



# The Role of Student Support Systems in Student Integration and Persistence at a TVET College in South Africa

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**Abstract:** Technical Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVETs) accommodate students from different backgrounds. The diversified student populace encounters challenges that interfere with their integration process and persistence. TVET colleges need to establish a conducive environment that fosters student integration and persistence through student support systems. This qualitative case study comprised three focus groups (18 Students) and student support staff (11) at one TVET College in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. The obstacles to student integration and persistence are investigated in this case study. The study also explored the various strategies that can be implemented to improve student integration. It emerged from the study that it is necessary for the institution to establish student support services that seek to eliminate obstacles that inhibit student integration and persistence to ensure student success. It was further noted that the institution's student support system could not sufficiently address the factors that inhibit student integration and persistence. The paper's findings indicate that several strategies, such as improvement in infrastructure and recruiting more qualified staff, could improve student integration and persistence at the TVET College in question.

**Keywords:** Student persistence, student integration, student attrition, student success

## 1. Introduction

The huge increase in students enrolling in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector and the huge budgetary allocation underscore the South African Government's commitment and recognition of the sector as critical to curbing the skills shortage in the country. Mojapelo and Faku (2020) assert that the post-apartheid South African government introduced TVET Colleges to complement universities to provide much-needed practical skills for youth employment, economic growth, and university education. In explaining, Mirabel, Diale, and Sewagegn (2022) postulate that the TVET sector in South Africa was meant to eradicate the cycle of poverty through employment creation among young adults. The TVET sector curriculum provides practical programs that wide career options and continuous learning among the youths (Mirabel et al., 2020). The Student Support Services Annual Plan illustrates the huge number of students enrolled at TVET colleges in South Africa, which shows that in 2018, TVET Colleges constituted a third of students enrolled in tertiary institutions. (Department of Higher Education, 2020). Tertiary institutions are bequeathed with the fundamental role of equipping the youth with the relevant skills and aptitudes (Santos, Marques, Justino, & Mendes, 2020).

South Africa's TVET sector accommodates students from different backgrounds, and the students experience unique challenges that interfere with their integration process. Deluborn, Marongwe, and Buka (2020) acknowledge diversity among the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVETs) population by asserting that students

from different backgrounds choose TVET Colleges to acquire the much-needed skills for employment opportunities. It is imperative to acknowledge the diversity among the enrolled students. Diversity is a broad, continuously evolving concept with several meanings (Pineda & Mishra, 2022). In the context of this study, diversity refers to students' backgrounds, including their socioeconomic status, culture, their sexuality and disabilities. The diversity among students infer that they experience challenges that can affect their integration process and, ultimately, their persistence and success. The students enrolled at TVET Colleges include first-generation students, students with disabilities, and students from low-socio-economic backgrounds. First-generation students are normally the first to enrol for tertiary education in their immediate family (Patfield, Gore & Weaver, 2022). Gregory & Rogerson (2019) acknowledge that first-generation students constitute a large portion of students enrolled in colleges. First-generation students encounter numerous obstacles that interfere with their adaptation process and academic performance. First-generation students find it difficult in college (Ogunji, Nwajiuba & Uwakwe, 2020).

Some students' difficulties in integrating into the college system could be attributed to their social and economic backgrounds. Students' difficulties include a lack of preparedness for tertiary education and limited financial resources (Havlik et al., 2020). These challenges require establishing inclusive student support systems that facilitate student integration and persistence. Ives & Castillo-Montonya (2020) postulate that some students are vulnerable to academic and social challenges during the transition into post-school education because of their unfamiliarity with the colleges' norms and practices. Shikhulo and Lekhetho (2020) suggest that colleges establish student support units that eliminate student integration and persistence barriers. Successful student integration and persistence with their studies require TVET Colleges to embrace a holistic approach when providing student support services. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that establishing inclusive student support systems is central to student integration and success. Critical to establishing comprehensive student support systems is the need to set up monitoring and evaluation systems (Nsamba & Mokae, 2017). The institutions' primary purpose is to comprehend and channel the available resources towards student achievement. Santos et al. (2020) state that successful student integration guarantees persistence and academic success.

## 1.1 Student Integration and Persistence

Numerous factors determine the students' integration process and persistence in their enrolled courses. McCubbin (2003) describes student integration "as a process that involves aligning students' attitudes and values with the social aspect of the student's life." (p.11). Student interaction with peers, academic staff, and institutional goals are the most important determinants of student integration. Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (2020) opine that critical to students persisting with their studies is the students' efforts in integrating into the institution's system. Congruence should exist between the determinants of integration: academic integration, social integration, institutional commitment, and the student's goal commitment. It is acknowledged that student attrition is a process that culminates from a futile interaction between the individual student and the academic and social systems of an institution (Heublein, 2014; Tinto, 2014). The greater the student's integration into the college community, the more committed the student leading to successful completion of enrolled programs. Students who have positive experiences academically and socially persist with their studies (Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2019). Students must have a sense of belonging and be a part of the college community to complete their courses. According to Sabtu, Noor, and Isa (2016), a student's characteristics and the system found within the educational institution are crucial to students persisting with their studies.

Several challenges impede students from successfully integrating into the college environment and persisting with their studies. The students' difficulty in integrating into the institution's environment could be attributed to the students' background and socioeconomic status. Students from low-socio-economic and deprived of cultural capital have limited information regarding programs on offer, affecting students' academic integration (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015). Research conducted in several European countries supports that students from low-socio-economic status struggle to integrate into college settings (Corredor, Álvarez-Rivadulla, & Maldonado-Carreño, 2020). There is a positive relationship between the student's economic status and their level of self-efficacy. Students with low socioeconomic status tend to have low self-efficacy. The lack of financial resources and information on the institution's systems hinders students' integration. Low self-efficacy also prevents the students' integration and persistence with their enrolled courses. Falcon (2017) alludes that it is a huge task for students with low self-esteem to adapt to the college's environments. Students with high self-efficacy have the necessary attributes to adapt to their new environment and counter any challenges. Students with high self-efficacy have the right character to easily integrate and perform academically (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020).

Most students enrolled in TVET Colleges in South Africa are from previously disadvantaged communities and are ill-equipped for tertiary education (Mutereko, 2020; Badenhorst & Radile (2018) as first-generation students. First-generation students are students whose parents never obtained a degree (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). First-generation students enter the college environment underprepared with limited financial resources and inadequate information, hampering their integration process. Students deprived of cultural capital lack the necessary information about the institution's operations. Upah (2017) postulates that students who enjoy cultural capital have adequate resources and easily adapt to their new settings. Some students' lack of cultural capital inhibits them from successfully adapting to their new environments. Most first-generation students find it difficult to integrate into college (Pratt et al., 2019). It can be inferred from the above that there is a link between first-generation students and cultural capital. Most first-generation

students are deprived of cultural capital and are bereft of resources necessary for student integration and persistence. Mutereko (2020) further claims that the shortage of accommodation and limited funds coerce students to quit college prematurely. The publication, Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges Student Support Services Annual Plan (2020) acknowledges that most students enrolling in the college sector are from less privileged communities. Institutions should be well-acquainted with the systemic inequalities prevalent in tertiary institutions (Raaper & Brown, 2020). The lack of acknowledgement by institutions of socioeconomic inequalities within the student population could serve as a systematic barrier to student integration.

In acknowledging the existence of barriers, Stephens et al. (2015) assert that individual and structural factors also serve as obstacles to students' successful integration and academic success. Therefore, it is important to concede that the integration process could be hampered by the individual student's attributes and the factors found within the institution. TVET Colleges invest substantially in resources, but in some instances, enrolled students leave the institution before completing their courses (Magut & Kihara, 2019). This student dropout trend can be attributed to the institution's lack of adequate awareness of student integration factors.

It is important to accept that mental health issues are common among youth enrolled in tertiary institutions (Bernal-Morales et al., 2015). Mental health issues could harm the students' academic performance and adaptation to the college environment. The enrolled students also experience cognitive challenges. The cognitive challenges among students affect their integration process and, ultimately, their academic aspirations (Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2019). The progression of mental health issues among students could be attributed to limited access to psychosocial services and their low socioeconomic status, making some of them out of their reach.

Several strategies can be utilized by institutions to improve student integration and persistence. Therefore, it is imperative to admit that student support systems are critical in nurturing student integration, persistence, and success in TVET Colleges. Students stand a better chance of accessing tertiary education and excelling in their enrolled programs when the college environment supports them to achieve (Stephens et al., 2015). There are several initiatives that TVET colleges can use to improve student integration and persistence. Institutions should seek to eliminate obstacles that stem from socioeconomic disparities. Stephens et al. (2014) suggest that institutions should implement programs that include students from less privileged backgrounds. Social networks serve as a tool for promoting student integration (Raaper & Brown, 2020).

The student support networks instantaneously encourage students to be engaged in college activities. Institutions can use surveys to ascertain factors that promote student attrition. The survey findings could assist in enhancing the students' integration process (Magut & Kihara, 2019). Student support programs critical to student integration include induction, educational advising, academic resources, study skills, cultural activities, and social adjustment. Mental health issues among students affect the students' college experiences. The institution's resourcefulness in providing counselling to students experiencing mental health problems improves the student integration process. The institutions should mobilize resources and expertise to assist students experiencing mental health issues (Corredor et al., 2020). It is important for the college to establish inclusive student support systems that promote diversity. The emphasis should not be solely on academic support activities but on factors that promote student social integration (Pitt et al., 2012). The institution has a huge role in building social interaction and cohesion between the students, peers, staff, and the system. Colleges should invest in mobilizing cultural and psychological resources to assist students in adapting to the college environment (Corredor et al., 2020).

## 1.2 Theoretical Framing

Student development theories are relevant to comprehending student integration and persistence factors. This paper is guided by Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory (SIT) and Astin's Student Involvement Theory of 1984. Since its inception in 1975, The Student Integration Theory has been used as a model for student retention. The theory outlines the relationship between the student's persistence in college and the extent of their integration into the college's environment. In 2003, Tinto agreed that the institution's social and academic aspects are critical to the Student Integration Theory. Students should experience the same level of attention between academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975). By implication, there has to be a balance between the students' academic activities and their social adjustment.

Critical to Astin's (1994) Student Involvement Theory is that the extent of student involvement in the institution's activities positively correlates with student persistence. Hafer et al. (2021) assert that time invested by students in the institution's activities is an important factor for student engagement and persistence. The institution is responsible for providing an environment that stimulates student involvement in college activities. Through student support systems, the college should provide an environment that allows students to engage with the college community (DeMatthews, 2020). It can be inferred from Astin's Student Involvement Theory that students who participate in the college's activities students tend to persist with their studies and perform academically better. As cited by Hafer et al. (2021), Astin theorizes that student engagement is comparable to student commitment, which culminates in student persistence. It can be deduced that students' persistence can be attributed to the extent of their involvement in the institution's activities.

Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory are relevant to this paper as they underscore the important role of academic and non-academic support in students' integration and persistence. Commenting on Tinto's student integration theory, Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (2020:124) assert that "the equivalence

between the students' motivation and academic aptitude and institutions' academic and social attributes assist in nurturing the students to commit" (p. 124). The Student Integration Theory challenges colleges to establish structural systems that promote congruence between the students' academic and social integration (Schreiber, Luescher-mamashela, & Moja, 2014). That aligns with Astin's Student Involvement Theory, which advocates for inclusive student support systems that seek to eliminate barriers to student involvement and persistence. Institutions should establish environs that allow student involvement in different college activities (Astin, 1984). In order to create social cohesion and identify the obstacles that inhibit student integration, tertiary institutions could exploit Tinto's Student Integration Theory as a guide to student integration and Astin's Student Involvement Theory as the key to student persistence.

Tinto's Student Integration Theory suggests that student attrition is compounded by non-congruency between the student's expectations and institutional factors (Cabrera et al., 2020). Critical to student success is how students fit into the institutions' interaction systems (Tinto, 2014). Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory suggests that students develop a sense of belonging if they are involved in the institution's activities. Hafer et al. (2021) assert that students involved in college activities commit themselves and persist with their studies. The Student Integration Theory and Student Involvement Theory could guide institutions to develop policies that remove the systemic barriers that obstruct the students' integration process and persistence with their studies.

The study aimed to explore the role of student support systems on student integration and persistence at a TVET College. The following research questions guide this paper:

- i. What factors promote student integration and persistence in TVET Colleges in South Africa?
- ii. What are the barriers to student integration and persistence in TVET Colleges?
- iii. Which strategies can be used to enhance student integration and persistence?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Approach and Design**

This paper used the qualitative approach to explore the factors determining student integration and persistence. Using a qualitative approach expedites the acquisition of knowledge about an explicit phenomenon and development of new concepts on the topic under study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In this study, the researchers used the qualitative approach to acquire profound information on the factors that foster student integration and persistence at a TVET College in South Africa. The approach also investigated the barriers inhibiting students' successful integration into the college environment and their studies.

This paper further explored the various strategies that TVET Colleges could exploit to improve student integration, persistence, and success. A case study meticulously focuses on a subtle issue and instantaneously narrates an immense story of the topic under study (Nueman, 2014). This case study analysed the phenomena of student integration and student persistence within the context of a TVET College in this paper. Cohen et al. (2011) also point out that case study designs respect geographical boundaries.

The researchers used the interpretivist paradigm to engage and derive meaning from interactions with student support services staff and students on student integration and persistence. Methods used by the interpretivist are subtle to an explicit context and never generalized beyond the context of the study (du Ploy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

In line with this paper's purpose and research questions, Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory of 1993 and Astin's (1994) Student Involvement Theory guided this paper to explain the significant value of student integration to students persisting with their studies and ultimately success.

### **2.2 Setting**

This study on student integration was conducted at one TVET College in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa, with about 13 500 students. The total number of staff slightly exceeds 700, comprising administration staff, academic staff, and management. The main fields of study include Business Studies, Hospitality, Engineering and Farming.

### **2.3 Participants**

The purposive sampling selected student support services staff to participate in the study. When selecting participants using non-probability sampling, the units are purposively selected on the pretext that the selected units will be representative of the whole (Kothari, 2004). This study used convenience sampling to select 18 students divided into three focus groups. The students were selected from 3 campuses offering business studies courses. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) outline that convenience sampling involves selecting participants who are accessible and willing to partake in the study. The researchers enlisted the assistance of student support services staff to recruit students for focus groups. The student support services staff are responsible for administering student support services. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select individuals who are well informed about the subject under study, depending on their availability and willingness to participate (Cohen et al., 2011).

## 2.4 Data Collection

This paper used semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions as data collection techniques. Interviews are an effective method of soliciting and noting the individual's experiences, using their own words immersed in their opinions, values and attitudes, perceptions about the world, and lived experiences (Saldaña, 2011). The students who partook in the study were divided into three focus groups consisting of six students each. Focus group sessions allow participants to present their opinions and engage on the topic under discussion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The focus group sessions allowed the participants to deliberate on factors determining student integration and persistence at various campuses. The individual semi-structured interviews allowed the acquisition of thick descriptions of student integration and persistence determinants. It is the researcher's responsibility to contact the participants prior to the interview (Saldaña, 2011). The interview venues were negotiated with the participants, and the details of the interview sessions were communicated before the interviews. The researchers obtained permission from the College's Principal to conduct interviews with the students and student support services staff. The COVID-19 health protocols were observed through the college interviews' temperature checks, masks, WhatsApp tracking tools and hand sanitisers. The venues were sanitized before the interviews, and social distancing was observed. The individual interviews and focus group sessions were conducted at the participants' respective campuses.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was used for this paper. The focus group sessions and individual semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed later. It is important to acknowledge that interviewers who use audio recordings become well-acquainted with the information captured (Seidman, 2006). The excerpts from the transcriptions allowed researchers to identify the codes, categories, and themes with less difficulty. The paper's research questions, and relevant literature guided the researchers to formulate the themes for data analysis. During the analysis process, identified themes are linked to literature and the theoretical framework, described by the researcher, and interpreted within the specific study context (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The excerpts were read several times to align the participants' responses to the themes derived from the research questions and relevant literature.

## 3.0 Findings

The findings of this study on student integration and persistence are presented under various themes that emerged from the research questions, relevant literature and the participants' thick descriptions. The main themes that emerged from the study are either aligned to the institution (systemic) or individualistic (student background).

### 3.1 Factors That Promote Student Integration and Persistence

Several factors determine a student's integration into the college environment. Several themes and sub-themes on factors that promote student integration and persistence emerged from the study's findings. The main themes that emerged include institutional support and individual factors. Academic support and non-academic support emerged as some of the most important sub-themes that foster student integration and students' persistence with their studies. It is important to acknowledge that the institution plays a vital role in promoting student integration and the student's successful completion of their courses.

The participants' responses indicate that institutions are responsible for advising students on career choices. Some participants suggest that the timeous dissemination of information about career choices facilitates students to adapt to their new environment and to persist with their studies. The students who participated in the focus group sessions and student support staff consented that the dissemination of information to students lies with the institution. Most participants' responses suggest that career advising on preferred courses, induction and continuous academic support are some of the key factors for student integration and persistence. The institutional support through the dissemination of information commences from career advising during the induction process, and it is a continuous process. The following excerpt from one of the student support staff members supports the significant role of career advising in student integration and persistence:

*I would also like to believe that career advising is part of academic support because we need to ensure that we give students appropriate advice. This career advising process helps the students make informed choices about their intended courses. Furthermore, it does not end there; it should continue during their college studies because career guidance is continuous.*

The sub-theme induction is an equally important factor in student integration. The following response emerged from one of the focus group sessions when asked about the important role of the induction process.

*During induction, they give us information about the college. Staff is introduced, staff in admin and some lecturers. We get to receive the code of conduct, and they try to explain it.*

The crucial role of the induction process cannot be overlooked. However, some students questioned the institutional commitment when they questioned the purpose of the induction process. The response below presented at one of the focus group interviews illustrates dissatisfaction with the student induction process:

*"We do not get much information on where to go when we need help. The staff share information about themselves, names, departments and after that, they are done."*

Academic support emerged as one of the key sub-themes of institutional support that facilitate student integration. Some participants presented student persistence as an important factor in completing their studies. The participants reported providing a supportive climate as crucial to student persistence. Most of the student support staff were of the view that students persist in their studies if they are supported adequately by institutions. Most of the participants opined that access to libraries and peer-tutoring were critical for student integration and persistence. The students' responses suggested that students lacked the necessary resources for academic purposes. Students and staff participants identified peer tutoring and extra classes as the college's main forms of academic support. The quote below from one of the student support staff indicates the significant role of peer-tutoring as academic support.

*Our students come from different backgrounds, including rural, township, informal settlement, and urban schools. Their performance is not the same. So there are those students who need extra support, including academic support. So we offer peer tutoring to help those students who are not doing well academically. Moreover, we monitor their progress and intervene until they write their exams.*

The significant role of peer tutoring as a form of academic support also emerged from one of the focus group sessions. The following quote supports this:

*Peer tutoring is a strategy. Some students are slow and often find it difficult to keep up with their peers. Peer tutors are easy to work with as they are so easy to ask when confused about something.*

The participants also highlighted that adequate resources such as libraries and access to the internet are critical to students' persistence with their studies. The following quotation from one of the staff members supports this view:

*We also look at providing resources like libraries. Students should have adequate access to the internet and books to read because we know a reading nation is a winning nation. So we need to ensure that we provide that kind of support that is part of academic support. This support should help them to excel in their studies.*

The responses from the focus group sessions highlight the need for the college to provide resource centres with adequate resources such as textbooks and internet connectivity:

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

The students' factors strongly affect students adapting to the college environment. The participants' responses suggest that students' preparedness for post-school education is factored in the students' integration process. The participants indicated that the students' preparedness for post-secondary education determines the students' integration process. The non-academic category of student support includes participation in extra-mural activities. Some responses from focus group sessions suggest including some students' categories, such as students with disabilities and students who belong to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) community in college activities. The crucial role of one of the aspects of non-academic support is supported by the following quote from one of the student support staff:

*We offer a variety of activities that include sports, debate, poetry, and cultural activities. We try to encourage these students to be a part of it. These activities assist them in building their confidence and being part of the college community.*

The following response that emerged from one of the focus group sessions indicates the exclusion of some students who belong to special populations:

*The campus does not accommodate everyone when it comes to college events. We have beauty contests that exclude gays and lesbians, which must be corrected.*

The response above from the participants points to some of the extra-mural activities offered at the college and the crucial role they play in building confidence, which can ultimately lead to student persistence, integration, and success. It should be noted from some of the participants' responses that extra-mural activities create a sense of belonging among students and at the same time improve their confidence which is equally important for student integration and persistence.

### 3.2 Barriers to Student Integration and Persistence

Numerous obstacles interfere with students' integration and persistence. The findings identified numerous themes of obstacles to student integration and persistence. Systemic barriers and individual factors emerged as the main themes. The systemic barriers are directly aligned to the institution, whereas individualistic barriers are linked to the student's background. Sub-themes to institutional barriers include the lack of institutional commitment to adequately provide the support necessary for student integration and the lack of qualified staff. The lack of awareness of student support available restricted students from utilizing the available student support services. Both student and student support staff believed there was a lack of commitment from the college to improve student support services. The factors aligned to individualistic barriers that were part of the findings include fear of stigmatization and stereotyping, the non-existence of college accommodation, and limited financial resources as some of the obstacles to student integration and persistence. They further reported that the lack of knowledge on the availability of student support services undermines the student integration process. There was consensus among students that students support services were not easily accessible. The lack of support from the institution and limited advocacy is summed up by the excerpt below from one of the students supports staff:

*Furthermore, again the support at the college level should not be questionable as we need people who understand student support. Moreover, when we go to the campus level, they should tell us what student support is.*

Students' restricted access to student support services emerged as a huge concern. The following quotation emerged at one of the focus group sessions.

*We only approach their offices (student support) during college hours. After hours and during weekends, the offices are closed. However, most of us are so far away from home. So we are always stranded.*

The student support services staff were concerned about the huge workload and serving multiple roles. The huge workload was attributed to the shortage of qualified staff to undertake various portfolios within the student support services structure. The following response from a staff member illustrates the lack of qualified staff within the student support structure:

*We are still operating under a skeleton structure, which means that we do not meet all the expected outcomes as student support staff. I am the only Development Practitioner on this campus, and I work with interns, which makes it difficult for me.*

The students and staff participants also identified fear of stigmatization and stereotyping as deterrents to some students seeking mental health support. The student support staff's perceptions of students' mental health are replicated by the verbatim quote below:

*Mental health is very important we have had many challenges with this phenomenon with students. One of the main challenges is that students are unconscious of mental health issues, and some are afraid to seek help.*

At one of the focus group sessions, some students were reluctant to seek assistance on mental health issues. The unwillingness to seek help was attributed to fear of stigmatization and stereotyping. The quote below supports this view:

*As students, we are unsure when and how to go to counsellors when we have a problem (psychological). We are just not comfortable talking to strangers about our lives.*

The student support staff reported that lack of support from the academic staff undermines the effort to assist students. The following response sums up the non-collaboration from the academic staff:

*However, lack of support from lecturers when dealing with student issues remains a major problem. The lecturers feel their job is teaching only. They do not seem to comprehend or attention about their learners' issues.*

There was consensus among students and staff participants that limited financial resources hindered the students' integration process. The participants also bemoaned the non-provision of college accommodation as an obstacle to student integration and persistence. The introduction section of this paper revealed that most of the students enrolled at TVET

Colleges are funded through the government bursary NSFAS. The repercussions on the student of deferred bursary disbursements are supported by the following excerpt from a student support staff member:

*Our role as a college is limited to assisting students with the bursary application. The main problem is that there are always issues regarding students receiving their money. There are always delays. The students cannot fund themselves, and they cannot afford it. Some of them leave college because of these delays from NSFAS.*

The challenges attributed to limited financial resources and delayed disbursements of NSFAS funds are echoed by the following response from one of the focus group sessions:

*We enrolled because of the bursary. We cannot afford to pay our fees. Things get worse when NSFAS fails to pay the money. It means no money for rent, and we end up being chased out by the landlords resulting in some students dropping out of college.*

The quotation above indicates that students rely on NSFAS funding for tuition fees, accommodation, and daily expenses. The participants further acknowledge that some student dropouts were attributed to delayed disbursements by the NSFAS.

### **3.3 Strategies to Improve Student Integration and Persistence**

The study's findings suggest numerous strategies the institution can implement to enhance student integration and persistence. As the participants suggested in their responses, colleges can implement several strategies to improve student integration and persistence. Institutional commitment emerged as the main theme of strategies to improve student integration and persistence. The findings suggest that it is the institution's responsibility to create advocacy among students and staff on the critical role of student support in student adaptation to the college environment. There was consensus among students and staff participants for colleges to improve campus student support structures. The participants' responses suggest that student integration and persistence could be improved through advocacy among students and staff on the crucial role of student support structures, employment of qualified personnel, establishing collaborations between the institution and other important stakeholders, and the provision of student college accommodation. Some participants reported that student support is crucial to improving student integration and persistence.

*Firstly, if our colleges understand and prioritize student support, they will appreciate how much work we are involved in as student support. Some sections of the college community are unaware of the crucial role student support contributes to student integration into the system for them to persist and succeed at the end of their studies.*

The quotation from one of the student supports staff members above indicates that the creation of awareness on the role of student support services staff was identified by student support staff as crucial to improving student integration and persistence. The following quote augments the importance of advocacy in facilitating cooperation between the student support and other internal stakeholders:

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

The lack of infrastructure and resources necessary for student integration inhibits students from successfully integrating into the college experience. The participants perceive that the college cannot adequately establish student support structures without the involvement of other key stakeholders. The student support staff revealed a need to improve and capacitate support systems. Most participants believed that the institution should invest in capital expenditure on resource centres and facilities that are important for student integration and persistence. They further reported that the college should hire well-knowledgeable professionals with student issues. The participants were concerned about the limited resources available and recommended more capital expenditure on resource centres and other student use facilities. There were further suggestions from the participants from the college to establish networks with other important partners. The following quote suggests the benefits that can be derived from partnerships in improving student support services:

*Consultations and collaborations with stakeholders such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and TVET Colleges can help to standardize and improve student support portfolios at the college.*

The lack of college accommodation makes it difficult for some students to adapt to the college environment. It should be acknowledged that college accommodation is a key factor that fosters student integration. College accommodation serves as a student residence and an area of study necessary for student integration and persistence. There was consensus

among the students and staff participants that the non-provision of accommodation was a huge concern and interfered with the students' integration and persistence. The participants advocated for constructing college residences to accommodate students in need. The following excerpt from one of the staff members illustrates the immediate need for TVET Colleges to provide student accommodation:

*There is an urgent need for the college to provide accommodation to students. The current setup exposes them to unsafe conditions. This issue of accommodation has been long overdue.*

### 3.4 Factors That Promote Student Integration and Student Persistence

This paper's findings revealed several factors crucial to students' successful integration into the college community. Individual and systemic factors linked to the institution determine the extent of student integration into the college environment. The individual factors include preparedness for tertiary education, which is also determined by the individual students' socioeconomic background. The findings suggest that students with low socioeconomic status and first-generation students find it difficult to successfully integrate and persist with their studies. Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Astins' (1984) Student Involvement Theory suggests that students integrate and persist if they identify with the institution. It is the institution's responsibility through student support systems to establish systems that focus on inclusive support for all student categories.

The factors emanating from the institution include bureaucratic procedures in place and student support systems for the diversified enrolled student cohort. Consenting to the significant role of the institutions on student integration, Tinto (2014) suggests that students tend to integrate without difficulty if they derive enough support from the college structures. It is important to acknowledge that students enrolled at most government-funded public TVET Colleges in South Africa come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This category of students from less privileged backgrounds enter college under-prepared and struggle to fit in. Students with cultural capital will likely integrate into the college environment with minimum hitches. It can be inferred from the findings that students of low socioeconomic status and first-generation students' lack of preparedness for tertiary education could be attributed to a lack of information on how the college system operates. The lack of preparedness could all be attributed to the students' lack of cultural capital. 'Cultural capital as a verbal capacity, is being aware of the institution's culture, aesthetic preference, having adequate information about the institutions' system and educational qualifications on offer' Bourdieu (1973:3). Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that students deprived of cultural capital find it difficult to comprehend how the college system works. Pratt et al. (2019) argue that most students short of cultural capital feel disengaged from the college environs and find it difficult to adjust to the new settings. It emerged from the study that most students enrolled at TVET Colleges are deprived of cultural capital and encounter numerous obstacles that make it difficult for students to integrate and complete their courses. The institution is critical in fostering student integration through inclusive student support systems. An equilibrium between academic and social aspects of the students' lives should exist to ensure that students successfully integrate into the TVET college environment. Tinto's Student Integration Theory (STI) advocates for an environment that balances the students' academic and social dimensions as crucial to student integration and persistence.

Students' persistence with their studies hinges on several factors. The degree of students' persistence is augmented if the students' career goals and expectations align with the curriculum. Students' persistence with their studies does not solely lie with the institution but also hinges on their efforts and commitment to their studies (Cabrera et al., 2020). It is necessary to assume that the students' commitment and motivation are also crucial for completing their courses. The students' alignment with the curriculum is determined by their informed decision to enrol on their preferred program after adequate career guidance. The findings show that students' commitment requires institutional support by providing academic and non-academic support resources such as student counselling. The college is bequeathed with responsible, ensuring that students have access to adequate student support and that all students have equivalent opportunities to participate in the college's activities. That is consistent with Astin's Student Involvement Theory which postulates that a student's commitment is determined by the extent of student involvement in the college's activities. Therefore, the institution is responsible for establishing an environment that allows students to engage in the institution's activities.

The existence of disparities between the student's expectations and the curriculum would lead to student attrition. Student attrition can be averted if students make informed choices about their careers through career advising and get adequate information on the college system during the induction process. Heublein (2014) argue that other than factors attributed to the student struggling with the curriculum, the unsuccessful interaction between the student and the institution. Tinto's Student Integration Theory (STI) prescribes that students' academic and social factors are critical to student integration and persistence. In support of integration factors, Motsabi, Diale and van Zyl (2020) suggest that institutions introduce academic and social programs that inspire students to engage. It is, therefore, imperative to accept that the curriculum and the students' social aspects of life at college are crucial to students' persistence. This paper revealed that the availability of resources for academic support is crucial to students' continuing studies. Students with fulfilling experiences academically and socially persist with their studies (Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2019). The institution could use several interventions to reduce the rate of student attrition. The interventions require a systematic approach to establish indicators contributing to student attrition.

### 3.5 Barriers to Student Integration

This paper revealed several obstacles preventing students from successfully integrating into college. The barriers to student integration can be categorized into personal and systemic barriers. In consenting to student integration and persistence obstacles, Stephens et al. (2015) identify individual and structural factors as the main categories of obstacles to student integration. The barriers include lack of college residence, students' lack of information on student support, the lack of resources, the lack of qualified staff, and limited financial resources. The findings suggest that most enrolled students are from low socioeconomic status and survive through NSFAS, a bursary government. The limited financial results interfere with the students' integration process. It also emerged from the study that most students find it difficult to integrate because of their lack of preparedness for college education. This finding is consistent with Mutereko (2020), who claims that the TVET sector enrolls many underprepared students for post-secondary education. The lack of information on available student support may be attributed to gaps and inconsistencies within the induction process.

It is crucial to concede that students' mental health is equally important for student integration. Mental health issues interfere with the student's academic aspirations and adaptation to the institution's environs (Van der Bijl & Lawrence (2019). The progression of mental health issues among students could be attributed to limited access to psychosocial services and the students' low socioeconomic status. Stigmatization and stereotyping deter students with mental health issues from seeking psychological help, impacting integration and persistence processes. Cage, Ryan, Hughes and Spanner (2021) agree that self-stigma is one of the most common inhibitors to individuals searching for help on mental health issues.

The systemic barriers also inhibit student integration. The study found institutional barriers include the lack of advocacy for student support services. This paper further revealed that TVET College views student support services as an important unit for student integration and persistence. This perception is reinforced by the lack of awareness of some of the services provided by the student support structure. This finding contradicts Tinto's Student Integration Theory, which advocates for equal prioritization of students' academic and social needs. The trivialization of non-academic support such as health and wellness and extra-curricular activities interferes with student integration and completing courses. The findings acknowledge the mental health issues among students, but some were deterred from seeking assistance. The students' reluctance to seek help was attributed to fear of stigmatization and stereotyping. It is, therefore, the institution's responsibility to enact an environment that encourages students to seek assistance. The lack of qualified staff and limited working hours for student support staff deprived students of adequate access and was reported by most participants as an obstacle to student integration and persistence. This finding is consistent with Tinto's Student Integration Theory, which advocates for adequate resources necessary for student integration and persistence.

### 3.6 Strategies to Improve Student Integration and Persistence

Student integration and persistence require commitment in the TVET Colleges. The institution must prioritize and establish student support systems that address the needs of the diversified students enrolled, including students belonging to special populations such as the LGBTI. Institutions must focus on eliminating systemic barriers that discriminate against certain students based on inequality (Raaper & Brown, 2020). The improvement in infrastructure for academic and non-academic support activities mitigates the challenges students experience at college. Priestley, Broglia, Hughes, and Spanner (2021) argue that most students' restricted access to student support is attributed to institutional barriers. There is a need for the institution to recruit qualified staff who have the necessary expertise in student support to improve student integration and persistence

Academic and non-academic support are both critical factors for student integration and persistence. That requires the institution to improve the existing infrastructure for academic and non-academic purposes. Colleges should also incorporate social factors that promote student integration (Pitt et al., 2012). The extra-curricular programs should be inclusive of all student categories. The college, through student support, should ensure that equilibrium exists between academic and non-academic support. Congruence should exist between the academic and non-academic factors that foster student integration (Schreiber et al., 2014). Successful student integration entrenches students' self-belief as they identify with the college community. It emerged from the findings of this paper that mental health issues among students interfered with the students' integration and persistence, but students were deterred to sought help. The institution must create an environment through student support structures focused on eliminating factors that lead to stigmatization and stereotyping. Tinto (2014); suggests induction programs, student support programs, and student involvement as crucial to student integration and persistence with their studies. There is a need for the institution to provide student accommodation as this is an important factor that promotes student integration and persistence. Systems should be implemented to ensure students' funding is disbursed timely. Most students come from poor communities and rely on government funding for fees and other expenses.

These factors cement the students' commitment to their studies and, ultimately, their persistence. Academically and socially college environment should be conducive for both privileged and under-privileged students. There is a need for the institution to commit to improving student support services. The institution and collaborations should prioritize advocacy on the significant role of student support systems with other important stakeholders who are key to student integration and persistence.

## 4.0 Conclusions

The study sought to explore the critical role student support system on student integration and persistence at a TVET College. This paper was guided by the Student Integration Theory of 1993 by Tinto and Astin's Student Involvement Theory. The findings of this paper suggest that numerous factors promote student integration and persistence with their studies. It is the institution's responsibility the establishment of adequate student support structure that focuses on the students' academic and social aspects. Crucial factors necessary for student integration and persistence include Several obstacles that inhibit students from successfully integrating into the college environment and persisting with their studies. The factors that promote student integration include establishing inclusive student support structures that focus on the needs of all student categories, including students from low socioeconomic status, first-generation students, and students with disabilities, and the LGBTI community.

The provision of college accommodation, adequate financial institutions, and information on how the system works through career advising and induction serve as factors that promote student integration. Mental health issues are prevalent among students and providing student counselling could foster student integration. The study identified the barriers, including the college's trivialization of student support services, the lack of infrastructure for academic and non-academic purposes, the lack of student accommodation, and the lack of qualified staff. Disparities attributed to socioeconomic status and cultural capital also emerged as barriers to student integration and persistence. All these have implications for students' integration, persistence, and academic success. The paper's findings have implications for TVET institutions, the DHET, student support service staff, and other stakeholders, considering several strategies to improve student integration and persistence at TVET Colleges. Through the student support systems, the need for the institution to create an environment that adequately addresses the students' academic and social aspects emerged as critical factors in this paper.

The other important factors suggested for improving student integration and persistence is establishing systems that allow students to access information on forms of student support available and prioritizing student support for student success. The findings of the study indicate that networks and partnerships improved infrastructure and resources and creating advocacy on student support systems can improve student support systems. The study's main limitation is that it focussed on staff perceptions of the role of student support systems on student integration and persistence. The limited literature on student integration in the TVET institutions suggests the need for scholars to conduct further studies in this sector. Further studies on the role of student support systems also consider integrating the qualitative approach with other approaches such as questionnaires and document reviews to derive more information on students' perception of student integration.

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