

## Accessibility and usability of student support services in South African TVET colleges

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**Abstract:** Enhancing the accessibility and usability of student support services within South African TVET colleges is fundamental to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. This approach proactively addresses students' needs arising from their diverse backgrounds and the unique challenges they face. Consequently, this study investigated the accessibility and usability of student support services in South African TVET colleges. The researcher adopted a mixed-methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from 83 participants selected from ten TVET colleges across South Africa. Participants, chosen through convenience sampling techniques, included student liaison officers, assistant directors, administrative clerks, career development officers, lecturers, and students. Data collection involved closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were examined through a thematic approach. The findings indicated that funding sources for student support services in South African TVET colleges originate from various contributions, including government subsidies, donations from caring individuals, and student fees. However, unclear guidelines and opaque eligibility criteria for accessing financial support pose significant challenges. It is recommended to develop strategies for fostering collaborative partnerships among TVET colleges, government agencies, NGOs, and local communities to enhance support services effectively.

**Keywords:** Accessibility, Financial aid, South Africa, Student Support Service, TVET colleges.

### 1. Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges in South Africa were established to meet the demand for skilled workers and promote comprehensive economic growth. These institutions provide practical, industry-focused education beyond conventional academic routes, accommodating a wide spectrum of learners [1]. The availability and effectiveness of Student Support Services (SSS) play a critical role in shaping students' academic experiences in TVET Colleges [2]. These services directly influence learners' success, retention, and overall achievement. This pivotal element covers both the presence and practical usefulness of these services for students [3]. Accessibility encompasses factors like physical proximity, financial support, and inclusivity [4]. Given the diverse student body, often from varying socio-economic backgrounds, the level of accessibility in these institutions is influenced accordingly.

The usability aspect of TVET pertains to how well services cater to individual student challenges and adjust their support mechanisms accordingly [5]. This involves considering diverse needs that may not fit into standardised support models. The awareness of available services significantly influences how much they are utilized. Hence, it is crucial to enhance accessibility by improving communication channels to raise awareness about these services [6]. Dealing with these elements requires a collaborative effort from various stakeholders. These collective actions encourage a proactive approach

to problem-solving, empowering students to seek help when needed. Therefore, implementing continuous assessment and feedback systems in these services ensures they stay adaptable and responsive to changing student needs [7].

Collaborative endeavours involving various stakeholders in South Africa. Ngcwangu [1] highlights the growing recognition of Student Support Services (SSS) as crucial to improving student retention, success, and well-being in TVET Colleges. This underlines the expanding role of SSS in addressing student needs holistically. Improving the accessibility and quality of these services to accommodate diverse student needs has been a growing priority [8]. Initiatives aimed at raising awareness about available support, enhancing counselling services, expanding financial aid programs, and offering mentorship opportunities have been among the concerns addressed.

Continuously evaluating the impact and identifying areas for enhancement allows colleges to refine their services, better meeting the diverse needs of their student body [9]. This ongoing assessment facilitates timely adjustments, whether that involves reshaping counselling approaches, expanding academic aid programs, or introducing new resources tailored to address the specific and evolving challenges faced by students. Such a commitment requires a forward-thinking approach, striving to consistently surpass standards and effectively address the ever-changing needs of each student. Hence, the significance of conducting this study becomes evident, recognizing its crucial role in ensuring that support services maintain a proactive stance and remain consistently adaptable to meet the dynamic requirements of students.

### *1.1. Research Objectives*

1. To analyse the financial support offered by Student Support Services for TVET Students.
2. To find out the obstacles faced by SSS personnel in delivering effective support services.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Financial Support Offered by Student Support Services for TVET Students*

One reason for the very high rate of dropouts among black students is almost certainly inadequate state funding in the form of scholarships, bursaries, and loans [10]. Although the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which operates on a means-test basis, has been successfully established and considerable funding has been allocated to promote redress for indigent students, the overall amounts allocated fall far short of providing effective support for all eligible students in need [11]. This highlights the reality of the interconnection of race and class and equity of access for students. Mostly black students, from working-class and impoverished rural social backgrounds, will continue to be severely compromised unless there is a greater commitment of public funding for financial aid to poverty-stricken students [12].

It is clear that the pace of social equity and redress in higher education continues to be severely constrained by conditions in South African schooling. Despite almost universal formal participation in schooling, South Africa's schools evince significant problems related to dropout rate, retention, progression, and successful completion [13]. As has been noted, "the simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning" [14]. South African school students perform extremely poorly on a range of international assessment tests, in terms of which "65% of school leavers are functionally illiterate" [15]. A fundamental challenge is to improve the quality of education and schools [16]. It is also clear that improved access to and outcomes in higher education, especially for black South Africans, and in the fields of science, engineering, and technology, are strongly dependent on significant improvements in the quality of South African schooling.

### *2.2. Challenges Faced by SSS Personnel in Delivering Effective Support Services*

According to Jansen [17], another challenge is "policies that have served as political symbolism in that at particular moments policy development hinged largely on the symbolism rather than the substance of change in education or was limited to the symbolism of policy production rather than the

details of policy implementation.” It is indisputable that an enabling policy framework that encompasses thoughtful state supervision, effective steering, predictability, continuity and consistency in policy is vitally necessary for higher education to realise its social purposes and goals [16]. However, while an enabling policy framework is vitally important, it is on its own not enough, which then poses a serious challenge for institutions of HE.

According to Schreiber, et al. [18] the Higher Education and Training ministry’s commitments to increasing enrolments and participation rates and access, equity and redress may be handicapped by the inadequacy of the state budget devoted to higher education. Similarly, equity of opportunity and the enhancement of quality may be retarded by the absence of or limited funding for programmes of academic staff and student academic development at institutions [12]. It is increasingly clear that public funding of higher education is inadequate in the face of the legacy of past inequities and the new demands on and expectations of TVET colleges. At least two areas of higher education are in need of either additional funding or dedicated new funding: The NSFAS, in order to provide equity of access, opportunity and outcomes for talented students from indigent and lower middle-class families; and earmarked funding for high academic development initiatives to enhance (1) equity of opportunity and outcome, (2) curriculum innovation, renewal and transformation to enhance the capabilities of institutions to meet the graduate needs of the economy and society; and (3) production of the next generation of artisans and workplace education [19].

In 2001, the National Plan for Higher Education estimated the gross participation to be fifteen per cent and set a target of twenty per cent gross participation by Schreiber, et al. [18]. Clearly, there has been only a minimal improvement in the overall gross participation rate, and inequities continue to exist in the participation rates of African and Coloured South Africans relative to white and Indian South Africans. Approximately twelve per cent of the South African and Coloured 20-24 age groups, are participating in higher education which is a serious cause of concern, for political, social and economic reasons, if the sector is not able to accommodate a higher and more equitable proportion of those social groups that have been historically disadvantaged and underrepresented in higher education sector [20].

One of the reasons students do not complete their studies is a lack of money. Support is envisaged academically, but without money, that too may suffer [21]. The following are the reasons efficient administration of the bursary process is important: firstly, the provision of student financial aid through the Department of Education’s TVET college bursary scheme is critical to access TVET colleges; secondly, it provides an opportunity for the following groups of students to be enrolled for NCV programmes [21]: “South African citizens who are registered or intend to register for NCV programmes; talented students who can show evidence of good academic achievement and who stand to benefit from financial assistance; financially needy students with academic potential, and unemployed youth.” Academically deserving students who are committed to intense vocational study, and who complete all forms accurately and timeously must also be funded through NSFAS bursaries, and be granted internships after the successful completion of their studies at the college. The Department of Education requested NSFAS to administer and manage the DoE TVET colleges’ bursary scheme, and NSFAS has adapted the Means Test Tool for the TVET college sector. The Means Test Tool should be used only as a guide when awarding bursaries to students [12].

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Person-environment interactive theories were developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1980s. The theory highlights the multifaceted and dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments across different systems [22]. This theory offers a robust groundwork to explore the complexities defining the accessibility and usability of Student Support Services (SSS) within South African TVET Colleges. It further focused on the dynamic relationship between individuals and their surroundings, shedding light on how this interaction shapes behaviours, experiences, and eventual outcomes. When applied to SSS accessibility and usability, it sought to scrutinize the relationship between the diverse attributes of students, spanning needs, backgrounds, and capabilities, and the

encompassing college environment, and the support systems. This lens allows for a full exploration of how these factors make an impact on the effectiveness and suitability of SSS provision.

## 4. Methodology

To achieve the objectives of this study, an exploratory mixed-method approach was adopted. This involved first collecting qualitative data to explore the problem, followed by quantitative data to support and strengthen the findings [23]. This approach is suitable as it enables the triangulation of findings when studying the accessibility and usability of student support services in South African TVET colleges. It allows the researcher to capture multiple perspectives, combining lived experiences with measurable evidence for richer and more reliable insights.

### 4.1. Sample and Sampling Procedure

The sample size of the study was 81 consisting of Assistant Director (10), Student Liaison Officers (10), Career Development Officers (10), SSS-Senior Administration Clerks (10), Lecturers, (10), TVET students (31) selected from ten TVET colleges in South Africa by using both convenience and purposive sampling techniques. These sampling techniques were deliberately used in the selection of participants or elements from a population based on accessibility and specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives [24]. The researcher opted for these methods to ensure that the chosen sample reflects traits or experiences essential for effectively addressing the research objectives. Employing purposive sampling in particular helped the researchers to strategically gather insights or diverse perspectives from individuals possessing the necessary knowledge, experiences, or characteristics pivotal to the study, thereby enriching the depth and applicability of the findings.

### 4.2. Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaires having closed-ended questions were used to collect quantitative data. The questions were framed using a YES or NO scale to measure challenges experienced by the SSS personnel in providing support services to TVET students. To collect the qualitative data, semi structured interview schedule was used, particularly to elicit quality data from the Assistant Director, Student Liaison Officer, Career Development Officer, and SSS-Senior Administration Clerk. The interview questions were focused on SSS funding to support TVET students.

### 4.3. Data Collection Procedure

The researcher designed the data collection instrument and gave it to three experts in the field of TVET content validity. The instruments were later modified as per the experts' suggestions. To collect the data, the researcher sought permission from the chosen TVET colleges to conduct interviews and administer questionnaires to participants. Ethical considerations were paramount, with the researcher transparently explaining the research's intent to the participants and guaranteeing that the data would solely serve research purposes. Additionally, the researcher requested permission to record the interviews, which typically lasted around 45 minutes per participant, ensuring transparency and thorough documentation of the conversations.

### 4.4. Data Analysis

The researcher gathered both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. Quantitative data underwent analysis utilising descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, allowing for a comprehensive numerical summary. On the other hand, the qualitative data underwent analysis using a thematic approach, enabling the identification and exploration of recurring themes or patterns within the narrative responses.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Financial support offered by Student Support Services for TVET Students

To ensure the anonymity of the participants, they were given unique codes. The codes were used throughout the analysis process. The details of the codes included, P1 (Participant 1), P2 (Participant 2), P3 (Participant 3), P4 (Participant 4), P5 (Participant 5), P6 (Participant 6), P7 (Participant 7), P8 (Participant 8), P9 (Participant 9), and P10 (Participant 10). The responses of the participants were categorised under three themes as follows.

### 5.2. Sources of SSS Unit Funds

Under this theme, the responses from the various participants have been presented.

P1: *I have noticed that a significant portion of support funds comes from government subsidies, which helps cover the basics we rely on for academic and personal assistance.*

P2: *Sometimes, it's amazing to see how donations from caring individuals or companies create opportunities through scholarships or mentorship programs, adding a special touch to our support services.*

P3: *We students know that part of our fees goes into supporting us beyond classes allocating funds specifically for the services that keep us going.*

P4: *I have seen how grants from trusts or foundations have made a difference in expanding counselling services, supporting us through tough times.*

P5: *Partnerships with industry partners bring in resources that help shape our future through career development and internships.*

P6: *Even within the college budget, there's a slice dedicated to making sure we have academic tutoring and resources available.*

P7: *I have heard about project-based grants specifically directed to areas like disability services, making sure everyone gets the support they need.*

P8: *When our community comes together for fundraising events, it's heartwarming to see how those funds go into helping students in urgent situations or boosting student welfare.*

P9: *Long-term support comes from endowments or investments, ensuring that our services can keep growing and evolving.*

P10: *I have benefited from programs funded by SETAs, designed to give industry-specific support, setting us up for success in our chosen fields.*

It can be learnt from the participants' responses above that the funding sources for Student Support Services in South African TVET Colleges come from various contributions, as perceived by individuals within the college community. Government subsidies form a significant base, aiding in foundational support. Donations from caring individuals and corporations create opportunities through scholarships and mentorship programs, adding personalized touches. Student fees allocate resources for broader academic and personal assistance. Grants from trusts and partnerships with industries amplify counselling, career development, and disability services. Moreover, fundraising events, college budgets, endowments, and specialized SETA programs each play vital roles, ensuring diverse and sustainable avenues for student support and enrichment.

### 5.3. Adequacy of SSS Unit Funding Earmarked for Support

The data that were generated under this category of theme are presented as follows.

P1: *The current funding adequately covers basic services, but there's room for enhancement, especially in specialized areas like mental health and career development support.*

P2: *While the unit does its best with the available funds, there's a need for more resources, particularly for diverse support needs such as disability services and emergency financial aid.*

P3: *Funding suffices for fundamental support, yet an increase could facilitate a broader range of resources and programs, especially for academic tutoring and skill-building workshops.*

P4: *The unit's efforts are commendable with the current funding, but more financial support could enrich counselling services and mentorship programs.*

P5: *Appreciating the existing support, additional funding would significantly aid international students and those facing socio-economic hardships.*

P6: *While everyday support seems adequate, additional funding would enable innovative programs beneficial for industry readiness.*

P7: *There's noticeable support, but an increase in funding would allow for more consistent and comprehensive mental health services.*

P8: *While some areas are sufficiently funded, more resources could expand opportunities, such as additional scholarships and career-focused initiatives.*

P9: *Existing funding covers certain areas well, but there's a clear need for increased financial aid options and expanded counselling services.*

P10: *The current funding appears insufficient, particularly in addressing immediate student needs like textbooks and emergency financial assistance.*

Participants within South African TVET Colleges expressed varied sentiments regarding the adequacy of funding for Student Support Services (SSS). While some acknowledged the current funding's coverage of basic services, there is a consistent call for improvements, especially in specialized areas like mental health support and career development. Others highlight specific needs such as disability services and emergency financial aid, suggesting the existing funds fall short in meeting these diverse support requirements. Generally, the participants appreciated the efforts of the SSS unit but emphasized the necessity for increased resources to enhance counselling, mentorship programs, academic support, and opportunities for students facing socio-economic challenges or seeking industry readiness. The consensus leans toward a need for additional funding to expand and enrich the scope of services provided by the SSS unit.

#### 5.4. Accessibility of SSS Unit Funds

The details of the data collected under this theme are presented below.

P1: *Accessing SSS funds is feasible, yet clearer guidelines for specific needs could enhance the process.*

P2: *While some funds are easily accessible for academic support, information about mental health resources could be more transparent.*

P3: *The process to access funds could be smoother; there's occasional ambiguity about eligibility criteria for financial aid.*

P4: *Transparent access to emergency funds is appreciated, but communication on other available support could improve.*

P5: *Navigating the fund access process has been challenging; clearer guidelines or support would enhance accessibility.*

P6: *Funds are accessible, but more proactive communication could increase awareness of available resources.*

P7: *Accessibility is reasonable, but a centralized system for fund inquiries could streamline the process.*

P8: *While funds exist, accessibility feels restricted due to specific limitations or insufficient awareness about alternative support.*

P9: *I have accessed SSS funds, but a more user-friendly process or online platform would greatly improve accessibility.*

P10: *Accessing funds can be overwhelming; simplified procedures or dedicated staff support would facilitate easier access to necessary support.*

Participants within South African TVET Colleges express varied experiences regarding the accessibility of funds within the Student Support Services (SSS) unit. Some note that while accessing certain funds is manageable, there is a call for clearer guidelines, especially for specific needs like mental health support or financial aid eligibility. Others find the process somewhat challenging, citing a lack of transparent communication or easily navigable procedures. Overall, there's a consensus on the potential



for improvement, suggesting that enhanced communication, streamlined processes, and proactive outreach could significantly improve accessibility to SSS unit funds. Participants highlight the importance of clearer guidelines, centralized systems, and user-friendly approaches to facilitate easier access to necessary support.

### 5.5. Challenges Faced by SSS Personnel in Delivering Effective Support Services

This section presents data about perceived challenges affecting SSS personnel in delivering effective support services. The details of the data are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

Challenges for delivering effective support services at TVET colleges.

Statement	No: N=83		Yes: N=83	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Established comprehensive academic support services at TVET colleges	8	40.0	12	60.0
Availability of computer-based and non-computer based academic support programmes that support learning	11	55.0	9	45.0
Availability and accessibility of the internet	14	70.0	6	30.0
Equipped library on the TVET campuses	9	45.0	11	55.0
Students are encouraged to form reading clubs	2	10.0	18	90.0
Upgraded facilities to accommodate disabled students	20	100.0	0	0.0
Established linkages with external institutions for referrals	13	65.0	7	35.0
Significance of academic support to student success?	0	0.0	20	100.0
Available systems in place to monitor students' progress	0	0.0	20	100.0
Availability of college counsellor responsible for counselling and life skills	4	20.0	16	80.0

The data presented in Table 1 reflect contrasting perspectives on the challenges associated with delivering effective support services at TVET colleges. The data highlight the presence or absence of crucial elements within the colleges. The responses, divided into "NO" (n=83) and "YES" (n=83) categories, offer insights into various aspects of support services: In terms of academic support, 60% of respondents expressed a need for more comprehensive services at TVET colleges. There's a divided view (55% affirming and 45% disputing) regarding the availability of diverse computer-based and non-computer-based academic support programs. Similarly, while 70% acknowledge the availability of the internet, 30% perceive accessibility as a challenge. Additionally, 55% affirm adequately equipped libraries on campus, but 45% note inadequacies in these resources. Notably, a significant 90% of respondents feel that students are not adequately encouraged to form reading clubs, indicating a potential area for improvement. Interestingly, all respondents (100%) confirm upgraded facilities catering to disabled students, signalling a consensus on accessibility measures. Regarding linkages with external institutions for referrals, there's a split view, with 65% acknowledging established connections and 35% indicating a lack thereof. However, unanimous agreement exists (100%) on the significance of academic support to student success and the necessity for systems to monitor student progress. In terms of support personnel, while 80% of respondents report the availability of college counsellors for counselling and life skills, 20% feel this service is lacking.

## 6. Discussion

The participants' responses shed light on the multifaceted funding sources supporting Student Support Services (SSS) within South African TVET Colleges. Government subsidies were highlighted as a fundamental pillar, providing foundational support for these services [25]. Beyond governmental aid, the contributions from private entities, including donations from individuals and corporations, stand out for their personalised impact, offering scholarships and mentorship programs that cater to specific student needs [26]. Additionally, the allocation of student fees toward academic and personal assistance, as revealed by Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete [27], showcases a direct student-driven contribution to the support services. These funding sources collectively paint a rich picture of support,

where each contribution plays a unique role in catering to the diverse needs of students within South African TVET Colleges. This variety ensures that the support services remain adaptive and responsive to the evolving needs of students, encompassing academic, personal, and career development aspects crucial for their success within the educational environment.

The diverse perspectives among participants within South African TVET Colleges highlight the complexity of evaluating the adequacy of funding for Student Support Services (SSS). While some acknowledge the current funding's coverage of essential services, there's a consistent demand for enhancements, particularly in specialized areas such as mental health support and career development. This is consistent with Munyaradzi and Addae [28] that TVET colleges in South Africa require psychological support for their students. These viewpoints emphasize a gap between existing resources and the diverse support needs as mentioned by Quan-Baffour and Akpey-Mensah [29], resulting in inadequacies in addressing specific requirements like disability services and emergency financial aid. For instance, while some participants acknowledge the coverage of basic services, others point out the need for specialized support like mental health services, indicating a nuanced range of requirements within the student body. Moreover, the emphasis on improving resources for academic support, mentorship programs, and career development highlights the integral role these services play in students' holistic development. The unified call for additional funding echoes the collective desire to bridge the identified gaps, ensuring that the SSS unit adequately addresses the diverse and evolving needs of students within the TVET Colleges [25].

The diverse experiences shared by participants within South African TVET Colleges offer insights into the varying degrees of accessibility to funds within the Student Support Services (SSS) unit. While some participants find accessing certain funds manageable, they expressed the need for clearer guidelines, especially concerning specific needs like mental health support or eligibility criteria for financial aid [29]. On the contrary, others expressed challenges in navigating the process, citing opaque communication and complex procedures as hindrances, which is supported by Sithole, et al. [30]. These sentiments highlight the significance of transparent guidelines, centralized systems, and user-friendly approaches, which participants believe would significantly ease access to essential support services. For instance, participants highlight the importance of clear guidelines, as concurred by Badenhorst and Radile [31], illustrating how such directives would alleviate confusion and ensure a smoother process when seeking funds for distinct support services like mental health or financial aid. Additionally, the emphasis on centralized systems and user-friendly approaches aligns with the collective desire for a more straightforward and navigable pathway to accessing necessary funds. The unanimous call for improved communication and streamlined processes [32], echoes the participants' shared aspiration for an accessible and equitable system that caters to the diverse support needs of students within the TVET Colleges.

Data about the challenges associated with delivering effective support services at TVET colleges demonstrated a substantial proportion expressed the need for more comprehensive academic services. Internet access was generally widespread; however, a notable minority still perceived it as a challenge. Similarly, while some respondents affirmed adequately equipped libraries, others noted inadequacies in these resources [33]. Surprisingly, a considerable percentage felt students lacked encouragement to form reading clubs, indicating a potential area for improvement. Notably, all respondents confirmed upgraded facilities for disabled students, signifying consensus on accessibility measures. This finding is in line with Delubom and Marongwe [34] that people with disabilities have limited access to TVET in South Africa. Views on linkages with external institutions varied, as did perceptions of the availability and adequacy of college counsellors for counselling and life skills. These diverse perspectives highlighting the need for support services within TVET colleges, identifying opportunities for enhancement and improvement [35].



### 6.1. Limitation

While descriptive statistics and thematic analysis offered useful insights, the study opens opportunities for future research to apply advanced methods such as regression analysis or structural equation modeling. This could provide deeper understanding of the causal relationships affecting the accessibility and usability of student support services.

## 7. Recommendations

- i. Consider strategies for collaborative partnerships between TVET colleges, governmental bodies, NGOs, and local communities to enhance support services.
- ii. Future researchers should assess the impact of existing support services on student academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. Analyze academic success rates, dropout trends, and conduct qualitative assessments to delve into the qualitative influence of these services.
- iii. Provision of resources such as library services, infrastructure development and adequate financial resources is crucial for facilitate inclusivity and progress of TVET students.
- iv. Clarity in institutional policies and procedures related to support services is essential in TVE colleges. Clarity, efficiency, and responsiveness of these policies play a major role in addressing students' diverse needs.

## 8. Conclusion

Financial aid provided by Student Support Services (SSS) serves as a lifeline for many TVET students in South Africa. However, there are persistent challenges that hinder its smooth delivery. These obstacles, which Person-environment interactive theories help us understand, are like puzzles within the support system. These hurdles range from vague guidelines on accessing funds to cumbersome processes. These represent the complex interplay between students' needs and the support mechanisms available. For instance, unclear guidelines may be a hindrance, making it difficult for students to access the support they need. These challenges underscore the need for support structures that are not reactive but anticipatory, adapting to students' diverse circumstances and aligning with the principles of these interactive theories.

Consider a scenario where a TVET student, eager to access financial aid for career-related training, encounters a complicated application process. Despite having the motivation and qualifications, the unclear steps and requirements act as barriers, causing frustration and potentially preventing them from accessing crucial support. These challenges highlight the gap between the intention of financial aid and its practical accessibility, illustrating the intricate dynamics between the student and the environment in which support services operate. Person-environment interactive theories shed light on these barriers, emphasizing the importance of creating an environment where the support system is available and user-friendly, responsive, and tailored to meet the varying needs of students. This understanding becomes the cornerstone for reshaping support services within SSS, ensuring they are adaptable and sensitive to the dynamic challenges students face in their educational journey.

### Institutional Review Board Statement:

The Ethical Committee of the University of Zululand, South Africa has granted approval for this study on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2017 (UZREC 171110 030 PGD 2017/194)

### Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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