

**THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN TWO  
TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL AND TRAINING COLLEGES IN KWAZULU-NATAL**

**by**

**MUNYARADZI MUCHINERIPI**

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**Supervisor: Professor Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor**

**Co-Supervisor: Professor Kofi Poku Quan-Baffour**

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## DECLARATION

**Student number: 45018715**

I Munnyaradzi Muchineripi, declare that **“The experiences of students of student support systems in two Technical Vocational and Training Colleges in KwaZulu-Natal”** is my own work, that all sources used or quoted have been indicated and referenced.

Signature



Date: 30 November 2021

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who never lived to see this day.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The South African Technical Vocational, Educational, and Training (TVET) sector has witnessed a surge in enrolment numbers over the years. The diverse student populace faces numerous challenges that interfere with their integration and academic success. In South Africa, the public TVET institutions provide support services to the enrolled student cohort. This qualitative study sought to explore the students' experiences of student support systems on student integration and academic success. The interpretivist paradigm applied in the study allowed this researcher to derive a profound comprehension of student support systems at two selected colleges. The sample comprised 12 student support services staff and 48 students. The purposive sampling method was used to select student support services staff, and convenience sampling selected student participants. Semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions were used to collect data from student support staff and students. The thematic data analysis process used themes derived from the research questions and relevant literature. Using Tinto's Student Integration Theory (STI) and Astin's Student Involvement Theory, this study postulates that students encounter obstacles that interfere with their integration and academic success. The findings from this study suggest that the student support systems play a crucial role in mitigating the challenges experienced by students during their academic journey. Academic support and non-academic support emerged as the crux of student support. The findings suggest that students accessed limited student services at their respective campuses due to a lack of resources and expertise. The study recommends that the institutions establish student support systems that eliminate barriers to student integration and academic achievement. The findings further suggest that the selected institutions can improve student support systems by establishing partnerships with key stakeholders and recruitment of qualified professionals. The findings would make significant contribution to the existing literature on factors that determine student integration and academic success.

**Key Words:** Student Integration, Academic Success, Academic Support, Non-Academic Support, Health and Wellness, Psychological Support, Students with disabilities, Accommodation, Inclusive, Special Populations

## **ABSTRAK**

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Tegniese Beroeps-, Onderwys- en Opleidingsektor (TVET) het oor die jare 'n toename in inskrywingsgetalle gesien. Die diverse student-populasie staan talle uitdagings in die gesig wat inmeng met hul integrasie en akademiese sukses. In Suid-Afrika verskaf die openbare TVET-instellings ondersteuningsdienste aan die ingeskrewe studentekohort. Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie het gepoog om die studente se ervarings van studente-ondersteuningstelsels oor studente-integrasie en akademiese sukses te ondersoek. Die interpretivistiese paradigma wat in die studie toegepas is, het hierdie navorser in staat gestel om 'n diepgaande begrip van studente-ondersteuningstelsels by die geselekteerde kolleges te verkry. Die steekproef het uit 12 studente-ondersteuningsdiens personeel en 48 studente bestaan. Die doelgerigte steekproefmetode is gebruik om studente-ondersteuningsdiens personeel te selekteer, en geriefsteekproefneming van geselekteerde studente deelnemers. Semi-gestruktureerde onderhouds- en fokusgroepsessies is gebruik om data van studente-ondersteuningspersoneel en studente in te samel. Die tematiese data-ontledingsproses het temas gebruik wat uit die navorsingsvrae en relevante literatuur verkry is. Deur Tinto se Studente-Integrasie Teorie (STI) en Astin se Studente Betrokkenheids teorie te gebruik, postuleer hierdie studie dat studente struikelblokke teëkom wat met studente-integrasie en akademiese sukses inmeng. Die bevindinge van hierdie studie dui daarop dat die studente-ondersteuningstelsels 'n deurslaggewende rol speel om die uitdagings wat studente tydens hul akademiese reis ervaar, te versag. Akademiese ondersteuning en nie-akademiese ondersteuning het na vore gekom as die kern van studente-ondersteuning. Die bevindinge dui daarop dat studente beperkte studentediens by hul onderskeie kampusse verkry het weens 'n gebrek aan hulpbronne en kundigheid. Die studie beveel aan dat die instellings studente-ondersteuningstelsels daarstel wat daarop fokus om hindernisse tot studente-integrasie en akademiese prestasie uit te skakel. Die bevindinge dui verder daarop dat die geselekteerde instellings studente-ondersteuningstelsels kan verbeter deur vennootskappe met sleutel-belanghebbendes te vestig en gekwalifiseerde professionele persone te werf. Dit het ook geblyk dat die bevindinge aansienlik sal bydra tot die bestaande literatuur oor faktore wat studente-integrasie en akademiese sukses bepaal.

## **ABSTRACT**

Umkhakha waseNingizimu Afrika Wemisebenzi Yezandla, Ezemfundo, Nokuqeqesha (i-TVET) ube nokwenyuka kwezibalo zokubhalisa eminyakeni edlule. Umphakathi wabafundi ohlukene ubhekene nezinsalelo eziningi eziphazamisa ukuhlanganiswa nempumelelo yabo ezifundweni. ENingizimu Afrika, izikhungo zomphakathi ze-TVET zihlinzeka ngezinsizakalo zokweseka iqoqo labafundi ababhalisile. Lolu cwaningo olusezingeni eliphezulu belufuna ukuhlola ulwazi lwabafundi lwezinhlelo zokusekela abafundi mayelana nokuhlanganiswa kwabafundi nempumelelo ezifundweni. Umqondo wokutolika osetshenziswe ocwaningweni uvumele lo mcwaningi ukuthi athole ukuqonda okujulile kwezinhlelo zokusekela abafundi emakolishi akhethiwe. Isampula ibihlanganisa izisebenzi zosizo lwabafundi eziyishumi nambili nabafundi amashumi amane nesishiyagalombili (48). Indlela yesampula ehlosiwe yasetshenziswa ukukhetha izisebenzi zosizo lwabafundi, kanye nokwenza isampula kube lula kwabahlanganyeli babafundi abakhethiwe. Izingxoxo ezihlelwe kancane kanye namaseshini okugxilwe kuwo asetshenziselwa ukuqoqa idatha kubasebenzi abasekela abafundi nabafundi. Inqubo yokuhlaziya idatha yetimu isebenzise izindikimba ezisuselwe emibuzweni yocwaningo kanye nemibhalo efanele. Kusetshenziswa iTheory ka-Tinto's Student Integration (STI) kanye Nethiyori Yokubandakanywa Komfundi ka-Astin, lolu cwaningo lubeka ukuthi abafundi bahlangabezana nezingqinamba eziphazamisa ukuhlanganiswa kwabafundi nempumelelo ezifundweni. Imiphumela yalolu cwaningo iphakamisa ukuthi izinhlelo zokusekela abafundi zidlala indima ebalulekile ekwehliseni izinsalelo abafundi ababhekana nazo ngesikhathi sohambo lwabo lokufunda. Ukwesekwa kwezemfundo nokwesekwa okungezona ezezemfundo kwavela njengengqikithi yokusekelwa kwabafundi. Imiphumela iphakamisa ukuthi abafundi bathole izinsiza ezilinganiselwe zabafundi emakhempasini abo ngenxa yokushoda kwezinsiza kanye nobuchwepheshe. Lolu cwaningo luncoma ukuthi izikhungo zisungule izinhlelo zokweseka abafundi ezigxile ekuqedeni izithiyo ezivimbela ukuhlanganiswa kwabafundi kanye nempumelelo ezifundweni. Okutholakele kuphinde kuphakamise ukuthi izikhungo ezikhethiwe zingathuthukisa izinhlelo zokuxhasa abafundi ngokusungula ubudlelwano nababambiqhaza ababalulekile kanye nokuqasha ochwepheshe abaqeqeshiwe. Kuphinde kwavela ukuthi okutholakele kuzoba nomthelela omkhulu ezincwadini ezikhona ezimayelana nezinto ezinquma ukuhlanganiswa kwabafundi nempumelelo ezifundweni.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DoH	Department of Health
DoL	Department of Labor
FET	Further Education and Training College
HEAIDS	Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme
Higher Health	Higher Education & Training: Health, Wellness and Development Centre
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
NCV	National Certificate Vocational
NATED	National Accredited Technical Education Diploma
NSA	National Skills Authority
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
ODL	Open Distance Learning
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
SASSA	South African Social Security Agency
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SRC	Student Representative Council
SSS	Student Support Services
SIT	Student Integration Theory
UNESCO	United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNEVOC	International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training

## **CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION**

### **1.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

The demand for individuals with the relevant technical expertise necessary for economic growth led to an increase in the establishment of Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVETs) in most countries. In acknowledging the need for TVET education, Maimane (2016) confirms that the last decade has seen a surge in enrolment figures in TVET Colleges in South Africa. TVET Colleges South Africa (2018) states that the enrolment numbers in TVETs are over 750 000. The huge amounts allocated for TVET colleges and the enrolment figures indicate the governments' commitment to expanding the TVET sector. Hong (2021) suggests that governments worldwide can produce a more skilled workforce by establishing Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVETs). Kenya, one of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, is regarded as a country that has identified TVET colleges as key to reducing unemployment among the youth and as a catalyst for economic development (Erima, 2021). The critical role of TVET Colleges in bridging the skills gap resonates with South Africa, which boasts of 50 public TVET colleges scattered across its nine provinces. Post-apartheid South Africa tertiary education has transformed the former Further Education and Training Colleges (FETs) into Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVETs) to make them more relevant to the country's socio-economic needs. That is, technical education to reduce unemployment and boost economic growth.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVETs) attract diverse students from different backgrounds and experiences to acquire the skills required for job opportunities (Delubom, Marongwe & Buka, 2020). The diversified student cohort encounters numerous challenges that interfere with their integration and academic success. This study sought to explore the students' experiences and the role of student support systems on student integration and academic success at two TVET Colleges in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Some of the challenges students experience include limited financial resources, under-preparedness for tertiary education, mental health issues, low self-esteem (Prat et al. 2019). Institutions need to establish student support systems that

eliminate student integration and academic success obstacles. Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) posit that institutions should establish effective student support systems that address the numerous challenges the diversified students experience. The student support systems should focus on adequate academic and non-academic support. Commenting on the importance of student support systems, Raaper and Brown (2020) emphasize that student support should be accessible to students in its various forms. The successful integration of students yields positive learning experiences and guarantees that they complete their programmes. Provision of student support should be a sustained effort that focuses on the needs of the enrolled students. The student support system should be fully functional, with professional staff occupying crucial portfolios (Al Salman, Alkathiri & Khaled Bawaneh, 2021). Students' academic success hinges on the student support systems' capacity to address the students' academic and non-academic needs.

## **1.2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

It is important to acknowledge the important role of vocational training in mitigating the impact of skills shortages in different countries. Vocational training is regarded worldwide as a route to address social and economic obstacles through imparting knowledge and skills necessary for youth employability (Pilz & Li, 2020). The purpose of vocational training may vary depending on each country or region's context. The purpose of vocational colleges is to equip the students with the necessary skills for employability. Community colleges focus on skills acquisition through technical education (Schröder, 2019). In South Africa, the TVET sector is regarded as key to bridging the skills shortage in different sectors of the economy. South African TVET Colleges use outcome-based education and training systems that focus on integrating theory and practical (McGrath, Ramsarup, Zeelen, Wdekind & Allais, 2020). In Sri Lanka, the government has labelled the period 2021 - 2030 as a Decade of Skills Development aimed at reducing the population of unskilled labour to below 10% (Hayashi, Jayasundara, Garcia, Balasuriya & Hirokawa, 2021). In Nigeria, the TVET sector is driven at preparing individuals for career development in different occupations and, at the same time, equipping them with the necessary skills (Okoye and Edokpolor, 2021). Motlhanke and Naong (2021) explain that the TVET sector in South Africa is bequeathed with the critical role of improving the national economy through human resources development. Motlhanke and Naong, 2021 further claim that contrary to other countries like Singapore, Germany,

Thailand and Zimbabwe, the TVET sector in South Africa is yet to leave a mark on its socio-economic.

The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (2013:12) identifies several objectives the TVET sector intends to achieve. Increasing the number of youths accessing programmes offered, improving throughput rates, and enhancing administration capacity are key objectives (Department of Higher Education and Training 2018). The college environment should be capacitated to identify and address the needs of the diversified student populace. Research conducted by the National Skills Authority (NSA) into the funding of TVET students from 2010 to 2012 highlights some of the challenges that TVET institutions face regarding the successful completion of programs. The study tracked students enrolled in the NCV programs between 2010 and 2012. The statistics illustrate that student dropouts were very high for the same period. Siwela and Van Der Bank (2021) suggest that in South Africa, the critical skills shortage could be attributed to the institutions' failures in student retention. According to Simkins (2013:19), the same study also illustrates poor reporting on performance in the South African Education System, specifically the TVET sector, further noted that success rates in TVET Colleges are generally poor on both NCV and Report 191 programmes. Research conducted by the National Skills Authority (NSA) funding on TVET students from 2010 to 2012, tracing students enrolled for the NCV programmes, further show a sharp increase in dropouts in 2012. The research indicates that 13.6% of the respondents were still studying, and most had dropped out due to lack of material and psychological support. The above statistics indicate some of the challenges that affect TVET colleges and highlight the need for comprehensive student support systems.

The provision of inadequate student support in its various forms negatively impacts students' success rates (Ntoyakhe & Ngibe, 2020). Student success is determined by the institution's capacity to establish student support systems that foster student integration and academic success. The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (2013:12) mandates institutions to provide adequate student support (Department of Higher Education and Training 2018). Higher education and training institutions should provide comprehensive student support services that fulfil the diversified student populace (Shikulo & Lekhetho,



2020). It is imperative to concede that effective student support systems are vital for student integration and academic achievement. Therefore, TVET colleges must incorporate input from stakeholders to improve the existing student support systems to foster student integration and persistence.

The TVET sector accommodates different categories of students. A huge number of TVET students are first-generation students. Most of the students enrolled in tertiary institutions are first-generation students (Gregory & Rogerson, 2029). This category of students experience challenges that adversely impact their integration and academic success. Being first-generation students aligns with the fact that most students are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Community colleges accommodate students with diverse backgrounds. Brower, Daniels, Bertrand and Hu (2021) point out that vocational institutions part of the community-based institutions that accommodate rural and marginalized groups colleges. The limited financial resources affect their integration process and academic success. Students from low-socio-economic status struggle to adapt to the institution's environs (Corredor, Álvarez-Rivadulla & Maldonado-Carreño, 2020). The majority of these students enter the college under-prepared. Badenhost and Radile (2018) claim that students enrolled in TVET colleges are less prepared and struggle to persist with their enrolled programmes. The lack of preparedness is an indication that they are deprived of information on the institution's systems. That translates to the fact that they are also deprived of cultural capital.

Various challenges interfere with the students' integration process and academic achievement. The majority of the students from low-economic status find it difficult to integrate into the college environment (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos & Ditzfeld, 2019). Lantrip and Ray (2021) point out that in the United States, community institutions are likely to enroll students from lower socioeconomic status which resonates with South Africa's TVET system whose majority are from less privileged communities and are dependent on government funding. South Africa's context suggests that most students are from low socioeconomic status. That is evidenced by the overreliance of the majority of the students on state funding through bursaries and loans. The historic announcement for free higher education for students whose guardians' combined income does not exceed R350 000 threshold per annum by the then President Jacob Zuma (TVET Colleges South Africa, 2018), on the 16<sup>th</sup>

of December 2017 serves as testimony that most families rely on the government to fund their tertiary studies. It can be inferred from the government's stance to subsidize education that most students in South Africa's tertiary institutions require funding. Karishma (2013) confirms that students from low socio-economic status enter tertiary institutions underprepared. The majority of students from less privileged backgrounds are vulnerable to myriad stressors. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016:39) also bemoaned the many challenges students face from socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Hoyne (2013) alludes that most students from low socio-economic status enroll for tertiary education with inadequate knowledge of how the college system works. The knowledge and skills this category of students lack are critical for student integration and the successful completion of enrolled programmes (Turkkila & Lommi, 2020). Most students from less economically privileged families are deprived of family support during their academic journey. A study conducted with students at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa indicates the lack of family support and the resources as catalysts for students' failure to successfully integrate and persist with their studies (Motsabi et al., 2020). Havlik, Pulliam, Mallot and Steen (2020) also support that some students enter post-secondary school underprepared. The under-preparedness could render students ignorant of how the college system works. Various factors determine a student's preparedness for post-secondary education.

The most notable factors are cultural capital and the discrepancy between first-generation and non-first-generation students. Upah (2017) acknowledges that most first-generation students are deprived of cultural capital. Upah (2017) further argues that cultural capital allows students to access abundant resources and know-how the college system works. Redford and Hoyer (2017:2) define first-generation students as students whose parents or guardians do not have any post-secondary experience. In South Africa, first-generation students are historically disadvantaged students who have been denied systemic access to higher education (Mutereko, 2020). To mitigate the challenges that underprepared students experience, institutions must establish student support systems that address students' needs. Perna (2015) suggests that colleges should employ a comprehensive approach to accommodate first-generation students by providing funds for paying their fees and other

resources. First-generation students should also access information on how the college system work. First-generation students are over-reliant on the institution's academic advisors on important aspects regarding their academic life. Ives and Castillo-Montonya (2020) suggest that most first-generation students are vulnerable to academic and social challenges during the transition process into higher education because of their unfamiliarity with institutional norms and practices. The lack of knowledge on how the system works could also interfere with the students' integration and academic success. Low self-efficacy also inhibits some students from successfully integrating into the college environment. Falcon (2017) suggests that students with low self-efficacy find it difficult to be part of the larger institution and struggle academically. The institutions must provide comprehensive support systems that include academic support and emotional support (Motsabi, Diale & van Zyl, 2020). Some of the challenges students experience also include inadequate academic support, a lack of resources, and limited psychosocial support. The government's obligations cannot be fulfilled if the tertiary institutions are not fully committed to improving the existing student support systems.

The TVET sector still experiences innumerable challenges despite the government's drive and commitment to improving the existing establishment. The Student Support Services Framework Manual (2008) insinuates that some TVET colleges' challenges are poor governance and limited resources (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). It can be argued that poor governance and lack of accountability strongly influence the students' integration and academic success. Student support is one of the most valuable assets that underline the existence and sustainability of TVET colleges (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). Establishing effective student support systems allows students to successfully integrate into the college environment and persist with their studies.

Institutions are required to render student support from the moment the student embarks on the enrolment process and for the duration of his or her studies. The effective rendering of student support can only be achieved through adequate support from the institution via student support systems. Department of Higher Education and Training (2017), through The Student Support Services Framework Manual (2008), points out that to mitigate challenges faced by TVETs, the government embarked on recapitalizing and restructuring the TVET

sector. Most tertiary institutions have established student support systems that seek to address the students' needs from enrolment until exit. That has seen the formulation and publication of 'The Student Support Services Framework Manual' in April 2008. The framework provides institutions with guidelines on adequately rendering student support (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2009). Roberts (2012) argues that tertiary institutions should not automatically expect diversified learners to adjust to their new environment. The institutions need to commit and substantially invest in student support systems to adequately cater to the diversified students' needs. To comprehensively meet students' needs, Motsabi, Diale and van Zyl (2020) postulate that support and effort from institutions are crucial.

There is a need for institutions to balance academic and non-academic support services. Post-secondary institutions still struggle to balance academics and social aspects crucial for student integration and academic success. Commenting on student support, Brown, Strigle and Toussaint (2020) insinuate that tertiary institutions still find it difficult to articulate a balance between academic and non-academic support. Rendering student support to students will facilitate student integration and persistence. The institution's failure to comprehensively provide student support could compel students to drop out (Olaya, Vásquez, Maldonado, Miranda & Verbeke, 2020). Mc Donnel (2014) identifies critical components within the academic facet. The critical components of academic support include student career advising and student resource centers. In support of student advising, Raaper and Brown (2020) posit that career advising informs students on programmes available and how to access the various services offered by the institution. Student counselling, language centers for international students, library facilities, and support for distance learning and open learning are some of the core academic facets. In alluding to the role of academic support, Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) claim that academic support results in improved students' academic performance.

Laima and Sajiene (2012) believe that the facets of academic and non-academic services are prerequisites for successful student integration and completion of academic programmes. Bridges (2008) laments that in most institutions, student support systems focus on academic support at the expense of other facets of student support that are non-

academic. However, tertiary institutions need to prioritize the provision of non-academic support. Student success and improved throughput rates can only be achieved if student support in its various forms is adequately provided. The student support system should encompass all the important aspects required for academic success. Hayes (2015) underscores the importance of student support services such as academic advising, access to modern technology, resource centers and psychosocial support as core and critical in improving students' academic performance. The institution's responsibility is to ensure that equilibrium exists on the significance of the academic and non-academic facets. Hoyne (2013) posits that improving engagements and integrating the academic and non-academic facets is a prevailing challenge. That clearly shows no congruence but rather friction on which facet takes precedence.

Student support systems should be inclusive of the diversified student populace. Mc Donnel (2014) reiterates that an all-inclusive student support system should adequately cater for the needs of individuals enrolled on post-secondary education. In support of inclusivity, Ogunji, NwaJuba and Uwake (2020) challenge policy-makers and other key stakeholders to ensure inclusivity of the needs of the diversified student populace, including students who belong to special populations. The student support systems should holistically focus on student integration and academic achievement factors. In alluding to the significant role of the non-academic facet, Laima and Sajiene (2012) also identify supporting students with disabilities as one of the critical aspects that should not be ignored. Students with disabilities continue to be discriminated against in educational institutions despite enacting laws to safeguard their interests (Harafsheh, Abu-Eid, Alshorman & Kanaan, 2020). Discrimination against students with disabilities still exists in most institutions (DeMatthews et al. 2020). Ibrahim (2021) suggests that the continued marginalization of students with disabilities deprives them of the right to access equal learning opportunities. Therefore, institutions must acknowledge the existence of systemic barriers that interfere with the integration and academic persistence of students belonging to special populations. Institutions should prioritize support for students belonging to special groups.

Mental health issues among students fall under the non-academic category of student support. It is also necessary to acknowledge the existence of mental health issues among

students that require institutional interventions. The stressors facing the students normally manifest into mental health problems. Mohd Shafiee and Mutalib (2020) opine that mental health issues among students are attributed to biological, psychological, and environmental factors. If the challenges are not adequately addressed, they will interfere with student integration and academic achievement. Recent studies have shown a correlation between high mental health problems among students with academic role impairment (Wilks, Auerbach, Alonso, Benjet & Bruffaerts, 2020). Mc Donnel (2014) further suggests that psychosocial support services should encompass strategies and means of managing one's emotional well-being. The psychosocial support should focus on the students' mental being, imparting life skills to the students, and identifying social problems that could negatively interfere with the students' learning. The provision of psychosocial support assists in mitigating some of the challenges students encounter during their time at college. Student retention is improved if the students' mental health issues are addressed. Thomas, Barr, Hotell, Adkins and Dick (2021) suggests that if adequately provided, psychosocial support can help institutions to reduce student attrition and at the same time, enormously improve academic performance

A significant number of obstacles inhibit students from accessing student support services. The lack of commitment to improve the existing student support systems is one of the main obstacles. Institutions are reluctant to commit significant amounts towards student support systems (Hendrick et al., 2020). Bill (2016) suggests that the lack of coordination within the student support systems inhibits students from utilizing the available services. In alluding to the constraints students encounter in accessing student support services, the obstacles further include the lack of trust in the existing system. Some students have pre-conceived cultural ideas. There is also fear of stigmatization and fear by the students of being labelled or stereotyped and lacking self-conviction. Mohd Shafiee and Mutalib (2020) suggest that fear of stigmatization prevents students from seeking help. The Student Support Services Framework Manual (2009) highlights some of the barriers that hindered the rendering of student support. Individual colleges worked independently to establish student support systems instead of standardizing student support administration. Hendrick, Woodward and Fuhr (2020) bemoaned the lack of standardized student support systems in tertiary institutions. That made it difficult to establish an effective monitoring and evaluation system.

Lack of qualified staff and understaffing were viewed as obstacles hampering the rendering of student support (Williamson, Callaghan, Whittlesea & Heath, 2011). The institutions should invest in continuous training of staff serving under student support systems (Lavill, 2020).

It is also important to acknowledge that students enrolled at TVET colleges are faced with a myriad of challenges. The challenges students experience includes the lack of family support, limited financial resources, lack of resources and mental health issues. Institutions should have strategies to address the challenges experienced by students. Mitigating the challenges students face requires establishing comprehensive student support systems. The student's academic success is over-reliant on the students' successful integration into the college environment. An all-inclusive student support system plays a critical role in aiding students to integrate into the college environment. The study sought to explore the students' experiences on student support systems to improve student integration and academic success.

### **1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Students enrolled at tertiary institutions experience numerous challenges during their academic journey. The diversified student populace is faced with varying challenges. The myriad challenges the diversified students face interfere with their integration and successful completion of their enrolled programmes. The students' background strongly links the student integration process and successful completion of programmes. The students enrolled at TVET Colleges include first-generation students and categories students belonging to special populations. The various categories of students face numerous unique challenges to each individual. Successful completion of enrolled programmes positively correlates with the student's successful integration into the college environment. Student success requires a conducive environment to eliminate student integration and persistence obstacles.

Literature suggests that the most common challenges experienced by students enrolled at TVET Colleges include lack of resources for academic support, limited financial support, the lack of information on college systems, mental health issues. Students from special

populations still encounter systemic barriers that inhibit them from utilizing student support services. Special populations include students with disability and students belonging to the LGBT community. The continued discrimination against students within this category infringes their constitutional rights and deprives them of equal learning opportunities. Most of these students from special populations, including students with disabilities, enter college under-prepared and struggle to integrate into the unfamiliar environment. The lack of accommodation is another important factor that negatively impacts the students' integration and academic success. Mental health issues are prevalent among college students. Students' mental health problems students they experience might negatively impact their integration process and academic achievement. The rendering of psychological support services is regarded as peripheral undermining its significant role on the students' mental stability. If the student's mental and health well-ness programmes are viewed as peripheral, this will interfere with students' quest for positive learning experiences. The existing student support systems at the two TVET Colleges appear to be deprived of resources and staff to adequately cater for students' mental health needs.

The institution's responsibility is to eliminate student integration and academic persistence obstacles. The institutions' student support systems are not comprehensive and are not adequately resourced to cater to diversified students' varying needs. Student needs are divided into academic and non-academic aspects. It is generally observed that institutions prioritize the students' academic needs over non-academic needs. Prioritizing the academic dimension creates an imbalance in how institutions administer and provide student support. Non-academic needs are equally important if the students derive positive learning experiences. Student support systems should create an environment that fosters student integration and academic achievement.

A viable, accessible, and feasible student support system is essential if students successfully integrate and achieve academic success. The existing student support structures at the selected TVET Colleges do not seem to focus on eliminating obstacles that inhibit student integration and academic success. The low completion rates can be attributed to obstacles that inhibit students from successfully integrating into the college environment. Students' failure to integrate into the new environment adversely affects their academic performance



and successful completion of academic programmes. Meanwhile, the existing student support services structures are inadequately equipped to mitigate the myriad of challenges that many college students face. It can be argued that most higher education institutions appear not to consider the differences among students before establishing student support systems. The institutions' non-acknowledgement of diversity among students results in excluding other student categories such as students with disabilities when providing student support. Establishing an all-inclusive student support system should acknowledge diversity among students but this appears not to be what is practiced at the TVET institutions under study here. The blanket approach inhibits students from effectively utilizing student support services. Given the above, the question can thus be posed as follows:

What are students' experiences of student support systems at two TVET college students in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa?

#### **1.4 AIM OF THE STUDY**

The study sought to explore the students' experiences and the role of student support systems in improving student integration and academic success at two TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Objectives:

The researcher set the following objectives to guide him to achieve the above aims:

- I. To identify the student support services offered by the Student Support Systems within the two TVET Colleges.
- II. To determine the students' experiences regarding the services offered by the Student Support Systems in the two TVET colleges.
- III. To determine how the Student Support Services currently on offer at the two Colleges meets the needs of the students.
- IV. To explore the factors that determine the administration of Student Support Systems in the selected colleges.
- V. To suggest the different and additional Student Support Systems approaches that can be used to ensure and improve students' integration and academic success at the two Colleges.

## **1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study seeks to clarify the following research questions:

- I. Which components make up the Student Support Systems structure at two TVET institutions?
- II. What are the students' experiences on the student support services offered by Student Support Systems in the two TVET Colleges?
- III. How do students use the available Student Support Services at the two TVET Colleges?
- IV. Which factors determine the administration of Student Support Systems at the two TVET Colleges?
- V. How can the student support systems improve student integration and academic success at the two TVET Colleges?

## **1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The South African government's treasury grapples with high state expenditure on TVET colleges. This huge financial investment has not been fully justified, evidenced by low completion and throughput rates. This study thus sought to fill gaps in the literature that addresses the learner support challenges that impact student integration and persistence with their studies. The study further sought to identify and describe the support services available for students within the TVET context. The findings and recommendations from the study can further assist institutions to determine the nature of student support that focuses on mitigating the challenges experienced by students. Students' input on what constitutes comprehensive support systems was derived from the study. That could allow TVET institutions to establish support systems that acknowledge diversity among students. The study can assist the college community to identify and implementing strategies that foster student integration and persistence. Students' persistence with their studies depends on their successful integration into the college environment. The research could indicate whether TVET Colleges use an effective student support system or not and thus improve it for students' retention and success. The study further addresses the academic and non-academic support required by different categories of students enrolled. It can also serve as the basis for colleges and their key stakeholders to draft and implement student support

policies that are inclusive and non-discriminatory can promote equal access to student support by all student categories. The findings and recommendations from the study can further assist institutions to identify and eliminate barriers to students' access to student support services. Some of the obstacles to effective utilization of student support services include marginalization of certain student categories. Therefore, the study will identify policies that defy stereotyping and stigmatization on marginalized student categories such as students with disabilities. The findings from the study further suggest the drafting of policies that embrace principles of inclusiveness, social equity, and the holistic development of students regardless of their background.

Critical to the utilization of student support services is the effective administration of student support systems. The recommendations from the study can assist the colleges to administer student support services to suit the diversified student population. The study can further assist in improving, classifying staff, and outlining job requirements and responsibilities of student support staff. The findings and recommendations from the study can assist institutions to prioritize student support services through the hiring of competent staff and the need for continuous staff development. If implemented, the findings can help key stakeholders draft guidelines and ethics that institutions should adhere to when discharging and administering the various student support services. The study can also assist in identifying the various approaches that can be used to improve the college climate into an environment that embraces the tenets of diversity and social justice.

### **1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The research was delimited to TVET College A and TVET College B in Kwazulu-Natal. TVET College A includes two technical campuses, two Business Campuses and one campus that offers engineering and business programmes. TVET College B has two campuses that offer business studies, whilst one campus offers engineering studies. The colleges form part of the 50 public TVET Colleges funded by the South African Government, establishing student support systems. This study excludes private colleges experiencing the same challenges when rendering student support services. Such exclusion might negatively impact the uniformity and standardization of the student support system and the holistic development of the students in TVET colleges. The researcher initially indicated in the proposal that

focuses group interviews would also be conducted with committee members of academic staff assisting student support from each campus. However, it later emerged that the committees were not operating optimally in most campuses as most of the academic staff that formed part of the committees were no longer involved. That affected the initial plan to conduct focus group interviews with committee members, and instead, the researcher was restricted to conducting focus group interviews with students and individual semi-structured interviews with student support services staff. The exclusion of committee members who were part of academic staff deprived the study of their views on the existing student support systems which are also crucial to student integration and success.

## **1.8 KEY CONCEPTS**

**Student Support Systems** - Junio-Sabio (2012:14) defines student support systems as constituting academic and non-academic, which generally foster the development of students' competencies, life skills, and habits of academic excellence. In this study, student support systems refer to the student support structure established by institutions of learning to provide a range of services and strategies meant to counter barriers to learning.

**Learner Support** - Chattopadhyay (2014:1) defines learner support as a mechanism to help the learner to learn. In a conventional system, classroom transactions, peer team interactions, and library facilities are learning components. In this research, learner support refers to providing academic and non-academic services essential for completing enrolled programmes.

**Non-Academic Support** - Karp (2008:2) explained non-academic support as undertakings assumed to inspire academic success and occur within properly structured programmes or informally through interactions. In this study, non-academic support refers to institutions' services to students that cater to their wellbeing.

**First-Generation Students** – Chen and Carroll (2005:1) define first-generation students as the first members of their families to attend college. In this study, first-generation students are individuals enrolled at tertiary institutions who are first in their families to be enrolled at college.

Socio-economic status - Winkelby, Jatulis, Frank and Fortmann (1992:2) explained that socio-economic status is usually measured by determining education, income, occupation, or a composite of these dimensions. In this research, socio-economic status refers measurement of an individual's economic and social standing in a given context.

Student Involvement Theory - Astin (1994:27) defines involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to their academic experiences. Student Involvement theory constitutes three important elements: inputs, environments, and outputs. In this study, Student Involvement Theory refers to how students participate in the college's academic and non-academic activities.

## **1.9. CHAPTER DIVISION**

This section consists of outlines of the chapters that make up this study.

### **Chapter 1**

Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter. It gives an overview of the emergence of TVET colleges in South Africa, the notion behind the TVETs' formation, government obligations, and the necessity for establishing a student support system. A preliminary literature review, the problem statement, the significance of the study, the purpose of the study, research objectives, and research questions are also covered in this Chapter. Key concepts that form part of this study are used are also explained.

### **Chapter 2**

This chapter of the study covers the theoretical framing relevant to the study. The theories utilized for this study include student involvement and student development theories. The focus is on their relevance and application to student integration and persistence with their studies.

### **Chapter 3**

The Literature review is the focus of this chapter. Literature on student support systems in TVETs and other similar institutions is adequately covered in this section. The literature also focused on the nature of student support services provided by TVET Colleges. Challenges faced by students during their learning experience also form part of this chapter. Covered also in this chapter are ways to improve the management and accessibility of these much-needed services.

### **Chapter 4**

This chapter of the study covers the methodology used. The qualitative research approach and its relevance to the study are covered in this chapter. The research design to be used is also covered in this chapter, which in this study is the case study. The site, population, sampling methods, and sample are articulated in this chapter. Chapter 4 also covers the data collection instruments and the tools used. Ethical issues affecting the study and data analysis methods are clearly outlined in the chapter.

### **Chapter 5**

The findings derived from the study are outlined in this section. The findings presented were derived from codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the semi-structured and focus group interviews. These were based on the themes derived from the study's research questions and the literature review. Verbatim responses from the participants also form part of the findings. Discussions of the findings is another component addressed under this chapter. The main themes were generated from the participants' responses and research questions.

### **Chapter 6**

This chapter serves as a synopsis of the findings. This chapter presents the summary of the study, and conclusions derived from the study are presented in this chapter. Any areas that need further research relating to the study and recommendations were also be highlighted in this chapter.

## **1.9 CONCLUSION**

This Chapter briefly discussed the significant role of TVET Colleges in mitigating skills scarcity in South Africa. TVET colleges fall under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) jurisdiction, which has invested large sums of money in recapitalizing the TVET sector. The TVET colleges are responsible for establishing student support systems that adequately address the needs of the diversified student population to ensure student retention and academic success. Students experience numerous challenges that interfere with their adaptation process and academic success. The institution has the responsibility through student support systems to provide comprehensive support services. The provision of academic and non-academic services is the ultimate responsibility of the student support division of the college. This chapter presented the background of the study, the purpose of the study, problem statement, objectives, research questions, and limitations of the study. The expected contributions from the study are also outlined in this chapter. The definition of terms and chapter outline have also been covered.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMING**

### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

The study is underpinned by Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory. Tinto's Student Integration theory outlines the correlations between student integration and persistence with their studies. Astin's Student Involvement Theory links student involvement in college activities and positive learning outcomes. Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory underscores the institution's role in integrating individual and institutional factors to determine student integration, student involvement, persistence, and success.

### **2.2. OVERVIEW OF THEORIES**

Tertiary Institutions are bequeathed with the critical role of establishing systems that encourage academic success. The institutions have an important role through the student support systems to embrace principles that foster student integration, student involvement, and persistence with their studies. There is interconnectedness between the Student Integration Theory and the Student involvement theory. The theories of Student integration and student involvement are critical factors for student persistence and the successful completion of enrolled programmes. The theories of Student Involvement Theory and Student Integration Theory seek to establish an environment that is supportive of the student's needs. Tinto's STI theory acknowledges that the key to student success is the integration of factors that determine students' academic commitment and the students' social influences. The STI theory acknowledges that academic and social factors impact their academic achievement. Astin's Student Involvement theory falls under student development theories derived from psychology. The narratives on student involvement theory signify the importance of understanding the different concepts that define student involvement in positive learning outcomes. The theories suggest that student integration, student involvement and persistence are key to academic success. It is imperative to infer that when embracing and promoting the utilization of student involvement theories, there is the need to coordinate and integrate the distinct factors that define the individual student and should also consider institutional factors that are key to student involvement. If adequately implemented by student support systems, the theories of Student Integration and Student



Involvement theory, would simultaneously not only promote the holistic development of the students but also ensures academic success.

### **2.3. TINTO'S STUDENT INTEGRATION THEORY (SIT)**

Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory (SIT) is relevant to this study. Since its introduction in 1975, The Student Integration Theory has been widely used as a student integration and retention model. The theory explains the correlation between student integration and student persistence with their studies. McCubbin (2003) acknowledges that the Student Integration Theory is the social and academic factors attributed to the institution. Tinto (1993) recommends that institutions allow students to experience institutional support between academic aspects and social integration. By implication, equilibrium should exist between the students' academic activities and social adjustment. The theory identified self-efficacy, sense of belonging, curriculum, learning environment, and institutional rights as critical key student integration and persistence. The institutions will be able to conjure means and enact programmes that boost the students' self-efficacy.

Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory is quite relevant to this study as it emphasizes the equally important roles of the facets of academic support and non-academic support in students' integration and persistence. Tinto (2017) recommends that educational institutions channel their efforts towards promoting student integration and persistence. Weighing on Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (2020:124) opine that the equivalence between the students' motivation and academic aptitude and the institutions' academic and social attributes assist in nurturing the students to commit to their studies. In this study, The Student Integration Theory can be used by institutions to harmonize factors that encourage congruence between the students' academic integration and social integration (Schreiber, Luescher-mamashela & Moja, 2014). The assumption is that academic and social aspects are equally important for student integration and persistence. If non-congruence exists between academic and social aspects of student support, students could find it difficult to integrate into the college environment. It is also important to concede that failure to integrate successfully affects students' commitment to their studies. To create social cohesion and identify the obstacles that inhibit student integration, tertiary institutions could exploit Tinto's Student Integration Theory to guide student integration and persistence.

Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (2020) posit that Tinto's Student Integration Theory proves that students' drop-out is exacerbated by non-congruency between the student's expectations and institutional factors. Tinto (2014) commends that pivotal to student success is how the students fit into the institutions' interaction systems. In this study, the Student Integration Theory could guide institutions to develop policies that remove the systemic barriers to student integration. Tinto (2016) affirms that institutional commitment is a precondition for students to fulfil their academic dreams. In this context, The Student Integration Theory could impel institutions to commit to eliminating barriers to student integration and persistence. It is essential that the institution's commitment goes beyond its mission statement and that it must invest and adequately provide the necessary resources and motivation to improve students' programme completion rates. Tinto (2016:4) opines that institutional settings focusing on academic and social factors are crucial to student integration and persistence. This study is also in tandem with the Student Integration Theory as it also seeks to establish factors that foster student integration. Institutional settings incorporate a culture where high expectations for success are better than a learning environment that hinders learning. Providing academic, social and financial support is a prerequisite for student integration and academic success. The focus should not be solely on addressing academic aspects but also prioritizing social aspects. Students deprived of a sense of belonging are likely to withdraw and may not engage, ultimately leading to student attrition. Institutions should be responsible for ensuring that they foster a sense of belonging.

As pointed out earlier, in TVET colleges, the student populace is diverse. The Student Integration Theory acknowledges diversity among students when addressing student integration factors. This study also highlights various challenges to student integration experienced by the diversified student populace. The enrolled student cohorts face different challenges, and their background and previous experiences shape these challenges. Some students enrol under-prepared and struggle to integrate into the college environment. Some students find the workload challenging, and if combined with other factors such as socio-economic issues, this may lead to student attrition. Although there are various challenges confronting students, there are numerous ways to improve student integration and persistence. The Student Integration Theory also outlines the institutional role in promoting

congruence among academic and social aspects. This study also focuses on the academic and non-academic factors key to student integration and academic success. The factors identify the challenges students face that lead to student attrition and give a platform on areas where institutions should address each factor's challenges.

This theoretical framework is relevant to this study as it enables institutions through their staff complement to identify and categorize students facing challenges. In TVET colleges, there are various categories of students, and this means the colleges must come up with different and timeous interventions to ensure student success. Criticism has been levelled against Tinto's student integration theory. Cabrera et al. (2020) opine a huge gap in Tinto's student integration theory by commenting that the significant role of external factors that shape the student commitments, perceptions, and preferences has not been emphasized. Van der Bijl and Lawrence (2019) acknowledge that Tinto's Student Integration Theory remains a useful asset for analyzing student retention and attrition in the South African context. Despite the criticism of Tinto's student integration theory, it can be relevant to explain students' integration and persistence with their studies by ensuring that equilibrium exists between academic and social factors when providing student support. This theory could serve as a basis for institutions to be proactive in creating an environment that focuses on student integration and persistence factors.

#### **2.4. ASTIN'S STUDENT INVOLVEMENT THEORY**

Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory is one of the theories relevant to this study. Astin (1984:508) defines student involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Astin suggested that student involvement is particularly important to the community college environment because students' time and effort could be the most critical resource (Hafer, Gibson, York, Fiester & Tsemunhu, 2021:554). It can be inferred that more time and energy students invest in college culminates in positive learning experiences. Roberts and Mcneese (2010) acknowledge that studies by Astin suggest that students who are actively engaged in the institution's academic and social activities tend to yield positive learning experiences. To derive positive learning experiences, the students should partake in both academic and extra-curricular activities of the institution. For the above reasons, institutions such as

Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges must establish student support systems that encourage students to remain engaged and committed to all campus activities for balanced academic life and success in their studies. Hence it is the role of the institution through the student support systems to provide a climate that fosters personal growth and at the same time, successful completion of programmes. The student involvement theory is premised on the following postulates by Astin (1999:5):

- I. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to its capacity to increase student involvement.
- II. That a correlation exists between the personal development of the student and the extent of his or her involvement in academic activities. The extent of student learning and personal development associated with any educational programme is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that particular programme.
- III. Constitutes both qualitative and quantitative features. Which explains that the magnitude of students' involvement in education-related work can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively.

Gardner and Barnes (2007) point out that Astin (1984:21) student involvement encompasses several concepts that include academic, political, and social dimensions and also emphasizes that intense involvement will yield greater academic performance. This study acknowledges that students' success revolves around academic and non-academic factors. The study also concedes that academic and non-academic facets are equally important for student integration and academic success. Astin (1984) asserts that highly involved students normally commit considerable energy in their studies, devote much of their time on college grounds, are enthusiastically involved in student organizations, and interact with other students and academic staff.

Conversely, students who do not engage in the institution's activities and minimize interactions with other students tend to neglect their studies. It can be deduced from the literature that student involvement in extra-curricular activities fosters a sense of belonging and boosts confidence. The focus should not be solely academic but also engagement in campus life. Roberts and Mcneese (2010:3) further acknowledge that failure by students to be actively engaged in college activities and extra-mural activities that encourage

involvement and integration can result in negative outcomes and possibly student attrition. Students that are less involved in college activities tend to disengage from their studies.

Astin's Student Involvement Theory of 1984 also describes how institutions of higher learning contributes to student transition and development. Astin (1984) also suggests that the institution has a critical role in whether students are engaged in the college's academic and non-academic activities. The college community determines the level of student involvement. In the context of this study, the different categories of students face varying challenges that may exclude them from participating in the college's activities. That requires the institution to determine the deterrents to student engagement in the college's extra-curricular activities. The lack of interest by some students to engage can be attributed to their background or because of their background. The Student Involvement Theory outlines that first-generation students struggle to cope and integrate into the college experience (Moote et al., 2020). First-generation students might be deprived of family support and, to a great extent, of financial resources necessary for students to get involved to endure positive experiences. Therefore, tertiary institutions, particularly TVET colleges, must establish an environment that accommodate students with different backgrounds. The theory recommends that institutions also initiate programmes on their campuses to integrate students into college life to ensure that their academic performance is ultimately maximized.

The institutions such as TVET Colleges can introduce various programmes that acknowledge diversity and promote inclusion. Programmes such as sports, involvement in various organizations, and workshops on diversity can be utilized by colleges to encourage student participation (Roberts & Mcneese, 2010). Long (2012) asserts that Astin believes that institutions should render quality programmes and amenities that make the learning process stimulating for students to become involved. The changes in the students' attitudes and development result from their involvement in co-curricular. Hafer et al. (2021) affirm that students develop a stronger sense of belonging and commitment with the institution and, in the process, improve their academic performance when they are actively involved in extra-curricular activities. This study equally accepts that the Student Involvement Theory is the basis for determining factors that foster student integration. It is also important to acknowledge that student support systems' responsibility is student involvement in extra-

curricular activities. DeMatthews et al. (2020) suggest establishing an all-inclusive student support system that prioritizes the eradication of obstacles that deter students from engaging in college activities. The college environment should accommodate all student categories, including students with disabilities. In other words, student support systems should be created to ensure that every student feels at home in the college. Therefore, the college environment should eliminate obstacles that deter student involvement in college activities. The Student Involvement Theory could also guide colleges to erect and upgrade the existing facilities to accommodate all student categories. Chiwandire (2019) advocates for institutional environments that promote student engagement among all student categories. Therefore student support must formulate programmes and activities that are inclusive to the diversified student populace. Roberts and MaNeese (2007) further state that student attrition emanates from non-involvement by students in extra-curricular activities. Students must become engaged in undertakings and experiences that foster academic development and acquisition of social skills. It is important for college student support systems to formulate programmes and activities that acknowledge student diversity.

This study acknowledges the critical role of Astin's involvement theory as the foundation for forming inclusive student support systems in TVET Colleges in South Africa. The efficiency of any educational policy or practice is directly related to that policy or practice's capacity to increase student involvement (Astin, 2014). Astin's subsequent notion that student involvement in college activities hinges on the extent of college commitment indicates the critical role of institutional policies in encouraging student involvement. In the context of this study, The Student Involvement Theory could serve as the basis for drawing policies that facilitate the formation of inclusive student support structures. The theory also enlightens on determining the factors that encourage inclusivity of students with different backgrounds and experiences. Institutions can use the Student Involvement Theory as a guide to introduce support programmes that encourage student involvement in college activities. Creating an environment that evokes student participation in college activities renders the student involvement theory appropriate for this study. To derive positive learning experiences, the students should partake in both academic and extra-curricular activities of the institution. Hence it is the institution's role through the student support systems to provide a climate that fosters personal growth and, at the same time, successful completion of programmes.

## **2.5. COMPARISON OF THEORIES**

Two theories utilized as the cornerstone for this study are Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory. These theories are relevant to the study as they could serve as the basis for establishing student support systems. The theories focus on factors that contribute to student integration and academic achievement. It can be deduced from the assumptions outlined in Tinto's Student Integration and Astin's Student Involvement that student integration, student involvement, and persistence are key to academic achievement. Both theories stress that the institution has a crucial role in creating a conducive environment for students to succeed. The institutional commitment is through the establishment of inclusive student support systems. Both Student Integration Theory and Student Involvement Theory acknowledge diversity among students. The two theories are interconnected and focus on student integration and academic success factors.

Astin's student involvement theory revolves around factors that focus on student engagement in the institution's activities. As cited by Hafer et al. (2021), Astin posits that student involvement is proportionate to student learning and development, resulting in increased student persistence. The Student Involvement Theory postulates a positive relationship between student engagement and academic success. Students who commit themselves to the institution's activities tend to perform academically. Students should invest their time and effort in academic and social activities (Gunuc, 2021:2). Tinto (1993) claim that students who adapt themselves socially and academically to college experiences tend to enjoy academic success

Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory are relevant to this study. Student involvement is critical to students deriving positive learning experiences from the institution's student support system. Tinto (1993), as cited by Kilgo and Mollet (2016), argues that students who invest a significant amount of their time in campus activities tend to develop better than their counterparts who shun college activities. The relevance of these theories may serve as the foundation for institutions to establish a student support system that focuses on factors that promote student integration, involvement and academic success.

Astin's theory of 1984 emphasizes the provision of an environment that fosters student involvement in extra-curricular activities. The theory further outlines that students who are highly involved in extra-curricular activities tend to excel in their studies. The same can be said of Tinto's theory which underscores the importance of student engagement in academic and social college activities. The theories could guide institutions to establish environments that promote student integration and involvement, which is critical for student persistence. The critical factors to student success are their involvement, integration, and persistence derived from Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory. In comparing the two theories, Rust et al. (2007) argue that Astin's Student Involvement Theory is closely aligned with Tinto's Student Integration Theory as their focus is on establishing a conducive environment that encourages student integration and persistence. Students who interact with faculty staff and their peers are more likely to commit to their studies. These theories could guide institutions to establish comprehensive student support systems and environments that promote student integration and involvement critical for student persistence. Students should have that sense of being part of the college community to be motivated. This part of belonging can only be instilled through student involvement in college activities. Integrating the principles underlying Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory is critical towards enacting a more comprehensive student support system. Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement theory could serve as a framework for establishing student support systems that focus on student integration, involvement, and persistence.

## **2.6. CONCLUSION**

Various factors determine student success. This chapter's discussion indicates that Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory were relevant to the study. Tinto's Student Integration Theory identifies student integration and persistence as critical factors to deriving positive learning experiences. The Student Integration Theory emphasizes the significant role of institutions in creating a favourable environment that fosters student integration and persistence. The Student Involvement Theory by Astin focuses on the positive results derived from student involvement in the college's academic and non-academic activities. The theory points to a positive relationship between student



involvement and academic success. The use of the two theories in this study is important because they complement each other which enabled the researcher to investigating student support systems in the TVET colleges understudy.

## **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter reviews the literature on student support. The literature review focuses on the composition of student support systems, the nature and phases of student support, different categories of student support services that incorporate academic and non-academic support and support, and support for students with disabilities. The chapter also discusses some of the challenges faced by international students regarding student support and some interventions to mitigate them. The most common challenges encountered by students in institutions of higher learning also form part of this chapter.

### **3.2. CONCEPTUALISING STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES**

The provision of student support is a meticulous process that requires proper planning and implementation. Badenhorst and Radile (2018) point to the role of student support by emphasizing that student support systems are structures that the DHET prioritizes. Student support systems should include factors that address students' academic and non-academic needs. The non-academic facets constitute factors that focus on student integration. Nsamba and Mokae (2017) suggest that student support systems create a favourable learning environment. The failure by institutions to adequately consider specific academic and non-academic factors as important components of student support systems may result in student attrition (Olaya, Vásquez, Maldonado, Miranda & Verbeke, 2020). They point out that the core responsibilities of student support systems include administering selection assessments, student placements, and overseeing extra-curricular activities. It can be argued that the importance of student support does not solely rest with the DHET but should be cascaded to the institutions responsible for the administration of student support. In support of student support, Maimane (2016) acknowledges that student support services are critical for student success by providing a conducive learning environment.

#### **3.2.1. Phases of Student Support Services**

There are several important factors that institutions should consider before establishing student services. Student support systems should include factors that address students'

academic and non-academic needs. Most post-secondary institutions are biased towards providing academic support (Brown, Strigle & Toussaint, 2020). On the contrary, the prioritization of academic support sometimes undermines and excludes factors that foster student integration. There is a need to identify and follow the different phases of student support. Student support systems comprise three phases: pre-entry support, on-course support, and exit support. Russo and Glercher (2013) posit that students' career advising, registration, recruitment, technical support, financial support, and personal student counselling are critical to combating student attrition.

### **3.2.1.1. Pre-entry phase**

Numerous factors are attributed to students' dropouts, including the students' under preparedness for tertiary education and the lack of information on how the college system works. The risk factors that result in student attrition need to be addressed through adequate student support. The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (2013) identifies career advising, student selection, enrolling, and orientation as the core processes involved at the pre-entry support stage. Career advising and induction are some of the programmes that are critical components of the pre-entry phase. Student advising plays a crucial role in providing students with the necessary information on available programmes and how to access student support services (Raaper & Brown, 2020). Badenhorst and Radile (2018) attest that one of the challenges colleges face is the student selection criteria. Student selection is a broad term that needs redefining, and it should clearly illustrate the selection process.

#### **3.2.1.1.1. Information dissemination**

Institutions should have a selection process that guides the process of enrolment and induction. The information provided at this crucial stage is key to students' decisions on their career choice. The orientation process is an important component of the pre-entry phase. The Australian Institute of Higher Education (2017) noted that the student support services team administers student orientation. The orientation process is used to disseminate information to students to access college facilities and resources. Different induction programmes should allow the covering of important information adequately.

### **3.2.1.2. On-Course support**

Successful student integration and academic success require comprehensive student support services. Equally important is on-course support. Academic advising, study skills, student support for students with disabilities, psychosocial support, financial aid, and suitable accommodation are under the on-course phase. Olaya et al. (2020) propose that on-course support include extra classes, counselling services, and student mentoring. It should be noted that the integration process varies among students. Comprehensive student support should cover a wide spectrum of student needs. On-course support is very important but could be difficult to administer as it requires integration and coordination of various forms of support (Maimane, 2016). The difficulty in administering student support can be attributed to the varying needs of the diversified student populace. Institutions must ensure that on-course support includes the main forms of support forms

### **3.2.1.3. Exit support**

It is equally important for institutions to prioritize the exit phase of student support. The exit phase prepares students for the world of work whilst they are still at college. Hong et al. (2021) posit that placing students with the relevant industry allows the students to acquire the much need practical skills. The student support system should not dwell on a few specific activities such as induction and should be continuous for the duration of the study. Students can easily cope with any challenges presented by the college environment if they are adequately supported. Commenting on the importance of student support, Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) posit that institutions should establish effective student support systems that address the numerous challenges the diversified students experience. The institution must ensure that students' needs are identified and adequately addressed through student support systems. The TVET sector should redefine a conducive learning environment considering the surge in students enrolled at TVET Colleges. The phases of entry support on-course support are important when conceptualizing student support services. The phases should be integrated to cater to students' needs adequately. Deductions can be made that student success relies on the institution's ability to prioritize academic and non-academic support equally. If adequately and effectively provided, the student support could foster student integration and academic success.

### **3.3. CONCEPTUALIZING STUDENT EXPERIENCES**

Students enrolled at TVET Colleges experience several challenges during their time at college. The challenges students face depend on their background and previous experiences. The challenges students experience could be attributed to being first-generation students and a lack of students' cultural capital. Challenges students face include limited financial resources, lack of social support, under-preparedness for post-secondary education, and low self-efficacy (Prat et al., 2019). The challenges may leave students prematurely leaving college before completing their enrolled programmes if unabated.

A significant number of students in TVET Colleges are first-generation students. Gregory and Rogerson (2019) acknowledge that most students enrolled in post-secondary institutions are first-generation students. This category of first-generation students' parents or guardians do not have a degree (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). This category of students experience numerous challenges attributed to their background. Some of the challenges experienced by first-generation students include lack of family support, limited financial resources, and the lack of information on college systems. A study conducted at Alex-Ekwume Federal University in Nigeria concluded that first-generation students experience challenges that interfere with their academic success (Ogunji, Nwajiuba & Uwakwe, 2020). The challenges experienced by first-generation students can also be attributed to their socio-economic backgrounds. Corredor et al. (2020) accept that students from low-socio-economic status find it difficult to integrate into the college environment and persist with their studies. Longwell-Grice, Adsit, Mullins and Serrata (2016) similarly acknowledge that first-generation students face numerous challenges during their academic journey. In the South African context, Motsabi, Diale and van Zyl (2020) point out that first-generation students in South Africa consist of students who originate from historically less-privileged communities and have endured restricted access to tertiary access education. Challenges encountered by this category of students include the lack of preparedness for tertiary education. Badenhorst and Radile (2018) bemoan the low readiness levels among students enrolled in TVET colleges in South Africa. Badenhorst and Radile (2018) further

state that students are not adequately prepared to make the required transition to courses offered by institutions.

Lack of preparedness is one trait associated with first-generation students, and this could be the case of most students enrolled at public TVET colleges in South Africa. Against such a backdrop, they experience insurmountable challenges from the moment they engage in the enrolment process. Most students enrolled in non-university institutions lack adequate information on programmes offered and the general enrollment process (Havlik et al., 2020). That emanates from inadequate information at their disposal on career choices, inadequate information on how the college system works, and barriers to successful integration into the collegiate atmosphere.

The students' lack of information can be attributed to the lack of cultural capital. Upah (2017) asserts that most first-generation students are deprived of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1973) defines cultural capital as a verbal capacity, awareness of the institution's culture, and adequate information about the institution's system and educational qualifications. Upah (2017), in analyzing Bourdieu's theory of 1973 on cultural capital, argues that students who have more cultural capital enjoy an abundance of resources at their disposal. Cultural capital sheds light on first-generation students' challenges, which can negatively impact their studies. Upah (2017) suggests that most first-generation students are deprived of cultural capital and are the least prepared to enter the college environment. Students deprived of cultural capital do not identify with any role model to support their academic aspirations. Students deprived of cultural capital feel disconnected from the college community and struggle to adapt to the new settings (Pratt et al., 2019). Parents or guardians of students who lack cultural capital are most likely to be ignorant about the colleges' admission system. This lack of information by parents burdens the students during the selection and enrolment process.

The institutions have a crucial role in alleviating TVET students' challenges, which can be achieved if a feasible student support system is in place. Prat et al. (2019) advocate for the establishment of student support systems that mitigate the challenges experienced by students from the moment they make contact with the institution. Adequate information on

programme choices should be made available and be accessible to all students. Accessibility and availability of information will empower prospective students to make informed choices on their career paths. Students deprived of cultural capital also need support in the form of adequate information on programmes available and how the admission system works. Ricks (2016) posits that first-generation students have inadequate knowledge of post-secondary education college culture, struggle to pursue their academic endeavors, and are at high risk of dropping out. Most students are less prepared for tertiary education due to the lack of information on college systems and career opportunities. Ricks (2016:3) further posits that first-generation students possess unique traits, that put them at high risk of academic failure. Resources play a significant role in the students' academic expedition. Parents of students with cultural capital would most likely have attained a degree and thus find it easier to adequately support their children during the admission process and the study's duration. In essence, cultural capital gives people a competitive edge, and it is passed on from generation to generation

Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) attest that first-generation students encounter obstacles that interfere with their academic aspirations. Students' challenges go beyond the precincts of their cultural aspects, social and academic facets. Numerous obstacles confront the academic journey of most students. The barriers faced by most students include a lack of adequate financial resources (Falcon, 2017). Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) further stress that some students' challenges are also compounded by the lack of support concerning their academic journey from their parents. Some of the students have to cope with extra responsibilities of dealing with family issues and conjure ways of dealing with this extra burden. Students also face challenges associated with mental health problems. Students' most common mental health problems lead to depression, feelings of isolation, and anxiety (Bernal-Morales, 2015). The mental health problems students could affect the students' integration process and academic achievement.

The literature review highlights the challenges faced by first-generation students during their academic expedition. The challenges result in lower completion rates and non-completion of programmes. The institutions are responsible for providing a conducive college environment that mitigates the challenges of underprivileged students. Demetriou, Meece,

Eaker-Rich and Powell (2017) propose that institutions should establish supportive environments that eliminate barriers to the academic success of most students. Institutions must acknowledge that similar challenges are not confined to first-generation students only. Higher education institutions should provide adequate support for all student categories' in their programmes. Having adequate financial resources does not guarantee academic success. It is the responsibility of institutions to put in place systems that foster academic growth for the diversified student populace. Students' background should not be the only determining factor in completing study programmes.

### **3.4. FACTORS THAT DETERMINE STUDENT INTEGRATION**

Student success is dependent on the extent of student integration into the college environment. It is important to acknowledge academic and social factors' important contributions to student integration and successful completion of enrolled programmes. In order to ensure student success, there is also the need to consider the extent of student engagement in the college's activities. Tinto (1993) points out that students' integration includes the interaction of students' attitudes and values with the social factors of the student's life. Critical to student integration is the students' interaction with peers, faculty, and the educational institution's goals. Tinto (1993) further postulates that the extent of students' integration into the institution's community correlates with the student's commitment. On the reverse, any adverse experiences attributed to students' interactions with factors of student integration result in less commitment.

Tinto's Student Integration Theory is an important factor determining student integration (Pascarella & Tenzini, 2005). However, it is also important to accept that student involvement is equally an important component of student integration and persistence. Cabrera et al. (2020) suggest that student integration into the college system is commitment to their academic goals. Tertiary institutions should take note of the existence of several factors that foster student integration and persistence. The students' integration process incorporates the students' academic, social, and institutional factors. Therefore, institutions must harmonize different factors that facilitate student integration and persistence.



The disparities between academic and social factors and institutional commitment could interfere with the integration process. It can be deduced that the students' failure to integrate into the college system successfully could result in student attrition. Student attrition is a process that results from a failed interaction between the students as well as between the academic and social factors at the college (Heublein, 2014). The students' resilience to continue with their studies hinges on the extent of student integration into the college environment. By establishing an inclusive student support system, the institution commits to play significant role in creating a conducive environment for the students. Students with positive academic and social experiences complete their enrolled programmes (Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2019). The sense of belongingness to the larger college community is equally important for student integration, involvement, and persistence. The student's attributes and the system found within the system are key to persisting with their enrolled programmes (Sabtu, Noor & Isa, 2016).

#### **3.4.1. Barriers to student integration**

Several obstacles obstruct students from effectively integrating into the institution's environment and persisting with their studies. The barriers could be attributed to the individual student and institutional barriers. The barriers to student integration include lack of preparedness for post-secondary school, limited financial resources, low self-efficacy, and lack of academic and psychosocial support. Stephens et al. (2015) opine that individual and structural factors could inhibit the students' integration process. The failure to integrate into the college environment could result in students deriving negative learning outcomes. The individual barriers can be linked to the student's background and attributes. Mutereko (2020) insinuates that most students enrolled in TVET Colleges in South Africa originate from previously disadvantaged communities. This category of students may also find it difficult to integrate because of the limited resources.

The students' level of self-efficacy equally determines the individual student's integration process. Self-efficacy plays a critical role in the students' integration process and successful completion of enrolled programmes. According to Falcon (2017), low self-efficacy is one of the main obstacles to successfully integrating into the college environment. The students' failure to integrate could be hampered by the students' failure to interact with faculty

members and peers. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1989) as an individual's beliefs about their competencies to produce certain levels of accomplishment that exert influence over events that affect their lives. Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy are confident individuals and can perform well in various activities. This category of students is likely to overcome any obstacles to integrating into the college environment. On the contrary, individuals with a weak sense of efficacy lack the confidence to tackle challenging tasks. (Bandura, 2000).

Individuals who have a sense of self-efficacy visualize success scenarios that provide positive guides for performance, and they cognitively rechoose solutions to potential problems (Bandura, 2000:1). Self-efficacy is correlated to a greater extent with academic performance. Students with strong self-efficacy tend to perform better because they possess the right knowledge, skills, and attitude (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020). It can be deduced from the subsequent literature on self-efficacy that students who doubt themselves find it difficult to integrate and persist with their studies. Educational institutions must therefore acknowledge the differences in levels of self-efficacy among students. A student with a low self-efficacy struggle requires institutional support to assist them in adapting to the college environment. The students' poor background can also exacerbate the difficulty experienced by students during the integration process. Some students find it difficult to settle and fit into the college environs and establish relationships (Pratt et al., 2019). Such challenges can impede the student's interaction and are also worsened by their different interests because of their backgrounds. Falcon (2017) further asserts that the students' lack of self-esteem significantly impacts their academic performance. Low student self-efficacy is correlated with non-engagement in the college's academic and non-academic activities (Rafiola, Setyosar, Radjah & Ramli, 2020). The failure to interact with others and the non-involvement in institutional activities could result in student attrition. The institution's responsibility is to acknowledge that students with low self-efficacy exist. Low self-efficacy discourages the affected students from participating in college activities that foster positive learning experiences.

The institutional barriers are directly connected to the college system, requiring the institution to create a conducive environment. Magut and Kihara (2019) contest that institutions must

commit resources to assist students during adaptation. The institutions must commit resources towards academic support and social support. The Department of Higher Education (2020) confirms that the students' pass rate is low. The low programme completion rate could be attributed to the students' failure to successfully integrate into the institution's environments. Institutions should be well informed about the systemic disparities found within educational institutions.

The failure to recognize disparities and the lack of social cohesion can be an institutionalized barrier. To encourage student integration, institutions should establish programmes that promote student involvement. Motsabi et al. (2020) recommend introducing academic and social activities that stimulate student participation. Student involvement in the institution's activities augments the students' sense of belonging to the college. Cultural capital also inhibits students from successfully integrating into the institution's environment. Students deprived of cultural capital feel disconnected from the college community and struggle to adapt to the new settings (Pratt et al., 2019). The lack of information on college systems and cultural capital is a barrier to students' integration and persistence. The barriers students experience during the integration process could culminate in student attrition. Therefore, it is imperative to admit that students' characteristics and institutional factors are critical to student integration.

#### **3.4.2. Suggestions for improving student integration**

It is important to acknowledge the critical role of student support systems in encouraging student integration and persistence in TVET Colleges. Students tend to perform better academically if the conducive learning environment (Stephens et al., 2015). The institutions could use several strategies to improve student integration and persistence. According to Raaper and Brown (2020), institutions can use social networks to encourage student integration and persistence. Social networks can engage students in academic and social activities where the platforms can be used to access the various student support services available. Magut and Kihara (2019) suggest using surveys to research and get feedback on factors that encourage student integration and, at the same time, report on aspects that promote student attrition. The institutions could use the findings from the study to improve the student integration process and student persistence. Student support programmes

crucial to student integration and persistence include induction, academic advising, academic resources, study skills, cultural activities, and social support programmes. The focus should be on factors that support academic activities and social factors that assist students to adapt (Pitt et al., 2012).

There is a need for institutions to eliminate factors emanating from social class imbalances. There is a need to introduce programmes that assist less privileged students in transforming into tertiary education (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). The elimination of socio-economic class within colleges can be attained through comprehensive student support systems. The institution's responsibility is to commit resources to mitigate the challenges experienced by underprepared and the less privileged. Student integration and persistence could be improved through adequate access to academic resources, facilities that promote student involvement, and support groups that promote social cohesion. Stephens, Hamedani and Destin (2014) opine that most first-generation students require psychosocial help to encourage students to develop self-efficacy. Students who have developed self-efficacy find it easy to explore and fit in the environments of the institution. Corredor et al. (2020:24) suggest that colleges should invest in the mobilization of cultural and psychological resources to assist students to adapt to the college environment. The DHET has identified student support systems as a priority (Jeffery & Johnson, 2019). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that institutions' student support systems should prioritize student integration and persistence.

### **3.5. CATEGORIES OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES**

The diversified student population requires various forms of support. The nature of student support depends on the unique needs of individual students. Institutions must provide the main forms of support that are critical for students to yield positive learning outcomes. Student support services are categorized into academic support and non-academic support. The main forms of support discussed in this section include academic support, psychosocial support, support for students with disabilities, institutional support for international students, and students utilizing Open Distance Learning. This section also covers the institution's role in student funding and accommodation supporting the students.

### **3.5.1. Academic support**

The academic support category focuses on improving the students' academic performance. The White Paper for Post School Education (2013) states that academic support is critical to guarantee the successful completion of their enrolled programmes (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). Student support systems are a critical component of any institution bequeathed to ensure successful student integration and academic success. The academic support category focuses on improving the students' academic performance. Olaya et al. (2020) concur that academic support addresses any obstacles that inhibit students from performing well in their studies. Improved academic performance can be derived from adequate academic support. The effective provision of academic support also reduces student attrition. Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) allude that academic support should improve students' performance and, ultimately, academic success. Since tertiary institutions accommodate a diversified student populace, varying student academic support depending on students' academic challenges is called for. Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) further agree that institutions should render academic support that satisfies the needs of the diversified student populace. Institutions must provide comprehensive academic support to sustain the varying academic needs of the enrolled students.

#### **3.5.1.1. Resource centres**

Institutions should view academic support as a continuous process that starts from enrolment until the completion of the programme. Maimane (2016) asserts that academic support is offered in different forms, including library facilities and educational advising. It is of utmost importance that access to resource centres improves the students' academic performance. There is also a need for institutions to adapt to technological changes when providing academic support. Brown, Strigle and Toussaint (2020) opine that institutions should be prepared to transform from traditional online support methods to ensure consistency when providing academic support. The Student Support Services Framework (2009) recommends the establishment of resource centres with complete access to technology. The students should be trained on utilizing the resources and accessing information from the system. The resource centres and facilities should allow uploading draft assessments for checking by the lecturer before submitting the final draft (Australian Institute of Higher Education, 2017). The uploading of draft assessments allows the lecturer

to check and make recommendations before final submissions. The system design should be user-friendly to the lecturers and students if benefits are to be derived. The system should allow lecturers to monitor and access feedback in real-time which is why designers need to consult the lecturers before implementing the online system. Improved student success relies on the institution's capacity to allocate sufficient resources for academic purposes.

### **3.5.1.2. Student mentoring**

Weighing in on academic support, Brown et al. (2020) suggest offering academic advising to struggling students. Student advising is also a critical component of academic support that improves the students' performance. An effective student support system must also prioritize academic support. Student advising is one of the strategies that can also be used to reduce student attrition (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Student advising is not solely responsible for improving student retention but also fosters positive learning experiences. Therefore, institutions have the responsibility to ensure that students have adequate access to student advisors. Badenhorst and Radile (2018) indicate that some students lack college preparedness when they enrol. Under-preparedness is a huge obstacle to student integration and academic success. This category of under-prepared students needs academic advisors to achieve their academic goals. Student advising allows students to access information on managing their studies, including study skills.

The institutions are responsible for ensuring that students have equal access to student advisors, irrespective of their background. Under-prepared students' academic success hinges on the students' relationship with academic advisors. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) further agree that the students' relationship with academic advisors is crucial to students retention. The academic advisors must comprehend the difficulties facing individual students during the adaptation process to yield positive outcomes. The institutions must establish platforms that facilitate interactions between the students and the academic advisors. It is also important to consider the students' background before establishing academic support programmes. Tinto (2014:12) asserts that in the United States, most of the universities are exploiting online advising systems. The online advising system complements the efforts of student academic advisors available for face-to-face interactions.

It should be noted that the system compliments advisors' efforts and, at the same time, reduces their workload. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016:42) suggest that intrusive advising is one of the strategies that can be used to reduce student attrition. The Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training (2014) points out that institutions should replace the traditional model of student advising with intrusive student advising. A high student-to-career advisor ratio characterizes the traditional model of student advising. The traditional model restricts the frequency students approach student advisors for academic counselling. Contrary to the traditional student advising model, intrusive student advising uses online links. The intrusive method of student advising involves constant interaction and engagement between the students and the student advisors. The constant engagement through different platforms in intrusive advising reduces the student/advisor ratio. Intrusive student advising challenges institutions to embrace new recruitment, student advising, and student retention strategies. Tinto (2014:12) asserts that in the United States, most of the universities are exploiting online advising systems. It should be noted that the system compliments advisors' efforts and, at the same time, reduces their workload.

### **3.5.1.3. Extra classes**

Numerous ways can be used as forms of academic support. Institutions can use extra classes to improve students' cognitive abilities in specific subjects. Topal (2021) postulates that the students' cognitive abilities can be enhanced by attending extra classes. The provision of extra classes also improves the students' academic performance. A study conducted in Nigerian schools indicates that extra classes are used to improve teaching and learning (Udokang & Odeyemi, 2020). The implementation of extra classes should be systemic and involve key stakeholders such as parents. The institution, parents, and teachers need to be involved in structuring the extra classes (Job, 2021). The parents should play a huge role in motivating their children. The extra classes allow the instructors or lecturers to generate more income (Bukaliya, 2021). The focus should not be solely on generating extra income for the lecturers but also on improving the students' academic performances. Therefore, there is need for the institution to have administrative systems in place to ensure the effectiveness of the programmes. Deductions can be made from the literature above, that the provision of extra-classes is a critical componenet of academic

support. It is important for the institution to put the necessary structures in place and provide adequate resources towards extra-classes.

#### **3.5.1.4. Peer tutoring**

Institutions can use various forms of academic support. The most notable form is peer tutoring. Thurston, Cockerill and Chiang (2021) point out that peer-tutoring as an approach to learning involving two students working together, with one assuming the role of tutor and the other tutee. In defining peer-tutoring, Svellingen, Røsland and Røykenes (2021) suggest a wider term for active learning approaches that focus on students learning from each other. Peer tutoring as an approach to learning should be taken as a systematic process that involves academic staff. Peer-tutoring is a structured approach involving students academically or socially (Radiusman & Simanjuntak, 2021). Peer tutoring can be administered in different forms.

The institution has to decide which form of peer-tutoring to use depending on the context and the intended outcome. Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (RPT) and Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) are some of the common forms of peer tutoring (Gazula, Gazula, McKenna, Cooper & Paliadelis, 2017). Reciprocal Peer Tutoring is a form of collaborative learning that involves students of similar academic backgrounds and experiences interchanging the roles of tutor and learner (Gazula et al., 2017:65). RPT students exchange roles in this case, and the benefits are mutual. This method is applicable if the students are at the same level academically. Both students develop the same set of skills, and it improves their confidence in communication skills and improves their comprehension of the subject matter. Peer-assisted learning is a form of collaborative learning that allows knowledge and skills through active help and support among students (Gazula et al., 2017:65). Peer-assisted learning (PAL) is normally used when a top-performing student assists another student struggling with a particular subject.

Previous studies have indicated that peer tutoring benefits both the tutor and the learner (Okilwa & Shelby, 2010). Benefits can be derived from peer-tutoring depending on the context in which it is applied. To ensure that it is used effectively, the institution should involve academic staff to guide the process. The lecturers' role cannot be overlooked as they



are responsible for providing the subject material and guidelines. Olulowo, Ige and Ugwoke's (2020) findings from a study conducted at a secondary school in Nigeria indicated that peer-tutoring improved the students' academic performance. It also emerged from the findings that it improves the students' communication skills and confidence and is beneficial to both. The peer tutors can express themselves in a manner that the tutee understands. Hegedűs (2021) suggests that peer-tutoring can be used as remedial for struggling students. From the subject matter expert's standpoint, feedback should be communicated after each session. That would allow the lecturer, peer-tutor, and tutee to identify gaps and suggest ways to improve the process.

The White Paper for Post School, Education, and Training (2013) postulated that institutions must provide academic support if throughput and certification rates are to be improved (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). Academic support is key to students achieving academic success. Institutions of higher learning should prioritize academic support as integral to the learning process. The institutions are challenged to avoid implementing a blanket approach to students' academic support. If properly administered, peer tutoring can serve as critical component of academic support.

### **3.5.2. Non-academic support**

Student support can be categorized into academic support and non-academic support. The institutions should acknowledge the challenges faced by students that require non-academic support. In support of non-academic support, Munyaradzi and Addae (2019) suggest that greater emphasis should also be placed on the students' needs not directly linked to learning activities. The non-academic support includes psychological support, support for students with disabilities, accommodation, support for students involved in Open Distance Learning, and support for international students.

#### **3.5.2.1. Student counselling**

Students' mental health is one of the areas that needs institutional attention. There is a need to accept that mental health issues are prevalent among college students. Wilks, Auerbach, Alonso, Benjet, Bruffaerts and Cuijpers (2020) postulate that epidemiological studies illustrate increasing numbers of students experiencing mental health the world over. Mental

health issues among students are attributed to several factors. The factors may vary among students depending on the student's background and predispositions. Students' mental health issues are attributed to psychological, biological, and factors emanating from the environment (Mohd Shafiee & Mutalib, 2020). Institutions need to identify and distinguish between various factors affecting students' mental well-being. Students' mental health problems negatively affect student integration and contribute significantly to students' academic impairment (Wilks et al., 2020).

Institutions need to accept that students' psychological well-being is equally important to persistence and academic success. Students are at risk of dropping out if they are deprived of the institutional support necessary for their psychological well-being (Thomas, Barr, Hotell, Adkins & Dick, 2021). Institutions have a critical role in establishing systems that prioritize the students' psychological needs and well-being. Psychological support differs amongst the students depending on their background and mental state. Mohd Shafiee and Mutalib (2020) identify increased workload, financial constraints, family issues, and disproportionate balance between academic and social activities as some of the causes of stress. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016:36) allude to the many challenges affecting different categories of students in colleges by highlighting that some students are vulnerable to emotional strain. Stress is one of the major contributors to students' mental health problems. The stress experienced by students emanates from a host of problems that include social alienation, academic workload, financial limitations, perceived discrimination, amongst other factors (Wu et al., 2015). The factors emanating from the students' background have a huge impact on the students' academic persistence. The individual student's emotional well-being correlates with the student's academic success (Hafer et al., 2021). Therefore, the fundamental praxis for student support systems is to holistically cater for the student's cognitive, emotional well-being, and social aspects of life. Institutional failure to address mental health issues among students could lead to student attrition and negative learning outcomes.

The nature of support to mitigate mental health problems differs among students. That requires the institutions to offer a wide range of support programmes. Thompson and Porto (2014) indicate that most tertiary institutions in the US offer wellness programmes. An individual's mental well-being and their extent of motivation are influenced by accessing

support that suits the individual's social context (Shin & Bolkan, 2021). Student wellness programmes range from emotional, spiritual, physical, alcohol, substance abuse prevention programmes, and sexual health. In addition, some institutions have enacted social network links such as Facebook to support or disseminate information on wellness programmes available (Thompson & Porto, 2014). The mental health programmes should also address the common problems that contribute to the students' psychological impairment.

Stressors, amongst other factors, add to the academic pressures the student is already experiencing. It is the responsibility of the institutions to put in place student support systems that make psychosocial support services easily accessible to students. Psychological support should always be available to mitigate students' mental concerns (Australian Institute of Higher Education, 2017). Institutions must prioritize and emphasize the significant role student support services play in mitigating students' psychosocial issues. If adequately provided, psychosocial support plays a role in alleviating mental issues facing students. For this reason higher education institutions should put in place systems and services that address the students' social issues. It is also imperative to concede several factors that inhibit students from accessing psychological support from the institution's existing support system. The factors could be attributed to the individual or the institution. Commenting on personal factors, Mohd Shafiee and Mutalib (2020) suggest fear of stigmatization as one of the most common obstacles that deter students from seeking psychological help. Stigma prevents students from seeking treatment and could further lead to discrimination and stereotyping.

Cage, Ryan, Hughes and Spanner (2021) similarly concur that self-stigma is one of the most common barriers to individuals seeking help. Therefore, institutions have an important role in eradicating factors that deter students from seeking help. Addressing issues around stigma requires establishing student support systems that embrace diversity among students. The institutional barriers to accessing psychological support could be attributed to the lack of relevant programmes for students experiencing mental health issues. Priestley, Broglia, Hughes and Spanner (2021) suggest that most students are deprived of access to support because of structural barriers such as the lack of information by students on student support services available to students. Based on the literature review, it is important to

acknowledge that students enrolled in TVET colleges are diversified. TVET colleges must provide student support services that are inclusive and that addresses the students' psychological well-being. Stefania (2015) advocates for non-exclusion when providing support services to students.

The myriad of psychosocial issues facing students is a reality, and student support systems should strive to combat their impact on students. In order to mitigate psychological and emotional challenges, psychosocial support should not be viewed as peripheral but critical to the students' retention. The institutions can utilize internal counselling services provided by the institution or external services depending on the nature and severity of students' mental health issues. Ricks (2016.5) recommends that institutions should be proactive. And have systems that facilitate individual student planning and mentoring programmes for enrolled students. Wu et al. (2015) recommend that post-secondary institutions provide psychological support to assist students during the transition and adaptation.

Institutions have the responsibility to establish a standardized framework for student counselling. Student counsellors should be involved in individual student counselling. The institutional system should be capacitated enough to identify individual students at high risk. Ricks (2016) recommends that student counsellors provide psychosocial services systematically. That requires the practitioners to adhere to the guidelines outlined by their registered professional board. The institution's counsellors' efforts should focus and respond to the students' different psychological problems. There is a need to draw a framework for student counselling that is flexible to different situations. It should be noted that life skills are crucial as they play a critical role in the student's holistic development. Psychosocial support must be comprehensively provided to the students (Le Vigouroux, Goncalves & Charbonnier, 2021).

In summing up psychological support, it is important to acknowledge that it is a critical component of the student support system. The diversified student population in TVET colleges would benefit immensely from psychological support. Student support is central to ensuring that students' emotional stability is sustained during their tenure in tertiary institutions. Conclusions can be drawn from the literature that students experience varying

challenges. The challenges can be attributed to their socioeconomic status and psychosocial issues. The myriad of challenges students face adversely affects their learning experiences. In order to mitigate the impact of challenges students face, psychological support is important. Students' mental health issues should be prioritized. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that bias should not exist when addressing the academic and non-academic needs of the students. There is a correlation between the student's academic achievement and mental well-being. The literature review suggests that numerous factors affect the student's psychological wellness. The institution has an important role in mitigating the impact of mental health problems on the students' academic success.

### **3.5.2.2. Students with disabilities**

Post-secondary education institutions the world over have of late witnessed a surge in enrollment of students with disabilities. Kaunda and Chizwina (2019) acknowledge that institutions of higher learning have witnessed a huge increase in students with disabilities. People with disabilities are regarded as part of special populations. The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (2013:47) advocates that explicit attention should be given to the plight of women with disabilities. Whilst prioritizing the needs of women with disabilities, it is also important to address disability issues inclusively. Governments have drafted and enacted laws that mandate institutions to protect the rights of students with disabilities (Harafsheh et al. 2020). Legislation has been passed to protect the rights of people with disabilities. Conventions and treaties have been signed to protect the rights of persons with disabilities (Mutanga & Walker, 2017). Despite the endorsements of such treaties the plight of people with disabilities and, students with disabilities still face marginalization and are discriminated against. In the Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for Post-School Education and Training Systems of March 2018, only 3049 students with disabilities were enrolled in South Africa's TVET Colleges. Among this figure 1611 were female students (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018). The statistics show the under-representation of students with disabilities in tertiary institutions. Ibrahim (2021) argues that students with disabilities are still alienated and deprived of equal learning opportunities. Institutions are responsible for creating an environment that nurtures students with disabilities to be competent and skilled individuals. Fleming, Oertle, Plotner and Hakun (2017) acknowledge that the college's environment influences the retention and

academic performance of students with disabilities. The continuous enrollment of students with disabilities requires institutional commitment.

Disability is presented in different forms. It is important to be aware of the different categories in the context of students. Dahlstrom-Hakki, Alstad and Banerjee (2020) accept that it is difficult to categorize and define disability among students. However, it is equally imperative to distinguish between the different categories of disability. The categorization of disability among students would determine the form of support the individual need. Students with disabilities are at risk of exclusion, marginalization, and underachievement (DeMatthews et al. 2020). The Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998 states that people with disabilities have a long-term or recurring physical or mental impairment that substantially limits their entry into or advancement in employment (Department of Labour, 2020). This study delineates students with disabilities into physical disabilities and learning disabilities. The most common forms of disability among students include; learning disability, visual impairment, speech impairment, hearing impairment, and health disability (Stevens, Schneider & Bederman-Miller, 2018). Disability is further divided into visible disabilities and hidden disabilities, with the former easily identifiable. Students with visible disabilities are first to receive support from the institutions (Gelbar, Mada-us, Lombardi, Faggella-Luby & Dukes, 2015). The extent of visible disabilities does not require intricate processes to diagnose. Institutions continue to prioritize the needs of students with physical disabilities and not address the plight of those with learning disabilities (Braun & Naami, 2021). By referring to the literature as mentioned earlier, deductions can be made that institutions find it difficult to attend to students with hidden disabilities.

Various obstacles deter students with disabilities from successfully integrating into the college community. The challenges experienced by students with disabilities interfere with the students' adaptation process and academic achievement. The strategic Policy Framework on Disability for Post-School Education and Training Systems of March 2018 indicates that in 2011 only 5.3% of students with disabilities attained higher education. The statistics indicate that students with disabilities struggle academically. The obstacles to the integration process and academic success of students with disabilities could be attributed to

personal and systemic barriers. Pearson et al. (2017) identify systemic barriers and the students' barriers as deterrents to students' integration and persistence.

Successful completion of programmes lies with the institution's student support system, which provides comprehensive support for students with disabilities. The non-existent flaws in policies for students with disabilities and the gaps within the monitoring system are systemic barriers to the institution (Dahlstrom-Hakki et al., 2020). In advocating for students with disabilities, Chiwandire and Vincent (2019) advocate for policies that promote inclusivity and academic success for students with disabilities in South Africa's tertiary institutions. The trivialization of support for students with disabilities undermines efforts to provide access to learning opportunities by students with disabilities. Fleming, Oertle, Plotner and Hakun (2017) acknowledge that retention rates are lower among students with disabilities than students without disabilities. The student's disability should not be an obstacle to learning. Students normally find it difficult to access the curriculum and other college facilities for teaching and learning (Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). The students with disabilities should also be given equal learning opportunities like students without disabilities. Pearson et al. (2017) claim that negative perceptions from staff compound the challenges faced by students with disabilities. Some staff members perceive students with disabilities as more likely to fail. The staff also view them as at risk of dropping out compared to students without disabilities. It has emerged from studies conducted at the University of Venda and Free state that some staff members lack knowledge on disability issues among students (Mutanga & Walker, 2017). The institutions can change negative perceptions about students with disabilities through the student support systems. There is a need for institutions to promote diversity and inclusivity. Bamiteko, Ibi and Bukar (2017) claim that staff perceptions of students with physical disabilities are almost the same with students without disabilities. It is important for staff to acknowledge that disability exist among students and that the needs of students with disabilities need to be prioritized. Adequate support for students is important to mitigate the challenges experienced by students with disabilities.

One of the most difficult tasks institutions face is the diagnosis of hidden disabilities among students. That practically means the institutions' are overreliant on student self-disclosure. Self-disclosure involves the self-presentation of documentation of the student's previous

diagnosis to the disability unit (Kim & Aquino, 2017). That makes it difficult for institutions to accommodate and adequately serve students with hidden disabilities. The majority of post-secondary institutions are still finding it difficult in acknowledging that disability unity is a key component of student support (Kerschbaum et al., 2017). The trivialization of college support for students with disabilities exposes the students to discrimination which calls for tertiary institutions to accept student disability as key to inclusivity.

The lack of resources also impedes the success of students with disabilities for utilization by students with disabilities. Previous studies suggest that educational institutions have limited financial resources and cannot provide adequate resources for students with disabilities (Kaunda & Chizwina, 2019). Some students find it difficult to navigate campus because of the existing infrastructure. Obiozor et al. (2011:1) bemoaned the deficiency in resources existing in colleges' capacity to address challenges experienced by this special group of learners. The limited provision of facilities for students with disabilities deters students from participating in the institution's academic and non-academic activities. Braun and Naami (2021) opine that access to college facilities remains a huge challenge. In South African institutions, barriers to students engagement by students with disabilities in college activities still exist (Subrayen & Dhunpath, 2019). The existence of systemic barriers with students' integration process and academic success. There is a need for critical analysis to identify the unique needs of students with disabilities. The marginalization and the continued exclusion of students with disabilities could be attributed to their lack of representation within the institution (Becker & Palladino, 2016). The lack of representation of students with disabilities deprives them of the accommodations they are entitled to.

Staff's limited knowledge of student disability issues denies the students access to equal learning opportunities. It has emerged from studies conducted at the University of Venda and Free state that some staff members lack knowledge on disability issues among students (Mutanga & Walker, 2017). The staff's inability to serve the needs of students with disabilities can be attributed to a lack of prioritization on staff development. Badenhorst and Radile (2018) claim that institutions are deprived of a proper referral system for students experiencing different challenges. Most of the institutions' resources do not adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities. The lack of institutional policies on disability



undermines the effort to serve the needs of students with disabilities. Mutanga and Walker (2017) point out that institutions lack formal policies consistent with the diversified needs of students with disabilities. There is a need to establish an internal system that addresses students' disability issues. It can be inferred from the literature that addressing the needs of students with disabilities is complex because of the varying nature of the disability.

Numerous strategies can be used to improve the lives of students with disabilities. The institutional support provided by the college is determined by the nature and severity of the disability. To ensure inclusivity when providing student support is the college's readiness to adequately serve students with disabilities (Mosia & Phasha, 2017). The institutions have the key responsibility of establishing a disability unit. The unit's operations should be guided by legislation and policies that focus on the needs of students with disabilities. Institutions should be guided by policies that prioritize the establishment of disability units to serve the needs of students with disabilities (Moriña & Perera, 2020).

It should be noted that the drafting of disability policies is not an overnight process, and it requires extensive research and consultations. The unique needs of students with disabilities can be adequately served by creating advocacy on disability issues. Stevens et al. (2018) suggest that institutions should create awareness on disability issues to cater for students with disabilities' needs. Obiozor et al. (2011:2) state that students with learning disabilities face different challenges in tertiary institutions. The students with disabilities have to cope with the stress and trauma of their disability.

The students with disabilities encounter barriers in accessing facilities and services that can mitigate their challenges. Assistive Technology can be used to alleviate the challenges students with disabilities experience. Assistive Technology for students with disabilities fosters inclusion and eliminates any perceptions associated with stigmatization. Assistive Technology can also be used to improve the students with disabilities' integration and academic performance. Kaunda & Chizwina (2019) suggest that students with disabilities should access remote databases for learning material. Assistive Technology can improve the institution's throughput and certification rate among students with disabilities, which

serves as part of academic support (Fichten, Olenik-Shemesh, Asuncion, Jorgensen & Colwell, 2020).

The erection of facilities for students with disabilities encourages students to participate in the institution's activities. The development of infrastructure to accommodate students with disabilities should be prioritized by institutions. That is acknowledged by Neill, Markward and French (2008), who suggest the erection of suitable accessible facilities for use by students with disabilities. It is important to acknowledge that disability among students varies. The nature of disability determines the kind of support the students with disabilities need. Therefore, support for students can be tailor-made to address the varying disabilities among students. The cost to tailor-made support for students with disabilities can be prohibitive. The student support services should focus on effective forms of academic support that foster autonomy among the students with disabilities. Ibrahim (2021) expressed concern that disability among students in higher education remains unexplored in most African Countries. That suggests a need for more research to improve support systems for students with disabilities.

### **3.5.2.3. International students**

There has been an influx of international students crossing borders for better education and job opportunities world-wide. Lately, there has been a surge in students from abroad enrolling with South Africa's post-secondary institutions (Daddow, Cronshaw, Daddow & Sandy, 2020). Misra and Castillo (2004) define international students as individuals from different countries, immersed with diverse beliefs, values, and political philosophies. International students also face the same challenges experienced by local students. In addition to common challenges experienced by the majority of students international students, also students face unique obstacles. The obstacles international students encounter interfere with their adaptation process. International students face systemic barriers that exclude them from the college community (Anandavalli, 2021). International students experience unique challenges during the integration process compared to those encountered by local students (Mokhothu & Callaghan, 2018).

International students face a mammoth task in pursuit of their studies. They encounter novel and new living arrangements, financial limitations, unfamiliar learning approaches, language demands, and individual barriers (Wu et al., 2015). Findings from studies conducted in China on international students indicate that the majority of the students experienced stress attributed to economic and social isolation (Song, Zhao & Zhu, 2021). To assist with the integration process, institutions must provide adequate support to international students. The institutions must establish support systems that allow international students to integrate into the new environment with minimum obstacles (Mokhothu & Callaghan, 2018).

Several obstacles interfere with international students' adaptation process. The most common obstacles to student integration by international students include social isolation, finding it difficult to negotiate cultural differences, and marginalization (Daddow et al., 2020). Kamaşak, Sahan and Rose (2021) claim that language remains one of the greatest barriers international students encounter. Some of the challenges experienced by international students are attributed to differences in culture. International students exhibit cultural stress and lower satisfaction with their learning experiences (Koo, Baker & Yoon, 2021). Wu et al. (2015), commenting on a qualitative study conducted with university students in the United States, noted that the problems faced include academic challenges, social alienation, and cultural adaptation.

The international students' expectations and the learning process with the institutions expose the students to cultural strain. The non-congruence between international students' expectations and the actual learning experiences adversely affects the international students' integration process (Perez-encinas et al., 2017:1031). Institutions must establish means and be prepared to address international students' academic, social, and cultural needs (Wu et al., 2015). It is important to acknowledge that it is difficult to address challenges faced by international students. The difficulty institutions face regarding international students could be attributed to complexity on cultural issues. Academic issues experienced by international students include challenges when communicating with faculty members, their peers, and other staff members. Chinyamurindi (2018) acknowledges that in some of the universities in South Africa, language differences serve as a huge problem affecting international students. Language differences may be the main obstacle to

international students' interaction with fellow students and academic staff. Institutions need to provide support to improve the language proficiency of international students (Kamaşak, Sahan & Rose, 2021). However, the communication and interaction can be exacerbated by cultural differences amongst students. Wu et al. (2015) further highlighted that discrimination against international students by local students is rife in United States universities. The discrimination emanates from perceived economic threats competition for employment opportunities. It is important to acknowledge that culture is complex and is a huge challenge for international students. Philips and Africa (2021) assert that there are concerns surrounding issues in the integration process of international students.

Some institutions lack the commitment to serve the needs of international students. The institution's lack of commitment may deter this group of students from participating in the institution's activities. Mokhothu and Callaghan (2018) point out that previous studies indicate that institutions are still lagging in prioritizing support for international students. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the institutions to mitigate challenges experienced by international students. Shu, Ahmed, Pickett, Ayman and McAbee (2020) propose that institutions should strive to improve the learning experiences of international students by identifying strategies that contribute to their successful adaptation. Chinyamurindi (2018) suggests that institutions can use social support and social networks to facilitate the integration of international students.

Social support would encourage the involvement of international students and develop a sense of belonging. The student support system can introduce programmes and workshops that also address the cultural aspects of student adaptation Chinyamurindi (2018) further suggests that stakeholders should continue to focus and prioritize addressing issues that affect academic achievement, health, and wellness of international students. It is also important to note that that individual barriers inhibit international students from accessing services at their disposal. Some students are reluctant to access existing health facilities because of perceived stigma and systemic barriers (Masai, Güçüz-Doğa, Ouma, Nyadera & Ruto, 2021).

It is also important to acknowledge efforts undertaken to improve the quality and experiences of international students. Research exploring international students' cross-cultural adjustment has increased over the past few years (Shu et al., 2020). Also acknowledging studies on international students, Perez-Encinas, Rodriguez-Pomela and Josek (2017) comment on the ESN Survey conducted in European Universities in 2016. The ESN survey focussed on the conduct of host universities when dealing with international students. What emerged from the study is that most of the universities which participated in the survey struggled to comprehend the needs of international students. Flaws in the admission processes were also noted as an area of concern. The institutions wanted to provide student accommodation, access to financial services, and information and technology. Wu et al. (2015) attest that it is imperative for institutions hosting international students to cluster and comprehend the numerous needs of these students. The host institutions should identify and provide appropriate support and services required.

In addition to the above assertions on challenges international students encounter in tertiary institutions, living expenses, proficiency in local languages, academic challenges are areas of concern. If the above students' concerns are addressed, the student's learning experiences can be enriched. It is of value for hosting institutions to establish a student support system that addresses and sustains the students' diverse needs. International students require social support networks that allow interactions on diversity issues (Al Salman et al., 2021). Significance should be placed on the role of orientation. The student orientation process allows the dissemination of information on the services available for utilization by the students. Therefore, colleges should put measures through student support to ensure that international students are not excluded.

#### **3.5.2.4. Distance learning**

Thompson and Porto (2014) acknowledge a huge surge in students embarking on online programmes in many tertiary institutions locally and globally. The rise in student numbers for distance learning has been propelled by its flexibility. Tinto (2014) alludes that enrolment numbers for distance learning have surged over the years the world over because of the attraction of non-traditional students to flexible online programmes. Non-traditional students who are much older appreciate the convenience of distance learning. Distance learning suits

the students' multiple roles, including family responsibilities, work, and study. Tinto (2014) further underscores that retention for students using distance learning as a mode of study is very low.

Students who are engaged in distance learning experience numerous challenges. Students enrolled in distance learning have to juggle balancing their multiple responsibilities (Thompson & Porto, 2014). Multiple responsibilities experienced by students in distance learning can lead to excessive stress, student attrition, and negative learning experiences. Thompson and Porto (2014) further underscore that student support services core to student wellness and success are often overlooked in adult learning. Not paying attention to distance learning students' academic and non-academic needs has negative results. That may lead to the non-completion of enrolled programmes. Open Distance Learning students encountered challenges can be alleviated through adequate student support. Students engaged in distance learning require support networks that eliminate the physical distance between the faculty, peers, and institution (Al Salman et al., 2021). The institutions can use social networks to connect the students with the institution. That might require establishing online platforms to access learning material and academic advising services.

Nsamba and Mokae (2017) point out that Open Distance Learning (ODL) – Student Support Services includes many services. Like any other students support, the services include career counselling, registration, advisory services, resource centres, and psychosocial support. Nsamba and Mokae (2017) affirm that adequate student support is crucial for academic success. In ODL, there is physical separation between the learners and their lecturers. The learning process is dependent on the utilization of printouts and electronic resources. The physical separation between the learner and the lecturers presents challenges that interfere with the learning process. However, with improvement in technology, it is now possible to conduct online sessions. The online sessions require support from the institutions in equipment and data for internet connection. Nsamba and Mokae (2017:92) explain that the ODL learning process makes students feel isolated and disillusioned. Conclusions can be drawn from the literature review that alienation depletes the students' level of motivation among students enrolled for distance learning. Establishing a feasible student support system can fortify student motivation, retention, and completion

of programmes. Therefore, it is critical for organisations offering ODL to acknowledge that students in such programmes require support. Nsamba and Mokae (2017) point out that students utilising ODL as a study mode are isolated and in different locations. Students' geographical dispersion adversely impacts any efforts of mobilization to facilitate the provision of quality education.

Most importantly, students involved in distance learning should have adequate support from the institutions. Kaunda and Chizwina (2019) argue that students involved in ODL should have adequate academic support with access to remote resource centers. Distance learning needs of students through ODL may vary with those of students attending face-to-face full time. Student support for distance learning should bridge the gap between the student and the instructor. A comprehensive student support system should equal or exceed the students' needs and expectations. That highlights the significant role of the institutions in establishing a student support system that provides adequate and desired student support services.

#### **3.5.2.5. Student accommodation**

Student accommodation is an equally important component aspect of student support. There has been substantial growth in private student accommodation globally. Recent studies indicate that most public tertiary institutions cannot accommodate students enrolled at their institutions (Gregory and Rogerson, 2019:187). The provision of accommodation contributes significantly to students' integration and academic achievement. The higher education sector continues to expand in most developing countries.

Institutions of higher learning need to provide student accommodation to improve student integration and academic success. Reynolds (2020) posit that the increase in students enrolling for tertiary education has resulted in a growing demand for student accommodation. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013:18) highlights that one of the main challenges facing TVET colleges is the shortage of accommodation. In South Africa, TVET colleges are experiencing shortages in student accommodation. Student accommodation is non-existent in most government colleges (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). Student accommodation remains a huge challenge in South

Africa's tertiary institutions. Statistics indicate that in 2010 only 23% of the enrolled students had access to college accommodation (Mokwena and Zuidgeest, 2020). The shortage of student accommodation is further acknowledged by Mzileni (2020), who suggests that accommodation for students has emerged as an area of concern in most tertiary institutions in South Africa. According to the Daily Maverick (2019), the shortage of student accommodation was also emphasized by Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Nzimande in his 2019 budget speech. The Minister explained that his ministry had prioritized student accommodation development for TVET Colleges. The Student Housing Infrastructure projected 300 000 beds for TVETs and universities. The estimated figure should be achieved within the next ten years. The projected figure of 300 000 by 2029 highlights the serious shortage of student accommodation. It can be deduced from the above assertions that providing college accommodation remains the government's responsibility.

Governments play a critical role in providing accommodation to students in tertiary institutions (Magambo, Dida & Kaijage, 2020). The provision of accommodation guarantees that the students' tenure at college is more comfortable and fosters positive learning experiences. Xu, Sunindijo and Mussi (2020) agree that student accommodation is among key facilities that contribute significantly to student integration. Student accommodation should provide a conducive environment for studying and serve as rest areas with adequate recreational facilities to promote healthy living. Obiozor et al. (2011) opine that students with disabilities should be provided accommodation. However, student accommodation should include all student categories, but priority should favour students with disabilities. Tinto (2014) assert that only a handful of enrolled students have access to college accommodation. Many students from low-income backgrounds are deprived of the privilege to reside on campus. The students resort to finding accommodation in overcrowded, unsafe, and crime hotspots (Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020). The provision of college accommodation could provide a safe environment for students in need. Tinto (2014) further postulates that non-resident students' time on a college campus is limited. The use of non-college residence impedes the students' engagement process. Therefore, institutions should commit to developing student residence. Institutions need to provide accommodation with enough facilities that allow students to study in a conducive environment (Zubair, Anuar & Sarbini, 2020). The college residence should also be safe and conducive for studying as well.



The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013:18) notes that the DHET and other key stakeholders will deliberate on erecting student villages where there is the proximity between institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). There is a need for institutions to focus on removing the systemic and structural barriers to students accessing and utilizing college residence. It would be beneficial to put a universal access design that benefits employees, students, and visitors alike (the University of Pretoria, Department of Student Affairs, Disability Unit, 2013). The Policy on Students with Disabilities (2013) asserts that the institutions will provide reasonable accommodation if the students ask for such provisions and that accessibility to sports and recreational facilities will be provided to the students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities should have equitable access to such facilities with minimum barriers. The Policy on Students with Disabilities (2013:4), alluding to accommodating students with disabilities, underscores the importance of the university in complying with the National Building Regulations and Building Standards Act as amended for persons with disabilities (University of Pretoria, 2013). It is imperative to acknowledge the drafting of inclusive policies when addressing accommodation issues in the TVET sector. The policy should be non-discriminatory. The guidelines for allocating student accommodation should give preference to students with disabilities. On-campus accommodation serves several purposes that include a place for sleeping, studying, and resting, and this requires the environment to be conducive for studying and student success (Zubair, Anuar & Sarbini, 2020). Improving student accommodation requires commitment from the government, the institutions and other key stakeholders. The institution needs to acknowledge that college accommodation is a key component of student support services. The lack of college accommodation compels students to live in sub-standard places, usually scanty, overcrowded, insecure, and residences that pose health hazards (Magambo, Dida & Kaijage, 2020). The literature review acknowledges that student accommodation is critical to student integration. Student accommodation remains a challenge in developing countries, yet it remains under-researched (Reynolds, 2020).

### **3.5.2.6. Student funding**

Student funding remains an area of concern for the world over for students to access higher education. The need for funding has impelled most governments to reflect on the numerous challenges students experience (Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020). Student funding is one of the key determinants that drive students to enroll at TVET colleges. In South Africa, the lack of government financial support to students has seen the emergence of movements such as #FeesMustFall. The movement challenged the government to address the inequalities attributed to escalating college fees (Raghuram, Breines & Gunter (2020). Through the student support services, the institutions play a huge part in ensuring that institutions provide funding to students. Walker and Mathebula (2020) challenge institutions to mobilize and administer funds for needy students. Student profiling administered by student support assists in ascertaining the eligibility of students qualifying for funding.

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013:18) asserts that when allocating funds, institutions should be aware that the majority of the enrolled students hail from low socio-economic status. Raghuram et al. (2020) also acknowledge that most students from less privileged backgrounds rely on government funding. Funding through bursaries is available to deserving students who meet the criteria as announced by former President Jacob Zuma on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2017, when he instructed the government to implement free education for students whose households have a combined income that does not exceed R350 000 (TVET Colleges South Africa, 2018). In TVETs before this announcement, bursaries were availed to deserving students as long as they met the criteria. In TVET colleges, student funding is administered by NSFAS. Student funding is crucial for the majority of the students. Gregory and Rogerson (2019) explain that NSFAS is a government scheme that funds students from poor backgrounds and some students from working-class families. Scott (2016) argues that NSFAS plays a huge role in funding the majority of disadvantaged students, but some students face financial exclusion. The institutions need to have systems that allow deserving students to access funding.

The funding should be systematic and must follow specific criteria. Many complexities associated with student funding make it difficult to administer. Naidoo and McKay (2018) argue that student funding is a sophisticated exercise and requires standardization based

on a specific category to determine who gets the funding. Funding includes transport, accommodation, and other necessities such as food and toiletries (Walker & Mathebula, 2020). Student funding is one critical aspect that should be provided timeously. Some studies have concluded that there is a relationship between student funding and the student's performance, while other studies object to the existence of any relationship (Wildschut, Megbowon & Miselo, 2020:1). Despite the inconclusive evidence on the role of funding in student performance student funding remains a critical area that allows students to integrate into their college environment and focus on their studies. Higher education institutions must therefore to prioritize student funding. Naidoo and McKay (2018) point out that institutions are under immense pressure to assist students to support the importance of student funding. Student funding is now a huge priority for the majority of institutions. It is imperative to acknowledge that student funding is one of the most important components of any institution's student support.

### **3.6. ADMINISTRATION OF STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

The holistic development of students requires commitment and coordinated effort from the institution and key stakeholders. The successful integration of students and the students' academic success hinges on effective student support systems. However, several challenges interfere with the effective administration of student support systems. Hendrick, Woodward and Fuhr (2020) cite the lack of standardization of services as one of the inhibitors to the administration of student support systems. The non-uniformity of student support offered by institutions renders it difficult to enact systems to improve the existing systems. Bill (2016) laments a lack of integration between components within the institutions' student support structures. The lack of coordination on the various services offered by the student support unit undermines the effort to serve students. Critical to the effective administration of student support systems is infrastructure and funds. Priestley et al. (2021) suggest that systemic barriers limit student access to the available support services. The lack of funding for student support makes it difficult for the student support unit to function optimally. The institution's tendency to commit low expenditure towards student support cripples student support systems (Hendrick et al., 2020). The low budget allocation leads to the non-development of infrastructure and equipment for use by student support staff.

There is a need to enact legislation and policies that guide the administration of student support systems. The absence of consistent student support policies makes it difficult for institutions to effectively manage the unit (Priestley, Broglia, Hughes & Spanner, 2021). Consistent policies serve as a platform for establishing standard operating procedures necessary for the governance of student support systems. The Draft Policy on Student Support Services for Community Education and Training Colleges (2017:6) states that quality education depends on effective support services accessible to all students and lecturers. The Draft Policy further states that priority has not been assigned to developing student support systems in Community Education and Training Colleges (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). Student support systems are regarded as integral to teaching and learning. However, it should be noted that the effective administration of student support systems transcends beyond the published legislation and policies. Therefore, it is important to consider the context in which the policies are implemented. Student support systems' staff structure comprises key personnel, including trained professionals, facilitators, and student mentors (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). The effective administration of student support systems requires coordination of staff's efforts. The emphasis should be the coordination of staff activities towards the main purpose of student support systems. The effective administration of student support is hampered by staff's reluctance to support students, and in some instances, staff exhibit unsupportive behaviour when executing their duties (Williamson, Callaghan, Whittlesea & Heath, 2011). The institutions must change the mindset of student support staff. The student support staff should be proactive individuals who have intrinsic motivation towards their roles within the student support system. Munyaradzi, Arko-achemfuor and Quan-Baffour (2021) view that the lack of qualified and competent staff undermines the effort to administer student support effectively. Therefore, it is a prerequisite that personnel found within the student support system should be individuals capacitated with the necessary skills and technical ability. Individuals filling the different portfolios should have the necessary expertise to administer programmes that address challenges faced by students. Conflicting staff roles creates confusion about each portfolio's core responsibilities, impacting staff responsibilities and roles (Williamson et al., 2011). Assigning a job description for each portfolio is important for the unit's administration and ensures accountability among staff. Integration and coordination of services offered by different categories of staff are critical. Coordinating staff

activities and continuous interaction allows early identification of additional support required by students before the problem exacerbates.

The student support programmes should advocate for inclusivity and embrace the principles of a culturally rich and diverse learning environment. Bill (2016) admits that policy barriers make it difficult to coordinate the multiple functions of student support units in most institutions. Policies that improve student support systems are key to the effective administration of student support systems. In supporting and complimenting government obligations, frameworks have been enacted to support the establishment of feasible student support structures. Policies determine how institutions administer specific issues within their constituency. The Student Support Policy Framework (2016) further highlights that qualified individuals are responsible for administering specific portfolios of student support systems. The staff must be familiar with guidelines when assisting students by offering and making referrals when necessary. It is important to address equality issues when formulating policy frameworks. Students' rights should be observed, and any factors that promote prejudice on mental health concerns must be eliminated. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013) advocates for a student disability framework that should incorporate norms and standards that facilitate students and staff with disabilities. (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017).

The Student Support Services Framework (2008) guides how TVET colleges can administer the student support systems. The role of student support systems is not confined to the students' skills acquisition and employability aspects. The students should develop as a people with social skills that allow them to contribute meaningfully to their community. The main issues embodied in the framework are the guiding principles, procedures, and strategies institutions should adhere to when providing student support services. The Student Support Services Framework for Further Education and Training (2008) affirms that quality education revolves around the accessibility of student support services provided by the institution (Department of Higher Education and Training 2017). According to The Department of Higher Education and Training (2017), the Further Education and Training Colleges Act 16 of 2006 outlined the following as the main roles of student support:

- i. To advocate that when establishing the Student Representative Council (SRC) in colleges, SRC should be represented in the college's authoritative structure. The structures include the College Council and the Academic Board of the College.
- ii. To take responsibility for the student support system to ensure that the college has a clear student admission policy. The admission policy should spell out the entry requirements of each programme. The student support has the mandate to draw up and provide the code of conduct to all students. The code of conduct should stipulate the student obligations to the college.

If students' needs are to be adequately covered, effective administration of student support systems is key. However, some challenges interfere with the administration of student support. These include the shortage of professional staff, low budget allocation for student support initiatives, and policies that do not prioritize student support services (Priestley et al., 2021). If educational institutions do not adequately address these challenges, efforts to develop students holistically are undermined. Succinct guidelines on the role of student support in administering and dealing with other marginalized student groups would be helpful.

Several obstacles to the effective administration and accessibility of student support systems still exist. The institutions can use several strategies to ensure that the diversified student populace can effectively use the available services. On improving student support systems, Day and Peachey (2019) recommend a well-integrated and strategic method to provide student support services that are responsive to the needs of diverse students. The student support systems should prioritize student support as critical to student integration and persistence. Gill (2016) concurs that institutions should draft and adopt policies that support the various needs of the students. Adopting inconsistent policies when serving students' diverse needs is detrimental to the student's holistic development.

The aspects of academic support and non-academic support are the main categories of student support services. Institutions are required to distinguish between students' academic and non-academic needs during the administration of student support (Nakata et al. 2019). Nakata et al. (2019) suggest that institutions should equally place academic and non-academic support when serving students. Therefore, it is important for student support

systems to eliminate any bias towards a specific category of student support. Student support unit staff's competencies and professionalism play a huge role in the proper functioning of student support systems. Al Salman et al. (2021) argue that sustaining the operations of student support systems requires continuous staff development and the establishment of student networks. Laville (2020) suggests that institutions prioritize staff training on student support issues to improve student support. Staff working under student support should be developed professionally. Staff development gives personnel under the student support the opportunity to be aware of any new procedures on student support. Staff development personnel must be aware that legislation is always changing. The development of professional ethics among staff is crucial when dealing with student issues (Nakata et al., 2019). The changes in legislation should seek to redress inequalities of previously disadvantaged groups. Staff must be aware of such changes for institutions to avoid any lawsuits. Lawsuits can emerge if staff breach the code of ethics required by professional boards that govern specific fields.

Nsamba and Mokae (2017) suggest that services offered by the student support system have largely been evaluated from the institutions' point of view. The literature missing from the literature reviewed is the TVET colleges' lack of consideration of evaluating the student support system from the beneficiaries' point of view. Daniel, Liben and Adugna (2017) point out that quality service is a critical component and a prerequisite to gratifying relationships with the institution's valued clients. In this regard, educational institutions' treasured clients are students. It can be deduced that to attract students, the institutions should provide quality services to meet their clientele's academic and non-academic needs. Nsamba and Mokae (2017:92) recommend developing monitoring and evaluation systems for the student support structures. The monitoring and evaluation systems require standardized tools to measure performance. Quality determination of student support systems will be limited if evaluation is confined to management perspectives only. Therefore, it is important to use tools that also assist in obtaining information from the staff and beneficiaries of student support systems.

In contributing to the significance of providing quality service to students, Daniel et al. (2017) further explained that quality service includes all the services that affect the ultimate

educational results. The institutions need to outline the characteristics of quality service further. Institutions can use the attributes of quality service to guide how to evaluate and improve student support systems.

In order to ensure that institutions provide quality services, Daniel et al. (2017) recommend that the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman & Berry in 1988 be used to improve student support systems as presented in Table 3.1 below. The model comprises five dimensions of quality: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy.

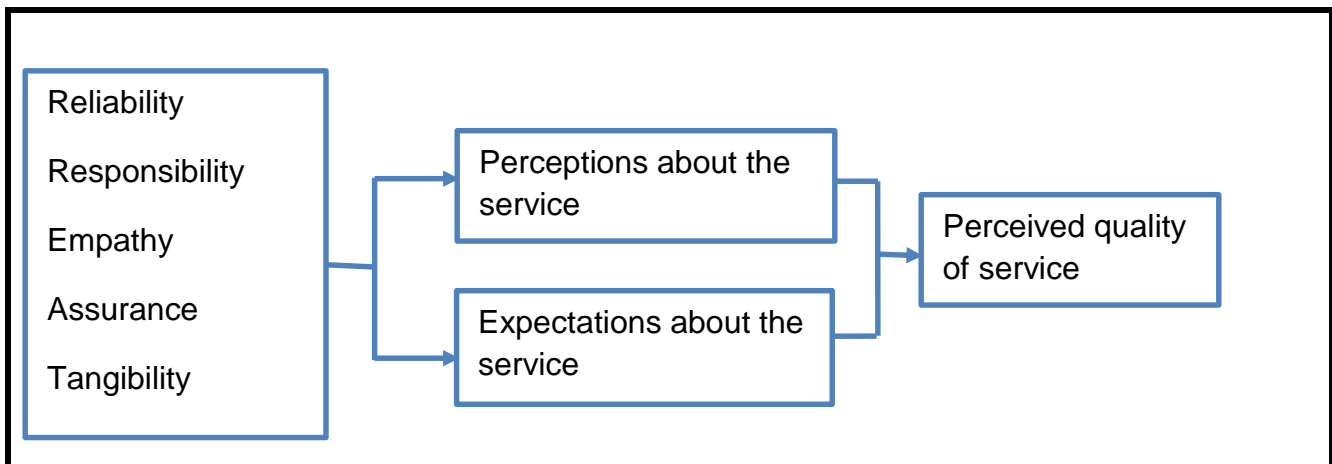


Figure 3.1. Perception of service quality in SERVQUAL model

Source: Parasuraman et al. (1988)

The above diagram illustrates the SERVQUAL model developed in 1988 by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry. The model is mostly used by profit-making organizations in improving the quality of services provided to customers. However, in the context of this study, the SERVQUAL model can be utilized in improving the provision of student support in TVET colleges. The SERVQUAL model can serve as a useful tool for evaluating and improving the student support systems in TVET Colleges. Ntoyakhe and Ngibe (2020) suggest that institutions can utilize the SERVQUAL model to identify any discrepancies in the quality of service provided by student support systems. The SERVQUAL model can assist institutions to identify the gap between the students' perception and expectations on student support services provided by the institutions. Soares, Novaski and Anholon (2017) further suggest that models can be used to measure performance. The models can also serve as a



benchmark for improving the quality of service. Education is a complex phenomenon, and institutions must choose models that suit the institution's context. The five dimensions of Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy can be used to determine stakeholder perceptions and their expectations of the services offered by the institution and ultimately their perception of the quality of service they receive based on their experiences. The SERVQUAL model can serve as a benchmark on the quality of services offered by education. It can be difficult to strike an equilibrium between the student perceptions and expectations. The SERVQUAL model can assist in identifying and categorizing students' academic and non-academic needs. The model can gauge stakeholder perceptions on the student support system. The institution can use this model to identify and implement remedial action to improve deficiencies within student support systems (Ntoyakhe & Ngibe, 2020).

Briggs and Ammigan (2017:1081) advocate for the learner's holistic development embracing the students' cultural competencies during their learning experiences. It is important to accept that student development is a complicated process. To transform the mindset of stakeholders on the importance of student support requires institutional commitment in creating awareness. (Priestley et al. 2021) argue that lack of advocacy or comprehension among stakeholders is an obstacle to students utilizing student support. Advocacy removes any myths on the important role of student support. Briggs and Ammigan (2017:1082) further challenge institutions to re-invent the existing student support systems by recapitalizing the institutions' existing infrastructure.

It is important to acknowledge the existence of barriers to the effective administration and utilization of student support services. However, several strategies can be used to improve the functioning of student support systems. Thompson and Porto (2014:23) recommend that institutions and key stakeholders draw up and implement policies and systems that promote inclusivity. The context is determined by the nature and category of their enrolled cohort. It is noteworthy that institutions establish a responsive and pro-active student support system. A student support system that can detect challenges and lay interventions effectively. Thompson and Porto (2014:24) point out that the administration of wellness programmes requires qualified professionals in student support systems. The literature review provides

limited strategies for improving the existing student support systems within the TVET context and this could be attributed to limited research on student support systems.

### **3.7. CONCLUSION**

The literature review focused on issues related to the different components of student support in higher education institutions. Student support includes three phases which are the entry phase, on-course support, and exit support. The review of the literature indicates that the diversified student populace experience numerous challenges that interfere with the students' integration process and academic achievement post-school education institutions. Covered also in this chapter is the academic and non-academic support. The academic support focuses on activities directly aligned to the students' learning activities. Psychological support, support for students with disabilities, support for international students, accommodation, and financial aid emerged as some of the critical components of student support. Some of the challenges to the administration of student support and strategies to improve student support systems were discussed in the chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the research paradigm, the research approach, the research design, the unit of analysis, population sample size, and the sampling method used by the researcher. In addition, the chapter discusses the data collection methods and instruments also form part of this chapter. The methods used in analyzing the data collected from the field are also described in the chapter. To ensure authenticity of the results and the overall contribution of the study to the existing body of knowledge in this field of adult education, issues of dependability, confirmability, credibility, and trustworthiness are also discussed in this chapter. This chapter also presents ethical issues related to the study and discusses ethical issues. The main research question and the sub-questions which guided the data collection and the data analysis process are highlighted in the chapter.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

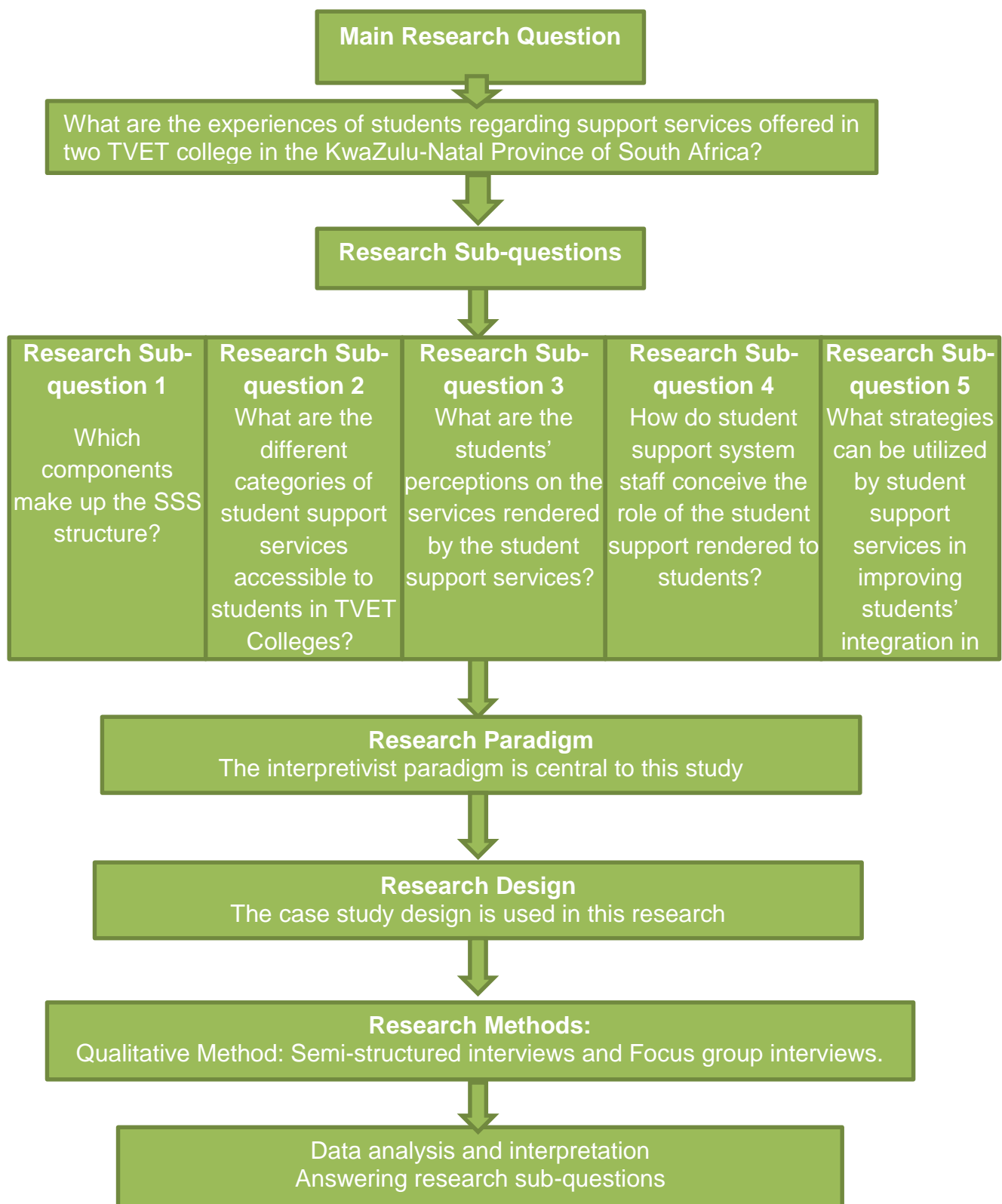
What are students' experiences regarding support services offered in two TVET college in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa?

The sub-questions are as follows:

- I. Which components make up the Student Support Systems structure at two TVET institutions?
- II. What are the students' experiences on the student support services offered by Student Support Systems in the two TVET Colleges?
- III. How do students use the available Student Support Services at the two TVET Colleges?
- IV. Which factors determine the administration of Student Support Systems at the two TVET Colleges?
- V. How can the student support systems improve student integration and academic success at the two TVET Colleges?

To answer the research question, this researcher reviewed the literature on student support systems which comprised various components of student support structures, categories of student support, student integration, and most common challenges encountered by students at two TVET Colleges in KwaZulu-Natal Province.

Based on the literature review and existing theories on student development, this researcher formulated five subjections aligned to the research objectives. This research process is diagrammatically presented in Figure. 1.



*(Adapted from Mouton, 2001, p. 47, 49)*

Figure 4.1. Research Process

## 4.2. RESEARCH PARADIGM

Bertram and Christensen (2014:22) posit that a paradigm in research epitomizes a specific worldview that delineates and guides the researcher on what is acceptable to the research and how this should be done. Denzin and Lincoln (2011:195) describe a paradigm as a basic set of beliefs that guide action and deal with first principles and ultimates. Several paradigms that researchers can use guide their research. The paradigm employed in any research is determined by the research approach selected. This researcher chose the interpretive paradigm to explore the student support system in two TVET colleges in the Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa. Leavy (2017:13) points out that the interpretive paradigm insinuates that people are actively engaged in constructing and reconstructing meanings through their routine interaction. Cresswell (2018) opines that the interpretivist paradigm centres on particular issues or topics and depend on the researcher's analysis of participants' narratives through interactions. This qualitative research involved interactions between this researcher and participants on students' experiences on student support systems at the selected TVET colleges. In line with the interpretivist paradigm, the interactions were through sem-structured interviews and focus group sessions. Leavy (2017:13) further states that people construct and reconstruct their social world through interactions and interpretation processes that involve ascribing meanings to activities, events, situations, and gestures. The interpretivist paradigm allowed this researcher to interact with the participants and interpret the participants' views on how the student support services contribute to the student integration process. The interactions also focused on the challenges that students experience during their time at college. The participants' opinions on student support systems were obtained through the interpretivist paradigm.

Du Ploy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014) assert that interpretivists in research are obliged to study and describe significant social action. Interpretivist research involves obtaining a rich and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The purpose of the study was to explore the students' experiences and approaches that student support systems can implement to improve student integration and academic success. The interpretations derived from the interactions gave insight into the obstacles that inhibit students from accessing student support services. Researchers should strive to grasp what the participants perceive as common sense to understand human behaviour. Babbie et al. (2007) emphasize that

human beings continuously interpret, formulate and assign meaning through justification and rationalizing their actions. Leavy (2017:13) assumes that researchers are obligated to appreciate the subjective interpretations and comprehension of individuals' experiences within their context. Du Ploy-Cilliers (2014) explains that methods used are subtle to a specific context and never generalized further than the context in which the research was carried out. The study was confined to two TVET Colleges, and as such, the findings from the interpretations were deduced within the context of the selected sites. Du Ploy-Cilliers (2014) further reiterates that interpretivists believe that reality is socially constructed. Reality relies on the meanings assigned by people to their own experiences and interactions with others. Interpretivists recommend credibility, transferability, conformability when assessing knowledge assertions. People's experiences are comprehended through thick descriptions. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) claim that theories or theoretical orientations guide researchers who exploit interpretive frameworks. This study is underpinned by the Student Development and Student Involvement Theories. The interpretive paradigm allowed the researcher to derive meaning from the participants on students' experiences and approaches that student support systems can use to improve student integration and academic success at the two selected TVET institutions. The meanings of the participants were interpreted within the contexts.

#### **4.3. RESEARCH APPROACH**

Researchers have numerous approaches that they can utilize when conducting research. Leavy (2013:8) points out that five major approaches can be used in research. These approaches include the quantitative and the qualitative approaches, mixed-method research, arts-based research, and community participatory research. A researcher's preferred approach depends on the purpose of the study. The context in which the investigation is being conducted also determines the research approach. The qualitative research approach was selected for this investigation because of its relationship with the interpretivist paradigm.

Qualitative research has been defined by Creswell (2014) as an approach meant to inspect and comprehend the interpretation people assign to a social problem. Saldaña (2011:12) outlines that qualitative research is a versatile approach, exploited by numerous disciplines,

including education, psychology, social work, anthropology, and communication. Leavy (2017) asserts that qualitative research utilizes, in most instances, uses inductive approaches to construct knowledge to generate meaning. The researcher chose the inductive approach, which describes and provides details about the assumption and procedures used in the investigation. The researcher explored student support services in TVET Colleges through the inductive approach. Leavy (2017:9) further opines that researchers can use the qualitative approach to discover, to intensively investigate and accumulate knowledge about a social phenomenon, to comprehend meanings assigned by individuals to events, situations, their daily activities, and a greater extent, have an in-depth appreciation of some social life facets.

Saldaña (2011:12) explains that qualitative research encompasses several approaches to investigate a phenomenon. Qualitative research, in most cases, involves collecting and analysing data that is non-quantitative. Qualitative instruments or tools include interview transcripts, documents, visual material, field notes, and information from internet sites. Data collected using qualitative instruments and tools allow documentation of human experiences of others and one-self in social action and spontaneous states. Schumacher and McMillan (2010:321) postulate that qualitative research has strength in that researchers are afforded the chance to observe behavior naturally as it occurs. It has also emerged that there are no externally imposed constraints in qualitative research. Leedy and Ormrod (2005:133) point out that the qualitative approach facilitates gaining knowledge about a specific phenomenon and developing new ideas on the topic. This study used the qualitative approach to comprehend students' experiences regarding student support systems at the selected colleges. Saldaña (2011) posits that in qualitative research, the researcher is perceived as the key instrument during the research process irrespective of his or her expertise. It can also be noted that this researcher is enthused to conduct a study inclined to his area of scholarly interest. Having an interest in student support prompted this researcher to explore the students' experiences and approaches that student support systems can implement to improve student integration and academic success at the two TVET institutions.

Saldaña (2011:32) further asserts that the background and demographic factors also determine the researcher's motivation to conduct research. Based on the background of the



researcher and the demographic factors involved that include the research's occupation and their standpoint concerning the study, bias is inevitable. Fortunately, guidelines and procedures augment the study's credibility and trustworthiness and allow the researcher to construct knowledge and develop a precise, refined, and unbiased product for the readers (Saldaña, 2011:32). In the context of this study, the investigation was guided by research questions, literature on student support systems, and Student Development and Student Involvement Theories. This researcher's interpretation that qualitative research allows a reflective understanding of the topic under study and augments the credibility of the research findings. To avert any bias as an employee of the sector, the researcher adhered to the research guidelines outlined in the code of ethics.

Researchers must note that different approaches can be utilized when conducting research. The different approaches, as stated earlier, include the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach, mixed-method research, arts-based research, and community participatory-based research. The selection and exploitation of the different methods depend on the topic and the settings in which the study is being conducted. In this study, the qualitative approach is more relevant. Denzin and Lincoln (2011:3) opine that qualitative research capacitates the researcher to use an interpretive and naturalistic approach in the quest to comprehend the world and different phenomena. Denzin and Lincoln (2011:3) further explain that the qualitative approach allows the researcher to study the phenomenon in its natural settings. This researcher collected data through interactions on student support systems with participants of the two selected TVET Colleges in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. Babbie, Mouton, Vorster and Prozesky (2007) attest that the researcher is the main instrument in the process and further state that the main objective of qualitative research is in-depth descriptions of the study.

The qualitative approach also guided this researcher to explore the students' experiences on student support services offered at two TVET institutions in South Africa. The narratives from the participants allowed the researcher to unpack the challenges that students face during their academic journey. The barriers to student integration and academic achievement were also obtained from the participants. The nature of student support was unpacked and the strategies that can be used to improve student integration and persistence

with their studies. The qualitative approach allowed the research to derive meanings from narratives from the students and student support services staff on student support systems.

#### **4.4. RESEARCH DESIGN**

Researchers can employ numerous research designs. According to Kothari (2004:44), a research design involves the organization of conditions for data collection and data analysis in a way that aims to integrate relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedure. Researchers often use research designs, including surveys, case studies, experimental surveys, and historical or archival analysis. The factors that determine the selection of a particular design include; the main research question and the extent of control researchers exert over the phenomenon (Yin, 2002). The choice of the research design depends on the phenomenon under study. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) identify ethnography, phenomenology, case study, textual analysis, and action and evaluation research as the most commonly used research designs in qualitative research.

The researcher thoroughly scrutinized the different research designs and checked their application and appropriateness before selecting one the case study designs this study. Case study designs are often used by researchers undertaking qualitative research. Yin (2002:9) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when no clear distinction exists between the phenomenon and the context. Leedy et al. (2005:135) point out that case studies involve an insightful investigation of a phenomenon for an indicated period. A case study design is deemed more appropriate in finding out more about an area of interest that is inadequately unknown. Lune and Berg (2017) underscore that a case study allows researchers to unearth the patent interactions of noteworthy attributes of the site under study. This researcher opted for the case study design because the focus is on student support services, a critical component of the student support system of the selected TVET Colleges.

Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) opine that case study design allows researchers to comprehend the attributes that delineate a particular bounded system and further describe the topic within the system. The case study design allowed this researcher to select the site, the population of the study, the sample, and focus on the topic. Cohen et al. (2011) suggest

that case study designs respect geographical boundaries. Geographical boundaries indicate the site where the study will be conducted. The researcher stuck to the sites that had been identified and were granted permission for the study. In alluding to the relevance of case study research design, Nueman (2014) explains that case studies have meticulous focus and at the same time narrate a huge story of the topic under study. The researcher found the case study design more relevant for this study as it presented a platform for exploring and adequately presenting findings on student support systems in selected TVET Colleges.

The descriptive case study was selected for this study. Lune and Berg (2017) explain that a descriptive case study is an approach that allows the researcher to identify and present a theory. The theory determined the theoretical framing followed during the entire research process. This study on student support systems at two public institutions was underpinned by Astin's Student Involvement Theory and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. The descriptive case study allowed the researcher to decide on the unit of analysis before embarking on the research. In this study, the unit of analysis were two colleges located in KwaZulu-Natal, College A and College B. Through the descriptive case study, Astin's Student Involvement Theory and Tinto's Student Integration Theory guided and allowed this researcher to adequately understand the different aspects of student support critical to student integration and academic achievement based on the participants' experiences. Conclusions on student support were drawn from the findings, which were based on the themes and categories derived from the research objectives and the review of literature

Babbie et al. (2007:281) point out that in case studies that involve the study of institutions, the focus is on studies of best practices, policy implementation and evaluation, human resource practices, management and organizational issues, organizational culture, and process change. The study focused on students' experiences with services offered by student support systems at College A and B. The case study allowed the demarcation of sites where the study was conducted. The case study facilitated the study to be confined to the identified area and facilitated the acquisition of rich data. It was ideal to use College A and College B as the site where the study was conducted as they are close to each other and fall under public TVET Colleges. Yin (2002) underscores that it is imperative to identify

key informants when the researcher has opted to use the case study design. The information provided by the key informants was critical to the success and credibility of this case study.

#### **4.5. SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS**

The selection of participants for research purposes is not done haphazardly. Several factors were considered during the selection of participants for this study. The participants' prominent role in the selected sites was one of the determining factors. Key informants who are knowledgeable about the problem under investigated were selected. Saldaña (2011) opines that normally, researchers select individuals who are more likely to give answers that are fundamental to the study. The selection process of the participants was devoid of any bias by the researcher.

##### **4.5.1. Population**

Schumacher and McMillan (2010) define a population as restricted to a cluster of features or variables for research purposes. All the student support services staff and students from College A and College B made up the population of this study. The identified categories for this study were the non-academic staff who fall under the student support system structure, administrative staff, and academic staff. Student support services staff were co-opted because they were responsible for serving students. Students from College A and College B also formed part of the population totaling, 26 700 at the study time.

##### **4.5.2. Sampling**

Researchers use different sampling designs. The choice of sample design is also determined by the research approach being utilized for the study. Kothari (2004) identifies probability and non-probability sampling as the two main categories researchers use. Probability sampling is based on the principle of random selection, and anyone in the population has a chance of being selected for the study. Kothari (2004) distinguishes probability sampling from non-probability sampling by indicating that the non-probability sampling method involves the deliberate selection of the participants by the researcher. In describing non-probability sampling, Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) posit that the selection process is premised on the characteristics of the participants and also on their willingness to participate in the study.

This study utilized the qualitative approach to fulfil the purpose of the study, and the non-probability sample procedure was used. Kothari (2004:71) asserts that when selecting non-probability sampling, the researcher purposively chooses the particular units of the universe to come up with a sample on the presumption that the selected units will be representative of the whole. This study used purposive and convenience sampling to select student support staff and students. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) explain that purposive sampling involves selecting participants on a particular attribute and are assumed to represent that group. The student support staff were purposively selected to participate in the study. The student support staff is responsible for administering student support services at the selected colleges. Leedy et al. (2005) opine that purposeful sampling targets key individuals equipped with enough expertise to provide adequate information on the phenomenon. In the context of this study, purposive sampling gave this researcher the leverage to access key rich individuals in institutions where the study was conducted. The criteria for selecting the identified key individuals hinged on their portfolios, area of expertise, and experience related to their linkage and role with the student support structure.

The convenience sampling method was used select students who participated in the focus group sessions. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) posit that convenience sampling involves selecting available participants and who live close to the site. In this study, the participants were selected from College A and College B. Cohen et al. (2011:156) suggest that the researcher enjoys selecting individuals who are easily accessible and willing to be part of the study. The selection process of the students was conducted at the two institutions' different campuses with the help of student support staff members. Full-time students from different programmes were approached individually to participate in the study. The SSS staff were used to assist in the selection process because their office deals with student issues, and they deal with student issues. Convenience sampling was appropriate for selecting the students to partake in this study.

It is imperative that the researcher be impartial and is devoid of any bias during the participant selection process. The sample was selected from a total population of 26 700.

The population comprised of 16 Student Support staff members and 25 360 students. The sample was selected as follows:

The total number of student support services staff was 16. 12 Student Support Services staff, including 2 Directors of Student Support Services, one from College A and one from College B, were selected. The 12 were selected because of their availability and willingness to participate in the study. The staff members served under the Student Support Services structure. 5 Student Development Practitioners and 1 Career Advising Counselor from College A. 1 Work Integrated Learning Officer, 1 Bursary Officer, and 2 Counselling Practitioners from College B. The staff under the SSS structure and the individuals responsible for the overall management of the SSS were identified as the key informants.

The sample also included 48 students, 30 students from College A's five campuses. College B had 18 Students from the College's three campuses. The convenience sampling method was used to select the students from the two colleges. Both Colleges offer morning and afternoon classes. The morning school starts from 7:30 am to 2:30 pm, whilst the afternoon school starts from 1:00 pm to 6:00 pm. The sample was selected from students attending morning school because of their availability during normal working hours. The researcher focused on obtaining rich and in-depth information on the students' views on providing student support services through focus group interviews. The researcher approached students and ascertained their availability and eagerness to be part of the research. To ensure that the required number for the focus group interviews was obtained, the researcher enlisted the help of the student support staff from the two institutions. The participants were selected based on their availability to participate in the study. The two colleges also used different titles for student support staff.

#### **4.6. DATA COLLECTION**

Qualitative research utilizes several data collection methods. This researcher used the qualitative approach in the form of interviews to collect data for the study because it enabled him to derive rich narrative descriptions from the participants. The interview questions were derived from the research questions and the literature review. Seidman (2006) posits that in qualitative research, interviews are perceived as the basic method of inquiry. Saldaña

(2011:41) asserts that interviews are an effective method of soliciting and noting the individual's own experiences, using their own words immersed in their opinions, values and attitudes, perceptions about the world, and lived experiences. The interviews allowed this researcher to obtain in-depth information on student support systems at the two TVET institutions. Seidman (2006) postulates that interviews serve as an authoritative asset for gaining insight into issues of significance that fall into the educational and social nature category by interpreting meaning from the participants' experiences on the phenomenon. The participants were contacted through email to confirm their consent to participate in the interviews. Saldaña (2011) points out that it is important to contact the interviewees before. The researcher should always portray and extend respect and courtesy to the participants during the interview process. This researcher needed to observe the ethics of informed consent and the right not to participate in the study. The consent forms were signed before the interviews, and the consent to record the interviews was also explained before the interviews. The investigation aimed to explore the students' experiences regarding student support systems and how they can be used to improve student integration and persistence. To collect adequate data for the study, semi-structured and focus group interviews were used.

#### **4.6.1. Semi-structured interviews**

Leavy (2017) asserts that semi-structured and unstructured interviews are the most common in-depth interviews used in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews enabled the rich to obtain rich data from student support staff on students' experiences regarding student support systems at the two selected colleges. The questions outlined in in-depth interviews are not characterized by having structured or pre-determined responses. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 Student Support staff members who were part of the SSS unit although the total number of student support was 16. Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that detailed information that outlines the participants' perceptions on the phenomenon can be collected using in-depth interviews. Key informant interviews were used for this study. Seidman (2006) posits that in-depth interviews evoke interest in comprehending the lived experiences of the divergent participants and the specific meaning the individuals attach to their experiences. Seidman (2006) posits that semi-structured interviews permit the researcher to access participants in their specific context. The

researcher gains insightful meaning from the participants' behaviors and experiences during the process. Interviews capacitated the researcher to attach the participant's behavior into their context and at the same time facilitate comprehension of the participants' actions. Seidman (2006:30) further explains that open-ended questions are mostly used by researchers exploiting the qualitative approach. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to recount their experiences in detail in the study context. During the interview process, this researcher explored the responses from participants.

Leavy (2017:140) suggests that interview guides can be used during the interview process. The interview guides can include general inquiry lines or themes the researcher intends to cover. An exhaustive list of open-ended questions can also form part of the interview guide. An interview guide was used as the research instrument during the interview process. Seidman (2006) suggests that follow-ups are critical for clarification during the in-depth interviews. This researcher needed to use an interview guide during the interviews. This researcher continuously referred to the interview guide to avoid deviating from the main research question and sub-questions that were the study's basis.

It was the interviewer's responsibility to establish rapport with the interviewees. Seidman (2006) explains that rapport infers the interviewer getting along with the audience in harmony, embracing the aspects of conformity and affinity between the interviewer and the participants. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the interviewer should control the established rapport. The prevailing rapport can distort the audience's reconstruction of their encounters if uncontrolled. Leavy (2017) attests that participants use their language during in-depth interviews and present long and detailed accounts of the phenomenon in question. Participants also choose the direction and manner in which they answer the questions posed by this researcher. The process of collecting data using in-depth interviews is to audio-record the interview process and transcribe the recordings (Seidman, 2006). The audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim. In addition, notes were made during the interviews. Recording of these semi-structured interviews ensured that the data collected was complete and, at the same time, improved accuracy. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed during the data analysis stage.



#### **4.6.2. Focus group interviews**

Denzin and Lincoln (2018:1211) point out that qualitative research can use focus group discussions for numerous reasons, with the interviews ranging from being extremely scripted to being broadly dialogic. Eight focus group interviews were conducted with College A and College B students. The focus group interviews were conducted at each of the college's campuses. Five focus groups were drawn from College A's five campuses, and three focus groups were drawn from College B's 3. The student focus group interview had six participants per group.

Babbie et al. (2007:292) opine that direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participants' opinions and experiences is obtained from group discussions. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) assert that focus group interviews facilitate the emergence of participants' opinions and, at the same time, focus on the dialogue, allowing the participants to divulge more about the topic exhaustively. Focus group interviews allowed the individuals to collaborate and establish meaning on the topic. Cohen et al. (2011) posit that interaction amongst the participants is central to the successful utilization of focus group interviews. During the discussions, the interviewer interacted with the student support staff to explore their views on students' experiences regarding student support systems. This researcher used the interview guide to steer the proceedings and ensure non-diversion from the research purpose.

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) postulate that the facilitation process should be viewed as a fair, unbiased and not so predictable process that allows note-making follow-up by the researcher on main themes and any existing gaps. The process should allow the researcher to listen attentively to any breakdowns and emerging subtexts. This researcher adhered to useful practices of asking for elaborations from the participants on the subject under review. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) further highlight that the researcher or facilitator should be non-directive to elicit rich information from the participants.

Just like in the case of semi-structured interviews, complete and accurate information is critical to any study. This researcher selected six students per campus for the focus group interviews. A focus group interview schedule was used to guide the focus group sessions.

Student consent forms were issued before the date of the focus group sessions. This researcher did explain the process and the participant's rights, and after explaining and answering any queries, the students were required to sign the consent forms. The approximate duration of each focus group interview was ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. The focus group proceedings were recorded with a voice recorder, and the interviewer also wrote down additional notes. The proceedings were also transcribed verbatim. The audio-recording and transcription of the proceedings and the additional notes yielded adequate and accurate data on the students' views about student support services rendered by their college.

#### **4.6.3. Document evidence**

Secondary sources are equally important sources of data for research purposes. The documents evidence was obtained from different forms used by student support staff to capture information on students and the nature of support the students need. The documents reviewed include Student Support Form, Student Counseling Forms, Students Disability and Consent form, Consolidated Disability Reports, Peer Tutoring Reports, and summary reports on Health and Awareness. In order to ensure the credibility of the data collected, triangulation of different methods can be used. Kumar (2011:163) acknowledges that document review is a secondary data source that can augment the data collection process and ensure credibility. The documents include government publications, individual records, and forms. Coffey, as cited by Flick (2014), explains that documents serve as a mechanism for comprehending secondary sources and as the basis for interpreting an organization's practices. Important decisions that affect that specific group of people under study can be made after analyzing the information in the documents. In the context of this study, students' records and various forms were used by student support staff when administering support to students were used. The document review sought to answer the question on factors that determine the administration of Student Support Systems. Kumar (2011:163) further suggest that the use of records allows the researcher to determine behavioral patterns of a specific group of people. The documents were under the custody of Student Support Services and were administered by them. In order to ensure confidentiality, the personal students' details and identities were when writing the report. The consolidated reports indicated the summarized

statistics on different forms administered to students. The researcher observed privacy ethics by ensuring the anonymity of the individual students' details.

#### **4.7. DATA ANALYSIS**

Qualitative data analysis is an intensive process that allows the researcher to derive meaning from the participants' narratives and interpretation of data in textual form. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) explain that qualitative data analysis results in narratives or textual descriptions of the phenomenon under study. In the context of this study, the data analyzed were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group sessions, and document analysis. In explaining qualitative data analysis, de Vos, Strydom, Fauche and Delpont (2011) describe qualitative data analysis as a process that brings order, structure, and meaning to the large quantities of data collected. They further explain the process involving reducing the volume of data, sifting important data from trivia, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the data's essence. Qualitative data analysis comes in different forms. Cresswell (2018) claims that qualitative data analysis is inductive and deductive. The inductive and deductive qualitative data analysis process involves the researcher's familiarization of the raw data by reading the excerpts to derive meaning of the narratives from the participants. The data analysis was not a haphazard process as it followed the steps outlined in the data analysis methods used in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher with student support services staff. Data that also was analyzed was collected from students using focus group sessions. Seidman (2006) postulates that audio recordings become well-acquainted with their interviews. The semi-structured and focus group interviews were audio-recorded with a voice recorder in this study. The audio recordings were manually transcribed verbatim. That allowed this researcher to familiarize with the interviews, which assisted in the data analysis process. The main challenge to transcribing the audio recordings was that the work was arduous.

Saldaña (2011:99) opines that the crux of data analysis is for the researcher to construct patterns from the interview transcripts, field notes, and other forms of data collection. Document analysis was also used as a source of data collection. The documents were obtained from the Student Support Services. Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) point out that

qualitative data analysis can be done inductively or deductively. Inductive data analysis involves arguing from the specific to the general, whereas deductive involves arguing from general to specific. Saldaña (2011) explains that deductive data analysis generally depicts and concludes from facts and existing evidence. This researcher used deductions during the data analysis process

Several methods can be used to analyze data in qualitative research. Neuman (2014) explains that raw data is organized into conceptual categories in qualitative research and creates themes. Thematic data analysis and content analysis were used as the data analysis methods. Thematic data analysis and content analysis complemented each other and ensured that the data analysis process was authentic and credible. Data analysis is a systematic process that the researcher should follow if credible results are obtained. The qualitative data analysis process is cyclical that allows the researcher to identify themes and categories from the collected data (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). Thematic data analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within the collected data (Braun, 2006:82). In this study, themes used for data analysis emerged from the research questions and the literature review. Focusing on thematic data analysis, Flick (2014:172) points out that thematic data analysis allows identifying themes that capture meaning relevant to the research questions and perhaps also makes links between such themes. The thematic data analysis method allowed this researcher to organize, provide thick descriptions, and interpret the various facets of student support systems. The researcher read through the transcripts and, in the process, familiarized with the data from the semi-structured interviews with staff and data from the focus groups. The researcher read the excerpt several times and indicated possible categories the data could fall under.

Qualitative data analysis involves the construction of patterns, which serves as the initial phase of data analysis. It is important to understand the relationship between categories of data during the data analysis. Saldaña (2011) outlines that pattern construction is preceded by category construction. The category construction involved clustering views into most categories. The categorizing process involved this researcher organising the large amounts of data collected. This researcher read and dissected the excerpt and highlighted the document to assist the coding process. That allowed this researcher to derive insightful

meaning from the data. This data intimacy allowed the patterns, categories, and interrelationships to be clearer to the researcher.

According to Flick (2014), content analysis is a method that systematically describes the meaning of qualitative data by assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame. Flick (2014) further asserts that content analysis reduces data while it is at the same time systematic and flexible. This method uses a coding frame that consists of the main category and subcategories. Lune and Berg (2017:182) outline that content analysis is a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular material body to identify patterns, themes, assumptions, and meanings. Lune and Berg (2017) further clarify that content analysis allows researchers to code the data to address research questions. Content analysis involves converting the collected data into transcripts. Codes are developed from the transcripts and further changed into categories. Content analysis and thematic data analysis can also be used to analyze documents. In the context of this study, the consolidated forms were analyzed using content analysis to determine the purpose of the different forms. As cited by Flick (2014), Coffey suggests that thematic analysis can also analyze documents regarding the frequency of words or other elements. The data on the forms were coded to identify key themes and in the process categories and identify patterns. Different forms were obtained from student support that included Student Support Forms, Disability and Consent Forms, and consolidated reports were analyzed to determine their purpose in assisting students. The narratives captured during counselling forms were also analyzed. This researcher read through the narratives between the interactions between student support staff and students. Codes were assigned to the data and further categorized into categories that later aligned to the themes. The same themes derived from the research questions used to analyze data collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions were used for document analysis.

Seidman (2006) suggests that the initial stages of data analysis should involve studying and reducing the text. The researcher has to read through the text and highlight or mark the passages and texts of interest. The researcher assumed the responsibility of identifying important concepts in the text. In sifting and reducing the text, the researcher analyzed, interpreted, and derived meaning. Seidman (2006) on data analysis asserts that organizing

excerpts from the transcribed data into categories is the most common method of utilizing data used by researchers. These categories were further coined into themes. The themes used to analyze the data were derived from the research questions and the relevant literature. The research questions are central to coding, categorizing data, and identifying themes (Saldaña, 2011). Using research questions to analyse data aligns with thematic and content data analysis methods. In the context of this study, the coding and emergence of themes were also based on the research questions. The same codes were then be grouped under one category. After classifying the codes, a category label was assigned to the codes. Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014:234) further postulate that during the analysis process, identified themes are linked to the literature and theoretical framework, described by the researcher in the study and interpreted within the context of the specific study. Braun (2006:82) indicates that the data analysis process should include familiarising with the data, generating codes, identifying categories, subdividing them into sub-categories, defining things, and producing the research report. The interview excerpts were read several times to identify the combined codes to form the categories that were later clustered to form themes and aligned with themes that emerged from the research questions, and the relevant literature. The coding and categorization process was premised on themes derived from the research questions and sub-questions. Central to the study, the themes were formulated as follows:

- I. Components of student support service structure
- II. Students' experiences
- III. Categories of student support services
- IV. Administration of student support systems
- V. Ways of improving student support systems

The study sought to explore the students' experiences on student support systems and the various strategies that can be implemented to improve student integration and persistence. The study aimed to determine the student support services offered and how they were experienced in the two TVET institutions to improve student integration and academic achievement. In this study, the researcher first analyzed responses from the semi-structured interviews. The responses were grouped and aligned with each of the objectives. The data

analysis of responses from students preceded the analysis of staff semi-structured interviews. The students' responses were also aligned with the study's objectives. The findings include staff's semi-structured interviews and students' focus group interviews. The study's findings were further synthesized by comparing and contrasting responses from staff working under student support and responses from the students.

#### **4.8. TRUSTWORTHINESS, DEPENDABILITY AND TRANSFERABILITY**

Qualitative researchers should always be mindful of the fact for their research be regarded as authentic, the issues of credibility, trustworthiness, confirmability, and dependability should be addressed.

Kalof, Dan and Dietz (2008) suggest that credibility focuses on the accuracy of collected data concerning reality. Triangulation is one of the methods used to enhance the data's credibility. Triangulation involves using more than one data source to develop an indepth comprehension of a problem under investigation. The triangulation process creates a platform for the researcher to fully understand and appreciate the study's settings. This researcher compared the excerpts with the additional notes during individual and focus group interviews. The data from the notes filled in gaps on any missing points from the excerpts. Document analysis of documents used by student support staff when administering student support services complimented data from the interview transcripts.

Seidman (2006) asserts that credibility for any study is very important. In order to ensure credibility, member checking can also be used. Member checking is a technique that allows the sharing of transcribed material with the participants to review if all their opinions have been included. This researcher provided the student support staff members with the interview transcripts to check read through the transcripts to identify any anomalies. The participants certified the interview transcripts correct, and no additions or alterations were effected.

Kalof et al. (2008:162) describe confirmability as how others can confirm the study results. To ensure confirmability, this researcher chronicled the data collection process. This audit trail documentation indicated the dates for interviews, notes recorded and the transcribed

audio records. That assisted the researcher to have all the data before the data analysis process.

Babbie et al. (2007) point out that dependability constitutes similar yielding findings within the same context. In order to ensure dependability, the researcher inquiry audit was used. Kalof et al. (2008) assert that dependability ascertains the truthfulness of the study. Babbie et al. (2007:278) further suggest that an audit inquiry should involve examining the product, data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations. Kalof et al. (2008) believe that to ensure credibility; the researcher should present the data accurately without compromising the virtues of honesty during the data collection and presentation process. This researcher was not biased during the entire research process and ensured that the data presented the participants' views. There were no alterations or additions to the collected data.

Thick descriptions can be used to ensure the transferability of the research findings. Babbie et al. (2007:277) posit that the transferability in qualitative research depends on the similarities between sending and receiving contexts; the researcher collects sufficiently detailed descriptions of data in context and reports them with sufficient detail and precision to allow judgments to be made by the reader. In the context of this study, the findings cannot be generalized since it utilized the case study design. The findings on student support systems were restricted to the two selected TVET Colleges. However, this researcher collected detailed information on student support systems and objectively reported the findings devoid of personal influence.

The literature review, which is central to the study, also contributed to enhancing the dependability of the findings. Dependability indicates consistency and reliability of the study's findings by ascertain the extent to which the procedures are documented. The findings were interconnected to the literature on student support systems. Dependability was achieved by identifying any gaps that were in existence on which the researcher premised the study. Kalof et al. (2008) opine that peer-briefing plays a significant role in the credibility of findings. That can be achieved through discussions between the researcher and peers who were not part of the study at the various phases of the study. The peers contributed by adding a different scope or dimension to the study. The colleagues also contributed by asking



clarifying questions and identifying loopholes in the study. The interview questions were peer-critiqued in this study to ensure the research questions were adequately addressed. Peer critiquing also ensured that the problem statement was also adequately covered. That improved the trustworthiness of the results. This researcher ensured the sample's representativeness by identifying the key individuals that were part of the population under study.

#### **4.9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

De Vos (2011) opines that ethics in research govern behavioral expectations about the most acceptable conduct when dealing with research participants. Saldaña (2011:12) in alluding to the importance of ethics, asserts that researchers are guided by ethics that include informed consent, permission to conduct the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity, protection from harm, dissemination of findings, and how to raise any concerns about the study. Researchers cannot research without adhering to the ethics mentioned earlier. In this study, the following ethical considerations were observed:

##### **4.9.1. Informed consent**

Leavy (2013:32) opines that informed consent constitutes an invitation letter to the participants to participate in the study. In this study, the invitation letter outlined the research topic, the main purpose of the study, and the rationale for choosing that category of participants. Saldaña (2011) points out that it is important to contact the interviewees before. Information on what was to be covered was conveyed to the participants. It was also important to include details of the researcher and their contact details. This vital piece of information was communicated when seeking consent from the participants. This researcher obtained the participants' consent in writing. Adequate information about the purpose of the study, the approximate duration of the interview session, and the participants' rights were spelt out to the participants. The participants signed consent forms to acknowledge their willingness to participate. All the concerned parties were eighteen years and above during the investigation.

#### **4.9.2. Permission to conduct the study**

Seeking permission is one of the main principles of ethics in research. The process and procedure depend on the nature of the organization. Seidman (2006) advises that researchers ask for the gatekeeper's permission to access the participants. Although participants are in their right gatekeepers, some are only accessed through institutions. This researcher adhered to the procedure published in the Government Gazette No. 38590 on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2015 'Higher Education and Training Information Standard DHET 004 Approval to Conduct Research in Public Colleges May 2015'. The researcher completed an official application titled "Approval to research in public colleges" and submitted it to the Heads of the two Institutions. That is governed by Act 5.1 of the Government Gazette No. 38590, which states that "Researchers who wish to undertake research in less than ten public Colleges must submit their application to the Head of the institution/s concerned." The application to conduct the research was approved by the two institutions.

#### **4.9.3. Voluntary participation**

Devos (2011) states that individuals should not be forced to be part of any study. Seidman (2006:79) also alludes to voluntary participation by stating that participants' rights should include voluntary participation and the right of withdrawal from the study. Leavy (2017) supports the notion that participation should be voluntary and that this should also be clearly outlined in the consent form. The participants also have the right of reviewing and withhold interview material if they feel it infringes their rights. Participants are also entrusted with the right to their interviews before publication. The participants' rights were included in the consent form, and their rights were explicitly outlined.

#### **4.9.4. Confidentiality and anonymity**

The researcher should outline the steps to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants' particulars (Seidman, 2006). This information was outlined in one of the sections of the consent form. To ensure the anonymity of the research sites, this researcher referred to the selected institutions as College A and College B. The use of pseudonyms ensures that the identity of the institutions was protected. In acknowledging the role of ethics on anonymity, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) allude that researchers should observe a code of ethics that protects the participants' identities and the study's site. The participants' details were not

included as part of the biographic information. The titles of staff who work under the student support staff were included to indicate their portfolios. However, caution was taken to omit their names and other personal details that could link the staff to the study. The personal details of students who participated in the focus group sessions were also omitted. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further explain that all information needs to be secured and remain confidential. This researcher also explained that the audio records were saved electronically and secured by a password for five years. The participants were to remain anonymous, and the information obtained was stringently meant for this study.

#### **4.9.5. Protection from harm**

Saldaña (2011) asserts that the prime importance of ethics is that the participants should not be subjected to any form of harm. In other words, participants should be protected from harm and potential risk. Leavy (2017) expressed that the researcher should categorically state their intention to protect the participants from harm during the research process and after the research. Seidman (2006) identifies risks associated with interviews during and after the interview. The interview process can cause discomfort or might raise participants' emotions. That depends on the topic under discussion. Possible risks should be explained to the participants. Corrective action or means to mitigate the potential risks should also be outlined during the application for ethical clearance with the university. Potential risks, harm or discomfort, should be communicated to the participants. In this study, the participants were not exposed to any harm or any form of emotional strain emanating from the research process, and the study complies with no harm ethical issues.

#### **4.9.6. Dissemination of findings**

Researchers should adhere to ethics when disseminating the research findings. Seidman (2006) attests that researchers outline how they intend to disseminate the study's findings. Before disseminating the results, the researcher should have sought permission to release or use the participants' wording in various publications. The researcher informed the participants of publishing their exact responses through information on the consent form. There were no objections from the participants, and none of the participants' names would be published. The report would be accessible to the participants at their request through their emails. The participants are privy to access the research report if they need it.

#### **4.9.7. Queries**

Seidman (2006) explains that the researcher should provide contact details and copies of the consent form to the participants. The researcher's contact details, the supervisor, and the ethics committee should be included. Participants will contact the researcher, supervisor, or representative of the ethics committee if they have any questions about their rights or any queries concerning the study. Participants should understand the language used by the researcher so that they can fully understand the information being relayed. Contact information was included in the consent form.

#### **4.10. CONCLUSION**

The research design and methodology were discussed in this chapter. This researcher used the qualitative approach to acquire in-depth knowledge of students' experiences regarding student support systems at the two TVET institutions. The chapter also discussed the interpretivist paradigm which was used for this study. The descriptive case study used was discussed in this chapter. This chapter also elaborated on semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews as the data collection instruments used. The sampling methods used for this study, purposive and convenience sampling, were also discussed. Thematic data analysis was also covered in this section of the study. This chapter also discussed issues of credibility, transferability, and dependability. The ethical issues of informed consent, voluntary participation, no harm, permission to conduct research, confidentiality, and anonymity, dissemination of findings and queries were adequately addressed in this chapter.

## **CHAPTER 5: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1.1. INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter outlined the research methodology and the design used in collecting data for the study. The current chapter focuses on the presentation, analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the data collected from the field. The case study used the qualitative data collection methods of semi-structured and focus group discussion to solicit information from selected people. The researcher backed the interviews with document analysis as a strategy to triangulate the data obtained from the field. The results from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were combined and presented under common themes to compare the information from the different categories of data. Specific themes were identified as primary to the presentation, analysis, and discussion of collected data. The study sought to explore the students' experiences and approaches that student support systems can implement to improve student integration and academic success. It was also aimed at determining the student support services offered and how they were experienced in the two TVET institutions to improve student integration and academic achievement. The following themes for data presentation and analysis emerged from the research questions and the literature review.

- I. Components of student support systems
- II. Students' experiences
- III. Categories of student support services
- IV. Administration of student support systems
- V. Ways of improving student support systems

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect in-depth information from staff members who work under or directly with student support services in the two colleges where the study was conducted. Focus group interviews were used to ascertain students' perceptions of the support systems provided by their institutions. The document analysis method involved the review of documents used to assist students by student support systems and institutional policy documents.

### **5.1.2. CODES**

The researcher used the thematic data analysis approach using themes derived from the research questions and the relevant literature review. Saldaña (2011) explains that a code in qualitative data analysis is most often a word or a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, and or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. The codes were assigned to the verbal quotations presented by the participants. The same codes were then clustered to form a category. The same codes were used for both staff and students because the codes which ultimately led to the formulation of themes were derived from the same research questions. The individual interviews comprised 12 participants from student support staff. The participants were identified from 1-12 and presented as P1-P12. The focus group interviews were used to collect data from the student participants. The total number of focus group participants was eight, participants in each group. In order to distinguish between the responses from participants, the following labels were assigned as pseudonyms: College A and College B. The breakdown and the total number of participants from the two colleges are illustrated in Table 1, under-sampling of the methodology chapter.

### **5.2. COMPONENTS OF STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

The study was conducted in two TVET colleges in the Northern part of KwaZulu-Natal. The similarities and differences on portfolios under the student support system are presented as participants' responses. Different individuals' main the portfolios within the student support structure. The twelve Student Support Services staff identified Academic Support, Health and Wellness, Financial Aid, Culture, and Arts and Student Leadership and Governance as the main portfolios that constitute the student support systems. 12 student support services staff have qualifications in either Education, Psychology, Social Work, and the remaining two had Human Resources and Financial Management. Some of the participants indicated that they are registered with either the South African Council for Educators or The South Africa Councilors Association, and some still aspire to register with the relevant board, The Health Professions Council of South Africa.

The table 5.1 below shows the distribution of participants that formed the study. The participants were derived from the two selected colleges, College A and College B. 60 was the total number of participants comprised 48 students and 12 student support staff.

**Table 0.1 Sample/Participants of the study**

<b>Category</b>	<b>College A</b>	<b>College B</b>	<b>Total No of Participants</b>
Assistant Director Student Support	1	1	2
Students Development Practitioners	5	-	5
Work Integrated Learning Officer	-	1	1
Bursary Officer	-	1	1
Career Advising Counselor	1	-	1
Counselling Practitioners	-	2	2
Students	30	18	48
<b>Total No of Participants</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>60</b>

The table 5.2 follows (next page) provides details of the student support staff members who participated in the study. The table summarizes the various portfolios that justified their selection as key participants of the study. The pseudonyms of the participants are also indicated. The Not Applicable (N/A) indicate that the individuals occupying those portfolios were not part of the interviews.

**Table 0.2 Composition of student support systems staff**

Research Site	Participant Pseudonym	Office Occupied	Gender	Age	Experience	Highest Qualification	Field of Study	Registration with any Relevant Board
<b>College A</b>	P.1	Assistant Director	Female	47	10	Bachelor's Degree	Education	None
	P.2	Student Development Practitioner	Male	52	8	Bachelor's Degree	Education	South Africa Councilors Association
	P.3	Student Development Practitioner	Female	39	8	Bachelors Degree	Social Work	South Africa Council of Educators
	P.4	Student Development Practitioner	Female	41	4	Honors	Development Studies	South Africa Council of Educators
	P.5	Student Development Practitioner	Female	32	6	Bachelors Degree	Industrial Psychology	None
	P.6	Student Development Practitioner	Female	26	3	Honors Degree	Development Studies	None
	P.7	Career Advising Counselor	Male	22	2	Honors Degree	Counselling Psychology	None
	N/A	Career Advising Counselor	Female	22	1	Bachelors Degree	Social Work	None
	N/A	Career Advising Counselor	Female	21	1	Bachelors Degree	Education	None
<b>College B</b>								
	P.8	Assistant Director	Female	44	6	Honors Degree	Psychology	South Africa Councilors Association
	P.9	Work Integrated Learning Officer	Male	33	7	Honors Degree	Human Resources Management	None
	P.10	Bursary Officer	Male	35	5	Diploma	Financial Management	None
	P.11	Counselling Practitioner	Female	23	1	Bachelors Degree	Social Work	South African Council of Education
	P.12	Counselling Practitioner	Female	25	1	Honors Degree	Psychology	None
	N/A	Intern	Female		1	Bachelors Degree	Social Work	None
	N/A	Intern	Female		1	Bachelors Degree	Social Work	None



There was consensus amongst all the staff members that The Assistant Director was responsible for managing the Student Support Systems. At the time of this study, both institutions did not have a substantive Assistant Director. The Acting Assistant Director reported to the Deputy Principal academic. It was further noted that College A has five Student Development Practitioners (SDPs), one stationed in each of its five campuses, and three Career Advising Counselors. College B has seven subordinates under the Acting Assistant Director. College B's student support system comprises Work Integrated Learning and Placement Officer, Bursary Officer, two Counseling Practitioners, and two interns. The verbal quote from P.1. which follows, confirms the existence of the key performance areas within the student support system in College A.

*Each SDP has a portfolio, mm, they have a portfolio for health and well-being, that has got to do with our HEAIDS programme, managing our aerobics, general management of students' health. We have our finance portfolio. We have a portfolio for student leadership and governance. That SDP deals with the SRC, their training, and capacity building. We have our academic support portfolio. And the disability support.*

The above quote illustrates that portfolios were critical in identifying the core functions of the student support services structure. It was further noted that the student support staff were assigned to manage a specific portfolio depending on their expertise. The various responses from the focus group interviews conducted with students from College A and B acknowledged the existence of student support services on their campuses. Some participants were also aware of the different individuals responsible for specific campus portfolios. However, most of the participants indicated that they were unaware of the main services offered and the individuals responsible for administering student support. The following response by P.8. illustrates the number of staff in College B and their main portfolios:

*Under student support, I have six subordinates. I have a Bursary Officer and also a WIL Officer, Counseling Practitioners. Then I also have Financial Aid Officer Level 5 on all the campuses.*

The above quote by one of the staff members acknowledged the existence of important portfolios within the student support unit. In contrast, students lacked in-depth knowledge of

the role of each portfolio. The following verbatim quotation sums up this view from one of the focus groups:

*F.G.4. The SSS Office focuses on supporting students when it comes to sports, when it comes to social services, when it comes to academic support, and when it comes to health and wellness. Those are the four main areas that they focus on.*

The above response from the focus groups discussions with students indicates that students were not well-acquainted with the exact portfolios found with the student support structure. The responses from student support staff from College A and College B were similar in that different titles are used for staff reporting to the Director for student support. It was also noted that the chain of command differs between the two colleges. For example, the participants reported that College A has Career Guidance Officers who report to the SDPs, whilst College B has Student Liaison Officers. In College A, the SDPs, report to the Assistant Director, whereas College B's Work Integrated Learning Officer reports to the Campus Manager.

The student support staff affirmed that the student support services have a critical role in ensuring student success. The participants reported academic success as the fundamental responsibility of the student support. They reported that student support is mandated to adequately provide academic and non-academic support. They further indicated that student support staff are guided by the Student Support Framework when administering their portfolios. The following is a response from P.1. when asked about the role of student support services on academic achievement:

*If they are having any challenges, we have to assist. The college's core business is academic achievement, and our main business as SSS is to help the students achieve academic success.*

The participants acknowledged and managed to identify the different portfolios found within the student support structure. The student support staff were adequately informed on the responsibility of each portfolio to ensure that students' needs were adequately covered. The students who participated in focus group sessions lacked detailed information on individuals responsible for each portfolio.

### 5.3. STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

The various responses from the student support services staff and student participants indicate that the enrolled student cohort is faced with numerous challenges during their time at college. The responses also indicate that the challenges experienced by students interfere with their integration process and academic achievement. The most common challenges reported include financial constraints, the lack of residential accommodation, health problems, mental health problems, and marginalization of certain students.

Most of the staff and student participants suggested that financial constraints were the most common challenges students face at college. The responses from individual interviews and focus group sessions indicated that most students depended on bursaries from NSFAS. The student support staff reported college's role had been limited to assisting students when applying for funding. They also conceded that colleges must assist in the appeals process when students' applications for funding are rejected. It was noted that the deferment or non-payment of NSFAS allowances affects students' livelihoods and has dire consequences on the students' wellbeing. The following statement presented by P.6. outlines the bursary application process:

*Everything now is done by NSFAS directly, so we assist students with, you know, applications, and we send all applications to NSFAS. Moreover, they make decisions if those students qualify or not. So basically, we also assist students with appeals if a student has not been funded. A lot has been taken off our shoulders.*

The above statement from one of SS the staff members indicates that NSFAS funds students. The institution's responsibility is limited to assisting students with the application and appeals process when the student's application is rejected. The student participants reported that some students' become stranded when their applications for NSFAS funding are rejected. It was also noted that the funds are not disbursed timeously in most cases. The following verbatim quotation obtained from focus group interviews with students illustrates the experiences students endure due to NSFAS payments deferment.

*FG.5. To be honest, most of us come from low-income families. We need money from NSFAS. Accommodation and transport money are involved. Sometimes the application is rejected, but we have to survive. Some students drop out because of this.*

The responses from both staff and students from Colleges A and B underscore that student funding remains a common challenge to students enrolled in the selected institutions. The rejection of student applications for funding and late disbursements remains a huge concern for students enrolled at the two institutions.

Most of the participants identified lack of resources as the main factor that interferes with student integration and academic achievement. The responses from the students highlighted the shortage of textbooks, the non-standardization of textbooks for examination purposes, and limited access to the internet as some of their greatest challenges. The students also lamented the lack of facilities for students with disabilities. The following excerpt presented by one of the students who participated in one of the focus group sessions highlights some of the challenges attributed to the availability of resources:

*As a student, you are expected to get good results. At this campus, the library does not have enough textbooks. The internet is always down.*

The verbatim quotation above supports the view that students have inadequate resources to improve their performance. Some of the responses from the participants also indicated that the colleges lack the necessary infrastructure for students with disabilities.

Most of the staff and student participants were concerned about the non-existence of suitable accommodation as one of the most common challenges students face. They reported that College A did not provide accommodation to students whilst College B provided limited accommodation. College B followed specific criteria when allocating student accommodation. Without on campus accommodation, students with disabilities might find integration into the college social and academic life very difficult. The criteria used to allocate accommodation to students seem to favor students who excelled in their studies during the previous examination, resulting in the newly enrolled students being the least to be considered for accommodation. The following statement from P.8. supports that:

*We only have one campus with accommodation that accommodates 500 students. We are looking at about 9000 students. Priority is given to returning students who have passed all the subjects. If there are spaces, then we slot in the new ones. However, we refer them to landlords because we know most of the landlords around.*

Some of the student support staff who participated in the individual interviews believed that priority should be given to students with disabilities when allocating accommodation. They also acknowledged that accommodation is a crisis facing students at their respective institutions. It was noted that most of the students were not from the vicinity and were dependent on government funding allowances for accommodation. The individual interviews and focus group sessions' responses suggested that the institutions should prioritize the building student accommodation. They proposed that a system should be put in place to avoid the exploitation of students by property owners. The participants presented safety issues and overcrowding as challenges attributed to the non-provision of accommodation. The following statement from P.10. highlighted some of the risks experienced by students:

*We are taking students from outside town, and in some cases, due to technicalities within the NSFAS, they don't get their allowances on time and some end up resorting to prostitution, which leads to STIs even contracting HIV/AIDS.*

The students further reported their annoyance with institutions of higher learning for failing to provide accommodation. However, it was noted that students received accommodation allowances from NSFAS. The challenges experienced by students because of non-provision of accommodation is underscored by the following statement that was presented by a student who was part of the focus group interviews:

*FG.6. I think the DHET and colleges should come together and agree on when to start building hostels for students. NSFAS does not pay on time, and landlords chase us out. Where do we get the money to pay for ourselves? What about disabled students? How do they cope without accommodation?*

The responses above from the staff and students who participated in this study underscored that student accommodation remains a huge concern at the two colleges. The lack of accommodation exposes students to hazardous conditions.

Socio-economic problems and mental health issues were also common factors that compel students to seek psychological help. The participants in their response concurred that mental health issues were common among students. They further reported that the mental health problems were linked to the stressors such as financial constraints, family issues, and relationships. When asked about psychological issues among students, P.3. responded as follows:

*It is no longer a secret. Some students have serious issues that need counselling. The problem is, it is not easy for them to come forward.*

The students and staff who participated in this study reported contrasting views on whether the tertiary institutions adequately support the LGBT community. Some student participants believed that the LGBT student community was being marginalized. The staff conceded that it took interventions from stakeholders such as HEAIDS for the college community to embrace the LGBT group. Some SS staff indicated that LGBT students participate in college activities and occupy portfolios within student bodies.

The majority of the participants from both individual and focus groups purported that the LGBT community is being deprived of essential needs such as tailor-made health and wellness programmes because of the lack of awareness of the needs of this category of students. Some of the participants from individual interviews and focus group sessions reported the lack of programs that cater to LGBT students to make them feel part of the greater college community. The following quote from P.5 sums up the above assertions:

*There is not much for the LGBTI community on campus, especially regarding their health and wellness. We do not have programmes that allow them to be part of the student community. So, I think we need advocacy on LGBTI.*

The above quotation from the staff member underscores the need to create advocacy on the existence of the LGBT community as a part of the student populace. The excerpt below that emerged at one of the focus group sessions augments the need for awareness on LGBT issues:

*Teach them acceptance tolerance. Because I could say, most of the people do not understand as to who lesbian is. We tend to shy away from that. So I think we need advocacy on LGBTI.*

The responses above serve as a reminder of the challenges experienced by students during their academic journey at the colleges' understudy, which could be what other students are experiencing in other TVET institutions. The responses further indicate that the students' challenges negatively impact the students' integration process and ultimately their academic achievement.

### **5.3. CATEGORIES OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES**

The responses from the participants indicate that student support services are divided into three phases; pre-entry support, on-course support and exit support. Phases are levels of support that are administered by student support systems. Responses from the staff and student participants reflected that academic support and non-academic were the two main categories of student support. The academic and non-academic categories fall under the pre-entry phase; on-course support or exit support. Whether academic or non-academic, student support services are grouped according to the earlier support phases. The staff was more informed of the phases of student support than students. Students were aware of some of the categories offered by their colleges. The following statement by P.8. specifies the three phases of student support:

*So basically we are here to support students and part of its core services is pre-entry, on-course support and exit support.*

The student support staff further corroborated in their responses that pre-entry support is the initial phase of student support. They added that the pre-entry phase is critical as it determines students career choices. The staff further reported that pre-entry support focuses on critical areas such as career guidance, placement test, disability disclosure, and student orientation. The participants concurred that prospective students are required to apply for enrolment online. The online enrolment process is being implemented following a directive from the Department of Higher Education and Training. It was further reported that some students would walk in for application and enrolment because of a lack of access to the internet. It was noted that student support staff assisted students who struggled with the

online application process. Walk-ins were attributed to a lack of internet access or inability to use computers. It was also noted that the enrolment process involved career guidance to new students. The following response from P.12. gives a scenario on career guidance:

*We talk to the students when they come in. We advise them on how to choose a career. Most of the students do not even know what to study.*

The responses that emerged from the focus group interviews also indicated that enrolments were done online. It was further noted that prospective students who struggled with the online process would enroll at their preferred campuses. However, it was further noted that the colleges enroll students on a first-come-first-serve basis, making it difficult for walk-ins to secure places. Some of the students assumed that the online enrolment process denied them the opportunity to enroll in their preferred programmes. The following statement surfaced from one of the focus group interviews on enrollment.

*FG.5. Yes. Enrolment is done online before the college opens. We do not have access to the internet. You enroll for any available course because your preferred course would have over-enrolled with other people on the waiting list.*

The following statement from P.11. identifies career guidance and placement test as crucial to the pre-entry phase.

*At pre-entry when they come in you do career guidance and placement test you see. (P.9).*

Some of the students and the majority of the staff consented that student support which falls under the pre-entry phase, serves as an information hub on the college system. The purpose of the induction programme is illustrated by the following quote that emerged from one of the focus group sessions. The individual interviews revealed that induction is a critical component of pre-entry support. The participants reported that the code of conduct which is unpacked to new students and staff, is also introduced during the induction.



*F.G.4. They tell us about things that occur here at college because we do not know much when we come here. They introduce staff and give us and explain the code of conduct.*

However, some of the students opined that the induction process was not systemically done and served little purpose to assist the students. They were also concerned about how the induction was conducted and its core purpose. The following quote from the focus group with Focus Group 3 questions the purpose of the induction process:

*We do not get much information on where to go when we need help. They just share information about themselves, and after that, they are done.*

The individual interviews involving student support services staff revealed that on-course support focuses on rendering support services throughout the students' academic journey. It was also noted that the on-course support consists of both academic and non-academic support. The on-course support addresses students' issues, focusing on academic support, learners with disabilities, health and wellness, leadership and governance, and extra-curricular activities. The following excerpt from P.6. is an overview of on-course support;

*In on-course support, we provide academic support. What else do we have on on-course? Moreover, that is where we have our health and wellness. We also got our disability section that the college has just started. We also have sports activities.*

The student support staff also revealed that student placement and work-readiness programmes focus on exit student support. They reported that student placement involves placing students in the relevant sector to gain work-related experience. The participants reported that students are placed for Work Integrated Learning programmes before completing their studies to experience work exposure. It was also noted that students are placed for in-service training with relevant companies to acquire practical skills. Student placement is a pre-requisite before the students are awarded their diploma certificates. It was further reported that students must attend work readiness programmes before placement. The participants pointed out that they engage other key stakeholders such as the Department of Labor to assist exiting students with Curriculum Vitae writing and preparing for interviews. The following response was presented by P.7. when asked about the importance of providing work readiness programmes as academic support.

*Because it allows students to be more, you know to be ready for the world of work. So we have workshops on CV writing job, interview skills to get students ready for, you know, the next phase of their lives.*

The document analysis confirmed that both Colleges hold inductions. The reports obtained from student support revealed that in College A, the induction is held separately for all programmes. In College B, the induction combines all programmes. The reports and memos also indicated that the colleges place students with various companies for work-related training. The peer tutor contract indicated that students receive a stipend during the placement period.

The information obtained from the individual interviews, focus group sessions, and document analysis corroborated that academic support improves teaching and learning. The pre-entry phase, on-course support, and exit support emerged as important phases of student support. The categories of academic support and non-academic support fall under the three levels of student support. The non-academic support focuses on student issues that foster student integration and students' well-being during their tenure at college.

### **5.3.1. Academic support**

There was consensus among the staff and student participants that academic support improves students' academic performance. They further indicated that the administration of placement tests, peer tutoring, and extra lessons are aspects of academic support found under the phases of student support i.e. pre-entry support, on-course support, and exit support. The responses from the focus group sessions presented peer tutoring and the provision of extra classes as the main forms of academic support. However, it was noted from the participants' responses that students encounter several challenges when accessing academic support. The participants identified lack of resources, issues surrounding examination permits, the role of lecturers, and lack of infrastructure as some of the main obstacles to the provision of academic support.

Both sets of individual interviews and focus group discussions presented the offering of extra classes and peer tutoring as critical to providing academic support. They added that lecturers offer extra classes during weekends and holidays. It was also noted that peer tutors need to

apply and are allocated some incentive once they are appointed for peer tutoring. The participants revealed that the Head of Departments (HODs), with input from the lecturers, are responsible for identifying and recommending subjects in which students struggle the most. Some student support staff participants presented resistance from the academic staff as obstacles to attaining peer tutoring objectives. They further reported that some lecturers felt that they rather are allowed to have overtime instead of engaging peer tutors. The following statement from P.4. highlights the significant role of peer tutoring:

*We feel students relay better with their peers. We have had positive results by implementing peer tutoring. It assists in helping struggling students to catch up.*

It was also noted that the students appreciated the positive contribution of peer tutoring in improving students' performances. That is highlighted by a verbatim quote from one focus group interview conducted with students.

*FG.5. I think peer tutoring is a good thing. Some students are slow and struggle to move with everyone. So peer tutors are very helpful, and it is easy to ask them when you do not understand. Some teachers are too serious and scary.*

The responses from the focus group interview above underscored peer tutoring as the most common form of academic support provided by the colleges. The following statement from students in Focus Group 2 illustrates that attending peer tutoring classes is not compulsory:

*F.G.2. We get supported, but it depends on the person who wants to be peer-tutored. There are peer tutors at school. Furthermore, if you are interested, you approach the SSS, and they will assist you to be part of the programme.*

During the focus group interview, it was also noted that some lecturers provide extra classes to students. However, it was noted that attendance is not compulsory. That is supported by the following statement presented by one of the students in focus group 4:

*Some teachers are willing to assist us. They offer extra classes, but if you are not keen to attend, you will be left alone with your problem.*

It is a pre-requisite for students to undertake a placement test. The student support staff indicated that the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam (PACE) Test was used to assess students' numeracy and literacy during enrolments. The PACE test results serve as a

determinant of early interventions for academic support. The response below from P.11. indicates that students are not enrolled based on the placement test results:

*Pre-entry support is where we have to analyze PACE Test results. The PACE test results are just used to assess their level of competency.*

The data obtained from the focus group interviews, individual interviews and document analysis confirmed that both colleges provide academic support to the enrolled students. Peer tutoring and extra classes were the main forms of academic support provided by College A and B. The Peer-Tutoring Report and attendance registers were the major sources used for document analysis. The Peer-Tutoring Report reports for 2019-2020 indicated that peer-tutoring classes were conducted for students sitting for the supplementary exam in college A. In college B, the Peer-Tutoring reports indicated that peer-tutoring was also offered to students registered for the supplementary examination and other students struggling with the specific subjects. The report revealed that most students sought assistance in fundamental subjects compared to vocational subjects. The document analysis also indicated that extra lessons were conducted in both Colleges. The staff attendance registers obtained from the HoDs indicated that extra classes were offered for all the subjects.

Academic support is critical to student success. The participants indicated that the main forms of academic support include peer-tutoring, extra classes, and support for students with a learning disability. The colleges also offered student placement and work-readiness programmes as academic support. The students with disabilities are assisted in applying for examination concessions and referrals to skills programmes.

### **5.3.2. Non-academic support**

Non-academic support is another important category of student support that focuses on factors that foster student integration and academic achievement. The responses from individual student support staff interviews, focus group interviews, and data from document analysis indicated that non-academic support for students includes campus clinics, psychological support, and support for students with disabilities.

### 5.3.2.1. Campus clinics

Most of the participants identified the establishment of campus clinics and fitness programmes as critical services provided by the two colleges. They further indicated that clinics are provided full-time in College B, whereas College A's campuses utilized mobile clinics on selected days of the week. Some participants presented fitness programmes such as aerobics as key to a healthy lifestyle. The responses from the participants revealed that the selected institutions have put in place programmes that address reproductive health issues amongst students. The following response reproduced verbatim from P.2. illustrates the significant role of partnership between the institutions and the Department of Health in alleviating student health concerns:

*So what we focus on mostly is sexual reproductive health. Most of our students come from rural areas, so we try to educate them when they come here. We try to promote a healthy lifestyle, and we also work very closely with our clinics which visit students to talk about sexual reproduction, including how they can prevent unwanted pregnancies.*

The participants indicated HIV testing, pregnancy testing, and treatment of minor ailments as the key services provided by the clinics. It was also noted that serious emergency cases the colleges used services from the local hospital. The statement below that emerged from one of the focus group interviews with students presents the nature of services offered by clinics.

*HIV testing, pregnancy testing, and they give us medication if there is any First Aids that we need. FG.2.*

It was also derived from focus group interviews that some students were reluctant to access clinic services. It was also noted that students' unwillingness to access clinic services was prevalent among male students. Fear of being stereotyped is why some students did not utilize clinic services. The excerpt below supports these views:

*FG.1. We are private. We do not want people to know about our problems. We are secretive. I think we have to be open, and they should also have male nurses who are approachable so that we can be open.*

The above response that emerged from one of the focus groups indicates one of the deterrents to students accessing campus clinic services. The student support staff were also concerned about the non-utilization of the clinic services offered by the institutions. Students' non-accessibility to health and wellness facilities was also attributed to the lack of information on the availability of such services. The following statement from P.5. confirms the limited accessibility of health and wellness services by students:

*We have high rates of teenage pregnancies. So, our concern is why are students not accessing methods of prevention? Why are they not accessing or not going to the clinic?*

However, most participants indicated dissatisfaction with how institutions administered student support services such as student counselling.

The students and staff who participated in the study acknowledged that individuals living with HIV/AIDS as part of the student populace. The participants reported that the institutions adequately supported students living with HIV/AIDS. The main obstacle to students utilizing the available HIV/AIDS support was their reluctance to disclose their status. One staff member noted that the students need to disclose their status before being assisted. When asked about the college's role in assisting students who are living with HIV/AIDS, P.8. provided the following response:

*It is like People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH). It is different now. We have to facilitate students receiving medication at campus clinics on our campuses. The students cannot travel every month for their medication.*

The student support staff and students indicated that referrals to specialists outside the college are always done. They further reported that referrals are linked to issues beyond the scope of the SDP's ability. The data from the document review indicated the referral forms used to refer students to an external specialist. Some of the students who participated in focus group interviews acknowledged the existence of a referral system. They reported that students were referred to specialists. Responses from the focus group interviews further indicated that referrals related to students' issues were beyond Student Support's expertise.

The following verbatim quotation from one of the focus group sessions supports what the participants said on referrals.

*FG.3. I remember this girl in our class, and she had a hearing problem. The lecturer could see she struggled, so he reported the matter to SSS. She was referred to an ear specialist, and the specialist gave her a hearing aid.*

The above responses indicate that clinic services are rendered on campuses and in local hospitals. The student support staff highlighted some challenges that hinder the effective rendering of health services and wellness programmes. The main areas of challenges, according to them, include the non-availability of services, the referral system, ignorance or lack of awareness, cultural and religious beliefs, and stigmatization.

### **5.3.2.2. Student counselling**

Mental health issues interfere with the students' integration process and academic achievement. The responses from the individual interviews and focus group discussions indicate that students approach Student Support Systems to seek psychological help on anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTD) which are most common amongst the students. It was also noted that students require psychological assistance after experiencing traumatic events such as violence and rape. The student support staff revealed that in such traumatic experiences, students are referred to the Trauma and Psychological sections of nearby hospitals. The following response from P.3 supports this.

*I refer trauma cases to a Social Worker at the Trauma and Psychologists section at the hospital. Most trauma cases are beyond my scope as the SDP.*

Psychological support emerged from the focus group interviews as one of the most important services provided under health and wellness. Socio-economic problems and health-related issues were presented as common factors that compel students to seek psychological help. However, it was noted that students face challenges in addressing their mental health issues. The following statement that emerged at one of the focus group sessions indicates the students' sentiments about counselling services.

*FG.4. As students, we come from different backgrounds. The majority of us come from poor backgrounds. Some of us have got many problems. Our family issues affect us when we attend school. Sometimes relationships. You are away from home, and you need someone to talk to at the college.*

The above excerpt from that emerged from one of the focus group sessions indicates some of the challenges that compel students to seek psychological help. Most participants reported that students find it difficult to approach responsible figures employed to attend to mental health issues. It was noted that students' cultural and religious beliefs also add to the list of obstacles that interfere with health and wellness programmes. The responses from the students indicated that some of the students were not comfortable disclosing their problems to student support staff. The following excerpt from one of the focus group sessions attributed privacy as the main barrier to seeking help:

*FG.3. Sometimes it is difficult to approach student support for help. I am not comfortable sharing my problems with a stranger.*

The above response indicates the students' lack of trust as an obstacle to seeking help. The document analysis indicates that a significant number of students seek psychological help. The Counseling Form used in both institutions captures the students' details and the nature of the problem the student is experiencing. The counselling sessions' details and interactions between the counsellor and the students are not included. The responses from individual interviews and focus group sessions suggest that students experience mental health problems. The participants conceded that psychological support is crucial but accepted that some deterrents inhibit students from seeking help.

### **5.3.2.3. Students with disabilities**

There was consensus from the student support staff and students that College A and B offer support for students with disabilities. The Student Disability and Consent Form that is part of document analysis also confirms the existence of support for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are divided into two categories, i.e. those with learning disabilities and students with physical disabilities. The participants revealed that students with disabilities must disclose the nature of their disability during the enrolment process.



Some of the student support staff indicated that disabilities amongst students range from mild to severe. Most of the participants acknowledged that students with disabilities experience numerous challenges during their time at college. Most participants believed that students with disabilities were not adequately supported on the two campuses. The participants attributed the challenges to inadequate support and non-provision of user-friendly facilities such as access to buildings by disabled students. It was also noted from the focus group interviews that the nature of disability determines the form of support the learner requires. The following statement from one of the students who took part in the focus group interviews indicate that students with disabilities find it difficult to navigate around the campus:

*FG.2. That is how I see it. The campus managers and the others in management are not serious at all. They enroll students in wheelchairs, yet they cannot move around as some of the classes are upstairs. Imagine how they share with every one of us.*

The participants were concerned about the non-existence of policies for students with disabilities. The response from one of the student support staff members indicates the college still experiences challenges when dealing with students' disability issues. The following verbal quote from P.6. attested to this when he/she retorted:

*But in terms of disability, we are not where we are supposed to be. We do not have policies. We do not have specialists. There is still a lot that needs to be done.*

The data collected through document analysis indicated that College A and College B provide some form of support to students with disabilities. The Referral Forms indicate that the colleges refer students to specialists if the assistance required is beyond the student support service scope. The institutions referred students with disabilities for proper medical diagnosis and treatment to experts outside the college. The documents obtained also indicated that students with disabilities are assisted financially by the institutions to acquire the needed aid or equipment.

## **5.4. ADMINISTRATION OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES**

The responses from the student support staff and student participants revealed that student support plays a crucial role in addressing the various issues affecting students during their tenure in institutions of higher learning. The student support staff acknowledged that student support activities are guided by The Student Support Structure Framework (DHET, 2008). It was noted from the student support staff's responses that students' needs are diversified. The framework focuses on core areas of student support which are academic and non-academic. The students' utilization of student support services hinges on the effective administration of the student support system.

### **5.4.1. Challenges associated with administering student support services**

The student support staff and student participants admitted that various challenges interfere with the administration of student support services. They identified understaffing and lack of staff development as the main challenges affecting student support services. Furthermore, they pointed out that staff could not deal with students with disabilities. The student support staff reported that non-involvement and lack of support from the academic staff make it difficult for student support to execute their duties diligently. The responses from individual interviews highlighted that the SDP student ratio does not correlate, and in some instances, the staff is required to multi-task. The following statement illustrates P.5.'s sentiments:

*This is just too much for me. It does not make sense that one SDP can take care of plus or minus 3500 students. It just does not make sense. Remember, I am taking care of all these four portfolios).*

The student support staff indicated no clear-cut policies that address issues relating to student support. Student support staff's conflicting roles were also perceived as an obstacle to the provision of student support. The staff was required to undertake multiple roles. They also identified inadequate infrastructure, limited support from management, and lack of advocacy on student support services as some of the major factors detrimental to effectively providing them. The following verbatim quote from P.3. highlights the need for advocacy on student support services:

*Furthermore, for support at the college level, we need people at the management level who understand what student support is. Furthermore, when we go to the campus level, they don't appreciate the role of student support. are not understood what exactly we are doing).*

The participants were also concerned with the limited availability of some of the services. The limited services served as a barrier to students' effective utilization of student support. Some of the students who participated in the focus group sessions bemoaned the short hours available to access the student support services. They further reported that the institution's services are accessible during normal working hours. The non-availability of student support services during odd hours makes the students vulnerable. The following excerpt from one of the students at one of the focus group discussions supports this view:

*My worry is the SSS Office is only available from 8 am to maybe 4 pm. After that, we are stuck when there is a problem. Something must be done.*

Most of the staff participants identified relationships with external partners, college management, academic staff, administration staff, and the SRC as critical to the success or failure of the student support unit. They further acknowledged the necessity for creating awareness on student support services. Some of the student support staff members indicated the non-alignment of SSS systems with the TVET colleges in the other provinces. They further conceded that the non-alignment of SSS systems renders the standardization of student support services difficult. It was also noted from the student support staff that the portfolios are different in each province. Some of the participants also viewed the lack of support from management as one of the main challenges affecting the provision of student support. They further reported that campus management does not support them sufficiently and instead views student support interfering with teaching time. The following verbatim quote from P.11. illustrates the lack of support for student activities:

*What I am just suggesting is that we do not get much support. We get limited support from our campus managers. They do not see the need for SSS at times. They think we waste teaching and learning time.*

The responses above revealed that student support staff encounter numerous challenges during the administration of student support services. They reported staff shortages, lack of staff development, student support staff conflicting roles, lack of advocacy on student

support services, lack of infrastructure, and limited support from management as some of the main challenges that interfere with the administration of student support services.

## **5.5. WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

In their responses, the student support staff and students suggested that several interventions can be put in place to improve student support. Some of the interventions include establishing partnerships, recruiting more staff, creating advocacy on services offered by student support, improving infrastructure, standardization of student support, collaboration, and improving accessibility of student support.

### **5.5.1. Partnerships**

The responses of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups revealed that establishing and maintaining partnerships with key stakeholders would have a positive impact on the rendering of student support services. The staff and student participants acknowledged that the new partnership would allow student support to widen their scope in addressing TVET students' challenges. The following quote from P.1. supports these suggestions:

*So very important for us is having working partnerships and collaborations.*

The need to establish partnerships with key stakeholders is also corroborated by the following excerpt that emerged at one of the focus group sessions:

*FG.1. The college needs to continue working with DoH and Sassa. We have clinics because of DoH. Sassa provides food parcels for students who are in need. Yeah, so it is important.*

The above responses from the participants augment the need for the two institutions to establish linkages with important stakeholders such as the Department of Health and The Department of Labour. The partnership would improve the rendering and accessibility of student support services.

### **5.5.2. Increasing and capacitating staff**

The responses derived from the individual interviews and the focus groups suggested that the institutions should recruit more qualified staff. The recruitment of qualified personnel would be beneficial in addressing students' issues. The student support staff further suggested that current staff needed the training to augment their competencies when addressing student issues. This view is summed up by the following statement presented by

*I think we need to reskill our staff by providing more training. Others should learn how to use sign language and even braille because we are moving towards that.*

Some students also suggested that the institution recruit internal academic staff with relevant qualifications. The following verbatim quotation was derived from the focus group interview sessions with students:

*FG.6. They should not just take anyone. They must take people who are qualified. There are many people, even lecturers, who have qualifications in psychology. Why not offer them a chance to join SSS? I think some lecturers will jump at the chance. I know life orientation lecturers. They qualify.*

The responses clearly show a need for the selected institutions to prioritize recruiting more staff and offer more training to the existing staff.

### **5.5.3. Advocacy**

Most participants viewed creating advocacy as one of the main strategies colleges can exploit to improve student support. They further revealed that creating awareness would mean the involvement of lecturers and college management in student support activities. It was also suggested that the college should prioritize student support. The following response from P.5. attests to the need for advocacy for student support services:

*We intend to create advocacy to get buy-in from lecturers and campus managers so that when they plan their timetable, they also make sure that we can provide this additional support.*

The above quote is supported by the following response captured from one of the focus group sessions with students as follows:

*FG.3. Some students are not aware of SSS. The college should find means to communicate to students, say if you want help on such issues, contact these people. They must not wait for induction. Induction happens only once a year.*

The above response indicated that advocacy on students' support should be done regularly to improve student support services.

#### **5.5.4. Collaboration**

Collaboration between student support staff, academic staff, and the SRC can improve student support services. The student support staff revealed that teamwork was essential in addressing students' challenges. In supporting collaboration, one of the interviewed staff said:

*The teamwork between management, the lecturer, and SSS themselves. That teamwork is essential for reaching out to the students. So, there is also the responsibility in terms of the student coming forward and the student taking responsibility. (P.11).*

Collaborations were viewed as critical to integration efforts from the different groups of people that deal with student issues.

#### **5.5.5. Improving infrastructure**

Most of the students who participated in the focus group interviews reported that existing infrastructure should be improved to mitigate challenges affecting the enrolled students. It was also noted that the few campuses that had resource centres were not adequately equipped with the necessary resources. They further reported that facilities should be placed to accommodate students with disabilities. The following statement illustrates the students' sentiments on lack of resources:

*FG.5. The campus should have a library with textbooks and more computers with the internet. How can students perform if there is a shortage of resources? The teachers alone are not enough.*

The above response from one of the students indicates the need for the institution to mobilize resources for teaching and learning purposes.

#### **5.5.6. Improve accessibility**

The focus group interviews showed that students should not find it difficult to access student support services. The participants reported that student support services should always be available to students. They further recommended the establishment of online student support. The following statement sums up the students' feelings on the accessibility of student support services:

*FG.4. Why can't they improvise and make some of these student support services available online? Student support should be available all the time. 24/7 without restrictions.*

The response from semi-structured interviews and the focus group sessions suggests that some strategies can improve the students' access to support services.

### **5.6. SYNTHESIS OF RESULTS**

This section presents the synthesized results from the semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve student support services staff. The focus group interviews collected data from thirty-six students from the two TVET Colleges. The synthesized results are based on themes derived from the study's research questions.

#### **5.6.1. Components of student support systems**

The research question sought to identify components of the SSS structure found at TVET institutions. The student support services staff and students concurred that student support services were provided in the two colleges on a limited scale. The study revealed that components of the student support structure revolve around the following five portfolios - Academic, Health and Wellness, Student Leadership and Guidance, Financial Aid and Arts, and Culture, which falls under extra-curricular activities. The different portfolios were confined to execute specific functions within the student support system. Nevertheless, at the time of this study, the portfolios were different between College A and College B. The

study further revealed that staff titles occupying portfolios in College A and B differed. College A used titles such as Student Development Practitioners and Career Advising Counselors, whereas College B used Work Integrated and Placement Officer, Bursary Officers, and Counseling Practitioners. The staff indicated that titles of individuals occupying different portfolios revolve around key performance areas that justify and guide activities of specific areas within the student support structure. However, students were not well acquainted with the critical role of portfolios found within the student support structure.

The student support services staff and students shared the same academic support and health and non-academic support sentiments. There was a consensus between staff and students that academic support is an important component of student support. The findings from staff and student responses emphasized the need for individuals responsible for administering identified portfolios to focus on key performance areas of each portfolio. The findings from student support staff revealed that most student support staff hold qualifications in Education, Psychology, and Social Work. The qualification in Psychology equips the staff member with the necessary expertise to provide counseling to students. In addition, a qualification in Psychology enables the staff member to have a profound understanding of issues of mental health problems and disabilities common among students. The study further revealed that most student support systems staff are not registered with the required professional board that focuses on student issues, such as The Health Professional Council of South Africa. The minority of the staff were registered with either the South Africa Councilors Association or the South Africa Council of Educators. The non-registration with the relevant professional board by student support staff raised questions on their competence when addressing student issues.

### **5.6.2. Students' experiences**

The various responses from the student support services staff and student participants indicate that the enrolled student cohort is faced with numerous challenges during their time at college. They reported financial constraints, the lack of accommodation, health problems, mental health problems, and marginalization of certain students. The responses from both groups of participants revealed that most of the students were dependent on funding from NSFAS. The availability of NSFAS means students' expenses such as, fees, transport, and



transport are catered for. The students reported that in most cases, the NSFAS payments were deferred. NSFAS also covers resources such as textbooks and laptops needed by the students for their studies. They further lamented that the deferment or non-payment of NSFAS allowances negatively affected the livelihoods of the students. The deferred disbursement of NSFAS allowances could result in student drop-out. Evidence from document analysis also confirms that most of the students were dependent on NSFAS funding. The findings revealed that student accommodation remains a crisis that affects the students' integration and academic achievement. The participants reported that most of the students used overcrowded private accommodation, which was also insecure.

Both staff and students also presented the lack of resources for learning as a common challenge that negatively impacted the students' academic performance. The participants alleged a shortage of textbooks and limited internet access for academic purposes. The findings from the participants and document analysis revealed that a significant number of students' experience mental health problems. The mental health problems interfered with the students' integration process and academic achievement. It was also derived from the responses that some students faced marginalization at their respective institutions. The minority groups are referred here as students with disabilities and students who belong to the LGBT community. The students lamented the non-provision of user-friendly facilities to accommodate students with disabilities. They further reported that the institutions did not adequately support students from the LGBT.

On the contrary, responses from some student support staff suggest that students from the LGBT community were adequately supported and were involved in college activities. Some of the students who participated in focus group interviews believed that academic staff lacked the commitment to assist students struggling academically. The students who participated in the focus group interviews attributed the limited access to support services to the non-availability of student support staff. The student support staff felt understaffed and were not adequately supported by the college management.

### **5.6.3. Categories of student support services**

The third research question sought to explore the main categories of student support services in TVET Colleges. The semi-structured individual interviews with student support services staff identified academic support and non-academic support as the main categories of student support. The academic and non-academic support fall under the three phases of student support: pre-entry support, on-course support, and exit support. The combined responses from semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews on academic and non-academic support are presented in the following sub-sections.

#### **5.6.3.1. Academic support**

The student support services staff and students agreed in their response that colleges A and B provide academic support to students in various forms. They reported the analysis of placement tests, peer tutoring and extra classes as the main forms of academic support. The essence of the student support is to ensure that students integrate into the college system with ease and persist with their studies. The findings from the individual semi-structured interviews with student support staff indicated that students were required to be assessed for literacy and numeracy through the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam (PACE) Test before finalizing the enrolment process. The student support services staff consented that PACE test results were used to determine the need for early academic support. However, the analysis of the focus group interviews with students questioned the significance of the PACE Test. The students argued that the PACE Test was not considered a determinant for student enrolment. The students were unaware that the results could identify at-risk students who might need early academic support.

It was revealed at both the focus group and individual interviews that peer tutoring and extra classes are the main forms of academic support. The college's curriculum unit involves the student support unit, lecturers, and Heads of Departments to identify problematic subjects in which most learners are struggling. The provision of peer tutoring and extra classes was presented as critical at both the focus group and individual interviews. It emerged from the focus group sessions with students that extra classes cushion students struggling to cope with their studies. Meanwhile, it was noted from the individual semi-structured interviews

with student support staff that the shortage of classes hindered the peer tutoring process in conducting extra classes.

### **5.6.3.2. Non-academic support**

The responses from student support staff and students revealed that non-academic support is critical to students' success. The rendering of non-academic support caters for the students' health and psychosocial needs which is vital for student integration and persistence. Staff and students' responses presented clinic services, psychological support, and support for students with disabilities as the main forms of non-academic support. The students and staff consented that the establishment of clinics is a partnership between the Department of Health and the TVET Colleges. They further presented HIV testing, pregnancy testing, and the treatment of minor sickness as some of the services accessible to students. The test results would determine whether the students need further assistance. If the students test positive they are advised on the options available. The findings revealed that some students were reluctant to use the clinic services for fear of being stereotyped.

The staff and students acknowledged that psychological support is a key element of non-academic support in their responses. Stress, anxiety, family issues, depression, chronic illness, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder were presented as some of the common mental health issues affecting the students. The analysis revealed that counselling services were available in limited form. The participants reported that referrals were made to experts at the nearby hospitals if the problem was beyond the scope of the student support staff. The findings further revealed that fear of being stereotyped, stigma, and cultural beliefs deterred students from seeking psychological help. The students' lack of trust in student support staff also inhibited students from utilizing health and wellness programmes. The responses from student support staff and students revealed that the colleges provided support for students with disabilities but in limited form. The document analysis confirmed the Student Disability and Consent form as the tool for capturing the details of students with a disability during the enrolment process. Physical disability and learning disabilities were presented by student support staff as the main categories of disability. The document analysis also revealed that the two colleges accommodates students with disabilities. The participants in their responses agreed that students with disabilities were not being adequately supported by

their respective institutions. The findings revealed that the respective institutions utilized referral systems for complex issues. The findings further indicate a lack of infrastructure and user-friendly facilities for students with disabilities. The lack of resources for students with disabilities could be attributed to the non-existence of policies consistent with students with disabilities. The non-existence of policies undermines efforts to adequately serve the needs of students with disabilities. The drafting of policies addresses the key issues and guidelines on handling disability issues.

#### **5.6.4. Administration of student support services**

The findings from individual interviews revealed that the provision of student support relies on the effective administration of the student support services. The data derived from the individual interviews suggested that student support structures in TVET Colleges should adhere to the guidelines and principles as outlined by The Student Support Services Framework. The student support services staff acknowledged that student support services focus on the holistic development of students. It was noted at both the focus group and individual interviews that numerous challenges interfere with the effective rendering of student support services at the selected TVET Colleges. The challenges reported include staff shortages, lack of staff development, limited support from academic staff, policies not clear on student support, non-alignment of student support services with other colleges, lack of advocacy, staff conflicting roles, and lack of support from management. The findings revealed that the students were concerned about the limited hours operated by student support staff that inhibited students from accessing the services. The document analysis also confirmed that students access support services within the college hours. The document analysis also indicates the cases that were referred to outside institutions.

#### **5.6.5. Ways of improving student support services**

The focus group discussions and the individual interviews showed that several strategies could enhance student support services. The strategies presented by staff and students include establishing partnerships with key stakeholders such as The Department of Health. The collaborations are critical in improving student support services to the enrolled students. The two colleges are public institutions who rely on government funding and partnerships strengthen the institutions' effort to support students. Participants also recommended

recruiting more qualified staff, and participants also recommended the capacitating staff to improve the provision of student support.

Furthermore, the SS staff responses revealed that creating advocacy on the importance of student support amongst students and the college would enhance student support services. It was also acknowledged at both the focus group and individual interviews that improving infrastructure in campuses for use by student support and students would foster students to integrate successfully. The findings from individual interviews suggested that aligning student support structure portfolios would positively impact student support services. The student support services staff suggested that institutions draw and adhere to policies that address student issues. They further presented a collaboration between student support, academic staff, student leaders, and college management to improve student integration in TVET Colleges. It was also noted that institutions should improve the accessibility of student support services to students. The students suggested that the accessibility of student support services could be improved by providing online services.

## **5.7. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The study explored the students' experiences on student support systems and the various approaches that can be utilized to improve student integration and persistence at two TVET Colleges in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It also focused on determining the student support services offered and how they were experienced in the two TVET institutions to improve student integration and academic achievement. The findings are discussed under themes derived from the research questions and related literature reviews. Astin's Student Involvement Theory and Tinto's Student Integration guide the discussion on student support systems at the selected colleges. The findings are discussed under the following themes; components of the student support services structure, common challenges faced by students, categories of student support services, administration of student support systems, and ways of improving student support systems.

### **5.7.1. Components of student support systems**

The TVET sector has been bequeathed to impart the necessary skills and competencies for economic development. Hong (2021) supports this assertion by asserting that governments can address the dynamic skills demanded through TVET institutions. To fulfil the demands of the dynamic world of work, TVET institutions need to acknowledge the important role of student support systems. Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) acknowledge that institutions of higher learning can provide quality education and training through the establishment of student support systems to the enrolled students. TVET institutions are required to establish student support systems that cater to the students' various needs. In acknowledging the critical role of student support, Erima (2021) consent that comprehensive student support systems are key to the institutions' ability to produce competent individuals. In the context of this study, South Africa's TVET Colleges support the establishment of student support systems. The South African government's initiatives are evidenced in The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (2013), in which it supports the establishment of student support systems. The literature review confirmed that student support systems are critical within the TVET sector. Student success hinges on the provision of comprehensive student support services.

Raaper and Brown (2020) assert that student support should be accessible in various forms. The analysis of the findings revealed that student support was rendered in the two selected TVET Colleges. The student support systems should integrate academic success and social integration factors. The important role of student support systems is the focus of Tinto's Student Integration Theory. Commenting on Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Brown et al. (2020) identified the academic and social dimensions as important to students' positive learning experiences. The student support system should address issues that allow students to achieve academic success. Students' academic achievement requires a balance between academic and social factors at institutions. The analysis of the findings suggest that the student support was offered in limited form by the two selected colleges. From the analysis of the findings, it is critical to acknowledge that the provision of student support in limited form interferes with the students' integration and academic success. The inadequate provision of student support services could also result in student attrition. Olaya (2020) opine that student attrition remains a huge concern in public institutions and this is exacerbated by

the institution's failure to establish inclusive student support services that acknowledge diversity among students.

The student support systems acknowledge the students' diversity. That is in line with Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020), who suggest that colleges provide inclusive support services that acknowledge diversity among students. There is a need for institutions to acknowledge diversity when providing student support to the enrolled cohort. The diversity among students means the students' needs also vary. Delubom et al. (2020) acknowledge that diversity among students requires different forms of student support. The TVET sector witnessed a surge of enrolments of special groups, including students with disabilities and students who belong to the LGBT community. That requires the establishment of student support systems that incorporate student diversity. Ibrahim (2021) argues that some student categories are underrepresented and continue to be excluded from institutional activities. The student support systems should be inclusive and prioritize the needs of students who belong to special populations.

The document analysis revealed that student support services also include support for students with disabilities. Inclusiveness when providing student support is important. Astin's Student Involvement Theory also echoes this that advocates for establishing an environment that encourages student involvement in the college's activities. In weighing in on Astin's Student Involvement Theory, Rust et al.(2007) suggest that the more students are engaged in the college's activities, the more motivated they become. The findings of this study suggest that student involvement in the college's activities positively correlates with student integration and persistence. In support of student involvement, King et al. (2021) claim that student involvement in institutional activities correlates with programme completion. The critical components of the student support system should seek to identify factors that also promote student involvement. The findings of this study concede that student support systems are critical to students persisting with their studies and academic achievement. That aligns with Tinto's Student Integration Theory, which focuses on eliminating student integration and persistence barriers. In support of student adaptation and persistence Astin's Student Involvement Theory student involvement positively correlates with academic success. The theories suggest that student integration, student involvement and persistence

are key to academic success. The findings indicate that there are specific portfolios found within the student support structures of the two institutions. The portfolios are meant to fulfill specific functions. There is a need to integrate and coordinate the functions of each portfolio to address the students' needs adequately. Therefore, the institutions are responsible through the student support systems to create a conducive environment that promotes student integration, student involvement and academic achievement. Contributing to comprehensive student support systems, Raaper and Brown (2020) suggest that an all-inclusive student support system is crucial to student integration and academic success. The diversified student cohort presents different challenges that require non-discriminatory solutions to derive positive learning experiences. The analysis of the findings also suggest that the student support was offered in limited form by the two selected colleges. It is critical to acknowledge from the findings that the provision of student support in limited form interferes with the students' integration and academic success. The inadequate provision of student support services could also result in student attrition. Olaya (2020) opine that student attrition remains a huge concern in public institutions and this is exacerbated by the institution's failure to establish inclusive student support services that acknowledge diversity among students. The student support systems should integrate factors that promote academic success and social integration.

The students and student support staff who participated in the study indicated that the existing student support systems could not adequately address the numerous challenges encountered by students. The synthesis of the results revealed students were concerned with the current student support systems. The findings suggest that the students had limited hours to access support services available thus depriving them of the important services. The institutions must therefore, establish a comprehensive student support system that adequately addresses the needs of the enrolled students. In that way, holistic student support and inclusion may be achieved, which is in tandem with Petcu et al. (2015) advocate for non-exclusion when providing support services to students. It is important to note that student support systems within the TVET sector should incorporate input from the main stakeholders. Badenhorst and Radile (2018) affirm that the DHET has taken great strides in restructuring and capacitating student support services to ensure that students' diversified needs are adequately catered for. It can be deduced from the findings that the establishment



of student support systems requires the involvement of key stakeholders such as The Department of Health, The Department of Social Development, and The Department of Labor. The colleges cannot independently set up comprehensive student support systems without enlisting the Department of Higher Education (DHET) assistance as it is the mandate of the DHET to draw policies and frameworks that assist with the establishment and administration of student support systems in public institutions. The policy document Further Education and Training Colleges (2009) highlighted the need to draft a new student support services framework for the TVET sector. Collaborations strengthen the institutions' student support systems to provide student support services adequately.

The student support systems constitute several components that seek to address the students' various needs. The analysis of the findings revealed components were narrowed to the following portfolios that include Academic, Health and Wellness, Student Leadership and Guidance, Financial Aid and Arts, and Culture, which falls under extra-curricular activities. Laima and Sajiene (2012) point out that critical to providing student support in identifying and establishing portfolios that seek to address the students' academic and non-academic needs. Standardization of portfolios is critical in establishing a consistent student support framework in identifying and addressing the students' needs. Al Salman et al. (2021) argue that student support systems must be fully resourced with professional staff responsible for each portfolio. The institutions should have feasible systems that foster coordination of the portfolios for holistic student development. The findings from document review revealed that there is no standardization and uniformity in the structure and portfolios between the two colleges. The non-uniformity of student support portfolios was also revealed from the analysis of findings reported by staff. Olaya et al. (2020) argue that the non-uniformity on student support systems makes improving student support in institutions difficult. The findings suggest that it is important to admit that the non-uniformity of student support structures within the two selected TVET Colleges makes it difficult to identify performance indicators. The identification of performance indicators can assist in improving the operations of student support systems. The non-standardization of student support services portfolio undermines efforts to improve student support services.

Nsamba and Mokae (2017) opine that student support encompasses the provision of a wide range of services. It is critical from the findings to distinguish between the various services required for students to derive positive learning experiences. The study identified academic, health and wellness, student leadership and guidance, financial aid, and arts and culture portfolios as critical to adequately serve students' needs. Acknowledging the existence of portfolios would allow institutions to define the scope of work (Hayes, 2015). The student support systems staff suggested that the scope of work called for the appointment of individuals with the relevant qualifications and expertise. The theoretical framing incorporating student integration and involvement theories emphasizes developing students holistically. Tinto's Student Integration Theory focuses on the academic and non-academic factors that facilitate student integration and persistence with their studies. Schreiber et al. (2014) suggest that institutions can use the Student Integration Theory to integrate factors that encourage congruence between the students' academic and social integration. Therefore, it is also important for institutions when suggesting portfolios to focus on factors that foster student integration and success. Conclusions can be drawn that students can benefit from student support services through meaningful coordination of portfolio activities. The effective coordination of portfolios could assist in the elimination of systemic barriers that inhibit students from successful integration and academic success. That aligns with the Student Integration Theory and the Student Involvement theory that seek to remove barriers that interfere with the students' integration and academic success. The document analysis acknowledge the existence of disability is one of the critical components of student systems. The analysis of findings confirms the existence of support of students with disabilities which was offered in limited form. Most of the students enrolled in TVET colleges rely on the colleges' student support system during their tenure at college which calls for a non-discriminatory student support system that addresses the needs of the diversified student populace (Motsabi et al., 2020). The institutions must, therefore establish inclusive student support systems. The literature review underscores that student support is an important asset that underlines the existence and sustainability of TVET colleges (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). The institutions can only fulfil their mandate to produce competent graduates if they adequately cover students' needs. The establishment of inclusive student support services is critical for tertiary institutions.

### **5.7.2. Students' experiences**

This section focuses on findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with student support staff, focus group interviews that involved students, and document analysis. The findings indicate that TVET Colleges enroll different categories of students. The challenges students face could be attributed to the student's background and previous experiences. It is also important to acknowledge from the findings that some of the challenges students experience are linked to the institution. The challenges that emerged from the study include under-preparedness for tertiary education, the lack of self-efficacy, the lack of financial resources, and the marginalization of certain groups of students. It emerged from the study that the student population's profile within TVET institutions includes first-generation students, students from low-socio-economic status, and students who belong to special populations. The theories underpinning this study advocate for college environments that are non-discriminatory and address the academic and social dimensions necessary for student integration and success. The document analysis corroborates with the findings revealed in interviews and acknowledges the need for inclusion of students from minority groups. Gregory and Rogerson (2019) suggest that most students enrolled at TVET colleges are first-generation students from low socioeconomic status. Raghuram et al. (2020) also admit that students with historically disadvantaged backgrounds experience financial difficulties. The study's findings showed that a correlation exists between student funding and students' performance. The numerous challenges that the enrolled student cohort experience interfere with pursuing their academic aspirations. In contributing to first-generation students' experience, Ogunji et al. (2020) opine that challenges encountered by first-generation students negatively affect their adaptation to the college environment and academic success. Pratt et al. (2019) suggest several challenges students experience, including financial limitations, lack of confidence, and lack of social adaptation. Corredor et al. (2020) also support the finding that students from low-socio-economic status find it difficult to integrate into the college environment to persist with their studies. Students' challenges interfere with their integration process into their new environment and their academic success. Deductions can be drawn that challenges experienced by these student categories could also compel students to leave the institutions prematurely. Applying Astin's Student Involvement Theory and Tinto's Student Integration could improve student retention and success. Commenting on student attrition, Olaya et al. (2020) acknowledge that the

students' failure to adapt to the college environment results in student dropout. The findings revealed that most of the students enrolled at the two selected institutions were from less privileged backgrounds who were first-generation students. That is also confirmed by Motsabi et al. (2020), who suggest that in South Africa, first-generation students are historically from disadvantaged and systematically excluded communities. These first-generation students enter college underprepared and without adequate family support on college systems. Consenting on family support, Motsabi et al. (2020) argue that student persistence is dependent on family and institutional support. That is in tandem with Badenhorst and Radile (2018), who acknowledge that most students enter the learning environment ill-prepared, and this requires institutions' intervention to mitigate the challenges they may encounter. The college is entrusted with providing an environment supportive of the student's academic and non-academic needs. The students deprived of cultural capital rely on the institution as the hub for information on college systems. Students deprived of cultural capital lack the necessary information on how the college system works. That also renders first-generation students and students from low socio-economic status deprived of cultural capital. The lack of cultural capital makes it difficult for most students to successfully integrate into their new environment. Havlik et al. (2020) argue that some students lack social and cultural capital and information on how the college system works. The lack of information by some students serves as an obstacle to the student's academic achievement. The findings of this study revealed that students rely on institutional support through student support systems to adjust to the college environment. Prat et al. (2020) argue that the institutions must strive to establish systems that encourage student integration. The student integration process is in line with Tinto's Student Integration Theory which claims that the integration process hinges on the institution's commitment. The institution should strive to strike a balance between the students' academic factors and social factors. Commenting on Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Brown et al., (2020) intimate that the academic and social dimensions of the Student Integration Theory are critical to student integration. Therefore, the institution needs to eliminate any bias between academic and social dimensions when providing student support through student support. Demetriou et al. (2017) support the findings from focus group discussions, staff interviews and document analysis that institutions must establish supportive student support systems that eliminate student integration and academic achievement barriers.

The findings from the focus group discussions revealed that the students also experienced a lack of resources for the learning process. The analysis of the findings suggests the resource centres at the two institutions were ill-equipped with limited resources and internet connectivity, which can negatively affect student support. That is consistent with Lawshawn (2015), who stresses the importance of providing adequate resources to ensure students complete their enrolled programmes within the minimum prescribed time. This researcher believes that the resource centres should allow online resource centres where students can easily access material relevant to their studies. The lack of resources for learning negatively impacts the students' academic performance and, ultimately, their completion rates. Mental health problems also emerged as one of the most common challenges students face at the selected colleges. Students' most notable mental health are aggravated by academic workload, family issues, and personal relationships. It emerged from the findings of this study that mental health issues affect the students' integration process and academic achievement. Saether, Knapstad, Askeland and Skojen (2020) point out that psychological problems are linked to poor social adjustment. If left unattended, mental health issues can interfere with their routine, rendering them dysfunctional and failing to cope with their academic work. Commenting on previous mental health studies, Wilks et al. (2020) posit a correlation between mental students' problems and academic impairment. The study's findings suggest that institutions have a critical role in establishing systems that adequately address the psychological needs of students.

The student population also comprises students belonging to special populations. The special groups that emerged from the findings of this study include students with disabilities and students who belong to the LGBT community. The findings revealed that the minority groups continue to face exclusion academically and socially. Students labelled special groups include many students, particularly those conventionally excluded, either formerly or unofficially (Ogunji et al., 2020:281). It was noted that students belonging to special populations continue to be marginalized. This situation needs to change in the light of democracy and inclusivity. Petcu et al. (2015) stress an all-inclusiveness student support system that acknowledges diversity among students.

Marginalization affects the students' self-efficacy, which deters students from participating in the college's activities. Students with a weak sense of self-efficacy find it difficult to adapt to the college environment and struggle with their studies. On the contrary, Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to perform better because they possess the right knowledge, skills, and attitude (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020). The exclusion of some student categories acts against the tenets of Astin's Student Involvement Theory. Tinto (2017) argues that extra-curricular activities are a critical component of the college environment in addition to academic support. Establishing a college environment that fosters student engagement assists students to identify themselves as part of the larger college community. The findings from focus group sessions revealed that the college environment restricted students engagement in college activities. Department of Higher Education and Training (2017:5) underscores the need to provide comprehensive student support systems that include student participation in extra-curricular activities. Students who engage tend to perform academically, consistent with Astin's Student Involvement Theory and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. The analysis of findings from students and staff reveal that students experience numerous challenges that negatively impacts their integration process and ultimately completion of their enrolled programmes. The document analysis also affirms that students face obstacles that adversely affect their learning experiences. The institutions must be encouraged to establish student support systems that seek to eliminate obstacles to student integration and academic success.

### **5.7.3. Categories of student support services**

Student integration and successful completion of programmes revolves around the effective provision of academic and non-academic support. The study identified academic and non-academic support as the main categories of student support at the two colleges. That aligns with Hayes (2015), who suggests that access to academic and non-academic support is critical in ensuring that students derive positive learning experiences. The study revealed that students sometimes underutilized student support services. Therefore, institutions must complement the government's efforts by establishing a student support system that adequately caters to students' academic and non-academic needs. Weatherton, Mayes and Villanueva-Perez (2017) posit that student success and retention are not determined by supporting students academically alone but also thrives on their ability to integrate into their

learning environment fully. That resonates with Tinto's Student Integration Theory, which identifies academic and social factors as significant to student adaptation to their new environs. What can be derived from the findings is the significant role of both academic and non-academic student support in ensuring the successful completion of enrolled programmes. The student support system should ensure that academic and non-academic support exists. That is consistent with Tinto (2016), who concedes that a correlation exists between academic support and non-academic support in students' persistence and successful completion of their enrolled programmes. Student integration and persistence are consistent with Tinto's Student Integration Theory. Commenting on Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Brown et al. (2020) concur that Tinto's theory seeks to integrate the academic and social dimensions that affect students to ensure student integration and academic achievement.

#### **5.7.3.1. Academic support**

The findings of this study affirmed that academic support is critical to student success. The academic aspect of student support is directly linked to learning activities (Tamuliene, 2014). Commenting on academic support, Olaya et al. (2020) also consent that academic support eliminates obstacles that interfere with the students' academic achievement. The institution's reputation is enhanced by improved throughput and certification rates. There was consensus between student support staff and students that the institution's mission of producing competent individuals cannot be achieved without adequate academic support. Brown et al. (2020) suggest that academic support include tutorial services, academic advising, technology support, and career advising. The main forms of academic support revealed in focus group interviews with students, staff interviews and document evidence analysis identified administering placement tests, academic support for peer tutoring, and extra classes. The document analysis further reveals that peer tutoring is a common method of academic support for students struggling with specific subjects.

The various forms of academic support expose students to various academic activities that encourage student engagement. That aligns with Astin's Student Involvement Theory, which postulates that students perform well if involved in college activities. In this context, peer-tutoring and extra classes serve as an opportunity to be involved and at the same time

commit to their studies. Mc Donnel (2014) and Russo and Glercher (2013) view career advising and access to student resource centers as critical components of academic support. Hayes (2015) also presented student advising and student access to resource centers as crucial to students' completion of enrolled programmes. There is, however, the need to integrate the different forms of academic support. It emerged from the study that the two institutions accommodate different students. Therefore, institutions must embrace the principles of diversity when providing academic support to enrolled students. Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) support the finding that tertiary institutions must provide academic support that addresses the needs of the diversified student populace. Conclusions can be drawn from the responses of students and student support staff that institutions must provide academic support that meets and sustain the enrolled students' different needs. The Policy on Students with Disability (2013) supports integrated learning that coordinates efforts to attain the desired learning objectives. On the contrary, the findings revealed that the two selected institutions' academic support was inadequate and still needed further attention. The provision of academic support should be compact with precise objectives and measurable outcomes.

The student support staff also revealed that the PACE test is an equally important tool for determining early academic support interventions for students. The PACE test focuses on assessing students' numeracy and literacy. It emerged from document analysis and student support staff responses the findings of this study that the results of the PACE test were used to determine early academic support for students. Institutions should heed the advice of Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) who suggested that institutions should use the right tools when providing academic support.. However, the students and some staff felt that the PACE tests were not important for academic support. They further revealed inconsistencies in linking the PACE test results with their continuous assessment. Holcombe and Kezar (2020) stated that educational institutions should re-evaluate their academic support programmes and formulate a more integrated approach. Tertiary institutions must, therefore invest more financial resources in restructuring and improving academic support activities

It can be derived from the study that wide consultations and due diligence should be executed before choosing and implementing critical tools for academic support. Bennet,



Hsiao, Dees, Kim and Bonchenko (2020) view that academic support should incorporate student academic advising, mentoring, study skills, and tutoring. It emerged from the study that continuous student advising is an important part of academic advising as observed by Lawshawn (2015). Student advising is continuous and should be for the duration of the programme. The study, however, revealed that student advising services were limited within the colleges. Some of the students were not aware of the existence of student advisors within the college. That is in line with Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004), who noted that formally structured programmes that focus on student advising were non-existent in most educational institutions. Stakeholders must acknowledge that institutions are required to establish systems that address challenges interfering with the student's academic journey. Literature from Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training (2014) recommends replacing the traditional model of student advising with intrusive student advising. The student support staff also highlighted that the student support structure was deprived of qualified student advisors resulting in the SDPs being tasked to multi-task and serve as student advisors to the enrolled students. Brown et al. (2020) opine that student advising allows students to obtain the necessary information on study techniques vital for academic achievement. In support of student advising, Waheed, Hassan, Aljohani, Hardman and Nawaz (2019) insinuate that it is important to note that student advising requires human and technological resources. Technology allows institutions to create repositories with student information. The data on students could be used to predict and analyze students' patterns in educational settings and ultimately make decisions on resources required to improve the student's academic performance. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) posit that advisors play a crucial part in attending to the student's academic needs. There were also concerns from the student support staff regarding the advisor-student ratio, hence the importance of establishing online student advising to improve student access. There was consensus among student support staff and students that SDPs were overwhelmed with student numbers. To address the imbalance between student advisor and student ratio, Tinto (2014:12) suggests using online student advising, which most universities in the United States commonly use. Institutions must incorporate input from faculty staff on academic support as the faculty staff interacts with the students more frequently than student support services staff.

Institutions must establish and implement comprehensive academic programmes that combine and align numerous interventions (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020). It emerged from the study that institutions were providing peer tutoring and extra classes as forms of academic support. Peer tutoring and extra classes emerged as crucial to improving students' academic performance. That is supported by Olaya et al. (2020), who acknowledged that offering extra tutorials enhances students' academic performance. Peer tutoring is a form of collaborative learning that allows students' knowledge and skills through active help and support (Gazula et al., 2017:65). The findings of this study suggest that peer tutoring was administered by student support staff and the academic staff's role was restricted to providing the learning material to the peer tutors. It is important to note that peer tutoring is a complex issue that requires the involvement of the college's curriculum unit, campus management, lecturers, peer tutors, and the students. The involvement of lecturers is important if positive outcomes are derived from peer tutoring. The process should be systematic, clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the curriculum unit, lecturers, and peer tutors. This observation is consistent with Abiddin and Ismail (2017), who acknowledge lecturers' important role in facilitating the learning process by aligning students' needs and the intended learning objectives. Resistance from academic staff and lack of infrastructure were presented as some of the challenges interfering with academic support. Holcombe and Kezar (2020) suggest tutoring, advising, bridging courses, and enriching activities as programmes that can be utilized as academic support. The Policy on Students with Disability (2013) supports integrated learning that involves the coordination of effort to attain the desired learning objectives. The provision of extra classes and peer tutoring requires commitment and adequate resources and should not be considered peripheral to academic support. Radiusman and Simanjuntak (2021) point out that institutions must consider peer-tutoring as a structured approach of academic support if students benefit from the process. Student and staff responses and document analysis findings suggest that academic support requires a collaborative effort between college management, curriculum unit, academic staff, and peer tutors. Furthermore, Tinto's Student Integration Theory postulates that students' success hinges on the successful coordination of students' academic and social factors. The narrative derived from Tinto's Student Involvement Theory is that crucial to student success is adequately addressing students' academic and social needs.

The study also revealed that resources are a critical component of academic support. Lawshawn (2015) stresses the need to establish student resource centres. However, it was noted that resource centres such as libraries were non-existent on some campuses. Maimane (2016) supports that critical to academic success is adequate access to resources. It can be deduced from the findings of this study that limited access to resources impedes the students' academic achievement. Brown et al. (2020) recommend that students should have complete access to modern technology and access to libraries and resource centers. The use of technology should prioritize online academic support. Online academic support must promote interactions between the lecturers and the students. Students would greatly benefit from interaction with academic staff when working on assignments as part of their continuous assessments. There is a need for institutions to adopt blended learning to improve students' performance. Raaper and Brown (2020) suggest that academic support should be available in different forms which facilitate face-to-face and online interactions. The student lecturer engagement could be improved through various online platforms which is consistent with the Australian Institute of Higher Education (2017) recommendation for establishing centers that allow uploading draft assessments for checking by the lecturer before submitting. It emerged from analysis of the findings that adequate access to academic support is fundamental to student retention and academic achievement. In support of academic support, Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) accept that effective academic support services are critical to reducing student attrition and improving student performance. The institutions' responsibility is to establish student support services that prioritize academic support.

#### **5.7.3.2. Non-academic support**

The findings from the study indicate that non-academic support is an equally important category of student support. There was consensus among participants that the two institutions should equally prioritize non-academic support. The importance of non-academic support was also illustrated on document evidence through the various forms used by the student support staff to support students with disabilities and students experiencing mental health issues. The institutions need to acknowledge that student success does not solely rely on addressing the academic needs of the enrolled students. Bennet et al. (2020) argue that the students' well-being and social adaptation are important components of student

support systems. Tertiary institutions must therefore create a balance between academic and non-academic support. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013) recommends establishing comprehensive student support systems. The non-academic category of student support augments students' persistence in their studies by providing student support services that are non-academic. The staff and students who participated in the study reiterated that non-academic support is pivotal to the successful integration of students into the college environment. This finding is consistent with Tinto's Student Integration Theory which asserts that the students' social needs are equally important to student adaptation to the college environment. However, Tinto further suggests that successful integration and persistence require incorporating and addressing student success factors. It is important to acknowledge that non-academic student support complements academic support in ensuring students persist and complete their enrolled programmes. The provision of non-academic support corroborates student integration and persistence. The factors that fall under the non-academic category focus on the student's social well-being. Karp (2011) outlines non-academic support as activities that are not directly connected to academic support but encourage academic success. The critical components of non-academic support include health and wellness programmes, support for special populations, accommodation, financial aid, and extra-curricular undertakings (Soares, Novaski & Anholon, 2017). The participants believed that the selected colleges are biased towards addressing the students' academic needs at the expense of non-academic needs. This finding from student support staff contrasts with DHET guidelines that advocate for student support systems that prioritize academic and non-academic support. Since the colleges' throughput and certification rates are measured against students' success rates, it is important to accept that their reputation hinges on adequately addressing non-academic challenges. Daniel et al. (2017) posit that providing quality service, including non-academic support, determines success. Students' persistence with their studies also addresses their needs that are not directly linked to learning activities. Clinic services, psychological support, support for students with disabilities, and support for students who belong to the LGBT community emerged as the main forms of non-academic support. There is a need to create social cohesion between academic and non-academic factors to derive positive learning experiences.

#### **5.7.3.2.1. Clinic services**

The findings from the study revealed that health and wellness support plays an enormous role in improving student integration and success. The findings suggest that clinic services available at the selected institutions' campuses were critical to students. Thompson and Porto (2014) acknowledge that health and wellness programmes are a top priority for most universities in the United States. This study revealed that campus clinics, health and wellness programmes, and psychological support are the most notable services offered by the two colleges under non-academic support. The participants argued that student support systems at the two colleges were not adequately resourced to address the non-academic needs of the students. The Department of Higher Education and Training through The Further Education and Training Colleges Act of 2006 initiated the establishment of student support systems with sufficient resources to improve the provision of student support but, it was revealed from the interviews and focus group discussions that the colleges seem to regard the addressing of students' health and wellness needs as peripheral as a result of inadequate resources. It emerged from the study that some students were reluctant to utilize the clinic services because of possible stigmatization. The lack of infrastructure and restricted clinic operational times emerged as obstacles to students' accessing the clinic services. The above view aligns with the Student Support Policy Framework (2016), which identified the need to recapitalise and add infrastructure for student support systems. The focus should not be on infrastructure only but also to add qualified and specialized staff to administer student support systems. The study also highlighted the importance of appreciating the emerging partnerships between the selected colleges and various stakeholders in improving access to health services. Continued engagements between the stakeholders are fundamental in improving students' access to health programmes. Conclusions can be drawn from the findings that the provision of health and wellness programmes requires well-established infrastructure and professional staff.

#### **5.7.3.2.2. Student counselling**

The study revealed that mental health issues adversely affect students' academic performance, which is consistent with Wilks et al. (2020:54), who accedes that epidemiological research consistently finds high rates of mental health issues among

students worldwide and academic impairment. Meanwhile, Hafer et al. (2021) found out that psychological well-being among students positively correlates with academic achievement and positive learning experiences. In South Africa, mental health problems among students are echoed in The Student Support Framework (2017), which acknowledges that different categories of students face many mental health issues. For example, social isolation has been associated with mental health problems among college students (Daddow et al., 2020). Students who experience alienation find it difficult to integrate into the college environment. The interviews and focus group discussions suggest that mental health problems among students are not confined to academic impairment alone but also affect the student integration process. The document analysis shows that many students experience mental health problems. In consenting to the impact of mental health problems among students, Sæther et al. (2019) noted that mental health problems are associated with student alienation and poor integration within the college community. Tinto's Student integration theory and Astin's Student involvement theory can guide institutions to establish student support systems that identify and address factors that lead to mental health problems among students. Mohd Shafiee and Mutalib (2020) opine that factors emanating from the environment contribute to mental health problems among students. Tinto's Student Integration Theory posits that the institution's commitment to integrating student support's academic and social dimensions is critical to student integration. Astin's Student Involvement Theory suggests that student involvement fosters a sense of belonging to the college community among students. If obstacles to student integration and involvement in college activities are eliminated, this would also reduce psychological problems among students.

The findings further suggest that stress linked to anxiety, family issues, academic workload, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were the most common mental health issues experienced by students. These problems are comparable to those identified by Russo and Glercher (2013) and Wu et al. (2015) in their study on the nature of mental problems experienced by students. They identified social isolation, anxiety, and depression as students' most common mental health issues. Benefits can thus be derived from the adequate provision of psychological support to TVET college students. The document analysis revealed that the two colleges could not currently deal with complex psychological issues and rely on referrals. Ricks (2016) suggests engaging practitioners to systematically

render psychological support that consistently adheres to their registered professional board guidelines.

Contrary to the view expressed by Ricks (2016) above, which recommends registration with the relevant board, the findings indicated that a few of the student support services staff were registered with professional boards such as the Health Profession Council of South Africa (HPSA). The failure to register with the relevant Professional Board could be because the individuals do not have the relevant qualifications and do not meet the requirements necessary for registration. The non-registration with relevant professional associations compromises psychological support services to the enrolled students. The non-adherence to policies has legal implications for the individual and institution if they fail to observe the guidelines when attending to students. The students are also deprived of effective counselling services because the staff lacks expertise. The institution must therefore ensure that student support staff should have the necessary expertise and professional registration. The analysis of findings from the interviews and focus group sessions further revealed that fear of being stereotyped, stigma, and cultural beliefs deterred students from seeking psychological help. Commenting on obstacles to seeking help, Mohd Shafiee and Mutalib (2020) agree that stigma deters students from seeking help with their mental health problems. To counter challenges associated with stereotyping stigma, Wilks et al. (2020) suggest adopting directed online psychological interventions such as counselling to combat students' mental health problems. It would be beneficial for institutions to recruit registered professionals to improve accessibility and utilization of psychological support.

Hendrickx et al. (2021) argue that the lack of standardization of services and shortage of personnel undermine efforts to administer psychological support. As Coates (2014) and Russo & Glercher (2013) acknowledge addressing mental health concerns can simultaneously decrease attrition and improve academic performance amongst students. The findings suggest that persistent mental health problems compel students to drop out. This finding is consistent with Thomas et al. (2021) who found that exposure to stressful situations may culminate into psychological problems, increasing the risk of students dropping out. The institutions' student support systems must prioritize establishing programmes that alleviate the impact of mental health issues amongst students.

### **5.7.3.2.3. Students with disability**

The findings from the interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis showed that the two colleges enrolled students with disabilities, and this category experienced some challenges. The challenges that students with disabilities encounter include the shortage of technological resources for learning purposes, lack of campus facilities for students with physical disabilities, and marginalization. The existence of challenges confronted by students with disabilities in tertiary institutions is confirmed by Moriña and Perera (2020:2), who argue that despite the surge in enrolment numbers for students with disabilities, adequate academic support for this category of students remains a mammoth task for most tertiary institutions. The findings further revealed that the institutions' failure to support students with disabilities negatively adequately impacts the students' completion rates, consistent with Ibrahim (2021), who argues that the institutions' failure to provide academic and social support results in prolonged completion time among students with disabilities. Also, in acknowledging challenges faced by students with disabilities, Kim and Aquino (2017) confirm that despite the increase in students with disabilities, a disproportionate number of them find it difficult to integrate into the system to complete their enrolled programmes. The institutions must take the responsibility to ensure that the environment supports students with disabilities. The observation by Fleming et al. (2017) suggest that some institutions could be ignorant of important environmental factors that foster student integration of students with disabilities. Tinto's Student Integration Theory can be applied to guide institutions to establish environments conducive to the needs of students with disabilities. It is also important to bear in mind that the nature of support depends on the nature of the disability. Physical disabilities and learning disabilities emerged from the study as the two main categories of disability amongst students. Stevens, Schneider and Bederman-Miller (2018) posit that disabilities are divided into visible and hidden disabilities. The document analysis revealed that the institutions rely on self-disclosure by students with a hidden disability during the enrolment process.

The findings further revealed that institutional support provided to students with disabilities includes assisting with the diagnosis of the disability and applying for examination concessions. The disability diagnosis process requires specialists. There was consensus



among student support staff that the two colleges relied on lecturers to identify students with learning disabilities during lessons. This over-reliance on lecturers to identify and recommend students with disabilities affects the diagnosis process and delays students with disabilities. Becker and Palladino (2016) opine that staff perceive students with disabilities as likely to fail or drop out prematurely before completing their programmes. The analysis of findings from student support staff revealed that perceptions among academic staff of students with disabilities are a high failure and attrition rates. The interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis emerged that the existing student support systems were not sufficiently equipped with the necessary resources to adequately support students with disabilities. However, institutions can change the negative perceptions on students with disabilities by creating advocacy on disability and establishing an inclusive student supports unity that adequately supports this category of students.

The findings from the interviews and focus group discussions revealed that several obstacles prevented students with disabilities from utilizing support services. Students with disabilities face architectural barriers and teaching and learning barriers. The barriers to accessing support by students with disabilities can be attributed to individual factors and systemic barriers. Weighing in on systemic barriers, Harafsheh et al. (2020) argue that failure by colleges to provide adequate resources and facilities inhibits students with disabilities from accessing support. Institutions must identify and eliminate barriers that inhibit students with disabilities from accessing their support services, which is consistent with Tinto's Student Integration Theory advocates for eliminating obstacles to student integration. The architectural barrier has proven to be a huge issue for students with physical disabilities, according to Moriña and Perera (2020), as the lack of infrastructure impedes the accommodation of students with physical disabilities. In addressing architectural barriers, Moriña and Perera (2020) further advocate for universal designs that accommodate all student categories without any restrictions or adaptations. Students with disabilities should be able to navigate the campus with minimum hitches.

The findings of this study suggest that student support staff were also not adequately capacitated to deal with students with disabilities. Tinto (2014) admits that institutions are deprived of qualified professionals. The limited provision of support to students with

disabilities was attributed to the non-existence of policies and the lack of resources to mitigate the challenges faced by students with disabilities. In contrast, Harafsheh et al. (2020) argue that legislations have been passed to enforce institutions to provide means and user-friendly infrastructure for students with disabilities. It can be deduced that the existing legislation serves as the basis for formulating policies for students with disabilities.

The study revealed that the selected institutions did not adequately support the needs of students with disabilities. That goes against The Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for Post-School Education and Training (2018), which advocates for greater emphasis on TVET Colleges to ensure that they can accommodate students with disabilities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). The institutions covered by the study did not fully adhere to the mandate by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2017) to establish student support systems that are comprehensive and inclusive of all students. The findings suggest the drafting of policies and provision of resources consistent with the needs of students with disabilities. The student support systems should be inclusive of the needs of students with disabilities. The elimination of barriers to students accessing student support services available is consistent with Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory. Tinto's Student Integration Theory advocates for institutions to prioritize academic and social factors that facilitate student integration and persistence with their studies. The findings suggest that students with disabilities experience numerous challenges that interfere with their adaptation process and academic achievement. The infrastructure makes it difficult for students to navigate around campus and participate in the campus' activities. Astin's Student Involvement theory focuses on the institution's role to encourage student involvement in college activities. The student involvement theory pinpoint that student involvement positively correlates to students committing to their studies and improves academic performance. Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory could guide the two institutions to establish an environment to eliminate barriers to student integration and academic success. The findings are consistent with the Student Integration Theory and Student Involvement Theory as they both focus on addressing factors that mitigate the challenges students with disabilities experience.

#### **5.7.3.2.4. Special populations**

It emerged from the findings that special populations were marginalized by institutions when providing student support services that align with Zehner's (2017) views that students within the special population's category are often marginalized and discriminated against. There was consensus among student participants that the needs of special populations were being trivialized at the two selected colleges. It was noted that programmes that facilitate the integration of special populations were non-existent in two TVET Colleges. Onu and Ugwoegbu (2011) highlight the need for concessions to accommodate students that make up special populations. The institutions are required to accommodate special populations reasonably which aligns with Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020), who suggest that institutions provide inclusive student support that accepts diversity among students. The student support systems are mandated to accommodate the diversified student cohort enrolled. The findings suggest that it is the institution's responsibility to create advocacy on the existence and acceptance of special populations.

#### **5.7.3.2.4. Accommodation and Student Funding**

The findings further suggest that limited funds and the lack of college accommodation could result in students finding it difficult to integrate and persist with their studies. In contrast, Wildschut (2020) argues that previous research suggests no relationship between student funding and the student's academic performance. Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that student funding in a developing country like South Africa is an important factor in student integration and academic achievement. The students had limited financial resources to adequately cover their accommodation and daily expenses. The delay in disbursement of funds by NSFAS resulted in students' failure to meet their financial commitments. It emerged from the findings of this study that student accommodation remains a huge concern for most institutions. Mzileni and Mkhize (2019) admit that student accommodation remains a crisis in most South Africa's tertiary institutions. The lack of student accommodation inhibits students from successfully integrating into the college environment.

Walker and Mathebula (2020) concur that the lack of college residence exposes some students to real hardships. It can be deduced from the findings that the non-provision of student accommodation also affects the students' performance and the institution's throughput and certification rates. The findings suggest that the lack of college accommodation exposes students to unsafe and overcrowded environments. The lack of accommodation inhibits students from deriving positive learning experiences. In arguing, Xu et al. (2020) assert that student accommodation supports students' learning experiences and assist students to integrate into the college environment. The institutions should prioritize student accommodation to ensure the students' safety. The institutions should also accept that college accommodation is not limited for sleeping alone but also study rooms. Therefore, the students' residence should be comfortable enough. The study's findings further revealed that most of the students occupied private accommodation with limited facilities for use by students. However, Zubair et al. (2020) argue that student accommodation should provide adequate habitation and academic success facilities. The fact that accommodation for students was overcrowded further exposed the students to hazardous conditions, as reported in both focus group and individual interviews. Astin's Student Involvement Theory also proves that campus accommodation is an important factor for students. Astin's theory suggests that student involvements are key factor to student success by outlining that students who are more engaged in the institutions' activities tend to commit to their studies. The provision of campus accommodation would encourage students to avail themselves and participate in the college's activities. As cited by Hafer et al. (2021), Astin postulates that the magnitude of student involvement is comparable to student commitment to their studies.

#### **5.7.4. Administration of student support services**

Although the study revealed that students appreciated the significant role of student support services, there are several concerns relating to student support services at the two colleges. Some of the concerns that emerged from the interviews and focus group discussion include the lack of resources and shortage of qualified staff. The study revealed that students and student support staff appreciate the significant role of student support systems in mitigating challenges of enrolled students. In support of student support systems, Ntoyakhe and Ngibe (2020) argue that ineffective student support interferes with the students' integration process

and academic achievement. Institutions must seek to establish effective student support systems to create an environment that fosters positive learning experiences. The finding aligns with Hayes' (2015) observation that comprehensive student support focuses on academic achievement and improves focuses on holistic student development. Students' holistic development hinges on the institution's ability to establish an environment that encourages student involvement and, at the same time, fosters student integration. The student's development is consistent with the theoretical framing guiding this study which emphasizes student integration and involvement. The integration of the Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement emphasizes the institution's role in ensuring students adapt to the college environment and persist with their studies. In relating to Tinto's Student Integration and Astin's Student Involvement Theory, Ntoyakhe and Ngibe (2020) consent that an effective student support system allows students to integrate and persist with their studies. The college environment should be conducive to enjoying positive learning experiences. Quinlan (2011) identifies knowledge acquisition, skills attainment, and personal growth as requirements for students to develop holistically. Tertiary institutions must establish student support systems that stimulate student development in cognitive, affective, and affective domains (Ricks (2016). It emerged from the findings that obstacles interfere with the effective administration of student support services. Priestley, et al. (2021) were of the view that institutional barriers serve as obstacles to the students' effective use of student support services. The obstacles that were presented collectively by students and staff who participated in the study include staff shortage, lack of staff development, limited resources, lack of awareness on student support services, lack of commitment from management, lack of collaboration between student support staff and academic staff, lack of standardization of student support units and unclear policies on student support. Contributing to the lack of standardization of student support systems, Hendrick et al. (2020) point out that the lack of uniformity on student support offered by institutions undermines efforts to effectively render student support services to the enrolled students. The administration of student support systems focuses on the operations and coordinations of the different portfolios.

Some student support services staff revealed that staff shortages interfere with the effective rendering of student support services. The study's findings suggest that the student support

staff and students' student support unit in one of the colleges was understaffed, which negatively affected the unit's operations and this aligns with Briggs and Ammigan's (2017) argument that student support systems should be adequately resourced with qualified staff. There should be an equilibrium between practitioner-student ratios to prevent staff from being overwhelmed with the workload. To counter the staff shortages, Raaper and Brown (2020) suggest that institutions introduce guided online platforms as an alternative to face-face interactions. The findings of this study suggest that there is a need for continuous staff development for student support services staff. Lbove, Kreiser, Camargo, Grubbs, Kim, Burge and Culver (2014) challenge policymakers to formulate policies that prioritize capacitating staff on serving students effectively. A clear and precise job description allows student support services staff to focus on their key responsibilities. Williamson et al. (2011) insinuate that conflicting staff roles create confusion and reduce accountability among student support staff. It also emerged from the study findings that different titles were used on student support staff in the selected colleges. Stevens et al. (2018) view that counsellor is the common title for individuals dealing with students' issues. The use of the title 'Counselor' complicates the job description of student support staff as the staffs' duties are not confined to counselling services only. The analysis of findings from staff interviews and students focus group sessions revealed the obstacles to the effective administration of student support systems include conflicting roles that emanate from non-adherence to the job specification and job description.

The lack of resources was cited as one of the principal obstacles impeding the rendering of student support services. That is in line with Maimane (2016), who laments that failure by institutions to invest resources in student support units affects the functionality of the system. The study highlighted that the lack of appropriate infrastructure crippled student support at the two TVET institutions. The study revealed that the two colleges lacked proper infrastructure to accommodate the specialized portfolios such as academic support, support for students with disabilities, and psychological support which corroborates with Obiozor et al. (2011), who acknowledge that resource scarcity incapacitated colleges' mission of alleviating challenges being experienced by learners. It is the institutions' responsibility to provide student support services adequately. The document analysis acknowledges shortage of qualified staff and tools as this is indicated by the use of external services for students with

complicated cases. The resources should embrace all the categories of student support which are academic and non-academic categories.

It also emerged from the study findings that the institutions lacked policies that support the effective administration of student support systems. The findings suggest that the two institutions should prioritise student support systems. Gill (2016) concurs that institutions should draft and adopt policies focused on students' needs. Priestley et al. (2021) argue that adopting inconsistent policies addressing students' varying needs is unfavourable to students' holistic development. Conclusions can be drawn from the findings that policies focussing on serving the diversified students are necessary.

#### **5.7.5. Ways to improve student support services**

The findings from the study revealed several strategies that can be utilized to improve the provision of student support services. It emerged from the study that the two TVET Colleges eliminate the barriers that inhibit students from accessing student support services. In acknowledging the existence of barriers, Moriña and Perera (2020) assert that obstacles that interfere with student integration and academic success still exist in most tertiary institutions. The institutions need to emphasize quality service when administering student support. Daniel et al. (2017) found out that quality service is a critical component and a prerequisite to satisfying relationships with the institution's valued clients.

The strategies that emerged from the study that can be used to improve student support include maintaining and establishing partnerships with key stakeholders. It is important to acknowledge that advocacy on student support and establishing partnerships should resonate with the college's assessment and needs. Briggs and Ammigan (2017) challenge institutions to re-invent the existing student support systems by recapitalising the institutions' existing infrastructure. The students and staff who participated in the study reiterated the need for institutions to recruit qualified staff and staff development. That is consistent with the suggestions of Lbove et al. (2014), who propose further specialized training for staff focussing on the unique challenges students face. The institutions should prioritize the continuous development of student support services staff. The findings further suggested the standardization and alignment of student support services in the two TVET Colleges.

The alignment of student support portfolios within the TVET sector would serve as the benchmark for monitoring and improving student support systems.

The findings indicate that student support services require wide consultations and input from the main stakeholders. Students should be consulted when the institutions plan to establish and implement student support systems (Maimane, 2016). There is a need for the formulation of policies that outline the significance of student support as one of the core responsibilities of the institution in the provision of student support as the important role of its key stakeholders. Briggs and Ammigan (2017:1081) advocate for the learner's holistic development, embracing their cultural competencies during their learning experiences. Therefore, institutions need to adopt policies that accommodate the diversified student cohort enrolled. It is crucial to acknowledge the need to alleviate challenges faced by students with disabilities. Moriña and Perera (2020:2) cite that obstacles encountered by students with disabilities include lack of information on disability and cumbersome bureaucratic processes. However, it is also critical for the colleges' understudy to focus on all students' academic and non-academic needs. It is imperative to note that creating advocacy on the importance of student support amongst students and the college would enhance student support services.

The institutions' responsibility is to prioritize the effective provision of comprehensive student support services. The effective provision of student support requires collaboration between student support, academic staff, student leaders, and college management. In support of collaboration, Skalicky et al. (2020) advocate for collaboration between staff and students when deliberating on student support issues. It emerged from the findings that institutions should improve the accessibility of student support services by students which is in line with Long (2012), who challenges post-secondary institutions to establish environments that present student involvement and development opportunities. The theoretical framing that focuses on student integration and student involvement should be pivotal to establishing student support systems that promote student integration and persistence. The study revealed that the accessibility of student support services could be improved by providing online services. In support of online support, Raaper and Brown (2020) suggest that student support systems can use online platforms to improve the accessibility of student support.



However, it is important that the system is user-friendly and allows the monitoring of student support services.

#### **5.7.6. CONCLUSION**

This chapter focused on data interpretation and presentation, and discussion. The findings from the student support services staff, the students, and the document analysis were presented under-identified themes. The findings were based on responses from students using focus group interviews and from student support staff utilizing individual semi-structured interviews. Document analysis was used to analyze forms used by student support staff when administering student support. The findings enabled the researcher to develop the themes based on the research questions. Academic support and non-academic categories were central to the discussion of this study. It can be concluded that academic and non-academic student support is critical to student integration and persistence with their studies. This chapter provided an opportunity for the researcher to discuss the study's results in light of the reviewed literature. The discussion was done in line with the stated objectives. The results were discussed to shed more light on the study results regarding the available literature on the problem under investigation. In the next chapter, the researcher summarizes and conclusions to the entire study.

## **CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **6.1. INTRODUCTION**

The study sought to explore the students' experiences of student support systems to improve student integration and academic success. The qualitative approach was used for the study. The researcher used the thematic approach and content analysis to analyze the data. The data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. This chapter presents the context of the problem as outlined in Chapter 1, a summary of the findings from the literature, theoretical framing, and the research design and methodology. This chapter summarizes the findings under the five themes derived from the research questions and the literature review. The conclusions and recommendations to improve student support services rendered to students in TVET Colleges also form part of this chapter. The chapter concludes with recommendations for areas that require further studying.

### **6.2. SUMMARY OF THE STUDY**

The TVET sector in South Africa has witnessed a surge in numbers of students enrolling for various programmes. The South African government has invested substantial amounts to restructure and capacitate public TVET Colleges. The TVET Colleges have a critical role in complementing the government efforts to equip the youth with the relevant skills relevant to the industry. The challenges students experience could be attributed to their students' backgrounds and experiences. The students enrolled at the TVET colleges include first-generation students, students from low socio-economic status, and students with disabilities. It emerged from the study that students experience a myriad of challenges during their time at college. Students' challenges include under-preparedness for post-secondary education, inadequate information on how the college system works, lack of resources for activities, limited financial resources, mental health issues, challenges associated with disabilities, and the lack of student accommodation. It emerged from the study that the numerous challenges students face interfere with their integration and academic success. The analysis from the interviews, focus group interviews and document analysis indicate that the student support systems at the two colleges are crucial to student integration and success. The student

support systems fundamentally mitigate the enrolled students' academic and non-academic challenges. Successful student integration into the college environment and academic achievement lie with the institution. The institution's capacity to adequately serve the academic and non-academic support correlates with the student's successful completion of programmes. It can be deduced from findings of the study that the student support systems were not adequately capacitated to cater to students' various needs. The students' academic success relies on the effectiveness of student support systems to adequately serve the varying needs of the diversified student populace. It emerged from the study that several obstacles inhibit the effective administration of student support systems. The obstacles emerged from the findings of the study shortage of staff, student support staff conflicting roles, lack of infrastructure, lack of advocacy on the existence of student support services, the lack of support from management, and the lack of prioritization by colleges of a student support system critical to student success. The study found that students can benefit from student support services if the two institutions' capacity to establish student support systems best serves the diversified students' needs. The institutions must therefore establish inclusive student support systems that acknowledge diversity among students.

Meanwhile, it emerged from the study that the institutions can implement several strategies to enhance the rendering and accessibility of student support services to the enrolled student cohort. Student success requires the institutions to create an environment that is supportive of the students' needs including students with disabilities and students belonging to the LGBT community. The institutions could use Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory to guide them to establish student support systems that focus on factors that foster student integration and academic achievement. The chapters are summarised as follows:

In Chapter 1, the purpose of the study was highlighted. The emergence and an overview of the TVET sector were presented and the rationale behind the TVET's formation. The government's obligations and the critical role of student support systems were also highlighted in this chapter. Chapter 1 further covered the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research objectives, and research questions. The key concepts used in the study were also defined in the Chapter. The chapter outlined the thesis into 6 unique chapters.

Chapter 2 focused on the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. The study was guided by Astin's Student Involvement Theory of 1984 and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. The theoretical framing analysed the factors that determine student integration, involvement, and persistence with their studies.

In Chapter 3, literature on the various aspects of the student support system was reviewed. The literature review focused on the composition of student support services and conceptualization of student support services. This chapter also discussed the factors determining student integration and persistence, challenges to student integration and strategies to improve student integration. Common challenges students face during their study time formed part of the literature review. The literature reviews also included the categories of student support that are academic and non-academic support. Covered also in this chapter were the challenges in the administration of student support services and ways to enhance the management and accessibility of these critical services.

Chapter 4 of the study covered the methodology used to conduct the empirical investigation. The qualitative approach was followed in this study. This study focused on the students' experiences of student support systems and the various approaches that can be used to improve student integration and academic success. Leavy (2017) asserts that a qualitative approach can exploit inductive methods that use questions to narrow the context of a study. The interpretivist paradigm was chosen to explore participants' experiences on existing student support systems at the selected TVET Colleges. The case study design was used for the study. As Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) insinuate, case study design allows researchers to comprehend the attributes that delineate a particular bounded system and further describe the phenomenon within the system.

Purposive sampling was used to select staff under student support service structures. The convenience sampling method was utilized to select student participants from College A and College B. Semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis was used as data collection techniques. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with student support services staff from College A and College B. The focus group interviews were

conducted with students from College A and B. Interview guides were used as data collection tools for the focus group and individual interviews. Document analysis was used to collect and analyze data on the forms used by student support staff when assisting students. The study made use of thematic and content analysis methods to analyze data. During the study, ethical requirements were observed by applying for ethical clearance, obtaining consent from participants, and safeguarding the rights and welfare of all participants.

In Chapter 5, data presentation, interpretation, and discussion were covered. The findings derived from the study are outlined in this chapter. The findings were derived from themes that emerged from the research questions and relevant literature. Document evidence complemented the data from semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. Verbatim responses from the participants also formed part of the findings. The chapter also discussed the findings derived from the data, document analysis, and literature review.

Chapter 6 of the study covered summary of the study, summary of the findings from the literature review and theoretical framing. The chapter also covered summary of the findings, including components of student support systems, students' experiences, categories of student support services, administration of student support systems, and ways to improve student support systems. The chapter also discussed implications of the study, limitations to the study, conclusions and recommendations.

### **6.3. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMING**

#### **6.3.1. Theoretical framing**

In this section, the theoretical framing underpinning the study was summarised. The theoretical framing provided the basis for investigating factors that encourage student integration, involvement, and persistence. The application of the theoretical framing was confined to the student support systems of the two TVET Colleges studied. The study was guided by Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory of 1984. Tinto's Student Integration Theory focuses on factors that determine student integration into the college environment and persistence with their studies. The study's

findings suggest that academic and social factors are critical to student integration and persistence. Institutional commitment to adequately address the students' academic and social factors are key to student adaptation and academic achievement (McCubbin 2003). The assumption is that students commit to their studies if their academic and social needs are met. Tinto (1993) recommends that institutions ensure that students' academic and social factors are equally prioritized. It can be deduced from the study findings that student success requires the integration of academic and social factors. Students are committed if their academic and social factors are adequately catered for (Cabrera et al. 2020). In the context of this study, there should be a balance between the provision of academic support and non-academic support. The study is also underpinned by Astin's Student Involvement Theory of 1984. Astin's Student Involvement Theory shows the correlation between student involvement in college activities and academic achievement. The study confirms that students' involvement in college activities motivates the student to perform. This conclusion is consistent with Hafer et al. (2021), who acknowledge that more involved students are enthusiastic and devote much time to their studies. The assumption is that students who are more engaged in the college's academic and non-academic activities tend to perform well in their enrolled programmes.

Roberts & Mcneese (2010) admit that students' involvement in college activities determines students' academic achievement. The Student Involvement Theory emphasizes the elimination of barriers to student involvement which is consistent with DeMatthews et al. (2020), who suggest establishing student support systems that identify and eliminate barriers to student involvement. Astin's Student Involvement theory suggests establishing an inclusive environment that acknowledges diversity among students. Institutions should establish inclusive environments that acknowledge diversity among students (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019).

Further review of the theories in this study revealed the institution's role in promoting student involvement, integration and academic achievement. The theories mentioned earlier are relevant to the study as they serve as theoretical basis for establishing student support systems. support systems. The student support systems should focus on eliminating barriers to student, involvement, integration, and student success.

### **6.3.2. Literature review**

The reviewing of literature served to provide insight into the rendering of student support services at two TVET Colleges. Maimane (2016) indicates that student support systems are critical to student integration and academic success. Student support systems focus on factors that allow student integration and academic achievement (Ntoyakhe & Ngibe, 2020; Olaya et al., 2020). The literature review recommends establishing inclusive student support systems that acknowledge diversity among students (Brown et al. 2020; Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). The literature relevant to the study emphasizes the critical role of student support systems in mitigating the challenges faced by the enrolled students (Badenhorst and Radile, 2018). The Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017:5; Nsamba; Mokae, 2017; Tamuliene, 2014, outline the benefits students derive from the utilization of services provided by the student support systems. Further discussed are the phases of student support that include pre-entry support, on-course support, and exit support (Russo & Glercher, 2013). Career advising, student selection, and induction are critical activities found at the pre-entry phase (Australian Institute of Higher Education 2017; Badenhorst & Radile 2018; The White Paper for Post School Education and Training, 2013). Student advising and student counseling are part of on-course support that are critical to student retention and academic success (Longwell-Grice et. al. 2016; Tinto, 2014).

The review of the literature discussed factors that contribute to student integration and persistence. Successful student integration into the college environment is positively correlated with academic success (Cabrera et al. 2020; Tinto 1993; Pascarella & Tenzini, 2005). The literature also suggests that individual and institutional factors are important to student integration and persistence (Heublein, 2014; Sabtu et al., 2016). The challenges interfere with the student's adjustment to the college environment (Longwell-Grice et al. 2016; Motsabi et al. 2020; Ogunji et al. 2020;). It emerged from the literature review that there are several obstacles to student integration and persistence. (Bandura, 1989; Corredor et al. 2020; Falcon, 2017; Havlik et al. 2020; Magut & Kihara, 2019; Mutereko, 2020; Ricks, 2016; Stephens et al. 2020; Upah, 2017). The obstacles to student integration lead to student attrition and academic failure (Prat et al. 2019; Rafiola et al. 2020; Van der Bijl,

2019). However, most of the studies on student support were undertaken in the West and might not completely cover all the pertinent issues in the developing countries in Africa.

The academic and non-academic support emerged from review of the literature as the main categories of student support (Tamuliene, 2014). Academic support is critical to students' academic performance (Olaya et al. 2020; Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). The adequate provision of resources improves the students' success rates (Brown et al. 2020). The literature emphasized the inclusivity of all student categories when administering academic and non-academic support. (Obiozor et al. 2010; University of Pretoria, Department of Student Affairs, Disability Unit, 2013).

The non-academic support category of student support emerged as critical to student integration and academic success in tertiary institutions (Thompson & Porto, 2014:22; Australian Institute of Higher Education, (2017). Psychological support is a critical component in addressing students' mental health. The most common mental health issues that emerged from the literature include stress attributed to academic workload, family issues, relationships, and financial constraints (Mohd Shafiee et al. 2020; Wilks et al. 2020). Mental health issues negatively pacts lead to academic impairment (Hafer et al. 2021). The review of the literature suggests that students with disabilities are still marginalized, depriving them of equal learning opportunities (De Matthews et al. 2020; Ibrahim, 2021). The disability among students has been categorized into physical and Learning disabilities (Stevens et al. 2018). Various obstacles inhibit students from integrating into the college environment. (Kim & Aquino, 2017; Kerschbaum et al. 2017). The lack of user-friendly resources and facilities for students with disabilities (Dahlstrom-Hakki et al. 2020). The institutions are responsible for establishing student support systems that address the needs of students with disabilities (Mosia & Phasha, 2017; Moriña & Perera, 2020). The provision of student accommodation and student funding as important forms of student support (Mokhothu & Callaghan, 2018). The limited literature from an African perspective indicates that few studies have been conducted on non-academic support especially on students with disabilities and mental health problems.



International students face unique challenges that require the intervention of student support systems (Perez-Encinas et al. 2017); Shu et al. 2020; Wu et al. 2015). The challenges cited are attributed to diverse cultural beliefs, language demands, unfamiliar learning approaches, financial limitations (Makhothu & Callaghan, 2018). It is suggested in the literature that students enrolled in distance learning are not adequately supported (Thompson & Porto 2014; Nsamba & Mokae, 2017). The lack of college accommodation challenges formed part of the literature review. College accommodation remains a huge concern for colleges, and it negatively impacts student integration and academic achievement (Mzileni, 2020). The literature suggests that institutions have a key responsibility in providing student accommodation (Magambo, 2020, Obiozor et al., 2011). The literature review covered the repercussions of lack of student funding. Students find it difficult to integrate and perform academically because of the lack of funding (Raghuran et al. 2020; Wildschut et al. 2020); Walker & Mathebula 2020). Financial exclusion of some students still exists in most institutions (Naidoo & McKay, 2018; Scott, 2016).

The literature review suggests that inadequate human resources impede the effective administration of student support, the lack of infrastructure, non-existence of policies to accommodate special populations, including students with disabilities (Gill, 2016; Hendrick et al. 2020; Priestley et al. 2020. Lack of qualified staff and staff's conflicting roles emerged from the literature as the main challenges to the administration of student support (Briggs & Ammigan (2017; Williamson et al. 2011; The Student Support Policy Framework, 2016). The review of the literature discussed further recommends strategies that can be used to improve student support services. The strategies include recruitment of qualified staff, staff development, The drafting and implementation of policies that include performance measures (Daniel et al. 2017Laville, 2020; Nakata et al. 2019; Novaski et al. 2017; Nsamba & Mokae, 2017; Thompson & Porto, 2014).

## **6.4. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

### **6.4.1. Components of student support systems**

It emerged from this study that student support services were available at the two TVET colleges and revolved around specific portfolios. The portfolios that emerged from this study

include Academic support, Health and Wellness, Student Leadership and Guidance, Financial Aid, and Arts and Culture. Student support staff are responsible for manning and guiding the activities of specific portfolios. The portfolios that emerged from the study fall under either the academic or non-academic dimensions of student support. The academic portfolio was directly linked to learning activities, whereas the non-academic portfolio focuses on factors that foster student integration. The health and wellness portfolio focussed on the students' health and psychosocial well-being. The study found the need for the selected institutions to integrate and coordinate the portfolios for holistic student development. The study established that most student support staff have qualifications in human sciences and were not registered with the relevant professional board. It emerged from the study that the non-registration with the professional board compromises the student support services staff's competence and compliance to the prescribed guidelines when executing their duties. It also emerged from the study that some portfolios from the two colleges were different. The lack of standardization on the college's student support systems renders it difficult to improve the existing support services between the selected TVET institutions which is indicated by the different titles used for different portfolios between College A and B. The total staff compliment is different between the two colleges. The difference between staff compliments could be attributed to the difference in size based on student enrolment. The standardization of portfolios was found to be critical to the enactment of frameworks that guide the functionality of the student support systems. The disparities between the portfolios need to be addressed if there have to be uniformity in student support systems. The study's findings suggest establishing student support systems that focus on factors that promote student integration and academic achievement.

#### **6.4.2. Students' experiences**

This study revealed that students encounter numerous challenges during their academic journey. The challenges students experience makes it difficult for them to integrate into the college environment. It was noted that students' failure to adapt to the college environment negatively impacts their academic performance. The findings suggest that most students enrolled at the two institutions were from less privileged backgrounds. The students' low socio-economic status was indicated by the students' over-reliance on government funding. The common challenges that emerged from the study include financial limitations, under-

preparedness for post-secondary education, the lack of resources for academic purposes, and mental health problems. The numerous challenges students face were also attributed to the students' background. It also emerged from the study that students with disabilities and those from the LGBT community were marginalized. The marginalization of students with disabilities and students who belong to the LGBT group adversely impacted their integration. This study also highlighted that the lack of facilities affected students' participation in extra-curricular activities offered by the two institutions. This study established that students encountered several challenges emanating from the non-provision of student accommodation. The challenges students faced served as obstacles to the student's integration process and academic achievement. The obstacles to student integration and success were also exacerbated by the lack of self-efficacy among some students. This study revealed that the selected institutions have a critical role in establishing inclusive student support systems. The findings suggested the establishment of comprehensive student support systems that focus on eliminating factors that interfere with student integration and academic persistence. The establishment of comprehensive systems requires institutional commitment and involvement of key stakeholders such as representatives of students. The representations should also prioritize input from representatives of students from special populations such as students with disabilities and students who are part of the LGBT community.

#### **6.4.3. Categories of student support services**

The academic category was directly linked to issues relating to learning activities. The findings indicate that the non-academic category addressed student concerns critical for student integration. The study established academic support as comprising activities related to the enrolment process such as administering the PACE test, academic advising, peer tutoring, extra classes, and the provision of adequate resources. The PACE test results served as an early intervention for academic support. The study revealed that students benefited from peer tutoring and extra classes. The institutions are responsible for establishing systems that allow for the effective administration of peer-tutoring and extra classes. However, academic advising was not fully utilized by the students. The students' non-utilization of academic advising was attributed participants to staff shortages. The

practitioner-student ratio inhibited students from accessing academic advising as academic support.

The non-academic category included health and wellness programmes such as campus clinics, psychological support, support for students with disabilities, and support for students who belong to the LGBT community. This study revealed that students were not fully utilizing the available student support services. The lack of advocacy on services available to students also emerged as a deterrent to students accessing the student support services. Students did not fully utilize the psychological support services. Some students were deterred from seeking psychological help because of stigma and fear of being stereotyped. It also emerged from the study that the institutions provided limited support for special populations such as learners with physical disabilities, the LGBT community, and students living with HIV and AIDS. The study also indicated that most students rely on NSFAS funding to rent accommodation from private property owners. The study further revealed that institutions' role in student funding was limited to assisting students during the application and appeals process when applications were declined as students were required to apply directly to NSFAS. Academic and non-academic support emerged from the study as critical to students' successful integration and academic success.

The categories of academic support and non-academic support are equally important for student integration and academic success. The findings suggest that the selected institutions should give the same priority to academic support and non-academic support.

#### **6.4.4. Administration of student support services**

The study found that adequate student support services is critical to students' holistic development. The study revealed several challenges such shortage of staff interferes with the effective administration of student systems. Some of the challenges that emerged from the study include huge workload, conflicting roles of student support services staff, lack of infrastructure, non-existence of policies on student support, and lack of advocacy on the critical role of student support services. This study further revealed the non-alignment of student support services portfolios with other colleges as a stumbling block to improving and standardizing student support systems. It also emerged from the study that staff was

deprived of continuous development, which undermines their efforts to execute their duties diligently. The lack of precise policies on the administration of student support services was also seen as an obstacle to the effective provision of student support services. It also emerged from the study that student support systems benefited from partnerships with key stakeholders such as the Department of Health, Department of Labor, other TVETs, and non-governmental organizations.

#### **6.4.5. Ways to improve student support systems**

The study revealed several strategies that can be explored to improve the rendering of student support services in TVET Colleges. The strategies that emerged from the study include establishing and maintaining partnerships with key stakeholders such as government departments, NGOs, and other tertiary institutions. The study further identified infrastructure development and recapitalization of student support systems as critical to providing student support services. According to the findings from the study, infrastructure development should be inclusive for students with disabilities. It was also noted that recruiting qualified personnel and continuous staff development would add value to student support systems. It further emerged from the study that drawing and refining existing policies consistent with the provision of student support is important. The standardization and alignment of portfolios would be crucial in improving the student support systems of the two colleges. It also emerged from the study that collaboration between student support staff, academic staff, college management, and student representative board are critical to providing student support services. The study further revealed that creating awareness of student support services among key stakeholders was critical. The findings suggest that student institutions can introduce online student support services to complement the existing face-to-face support.

### **6.5. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

As outlined in the background to the study, the context of the problem revealed that student support systems are a critical component of any post-secondary education institution. The student support systems play a critical role in student integration and persistence with their studies. (White Paper for Post School Education and Training, 2013:12; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). The study revealed that students face numerous

challenges during their academic journey. The challenges students experience negatively impacts the students' integration and academic achievements.

- This study acknowledges the role of the institutions through the support systems to mitigate the challenges of the diversified student populace. The conclusions suggest that eliminating obstacles to student integration would improve the students' academic success. The fact that student integration and academic success lie with the institution is cited in the study. To improve student integration and academic success requires the institutions to acknowledge the existence of such barriers. The study reiterates that the institutions are responsible for establishing a conducive learning environment. The establishment of a conducive learning environment is linked to the administration of student support systems may go a long way to address the major challenges students face and keeping them in the programmes till successful completion.
- The problem statement highlighted that the diversified student populace is faced with numerous challenges. (Karishma, 2013; TVET Colleges South Africa, 2018; Longwell-Grice et al.; 2016:39) identified students' low socio-economic status, ill-preparedness for tertiary education, overwhelming academic workload, psychosocial factors, and being deprived of cultural capital as common challenges experienced by college students. In the light of the challenges students face, the findings could assist colleges through the student support system to create a conducive environment that promotes integration and social cohesion by eliminating socioeconomic classes among students.
- The findings from the study could further capacitate the colleges by serving as a benchmark to consolidate and improve the functions of the existing portfolios found within the student support system. Derived from the study is the existence of challenges that interfere with the administration of student support systems. The study can improve the administration and provision of student support services. It emerged from the study that the lack of infrastructure and human resources undermined efforts to support students effectively. In order to improve student support systems, the selected institutions should invest in infrastructure and recruit more qualified staff.

- It emerged from the study that there was non-standardization of portfolios within the student support systems at the selected colleges. The study's findings suggest it would be beneficial to standardize the portfolios to allow the measurement and monitoring of the effectiveness of student support systems. The study suggests that the standardization of portfolios would serve as the basis for improving frameworks for student support systems.
- Conclusions drawn from the study suggest that drafting and implementing policies that prioritize student integration, and academic success are crucial. (Hayes, 2015; Laima & Sajiene, 2012; Mc Donnel, 2014). The study found no balance between academic and non-academic support aspects of student support, leading to students' non-academic needs being trivialized. The institutions must therefore ensure that equilibrium exists when providing academic and non-academic support. If the students' academic and non-academic needs are adequately met, student success is inevitable, and the college's throughput and certification rates would also improve.
- The conclusion cites that students with disabilities and students who belong to the LGBT community continue to be marginalized. The continued exclusion of students under special populations deprives them of equal learning opportunities. The conclusions drawn from the study could serve as the basis for the establishment of inclusive student support systems that acknowledge diversity amongst students.
- The study's findings have wider implications on the perceived role of student support systems in TVET Colleges. The students, administrators, college management, policy and the DHET. The study could lead to changes in how student support systems are perceived and, more particularly, to address the needs of the diversified student populace. That could result in a policy change and priority establishing inclusive student support systems. The study has legal implications for students belonging to special populations. That could witness the formulation of legislation, policies and guidelines that institutions should follow to protect the rights of vulnerable groups of students. The vulnerable groups include students with disability and students who are part of the LGBT Community.
- The literature review indicates that limited studies factors determine student integration and persistence in TVET Colleges. This limited research means there is a need for further investigation on student integration and persistence. Further research

on student support systems would be critical to improving student integration and persistence.

## **6.6. LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY**

The study comprised student participants from the full-time courses and programmes. This excluded part-time students who only attend evening lecturers from the study. That deprived the research of holistically investigating affected part-time students as they were not represented in the study. However, this researcher managed to derive enough participants initially indicated in the proposal. The researcher intended to conduct focus group interviews with student support committee members, but just before the data collection, this researcher found out that the committees were no longer operating except for two members. The samples used in this qualitative approach allowed the researcher to select a limited number of participants. The sample used exclude part time students and their experiences on student support systems were not explored. The part-time students' non-participation could not allow this researcher to collect their opinions on student support system although they are part of the student population which is against the principles of inclusion when providing student support services. The researcher was restricted to public TVET Colleges in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and this was undertaken because of time factor and the lack of financial resources. Parameters bound this qualitative case study and the focus was on student support systems in the two selected TVET colleges because of their proximity. The reason for selecting the two TVET Colleges was based on the fact that they are government funded and they offer the same programmes.

## **6.7. CONCLUSION**

The study sought to explore the students' student support systems experiences regarding student support systems and how they can be used to improve student integration and ultimately student success at two TVET Colleges. It has become evident from the findings of this study that TVET students experience numerous challenges during their time at college. Students' challenges are attributed to their background and previous experiences. It emerged from the study that the challenges students experience negatively affects the students' integration process and academic achievement. In order to mitigate the impact of challenges, the enrolled students require interventions from the institutions. The college's



interventions should establish a conducive environment that allows students to derive positive learning experiences. Positive learning experiences as it emerged from the findings can be achieved through the establishment of a comprehensive student support system. The student support systems should prioritise academic support and non-academic support equally. The student support system eliminates systemic or institutional barriers to student integration and success. The institution is responsible for profiling its students to understand their challenges and the required student support. The students' needs can be better served by establishing an all-inclusive student support system that acknowledges diversity among students. The student support systems should identify and address factors that interfere with students' integration process and academic success. If administered effectively, the student support systems would allow students adaptation to their environs and achieve academic success. In considering the findings outlined in the sections above, the study concludes that for student support systems to be effective and assist students to integrate fully into college life and succeed in their studies, the government, through the Department of Higher Education and Training must provide the TVET colleges with adequate material and human resources.

## **6.8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is imperative from the findings of this study to acknowledge that student support services play a critical role in fostering student integration and persistence. The institutions are bequeathed with the responsibility of providing a conducive learning environment. The successful completion of enrolled programmes requires establishing comprehensive student support systems. The student support systems should be capacitated to address the various needs of the diversified students enrolled. The recommendations proposed in this study are limited to the two colleges that were studied and not be generalized to all TVET colleges in South Africa and elsewhere because of the limited scope of the study and sample of the study although the researcher is of the view that lessons can be learned from its findings which may apply to other TVET colleges. The recommendations and implications are presented as follows:

### **6.8.1. Establishing linkages**

The evidence from the study suggests that the students at the two TVET colleges where the study was conducted experience numerous challenges. The obstacles students encounter negatively impact their integration and academic achievement. Mitigating the impact of obstacles to student integration and academic success requires establishing effective student support systems. The findings suggest that integral to the provision of comprehensive student support systems is the establishment of partnerships. In support of partnerships, Badenhorst and Radile (2018) acknowledge that partnerships between the institutions can restructure and capacitate inclusive student support units. Therefore, it is recommended that selected TVET Colleges' student support units establish partnerships with key stakeholders. The linkages would allow student support systems to mobilize resources and technical capacity to improve the student support systems. The findings from this study highlight the significance of partnerships with government departments and NGOs in addressing students' academic and non-academic needs. It would be noteworthy for the selected TVET colleges to establish further partnerships with industry to enlist support relating to the curriculum's relevance to the industrial needs.

### **6.8.2. Increasing and capacitating staff**

Adequate human resources are critical to the provision of student support systems. It emerged from the study findings that the shortage of qualified staff served as an obstacle to the effective administration of student support systems. This study therefore recommends that institutions increase student support staff capacity. Recruiting qualified and professional staff would allow institutions to balance the practitioner-student ratio. It further emerged from the findings that colleges should establish systems that allow for continuous staff development. Continuous staff development resonates with the Higher Education and Training publication (2017) which emphasizes the continuous training of staff who deal with special needs students. The institutions are recommended to sanction systems that allow student support services staff to register with professional boards such as HPCSA. The staff's registration with the relevant board would ensure that staff observed the necessary ethics when dealing with student issues. The statutory registration ensures that the institutions are protected from lawsuits for not observing the protocol required by the relevant

boards. The institutions are further recommended to draw clear job descriptions for student support staff. Precise job descriptions ensure that student support staff stick to their core duties to prevent serving multi-roles.

### **6.8.3. Advocacy on student support services**

It is important to acknowledge that student support systems are key to student integration and academic achievement. It is evident from the study's findings that lack of advocacy inhibited students from adequately utilizing student support services. The findings suggest that some of the students were not aware of the availability of some student support services. The findings further suggest that some academic and administrative staff were not aware of the critical role of student support. The lack of advocacy by some of the key stakeholders undermined the institutions' effort to render student support services effectively. Creating awareness of student support services and the nature of services available to students is crucial. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the institutions prioritize student support services by creating awareness amongst students, administrative staff, and academic staff. The student support services should not be perceived as a peripheral component to the operations of the selected colleges. The college's marketing team must give student support services the prominence it deserves which is in line with the Australian Institute of Higher Education (2017), which highlighted the importance of disseminating information on services available as the primary function of inducting students.

### **6.8.4. Improving infrastructure and resources**

The institution's capacity to invest in student support systems improves the rendering of student support services. The lack of infrastructure and resources inhibits students from using student support systems effectively. This study's findings noted that the two institutions lacked the necessary resources and infrastructure to adequately cater to the student's academic and non-academic demands. It is recommended that institutions invest in resources that provide students unlimited access to academic support and non-academic support. The resource centres must be equipped with the latest technology to access academic and non-academic support remotely. Some of the adverse findings that emerged from the study include the non-availability of student residence and the inaccessibility of some parts of the existing structures to students with physical disabilities. These findings are

at odds with Petcu et al. (2015), who advocate for inclusiveness when rendering support services to students. There is a need to establish a Student Disability Unit that focuses on addressing the needs of students with disabilities. It is further recommended that the two colleges engage the DHET to prioritize the building of student residences. The existing structures should be renovated to accommodate students with disabilities. The provision of student support services should be comprehensive and non-discriminatory.

#### **6.8.5. Collaboration**

Student integration and academic success rely on providing a conducive learning environment. The institutions' commitment to establishing a conducive learning environment requires key stakeholders coordinated and sustained effort. The findings suggest a lack of collaboration between the student support staff, academic staff, college management, and student bodies. The lack of collaboration undermines efforts to adequately provide student support to the enrolled student cohort. Teamwork is critical if students' academic and non-academic demands are adequately addressed. This study's findings recommend collaboration between important internal stakeholders of the institutions. The institutions should thus provide a conducive environment that facilitates collaboration between the student bodies, student support staff, administrative staff, academic staff, and college management. Abiddin and Ismail (2017) underscore academic staff critical to student academic support. Collaboration between important stakeholders improves working relationships and prevents any misconceptions on the critical role of the student support structure.

#### **6.8.6. Aligning student support services portfolios**

Standardizing student support portfolios serve as a benchmark for monitoring student support systems. It emerged from the study that student support services portfolios at the two colleges were not standardized. The non-uniformity of student support services portfolios impacts efforts to improve student support systems. Therefore, it is recommended that the DHET prioritizes standardizing student support services portfolios in all provinces. Uniformity of student support services would allow the establishment of monitoring systems. The monitoring system would allow the establishment of a benchmark that can be used as a basis for performance measurement of student support services.

### **6.8.7. Reviewing student support policies**

The factors that determine student integration and academic achievement should serve as the basis for drafting policies on student support systems. The study's findings revealed that policies for student support systems were non-existent as the drafting of the policies was still a work in progress. The non-existence of policies rendered the administration of student support systems difficult. Policies are crucial as they guide how the student support system should be administered. Petcu et al. (2015) suggest that amendments to policies should be more consistent to improve student integration and academic success. The policies should embrace diversity among students. It is evident from the study findings that the two TVET colleges enroll different categories of students. The needs of the identified student categories are unique. It is the responsibility of institutions to ensure that students' challenges are alleviated. It is therefore recommended that policies on student support should be drafted. The policies on student support should include the needs of students with disabilities, students living with HIV/AIDs, and students who belong to the LGBT Community. As Petcu et al. (2015) suggest, amendments on policies should be effected more consistently for students with learning disabilities. The policies to accommodate students with disabilities should be drawn with input from representatives of students with disabilities. The emphasis should not only be on the drafting of the policy but also the implementation part. Maybe the selected TVET Colleges should consider the call made by The University of Pretoria for access to technological resources, engaging in sign interpreters and granting of extra time during assessments and examinations (The Policy on Students with Disabilities (2013). The Department of Higher Education and Training's (2017) suggestion of continuous training staff who deal with special needs students must be borne in mind.

### **6.9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES**

The current study was only carried out at two public TVET Colleges in the northern part of KwaZulu-Natal. It is therefore recommended that a further study be conducted in other provinces and private TVET Colleges to gain more insight into student support systems. Further research in other TVET colleges would consolidate knowledge derived from this study on student integration and academic success. Further studies in other TVET Colleges

could allow policymakers to compare and incorporate input from other stakeholders on student support systems. This study focussed on the academic and non-academic student support system. This study acknowledged the existence of students with disabilities in colleges. It is noteworthy to conduct further studies that focus on support for students with learning abilities and other marginalized groups such as the LGBT community. Conducting further in-depth studies on special populations would also give insight into factors that determine their integration and academic success. That would assist in formulating policies and strategies that will improve the student support system for special populations.

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## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Consent Form – Student Support Services Staff Interviews**

**Appendix B: Consent Form – Students Focus Group Interviews**

**Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

**Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Guide**

## **Appendix A: Consent Form – Student Support Services Staff Interviews**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Dear Prospective Participant**

My name is Munyaradzi Muchineripi and I am doing research towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Education with Specialization in Adult Education at the University of South Africa. I am inviting you to participate in a study entitled:

### **The experiences of students of Student Support Systems in two Technical Vocational and Training Colleges in KwaZulu-Natal**

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study is expected to collect important information that could allow TVET Colleges to put in place a feasible student support system structure that is focused on serving the academic and non-academic needs of the students. The study will assist in determining strategies that can foster the effective rendering of student support services to students at College A and College.

#### **Why am I being invited to participate?**

The researcher has identified you as part of the staff that falls under the College's Student Support Services and as key informants to the study. The researcher used purposive sampling to select key informants that forms part of the Student Support Services Structure. The researcher identified Student Support Services Assistant Directors, Student Development Practitioners, Student Support Services Committee Members from College B and College B.

#### **What is the nature of my participation in the study?**

The study involves semi-structured interviews that will be recorded verbatim and focus group interviews. Open ended questions will be used to get in-depth information on the provision of student support services. The duration of the semi-structured interview will be between 15-25 minutes. The focus group interviews will constitute 2 focus groups with a total of 8 participants in each group.

#### **Can I withdraw from the study having agreed to participate?**

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. There is no compensation for participation and the data collected will be used for the sole purpose of the study.

#### **Are there any negative consequences for me if I participate in the research project?**



The researcher does not foresee any risks or discomforts.

**Will the information that I convey to the researcher and my identity be kept confidential?**

Although the semi-structured interview will be tape recorded, your responses will remain anonymous and no names will be mentioned in the research report. Your name will not be recorded anywhere and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a code number or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings.

A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

**How will the researcher(s) protect the security of data?**

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked filing cabinet for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer.

**Will I receive payment or any incentives for participating in this study?** There is no compensation for participation and the data collected will be used for the sole purpose of the study.

**Has the study received ethics approval?**

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the CEDU ERC, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

**How will I be informed of the finding of the findings/results of the research?**

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Munyaradzi Muchineripi on +278 3510 8190 or [45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za](mailto:45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za). The findings are accessible from October 2020. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Munyaradzi Muchineripi on +278 3510 8190 or [45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za](mailto:45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za).

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Prof Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor on +2712 4812902 or [aachea@unisa.ac.za](mailto:aachea@unisa.ac.za). Alternatively, contact the research ethics chairperson of the CEDU REC Dr Madaleen Claassens ([mcdtc@netactive.co.za](mailto:mcdtc@netactive.co.za)).

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

.....  
**Munyaradzi Muchineripi**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY (Return slip)**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or has been explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interview.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname

.....

(Please print)

Participant Signature..... Date .....

Researcher's Name & Surname ..... (Please print)

Researcher's signature..... Date.....

## **Appendix B: Consent Form – Students Focus Group Interviews**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Title: The experiences of students of Student Support Systems in two Technical Vocational and Training Colleges in KwaZulu-Natal**

#### **Dear Prospective Participant**

My name is Munyaradzi Muchineripi and I am studying doing research towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Education with Specialization in Adult Education at the University of South Africa. I am inviting you to participate in a study entitled. **Investigation into the role of student support systems in Technical Vocational Education and Training Colleges.**

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study is expected to collect important information that could allow College A and College B to enact a feasible student support service structure that is focused on addressing the academic and non-academic needs of the students. The study will assist in determining strategies that will foster the effective rendering of student support services to students at College A and B.

#### **Why am I being invited to participate?**

You have been identified as key informants on the study. The researcher used convenience sampling to select students who will form part of the study. The researcher will approach students College A and College B's campuses until the required number of 16 students per campus is reached. The total number of student participants will be 32 students. That will constitute 4 focus group interviews with 8 members in each group.

**What is the Nature of my participation to this study?** The study involves focus group interviews that will be recorded verbatim. Input will be derived from the participants on questions posed by the researcher. The participants will have the platform to express their opinions on the issues under study. Participants are expected to participate without any fear or prejudice. The duration of the focus group interview will be between 30-45 minutes.

#### **Can I withdraw from the study even after having agreed to participate?**

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. There is no compensation for participation and the data collected will be used for the sole purpose of the study.

**Are there any negative consequences for me if I participate in the research project?**

The researcher does not foresee any harm or discomfort.

**Will the information that I convey to the researcher and identity be kept confidential?** Although the focus group will be tape recorded, your responses will remain anonymous and no names will be mentioned in the research report. A focus group interview constitutes 6-10 members discussing responding to questions presented by the researcher. The participants will be responding to issues of a common nature. Your name will not be recorded anywhere and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a code number or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

While every effort will be made by the researcher to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I advise you not to disclose personally sensitive information in the focus group.

**How will the researcher(s) protect the security of data?**

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked filing cabinet for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer.

**Will I receive payment or incentives for participating in this study?** There is no compensation for participation and the data collected will be used for the sole purpose of the study.

**Has the study received ethics approval?** This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the CEDU ERC, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

**How will I be informed of the findings/results of the research?**

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Munyaradzi Muchineripi on +278 3510 8190 or [45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za](mailto:45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za). The findings are accessible from August 2020.

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Munyaradzi Muchineripi on +278 3510 8190 or [45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za](mailto:45018715@mylife@unisa.ac.za).

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Prof Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor on +2712 48112902 or aachea@unisa.ac.za. Alternatively, contact the research ethics chairperson of the CEDU REC Dr Madaleen Claassens (mcdtc@netactive.co.za).

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

.....  
**Munyaradzi Muchineripi**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY (Return slip)**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the focus group interview.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname..... (Please print)

Participant Signature..... Date.....

Researcher's Name & Surname..... (Please print)

Researcher's signature..... Date.....

## **Appendix C: Interview Guide – Semi-Structured Interviews**

### **Objective 1 - To identify the various components of the Student Support Services**

- Can you briefly explain the components that make up the student support services structure?
- What are your general views on the student support services that exist in your institution?
- Can you outline the various portfolios that are found within this structure?
- What are the key responsibilities of individuals occupying these portfolios?

### **Objective 2 - To define the nature of services provided**

- Can you outline the nature of services rendered to students by the College's SSS?
- Student support services are divided into academic and non-academic support. Please outline the core areas covered by each category?
- What are some of the challenges that student present that require the intervention of student support services?
- Outline some of the challenges that you encounter in providing student support services?
- What strategies do you utilize to ensure that these services are available to the students?

### **Objective 4 -To ascertain student support staff perceptions on the role of the Student Support Services in improving students' integration**

- What is the role of the SSS on student academic support?
- Outline the common problems that student present that require academic support?
- What are some of the challenges do you encounter in providing academic support?
- Do you think SSS improves the academic support of the learners and facilitates successful completion of programmes? Please explain.
- To what extent do you think that the provision of SSS facilitate student integration?
- Outline some of the challenges that students encounter as they adopt to the college environment?
- Which strategies does the SSS use in order to improve the provision of academic support?

### **Objective 5- To discover the numerous student support services approaches that can be used to mend the students' integration process in TVET Colleges**

- Can you pinpoint some of the strategies that can be implemented by the institutions to ensure that SSS are rendered effectively?
- Does the college have any linkages or partnership that focus on the provision of SSS?

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide – Focus Group Interviews**

### **Objective 1 - To identify the various components of the Student Support Services**

- Please explain your general understanding of Student Support Services?
- What are your general views on the existence of Student Support Services?
- What do you think are the key responsibilities of staff working under the SSS structure?  
Briefly outline the key role of the student support services at this institution?

### **Objective 2 - To define the nature of services**

- Can you explain the nature of services that are rendered to the students by the College's SSS?
- Please explain some of the challenges that you encounter that require psychological support?
- What are some of the challenges do you encounter in trying to access these services?
- Can you explain instances where you seek help from the SSS?

### **Objective 3 – To ascertain students' perceptions on the role of the Student Support in academic support**

- What are your views on the role of SSS in improving students' academic performance?
- Can you explain some of the challenges you face, that might require academic support?
- Outline the kind of academic support that you get from you get from the college.
- What are some of the challenges you encounter in accessing academic support?
- Which strategies do you think the college needs to introduce or reinforce to improve students' academic success?
- Explain your basic understanding of student integration?
- What are some of the challenges that you encounter during your tenure of study?
- What form of support from the college do you need to assist you in adapting to the college environment?
- What are some of the obstacles do you encounter in accessing support from the college?
- Please recommend strategies that can be used to improve student integration?

### **Objective 5 - To discover the numerous student support services approaches that can be used to mend the students' integration process in TVET Colleges**

- Which strategies can be put in place to ensure that the services are easily accessible by the students?