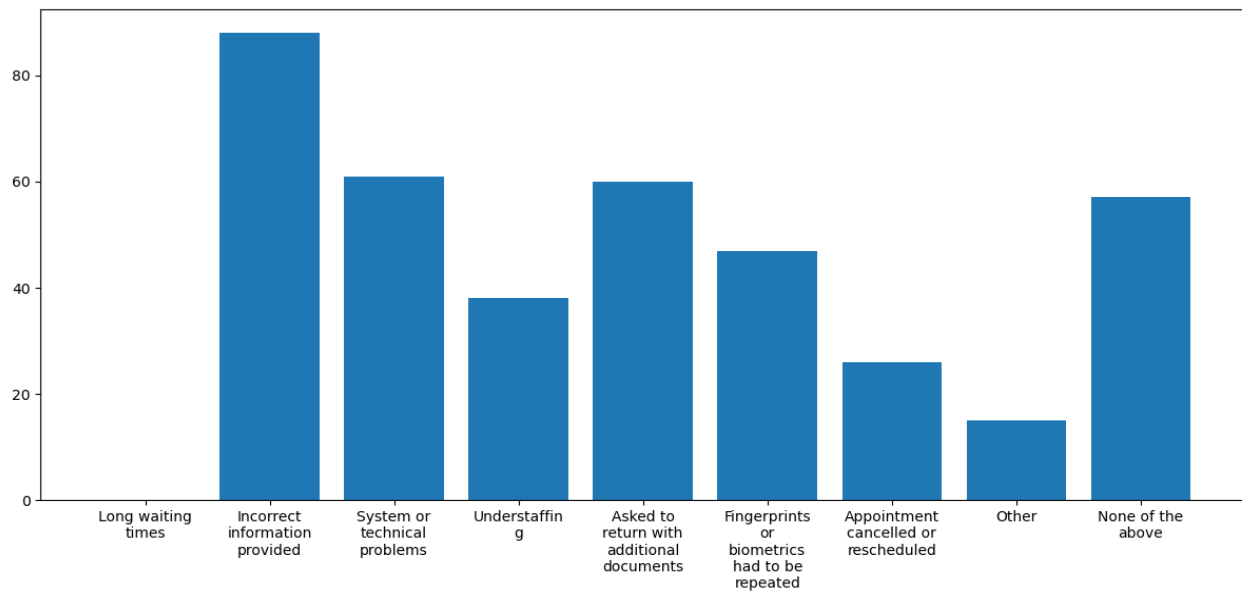
Responses to this question indicate that experiences at appointments were mixed, with a portion of respondents reporting efficient and smooth processes, while a significant number of respondents experienced delays, disruptions, or were unable to complete their applications. This suggests that appointment handling is inconsistent, with service quality varying across locations and providers. For many applicants, inefficiencies at this stage contribute to extended timelines and additional costs.

Q17. Professionalism and helpfulness of staff – number of responses: 289



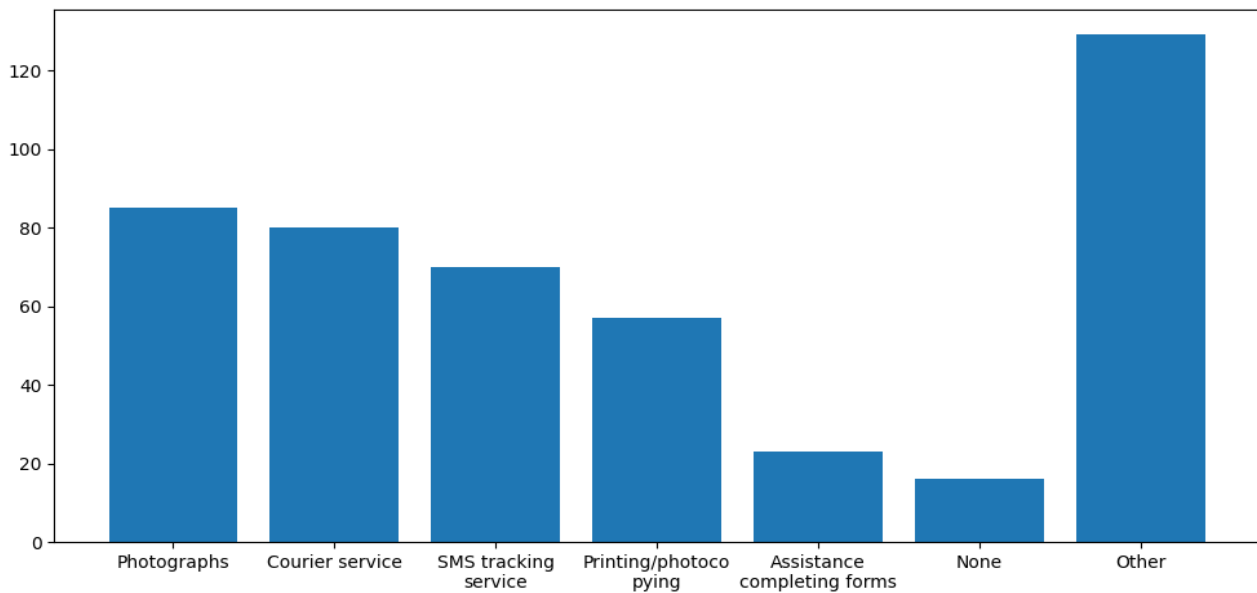
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Q18. Issues at the appointment (select all that apply) – number of responses: 289



Out of 289 respondents, only 85 reported no issues, while 477 issues were recorded across categories, indicating that the majority of applicants encounter problems during their appointments, including long waiting times, incorrect information, and understaffing. Other issues mentioned include 2nd trip and travel costs, too far to travel to nearest VFS Global office (thousands of kilometres), unable to access an appointment, unaware of outsourcing to VFS Global.

**19. Additional services purchased (select all that apply) – number of responses:
289**

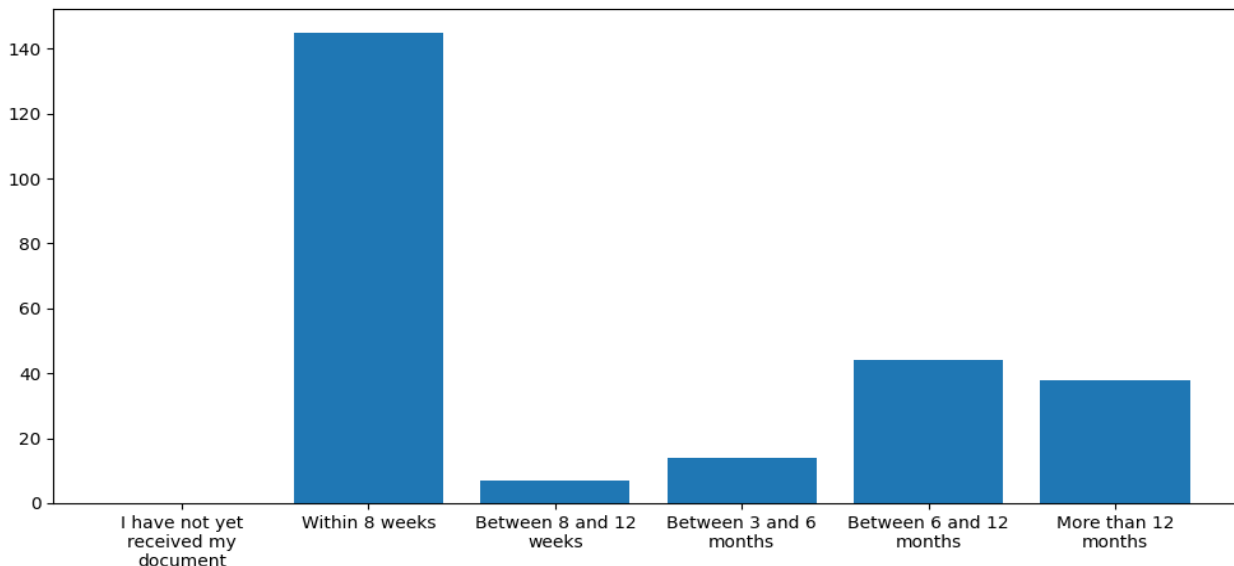


Many respondents reported incurring additional costs for services such as photographs, courier delivery, SMS notifications, and document assistance. These additional requirements contribute to increased financial burden and complexity.

Additional note: Many have expressed positive sentiment across social media platforms that they welcome the courier service via VFS Global however again, this is applied inconsistently and should also be available via foreign missions. Also many with reasonable access to foreign missions have expressed frustration at being forced by DHA to pay the VFS service charge for the same service that should be accessible at missions but has now been outsourced.

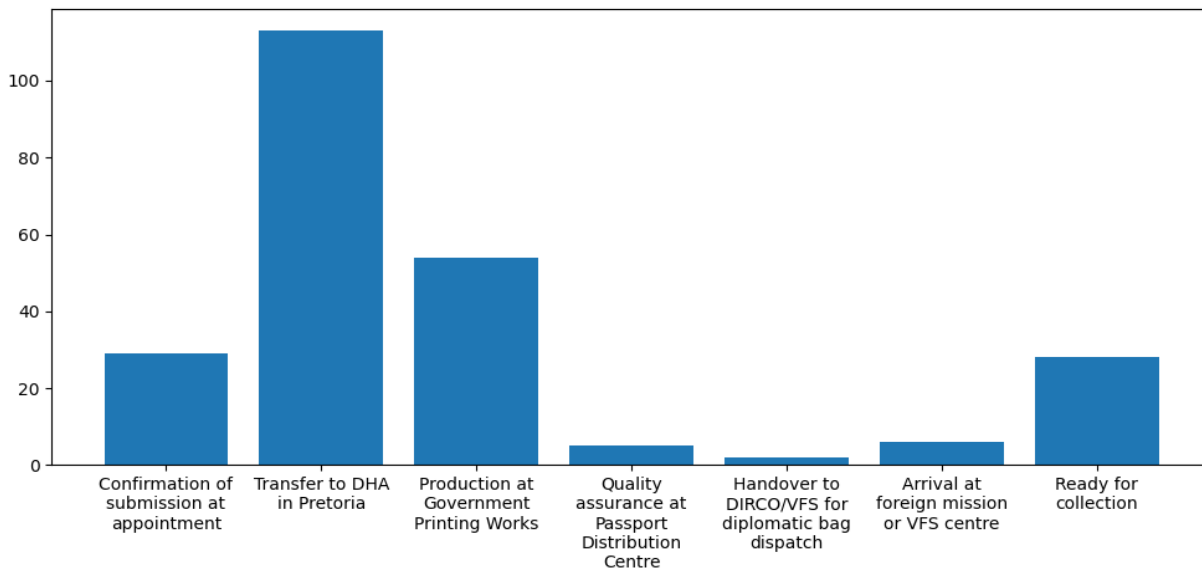
SECTION FIVE – AFTER THE APPOINTMENT

Q20. Time to receive documents – number of responses: 289



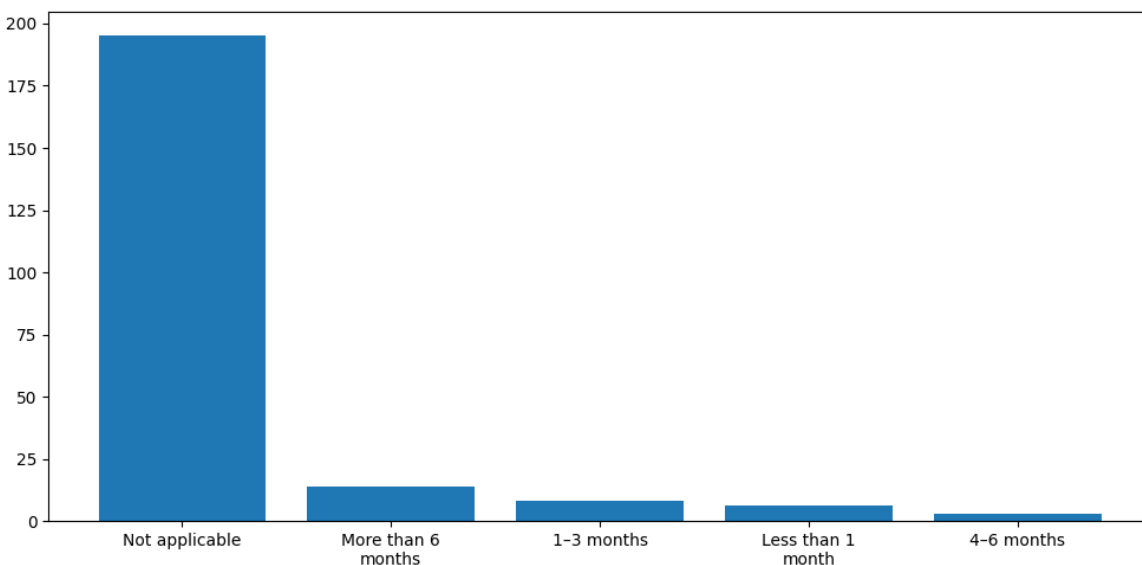
Responses indicate that processing times vary significantly, with many applicants reporting delays extending well beyond expected timelines. A common concern raised is that applicants are often advised by missions or VFS Global centres that they cannot follow up on their applications until at least six months after submission, limiting their ability to seek updates or escalate issues. This lack of responsiveness contributes to prolonged uncertainty and frustration. As part of this civil society initiative, ongoing engagement with affected applicants has revealed a pattern of long-overdue cases requiring intervention, suggesting that delays are not solely due to processing volume but may also reflect basic administrative shortcomings within the system. The absence of proactive communication and effective case management further exacerbates these delays, undermining confidence in the overall process.

Q21. Which stages could you track? (select all that apply) – number of responses: 289



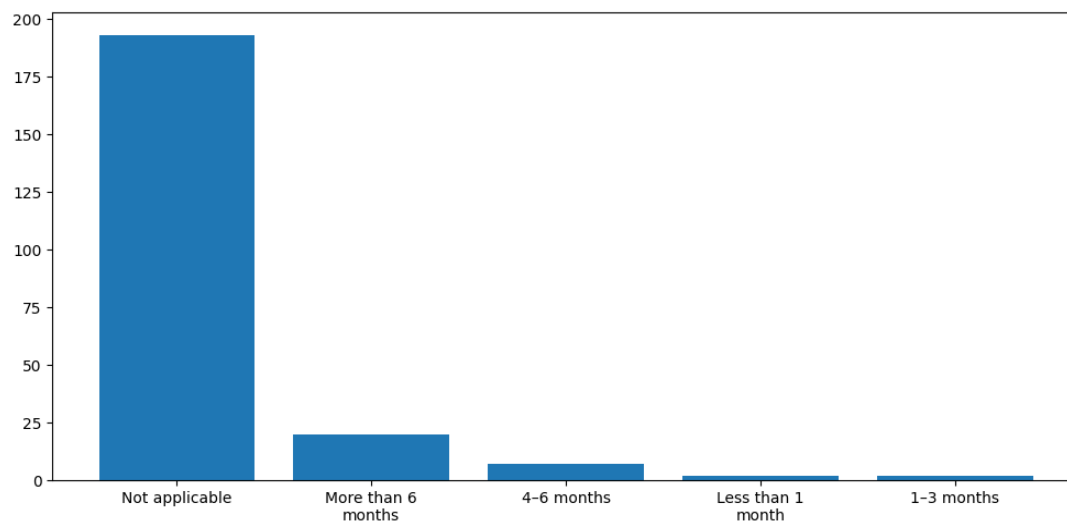
Out of 289 respondents, only 237 tracking instances were recorded, with most limited to initial confirmation (113 responses) and very few able to track later stages such as production (5) or quality assurance (2). This demonstrates limited transparency and poor visibility in the process.

Q22. Time to be contacted after resubmission (if applicable) – number of responses: 289



This question specifically examined how quickly applicants were notified if there was an issue with their application. Responses indicate that notification timelines are inconsistent and often delayed, with many respondents reporting that they were either informed only after significant time had passed or were not notified at all. In several cases, applicants only became aware of issues when proactively following up or attending further appointments, resulting in avoidable delays and repeated visits. The lack of timely communication at this stage has a compounding effect on processing times, as unresolved issues can remain unaddressed for extended periods. These findings suggest weaknesses in early-stage application review and communication processes, where delays in identifying and communicating issues contribute directly to inefficiency and increased burden on applicants.

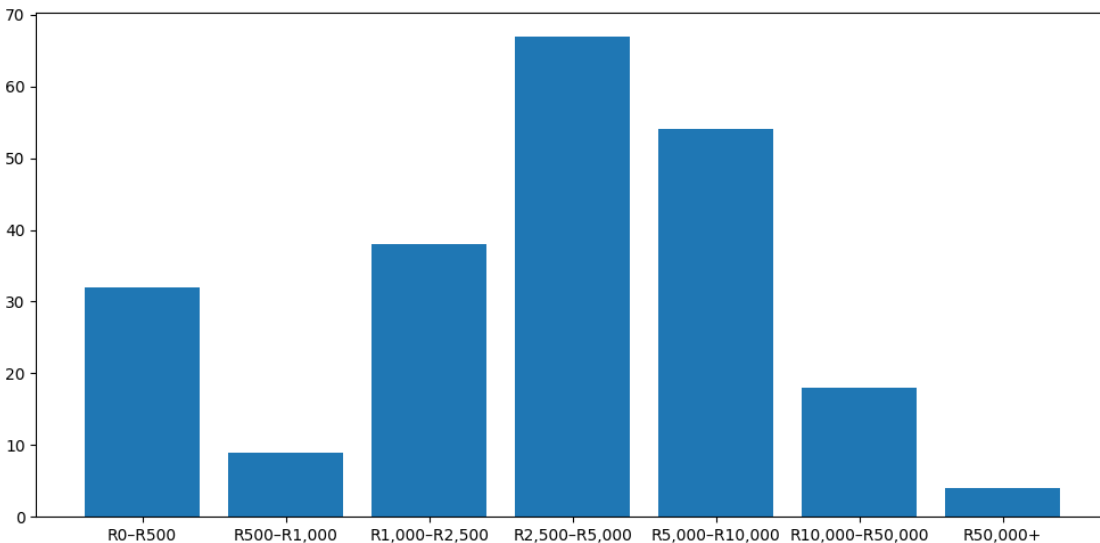
**Q23. Time to receive after resubmission (if applicable) – number of responses:
226**



This question examined how long it took for applicants to receive their documents after resolving any issues with their application. Responses indicate that processing delays often persist even after issues have been addressed, with many applicants reporting extended waiting periods before receiving their documents. In several cases, respondents experienced additional delays without clear explanation or updated timelines, suggesting that the resolution of issues does not necessarily lead to efficient continuation of processing. This points to gaps in workflow continuity and case management, where applications may not be promptly reactivated or prioritised after issues are resolved. The lack of clear communication and predictable timelines at this stage further contributes to uncertainty and frustration for applicants.

No question 24 due to misnumbering on survey.

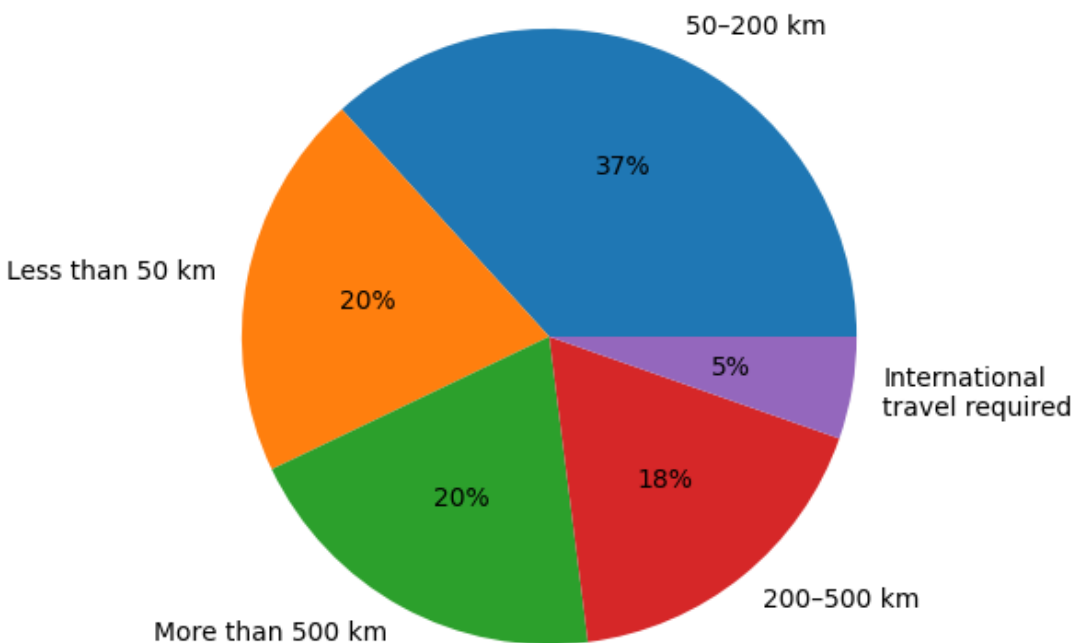
Q25. Total cost distribution (ZAR, estimated as of 05 April 2026) – number of responses: 229



Includes: Application fees, VFS service fees, Travel costs, Flights, Accommodation, Transport/parking, Courier fees

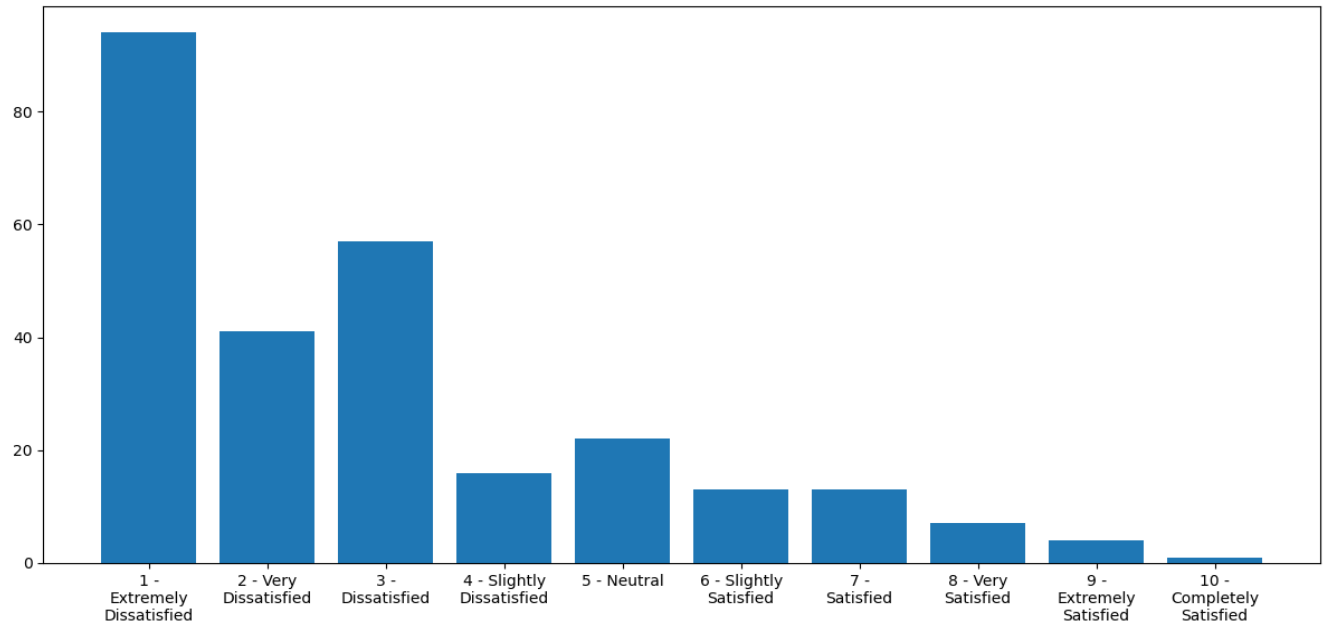
Out of 289 respondents, 229 provided cost information (222 usable responses), showing that the vast majority incurred significant expenses in order to access Home Affairs services abroad. Reported costs varied widely but frequently included travel, accommodation, courier services, photographs, and additional administrative fees, often compounded by the need for multiple appointments. For many respondents, total costs reached several thousand Rand or more, particularly where long-distance or international travel was required. These findings highlight that accessing essential services is not only administratively complex but also financially burdensome, with costs often disproportionate to the services being rendered. The financial impact is further exacerbated by system inefficiencies, such as repeat visits and delays, which increase overall expenditure. As a result, cost emerges as a significant barrier to access, particularly for those with limited financial means, raising concerns about equitable access to essential civic services.

Q26. Travel distance to appointment – number of responses: 261



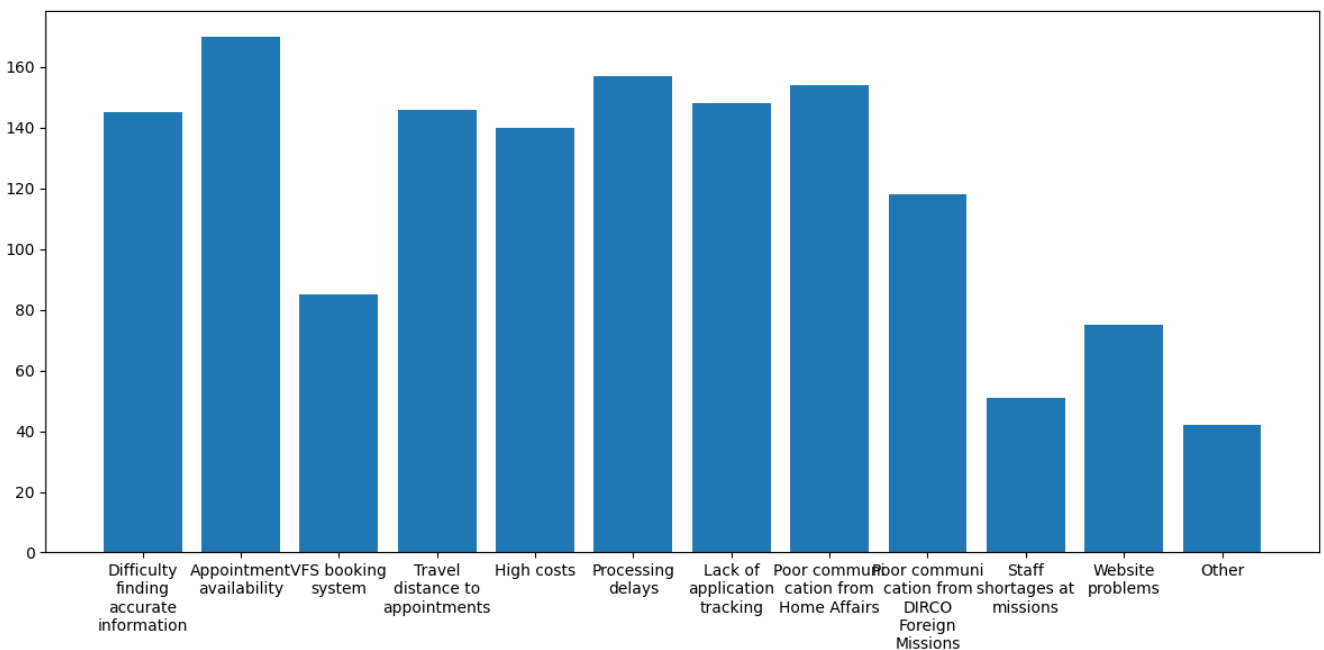
Out of 289 respondents, 261 provided information on travel distance, revealing that a significant proportion were required to travel considerable distances to attend appointments. While some respondents were located within 50 km of a service point, a large share reported travelling between 50 and 500 km, and notably, a substantial number were required to travel more than 500 km or even internationally to access services. These findings highlight the geographic limitations of current service provision, where access is concentrated in a small number of locations, often requiring applicants to incur additional travel, accommodation, and logistical costs. The need for long-distance or cross-border travel not only increases the financial burden but also creates practical barriers for those with work, family, or mobility constraints. As a result, travel distance emerges as a significant structural barrier, reinforcing broader inequalities in access to Home Affairs services abroad.

Q27. Overall experience (1–10) – number of responses: 268



Out of 289 respondents, 268 provided an overall rating of their experience, with results heavily leaning toward dissatisfaction. A clear majority of responses fell within the lower end of the scale, with high concentrations in the “extremely dissatisfied,” “very dissatisfied,” and “dissatisfied” categories, and only a small minority reporting positive experiences. This distribution indicates that negative experiences are not isolated but widespread, reflecting systemic challenges across multiple stages of the service journey. The low levels of satisfaction are consistent with findings across other questions, particularly in relation to appointment access, communication, delays, and cost. Overall, the data suggests that the current system is not meeting user expectations, resulting in a broadly negative perception of Home Affairs service delivery among South Africans abroad.

Q28. Biggest challenges experienced (select all that apply) – number of responses: 289



Out of 289 respondents, a total of 1,431 challenges were reported across categories, indicating that most applicants experienced multiple, overlapping barriers when attempting to access Home Affairs services abroad. The most frequently cited challenges included appointment availability, processing delays, poor communication, lack of application tracking, high costs, and difficulty finding accurate information. The volume and distribution of responses demonstrate that these issues are not isolated, but rather systemic and recurring across different regions and service points. The fact that respondents typically reported more than one challenge highlights the cumulative nature of the burden, where inefficiencies at multiple stages of the process compound one another. This reinforces the conclusion that the current system is not failing in a single area, but is instead affected by interconnected weaknesses across access, communication, processing, and cost, resulting in a consistently difficult user experience.

Q29. Themes highlighted in suggestions/comments – number of responses: 229

A total of 229 respondents provided open-ended feedback, representing approximately 79% of all participants, indicating a high level of engagement and a strong willingness to share detailed experiences and recommendations.

Open-ended responses provided a clear and consistent set of priorities for improvement, reinforcing the findings across the structured survey questions. The most frequently raised issue was the need to **fix booking systems (70 mentions)**, with respondents highlighting ongoing difficulties in securing appointments and navigating unreliable or inaccessible platforms. This was followed by calls to **improve communication (53 mentions)** and **improve information clarity (51 mentions)**, with many respondents reporting unanswered queries, inconsistent guidance, and reliance on unofficial sources. **Concerns around processing delays (31 mentions)** and the **need to increase capacity and staffing (28 mentions)** further point to systemic inefficiencies within service delivery. Additionally, **high costs (22 mentions)** were identified as a significant burden, particularly when combined with travel and repeat visits.

Taken together, these responses demonstrate that applicants are not only experiencing challenges but are also clearly identifying the areas where improvements are most urgently needed. The consistency of these themes across a wide range of respondents indicates that these are not isolated concerns, but widely shared experiences, reinforcing the conclusion that the current system is affected by structural and systemic shortcomings. Importantly, the nature of the feedback reflects a desire for simpler, more accessible, and more transparent processes, highlighting the need for reforms that prioritise user experience, accessibility, and efficiency.