



Reflections of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges' Management on the Impact of Student Support Services (SSS) on Student Retention and Throughput Rates

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Abstract

Students at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges do not always complete their courses within the projected time framework, especially students studying for the National Certificate Vocational programme introduced in 2007. Student support services (SSS) for students is essential to assist students in the challenges they are encountering. In addition, the Department of Higher Education and Training is investing significantly in terms of TVET bursaries through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme(NSFAS) in an attempt to improve the results, retention and throughput rates of these institutions. A qualitative research approach was applied to investigate the impact of SSS on student's retention, success and throughput rates in selected TVET Colleges. Twenty-eight managers from seven TVET colleges participated in the study. The findings indicated that SSS is impacting student retention and throughput rates by giving students support on three levels of support which are pre-entry, on-course and exit level. The findings further show a positive impact on student retention, success and throughput rates and that SSS could add value on both student retention and throughput rate. It is recommended that TVET colleges 's management equip SSS practitioner's trainings and workshops to ensure that they stay abreast with changes. The implication for further study is that SSS at TVET colleges is broad and areas such as non-academic support to students can lead to improved academic achievement of TVET college students.

Keywords: *Technical Vocational and Training (TVET) Colleges; Student Support Services, Students' Throughput Rate, National Certificate Vocational (NC(V)); Dropout Rate, Work Integrated Learning*

Introduction

Students' retention, academic success and throughput rates, do not only depend on the effective implementation of curricula, teaching methods and strategies and a conducive teaching and learning environment but also on student support services applied at TVET colleges (Pitikoe-Chiloane, De Jager &

White, 2022). Since 2008, the Department of Education (DoE) pre-empted that the support systems which TVET colleges use to support their students can have a significant impact on their academic performance and the throughput rates (DoE, 2008). Student Support Services (SSS) within higher education institutions perform an important role to support students holistically in succeeding with their studies, irrespective of their socio-economic problems. Students who lack academic support of various nature, tend to end their studies before completing the course (Wilfong & Miller, 2022). The goal of the SSS programme is to increase the TVET colleges' completion rate, especially first year students, students from low financial income families and those with differently abled learning challenges.

Williamson (2023) argues that substantial and coordinated student support service interventions are not available in the majority of TVET institutions. Mabunda and Ntshoe (2012) also argue that South African TVET college students' low retention, throughput and dropout rates, could possibly be linked to the poor levels of student preparedness for entering higher education. Another possible reason could be that higher education institutions in South Africa accept poor student graduation rates as a norm (Fakude, 2012). Ndlela and Brysiewicz (2018) point out that South African higher education students have a graduation rate of 15 per cent, which is one of the lowest in the world (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). The high dropout rate is even worse at the TVET colleges, especially students enrolled for the three-year National Certificate Vocational (NC[V]) programme. According to Khuluvhe and Mathibe (2021) the NC(V) was introduced in 2007 as an initiative to improve the South African economy by developing and training students in scarce artisan skills. It was emphasised by National Development Plan (NDP) that the TVET colleges are expected to improve the economic growth and job creation basis for the South African economy. In support of the NDP, the National Development Artisan Strategy (NDAS) projects that the TVET colleges offer, should be able to produce 30 000 qualified artisans by 2030 (DHET, 2017).

However, the inordinate amount of years that registered students spend at TVET Colleges to complete the full NC(V) qualification is alarming (Khuluvhe & Mathibe, 2021). The excessive time that students take to graduate is a major concern and action is required to support these students to graduate successfully (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018).

Till to date, limited research studies have been conducted to establish the possible effect of SSS on TVET college students' academic success. Therefore, the study investigated the impact of SSS on students' retention and throughput rates in TVET colleges, using the perspectives of TVET college managers. In order to establish how SSS can effectively assist in increasing student retention and throughput rates, the study focuses on the following research question:

Management's reflections on how diverse student support services impact TVET college students' retention and throughput rates?

Background

High student retention and though put rates is a major concern for tertiary institutions globally (Aljohani, 2016). The throughput rate is described as the rate at which a cohort successfully completes a qualification within the stipulated timeframe for that qualification (DHET, 2021).

The high demand of TVET college programmes can be traced back to 2014 where one million students were registered in TVET colleges and increased to 2.3 million students in 2016 (DHET 2018, 31). However, of the 2016 registered students, 177 261 TVET students were enrolled for NC(V) programmes and 429 026 for NATED (Technical) programmes (DHET 2018, 31). Thus NC(V) students represent around 70% of all TVET enrolments. Therefore, the concern is that the National Certificate pass

rate for NC(V) is still low. Khuluvhe and Mathibe (2021) pointed out that students who enrolled for NC(V) Level 2 in 2016 and completed Level 4 in 2018 had an overall throughput rate of 9.2%. The following year Khuluvhe and Mathibe (2022) indicated that there was a slight improvement, as the overall throughput rate of 2017 NCV Level 2 student cohort was 10.4%, these were students who enrolled for NC(V) Level 2 in 2017 and completed Level 4 in 2019 (three years) which is the expected time frame to complete this qualification. To enhance the throughput rate the SSS programme was established in 2004 in most of the Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges, now renamed as TVET Colleges (DHET, 2019). The aim of the SSS was to assist and support students with maximum assistance to succeed in their studies. The support was required for the following two programmes offered by TVET colleges: To enhance the throughput rate the SSS programme was established in 2004 in most of the Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges, now renamed as TVET Colleges (DHET, 2020). The aim of the SSS was to assist and support students with maximum assistance to succeed in their studies. The support was required for the following two programmes offered by TVET colleges: The National Accredited Technical and Vocational Education Diploma (NATED) which includes, Business studies- following a semester system and Engineering studies following a trimester system and the National Certificate Vocational (NC(V) which is a three-year qualification. The curriculum of level 2 students is equivalent to grade 10, level 3 is equivalent to grade 11 and level 4 equals grade 12. Both programmes are funded by DHET bursaries, called the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (DHET, 2019(a)).

Various research studies, both local and international have been conducted to support the allegation of students' high dropout rate. Paideya and Bengesai (2017:55) indicated that the retention and throughput rates in higher education is a global problem and that high attrition rates are severe for the previously disadvantaged students. The challenge concerning students dropping out from vocational training colleges shows similarities across the globe. In more developed countries such as Britain, Switzerland and Australia, students are expressing dissatisfaction in the selection of their course and in some instances, a desire to exit early and start earning a salary (DHET, 2020). Moreover, Hanson (2023) indicated that in the United States of America, 40 Million Americans were college dropouts in July 2021.

In South Africa a lack of finances, ineffective pre-entry education, foundational programs that can alleviate language problems, motivational issues, mathematics skills (a fundamental skill in many TVET colleges' technical subjects), reading and thinking skills and problem solving skills, study, time management skills, the ability to set work goals and how to prioritize tasks (DHET,2020). All these challenges contribute to high dropout rates in TVET colleges as well as low degree completion rates (Farooq, 2017).

The previous minister of Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Naledi Pandor, declared 2014 - 2024 as the "Decade of the Artisan" with the aim of developing qualified artisans in TVET colleges to limit the scarce skills shortage in South Africa (TVET College Times, 2019). DHET (2013) defined the main purpose of TVET colleges as to train young school leavers, providing them with skills, knowledge and positive attitudes necessary for employment in the labour market. Especially for occupations related to engineering, construction industries, tourism and hospitality and business and management. The importance of TVET colleges is well described by Balkrishen and Mestry (2016) who indicated that colleges are uniquely positioned to provide students with intermediary and higher level education and training that can lead directly to employment, provided that the education and training are effective.

The implementation of NC(V) programmes was intended to transform South African education and training (DHET, 2013). However, the low pass rate of students completing NC(V) as well as the high failure and dropout rates could affect a country's economic growth, which includes both the employability and financial wellbeing of individual students (Allen, 2012).

The low throughput rate also contributed to the development of a stigma attached to students studying at TVET Colleges. Often TVET colleges are associated with: practical skill development programmes and qualifications; low graduation and throughput rates arising from high failure and low retention rates; low technical and cognitive skills of graduates; a lack of relevance and responsiveness to the needs of the economy, the shortage of managerial skills and capacity, low funding of the FET college sector, the absence of effective management information systems to inform decision making and a shortage of suitably qualified lecturers to drive vocational education (Balkrishen & Mestry, 2016).

To enhance the successful throughput rates of TVET colleges effective student support services programmes are essential (South Africa, 2018). In addition, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) introduced the TVET Student Attendance and Punctuality Policy in 2013 for students to attend at least 80% of their classes in order to qualify for DHET college bursaries, in an attempt to improve students' throughput rates. The SSS programme is a group of activities used to enhance students' academic performance and include academic and non-academic support (Ndlela & Brysiewicz, 2018). The SSS activities are grouped into *pre-entry* support (career guidance, placement and selection test, induction and orientation), on-course support (academic support, tutoring, extra classes, financial aid, personal support, health and wellness, counselling, student governance and exit support) and *exit support* (work integrated learning [WIL], work based experience [WBE], learnerships, internships, apprenticeship, entrepreneurship and further studies at institutions of higher education).

Although many factors lead to demotivated students, financial constraints are the most common factor. Manik (2014) agrees, that there is usually a combination of factors that contributes to a student dropping out from a course, but the main cause is mostly a lack of finance coupled with other socio-economic factors. Sanchez (2012:12) established that 56% of student participants identified insufficient financial resources as the primary cause for leaving the institution. Furthermore, 55% still enrolled in the institution responded that insufficient financial resources are the primary cause why they leave college before they complete their studies.

The SSS assists with the admission of students with different learning abilities to a college programme and where the necessary support structures for these students are available (South Africa, 2019). Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure that all TVET colleges have adequate facilities to engage students with different abilities in learning and physical activities (DHET, 2013). In addition, counselling services provided by SSS at TVET colleges, provide valuable services for students in need of extra support to complete their qualifications. Cilliers, Pretorius and Van der Westhuizen (2010) are of the opinion that students often need assistance when trying to cope with the pressure of examinations, struggling to adapt to tertiary institutions and when applying study skills to learn effectively. Additionally, SSS is also expected to assist students with exit support, where final year students are efficiently prepared for the workplace, or become an entrepreneur or further their studies at higher education institutions. Many graduates face the dilemma of not acquiring workplace experience when exiting the TVET colleges and when entering the industry (DHET, 2017). This cause many college graduates to be unemployed. Therefore, TVET colleges have a responsibility to provide their students with hands-on work integrated learning (WIL) to enhance their students' prospects of future employment (DHET, 2013). Thus workplace learning should form an integral part of the qualification and programme design.

Theoretical Framework

The TVET College student requires interactive teaching and learning activities in a conducive learning environment that offers opportunities where they can observe appropriate behaviours and apply hands on activities (DHET, 2013). Therefore, promote effective modelling, the TVET College managers

and lecturers are responsible to model appropriate behaviours and help students to set realistic expectations for their academic accomplishments. This is in line with the Social Learning Theory of Bandura, that focuses on observable behaviour for learning (Maphalala, 2016). The theory emphasises that people learn through observation, imitation of other people's behavior.

McLeod (2018) emphasises vicarious reinforcement where a person learns by observing the success of another person, which means students who are not successful will emulate the behaviour of the successful ones. In addition, the study also includes the social constructivist theory of Lev Vygotsky's that propagates that knowledge is co-constructed and that individuals learn from one another (Hein, 1991). When tasks are too difficult to complete individually, TVET students can interactively work with other students or guided by the lecture to complete the task successfully. Hein (1991) further states that the term constructivism refers to learners who construct knowledge themselves with the necessary support, interactions with others and the application of knowledge in real life situations. The principles of constructivism can be applied to learning at TVET colleges to increase both retention and throughput rates. With the constructivism theory in mind students need to participate actively in classes and not only acquire theoretical knowledge but should also be able to apply the practical skills they have developed. Thus TVET college students are given the opportunities to display their talents and abilities with the necessary support. For example, NCV students are supported with sufficient time to conduct practical work at each level, while NATED students do apprenticeships for engineering and internships for business studies at the end of their studies before they graduate.

Furthermore, involvement of students in academic and non-academic activities is important as it can lead to positive success and throughput rates results. Hurst, Wallace and Nixon (2013) concur by stating that a student's interactive participation in social and academic activities play a vital role in academic success. Therefore, the SSS programmes should play an active role in students' academic and non-academic activities with emphasis on academic success.

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative research approach guided this study. The researchers were able to engage with participants and to share their meaningful everyday experiences. Participants were purposively selected from the following seven TVET colleges: Ehlanzeni TVET College (seven campuses), Gert Sibande TVET College (six campuses), Nkangala TVET College (five campuses), False Bay TVET College (five campuses), Goldfields TVET College (four campuses), Majuba TVET College (seven campuses) and Orbit TVET College (three campuses). Each of the TVET colleges had a central management office and only one campus was selected from each of the seven Colleges. Participants of the seven central offices included the deputy principal (n=1), academic and curriculum manager (n=1), campus manager (n=1) and a Head of department (HOD)(n=1) of each central office. In total 28 interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth information.

Data Collection

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from a higher education institution in South Africa, the central offices of seven TVET colleges and the seven participating campuses. All participants were informed regarding the voluntary nature of participating in the study. The disclosure of the research methods and presented findings were discussed with the participants prior to the study. Participants were informed on their right to withdraw at any time.

The issues of reliability, validity and trustworthiness were also considered. The findings were shared with participants to ensure the correctness and validity of this study. Trustworthiness was also

considered in accordance with Guba's model of trustworthiness, which included the truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality (White, 2003). Data was collected using both face to face and an online platform to conduct interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using research questions that were compiled with the social learning and observation theory of Bandura and Vygotsky's social constructivism in mind. Interviews were audio taped with the permission of the participants, and probing questions used to gain more clarity and an in-depth understanding of responses. Only accessible participants who represented selected types of characteristics of interest were interviewed to establish on College management reflection on the impact of SSS on TVET students' success and throughput rates.

In answering the main research question of the study the main aim was to establish from TVET college managers how SSS impact TVET student's retention and throughput rates. The collected data deriving from the interviews was grouped into themes according to similarities.

Analysis of Data and Findings

Participants' reflections were grouped in themes and categorised according to similarities. The most common responses of participants were quoted verbatim.

Many TVET colleges are experiencing challenges with student retention and throughput rates.

Deputy Principals Academics (DPA'S) managers indicated that they were experiencing challenges with student retention and throughput rates and is a challenge that recurs every year. This implies that not all students are retained, which affects TVET colleges' throughput rates. The majority of participants indicated that most students drop out early in their academic career usually at college entrance level which is noted:

As a college we do experience challenges especially with the retention and also the throughput rates. The challenge is that student's use to dropout along the way throughout the year, in most cases students that are dropping out, they move from one programme to the next, most of them they are moving from NCV. Initially they register NCV in a big number throughout the year they dropout changing from NCV to Report 191.

There are students who come to college to look for space and they register for any available course and within a short while they become bored and leave the college, while some apply for NSFAS only.

Most students tend to register for different programmes in a short while and some merely register to obtain financial aid from NFSAS without completing their course.

Curriculum Managers also indicated that they are experiencing challenges in regard to student retention and throughput rates. The following responses were quoted:

There is a high level of dropouts. The reason could be late payment of NSFAS funds as about 99% of students are reliant on NSFAS.

The report 191 drop-out rates is high in engineering N1, 2 and 3 because students lacked mathematics and science background from high school.

Sometimes colleges selected students with good results but some of them drop out in June and go to university as they qualified because of their good results. In 2020 about 50% of college students dropped out to rather register with a

We have a huge dropout [rate], specifically on Level 2, because I think the students just want entrance into the college without actually minding which programme they end up doing because they want to get money.

Sometimes the students think “that is what I want to do”, but when they are in the programme, they realise that it is not what they really want to do. It is normally in the entry level where the biggest dropouts are.

Challenges such as students not guided in selecting the appropriate programme they want to follow, financial constraints and students opting to study at university lead to high dropout rates.

The most common responses of Campus managers are quoted below.

At Level 2 we use to register two hundred students, but if you look at the throughput rate at the end of the course, three years will end up with less than a hundred students usually with seventy to eighty students. Thus most of the students drop out from Level 2, 3 until Level 4. The reasons are: Some of the students joined colleges because of NSFAS. They view NSFAS as another way of making some money.

Students register and come to campus whenever they feel like and what is worse is when they get money that particular week they won't be coming to the campus. They will be spending money and so forth, and if they don't have money, they will be coming to us and say we don't have money to travel and when they have money, they stay at home again to spend the money. These reasons cause them not to progress to the next level or to complete the examination process. This leads to low throughput rate.

Those who could not attend classes will drop out.

Students tend to change programmes frequently, do not attend classes and mismanage the funds they receive from NFSAS for personal expenses. This contribute to students not being able to register again for the next year due to a lack of funding.

Heads of Departments most common response was:

Most dropouts are from the entry level, more especially from NC(V). The high dropout rate of students occurred at entry level rather than higher levels, during their first year.

Participants indicated that TVET colleges are unable to retain most of their registered students until they complete their studies as they drop out at entry level.

Lack of pre-entry support, career guidance and placement procedures

Deputy Principal Academics responded as follows:

SSS provides student counselling and career guidance to students in order to select the appropriate course. The dropout could be the result that students were not guided properly at entry level what programme to follow.

Pre entry support and career guidance should be provided by SSS before the students register for a course at the college. Students have to receive career guidance, orientation and induction from which students will make an informed decision in accordance with their ability, aptitude and potential.

Curriculum Managers agree that career guidance could assist students to make informed decisions when choosing their academic programmes and added the following:

Courses are sometimes full, and then students are forced to take a course that do not always suit them

When selecting programmes students do not always realise they have seven subjects and they have to work hard.

Some campus managers pointed out that students were given career guidance and all new students did a placement test or college readiness test before they could register. Selection was made after prospective students completed the placement test to see whether they met the set admission criteria and if a learning challenge is detected students are referred to an occupational therapist. One of the TVET college campus managers indicated that they are not doing placement tests at their College.

Head of Departments also confirmed that students are given career guidance and placement tests in their college before they are registered in a programme. But still it is found that students are still indecisive in what course they want to follow and students are not always supported by SSS effectively in the transition from high school to college level.

The importance of academic support

Deputy principal academics mentioned that they are offering students' academic support in all their colleges. The intervention programme of SSS included academic support which is necessary to improve the throughput rates of students. Academic support included:

The creation of a conducive learning environment where students are motivated to perform academically at their very best, the teaching of study skills, note taking in classes and there is also peer support where we train peer educators and the peer counsellors so that they are able to speak to people of their own age and of their own gender.

Lecturers are requested to refer students who are not performing well to SSS so that they can be assessed to determine whether the problem has to do with learning disability or maybe is just a question of strictly not attending classes.

Peer academic leaders or peer tutors are assisting by providing tutoring to underperforming students. SSS also assist with guidance in how to use study methods, providing students with previous question papers and how to approach questions during examination.

The TVET college curriculum managers were in agreement as they indicated that they offered their students tutors to assist those who were struggling academically. SSS provides academic support such as study methods, peer tutoring and referring students to other professionals to support their students. Responses included the following:

SSS organised tutoring classes, and motivational sessions and provided students with study guidelines. If they realised that the student's needs were beyond what they could provide, they would refer the student to government institutions.

We had intervention classes which are conducted by lecturers as well as peer tutors. We prepare online material for the students so that once they are registered, they are linked to all the subjects online and they also access the learning material on line. For instance, when a lecturer made a recording of a class, we upload it and they could also have online material such as old question papers available to students.

Peer tutoring is encouraged to enable students to study further and to understand unclear content and extra online support material is available.

Campus managers' mostly said the same as the other participant, by saying that they support students by providing them with study skills and tutoring support, they do academic intervention and utilise Peer Academic Leaders (PAL) to give students' academic support.

Head of Departments indicated that by giving students' academic support they will be improving student retention and throughput rates. It was also indicated that:

As it is mandatory by department of Higher Education for students to write placement test, the results of such test should be used to provide academic support immediately after enrolling students. Intervention as a results of placement test results can assist with academic support without waiting for students to fail first tests.

Lack of financial Support

All participants mentioned that a lack of financial support is a major challenge and contributes to one of the reasons why students to drop out from the TVET colleges. Finance is a challenge to most students at TVET colleges. They indicated that majority of students at colleges depend on financial aid to pay for their tuition, accommodation and transport. Lack of financial support has a serious effect on their studies. The following comments were also made:

SSS should provide student assistance when they apply for NSFAS or any other private funders or financial assistance from the college. Finance support is important to ensure students will be able to study and attend classes without blaming their financial situation, that they are without travelling or any other allowances to attend their classes. SSS should also be able to assist students deal with socio-economic challenges even outside the college".

Late payment of student contributes to a high level of dropouts as about 99% of students are reliant on NSFAS and cannot register without funding. On the other hand, some students only wait for the monies to be transferred in their accounts, then they drop out from College.

It was also pointed out that NSFAS bursaries are not awarded to students who failed and opted to enrol for the same subject or level twice, unless the student was completing his/her academic course. It must be noted that the majority of students at TVET colleges come from disadvantaged backgrounds and as such have financial difficulties. Some come from families where no one is working while others depend on government grants and/or grandparents' pensions.

Social Impediments

Some participants mentioned social challenges as the cause of low retention and throughput rates at TVET colleges. They indicate that sometimes students drop out of college because of social challenges experienced at home. Comments were listed as follows:

A student is also a social being and therefore challenges surrounding them affects them. Often students are from child-headed families and has to provide for their siblings. Students with possible social challenges were referred for counselling sessions to assist them in their academic careers.

Attention is not always given to physical and social aspects but only to the intellectual challenges students encounter. Students need holistic support and should be assisted as soon as possible to avoid academic challenges. SSS must be equipped with a psychologist, career guidance officer and a nurse. Students can consult a psychologist when it is needed (some students are addicted to drugs). If there is a person on campus that could deal with the mental part and the nurse that could deal with the physical needs of the student, the dropout rate could possibly be reduced at an early stage. If these support structures are not in place, the students could encounter more challenges and eventually drop out from college.

The SSS sought to provide students with counselling and assists students not to drop out from college but to stay until they have completed their course.

Lack of participation in extra-mural activities

Participants in some of the TVET colleges indicated that in their colleges they motivated their students to perform academically and in extracurricular activities. The following comments were made:

The students who are involved in extra curriculum activities such as, soccer, netball, volleyball, debate, arts and culture and recreational activities are mostly those students who are also performing well in their academic courses.

SSS organises extramural activities such as games for students to participate and stay fit and healthy, as 'a healthy mind stays in a healthy body', SSS is involved in all the extra mural activities in which students participate.

The participants indicated that extra mural activities have a positive impact on improving retention and throughput rates of students. By taking part in extra mural activities students are supported as a social being and could possibly increase their chances in completing their studies.

Discussion

The TVET colleges are experiencing low student retention and throughput rates due to various challenges students experience. To combat the extreme time that TVET students take to complete their qualifications, action is required to support these students effectively (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018). Since 2008, the Department of Education (DoE) encouraged TVET colleges to use support services to support students academically and socially in an effort to enhance students' academic performance (DoE, 2008). The aim of SSS is to apply various support structures to increase the TVET college students' completion rate. However, Williamson (2023) points out that the majority of TVET colleges do not have effective support services available for students when selecting their courses at 1st year level or applying for financial assistance. Moreover, Mabunda and Ntshoe (2012) argue that South African TVET college students are often not sufficiently prepared to enter higher education from secondary school level.

The findings revealed that if all support activities on the three levels of student support, namely pre-entry, on-course and exit level are aligned, the retention and throughput of students can be improved. It was also found that students tend to frequently change from one course to another, especially from

NC(V) to NATED courses which increases the low completion rates. To avoid the change of courses, Balkrishen (2016) emphasises the importance of the provision of career guidance to ensure selected courses are according to their aptitude, interests and abilities. This was also in agreement with the findings where participants indicated the importance of providing prospective and new students with pre-entry support, in order to retain them at the TVET college until their studies are completed. By providing them with career guidance could enable them make informed decisions when registering for a course, not only according to their aptitude but also according to scarce skills that are required for economic growth globally.

Prior to registration in a course most TVET colleges conduct placement tests, which assists the SSS to identify possible needs of students and academic support required. Academic support includes: effective study skills, how to plan a study time table and to adhere to it, effective time management, planning and completing of academic and practical assignments, reading skill development and taking notes of content during lectures. In addition, it was indicated that peer tutoring and computer aided support are academic support structures that could contribute to students' success rates. Wilfong and Miller, (2022) caution that students who lack academic support, mostly end their studies before completing the course.

The main challenges that were identified and are mostly in agreement with the challenges raised by DHET (2020) and Faroa (2017) by various TVET college managers were, lack of: *pre-entry support, career guidance to select the correct courses, placement procedures, academic support*, financial aid, motivation to complete the course, participation in extra-mural activities and acknowledgement of students as social beings. Student Support Services should assist firstly, students to apply for financial aid in order for them to pay their tuition, allowances, accommodation and transport to attend classes. Findings revealed difficult circumstances at home force students to leave college at an early stage of their course, to seek for employment to support their families financially, as there is no one working at home or parents are unemployed. Participants further explained that some were from child headed families and had to provide for and look after their siblings, which could contribute to low retention and throughput rates. It was found that participation in extra-mural activities make students feel part of the campus community and may lead to a higher academic success rate.

Recommendations

The study pointed out that TVET Colleges prioritise SSS activities that could contribute to students' academic success and assist TVET colleges to retain students in their courses until they complete. It is further recommended that:

- The SSS in the TVET Colleges be managed as separate units to ensure that students who encounter academic, financial and social challenges at the commencement of their studies are immediately identified and supported. Pre-entry, exit sss support should be compulsory for all.
- The TVET Colleges increase students' academic support resources (financial, accommodation, study material) and human capacity to accommodate the disadvantaged students and possibly improve the retention and throughput rates.
- The TVET Colleges should also introduce extra-curricular activities within the sport, health and wellness spaces to improve students' wellbeing that could lead to academic success.

The study also showed limitations as only seven TVET colleges in Mpumalanga Province, KwaZulu-Natal, Northwest, Free-state and Western Cape Provinces participated in the study and the results cannot be generalised for all TVET Colleges in South Africa. A single research approach was utilised to collect data which could also affect the triangulation of findings.

Conclusion

The research study examined the reflections of college management on the impact of SSS on student retention and throughput rates at public TVET Colleges. The sector requires effective training of students to improve the low throughput rates. As a result of colleges enrolling students from poor educational and socio-economic backgrounds, student support services at these colleges should be able to address academic challenges that are faced by these students. TVET Colleges need to prioritise student support services to make it student centred and responsive to students' needs.

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