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Effectiveness of Student Psychological Support Services at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training College in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In this case study research, the effectiveness of psychological support services rendered to students at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college in South Africa is explored. Using the systems theory of psychology, the article postulates that students at TVET colleges encounter a myriad of psychological challenges, which can adversely affect their academic success. From an interpretivist paradigmatic standpoint, a sample of 30 students was purposively selected to participate in focus group interviews. It was found out that psychological support services improved students' academic performances, attendance, retention, and also enhanced college certification rate. It is recommended that institution need to establish linkages with key stakeholders such as the Departments of Higher Education and Training and Health, psychological professional bodies, and other TVET colleges in order to create a platform for sharing vital information on psychological support to students.

KEYWORDS

College; Psychological Support Services; South Africa; Student; Technical and Vocational Education and Training

Introduction

The government has turned to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in its quest to address the skills deficit in South Africa. There are 50 registered and accredited public TVETs in South Africa with an enrollment of more than 700,000 students (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2016). As part of government's drive to stimulate desirable learning experiences and as such enhancing success rate in the academic pursuits of students in TVET colleges, legislation has been passed to promote the provision of psychological support services in such colleges. According to the Student Support Services (SSS) Framework (Department of Education [DoE], 2009, p. 4):

Learner counselling and support services should be established to assist new students make significant options about their career and to ensure that previously disadvantaged students are granted the opportunity to fulfil their academic dreams.

At this juncture, it is important to concede that professional psychological support services are available to students at most TVET colleges in the country with a focus on both academic and broader psychological needs of the students. Psychological support focuses on improving study skills and alleviating problems that interfere with students' performance. According to Miller, Smith, and Nicholls (2011), psychological support services encompass the application of mental health and psychological techniques that address the students' emotional stability and their personal growth to

ensure they yield positive academic results. The non-academic support forms an integral part of institutions of which psychological support services are one of its key performance areas. As students enter tertiary education, they are entering a foreign environment, and as a result, they encounter many challenges as they try to settle in. This calls for interventions to be put in place to assist the learners during the integration process. Bridges (2008) asserted that institutions enroll large numbers of unprepared students who require psychological support services to assist in the process of integration into the college setting. Psychological support services are meant to facilitate student transition into institutions and to enhance student retention.

It is imperative that TVET colleges have a common standing on legislation and policies on how to establish and run the SSS structure. The SSS Framework provide guidelines to support students in achieving academic success (Department of Education [DoE], 2009). The Student Support Services Framework outlined that there are several barriers to the provision of SSS in TVET colleges. Policies and procedures are developed within colleges but there is little coordination within the TVET sector. There is lack of human and physical resources to support the provision of SSS. In order to fulfill the government initiative, the learning environment should be conducive to diversified students. If properly implemented, psychological support services will assist in improving student retention. Coates (2014) confirmed this by indicating that most students from low-income backgrounds indicated psychosocial problems as the main reason for dropping out. Psychological support is an essential part of the SSS structure and contributes in assisting the students to settle in the new environment through provision of counseling services which should cater for all students with their different backgrounds.

The question then arises as to the suitability of psychological support services rendered in TVET colleges in South Africa in addressing diversity, personal psychological needs of students. The researchers are of the view that SSS should incorporate all the important aspects of students' socio-psychological well-being that will assist students to integrate into the learning environment with minimum obstacles.

Objectives of the study

It has been argued that the academic success of students rest on many factors of which psychological support services play an important role. Therefore, the academic support services rendered to students must be such that it alleviates students from the many socio-psychological strains that might impede their academic progress. Given this premise, this study sought to examine the effectiveness of psychological support services rendered to students at the TVET college in South Africa. While this is the overarching theme throughout this article, the study also sought to achieve the following specific objectives:

- (1) To identify the nature of psychological support services rendered to the students in the college;
- (2) To identify factors compelling students to seek psychological support services;
- (3) To analyze the effectiveness of psychological support services rendered to the students; and
- (4) To solicit the views of the students on ways of enhancing the psychological support services.

Theoretical framing

This study is underpinned by the systems theory of psychology. The theory was propounded by von Bertalanffy in 1937 and further developed by a group of scholars such as Boulding, Rapoport, and Gerard in 1954 at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto (Krippner & Laszlo, 1998). Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen (2008) described the systems theory as being comprised of smaller elements which are also referred to as subsystems and which are the components that make

up the larger supra-system. The above notion clearly indicates that individuals are part of a subsystem of the larger family system and that systems form a hierarchy of related systems.

In alluding to the preceding assertions on systems theory, Arthur and McMahon (2005) described the systems theory framework as an approach that has significant influence on individuals' career development and includes the individual, social, and the societal context. Systemic psychology has allowed for further development of the study of interpersonal features of human behavior and provides an interpretation of these processes with the intra-psychic dynamics and the personal history of individuals. Keys and Lockhart (1999) are of the notion that the systems theory expands our comprehension of the individual's psychological development to a view that positions the individual within the context of relationships and interactions with other people. According to Arthur and McMahon (2005), the system is greater than the sum of its parts. The client-seeking behavior modifications are regarded as agents of their own transformation. The systems theory challenges counselors to expand their role and levels of interaction in multicultural counseling. This view is shared by Nicoll (1993) who noted that clients' concerns are conceptualized from their own cultural perspective and when there is congruence with the organizational perspectives in which they thrive, contentedness, and positive adjustments occur. A system constitutes established roles, relationships, and patterns of behavior that the system may wish to maintain. The interconnectedness suggests that change in one part of the system results in change in other parts of the same system (Keys & Lockhart, 1999). The assumption is that an effective system underscores the role of each component. Stichweh (2011, p. 1) described the relationship within as constituting,

...interdependency of the parts of the system, the reference of any structure and process in a system to the environments of the system, equilibrium and adaptedness, and continuous re-adaptations to environmental demands as core elements of understanding the system and self-organisation of as system as the principal way it responds to external intervention.

Stichweh's view is relevant to the provision of psychological support services. Students are part of a large system that constitute policies enacted by the government, which college management, staff, parents, financial institutions and regulatory bodies, and fellow students must then follow. The systems theory embraces the role of all these stakeholders in the provision of psychological support services and other learning activities. There must be congruence between the stakeholders and structures that are in existence if the psychological needs of the students are to be met. Adjustments are bound to take place in order to accommodate any change in any issues affecting how the institutions are run. However, these should not be at the expense of the students' needs.

Stichweh (2011) maintained that there are four possible formations of systems. The formations are identified as adaptive systems, goal attainment, integration of systems elements, and maintenance of long-term patterns. The most important fact to note is that the system should adapt to any environmental changes. The system should aim at attaining specific goals by integrating the parts of the system and sustaining pressure from the environment.

The provision of psychological support services should not be rigid, but rather adapt to the dynamic changes in the field attributed to policy changes and changes in students' psychological needs. These changes could be a result of economic, political, and social transformations that impact student's successful integration into tertiary institutions. Systems theory does not alienate but focuses on synergy.

Important relationships exist between the system and the environment. Krippner and Laszlo (1998, p. 11) defined the term environment as "the set of all objects a change in whose attributes affects the system as well as those objects whose attributes are changed by the behaviour of the systems." The above statement signifies the role of the environment on the provision of psychological support services. The institution's structures should be aware of its key environs and effect relevant changes when the need arises. It is essential that individuals responsible continually scan the environment to avoid lagging behind changes in student counseling.

Literature review

Public institutions of higher learning are government-funded and they enroll the majority of students. There are still major concerns with students' achievements because of the challenges they encounter in the learning environment. Brock (2010) shares a similar view when he stated that access to higher education by individuals has increased significantly over the last few years but students' achievement is still a concern. Brock further maintains that government-funded institutions accommodate the majority of the students. It can be argued that the diversified student populace enrolled in public institutions is faced with varying challenges which require concerted efforts from the various key stakeholders to intervene in enacting a comprehensive SSS. This is supported by Young (2009) who bemoaned the challenges faced by students in tertiary institutions in their pursuit of academic success and further emphasized the need for the government and other key stakeholders to establish comprehensive SSS, which should cater for psychological and emotional needs of the students. Tamuliene (2014) described student support as a system that is made available by institutions of higher learning, which caters for the students' academic and emotional needs, and it is regarded as a requirement for enhancing the students' academic success. The National Education Act of 1996 (Government Gazette 34620, September 19, 2011) outlined the significance of the SSS as a tool that should fully contribute to students' development in specific areas that encourage individual growth, moral, social, political, and economic development based on principles of democracy, human rights, and resolution of disputes in a peaceful manner. It is essential for government institutions, TVET colleges included, to establish comprehensive support services that constitute academic and non-academic support services.

The SSS should cover the whole spectrum of student needs as this is regarded as a precondition for student achievement. The focus should not be confined to the academic part only but should include non-academic issues such as the learner's psychological well-being. Tamuliene (2014) identified two categories: academic support and non-academic support. The academic support function is aimed at fulfilling the student's emotional and social needs that are directly linked to the learning process. Non-academic support provides support for the student's emotional and social needs, and these are not directly linked to their learning process but have a strong bearing on how they perform academically.

It is imperative that a balance should exist and be maintained when enacting and implementing SSS. The services should encompass all the important components that promote student success. Failure to provide comprehensive support services impacts adversely on the students' quest to fulfill their academic dreams. SSS should be provided from the day students enroll until they leave college.

Institutions are faced with quite a number of challenges in their attempt to establish comprehensive SSS. It is imperative that the crafting of such a crucial student support system be guided by existing legislation and policies. The White Paper as stated in the SSS Framework (DoE, 2009) advocated for a new comprehensive SSS framework that focuses on learner counseling provides better advice on career options and ensures that previously disadvantaged groups are catered for to fulfill their academic dreams.

Challenges faced by students in institutions of higher learning

Challenges experienced by students during their tenure at learning institutions vary. The problems may be academic, social, or psychological and may have a negative impact on the student's academic performance. Young (2009) conducted research that indicated that mental health issues are common among students attending institutions of higher learning. This is supported by large numbers of students who approach institutions' psychological support services, seeking assistance regarding their social and personal issues. These mental health problems include depression, suicidal ideation, as well as posttrauma stress from sexual assault. Julal (2013) also affirmed that individuals studying in

institutions of higher learning are more likely to experience a number of significant stressors. The stressors have a strong bearing on the student's academic performance, students' decisions to remain at the institution, and their psychological well-being.

The diversified student population makes it difficult for some groups to fully integrate in the learning setup. These challenges require different psychological programmes that are tailor-made to solve individual students' needs. Stebleton and Soria (2013) suggested that students with low self-efficacy are likely to perform poorly and such individuals tend not to seek psychological help. Self-efficacy also determines whether a student will integrate well enough at an institution of higher learning. Russo-Glercher (2013, p. 6) tabled statistics that show there is a high increase in the number of students reporting psychological challenges. The main problems reported were anxiety and depression. His study also indicated that mental health issues were coercing students to withdraw from college. Student diversity should be considered when enacting SSS if these services are to be utilized effectively by the students. The individual student's capacity to adapt and manage changes in culture and the environment and his/her social engagements has a strong bearing on how he/she performs academically.

Challenges in administering psychological support services

Institutions of higher learning particularly TVET colleges are faced with quite a number of challenges in their drive to render psychological support services. The challenges may emanate from the legislation and policies in place, institutional structure, and the role of key stakeholders. These obstacles to the provision of psychological support services are backed by Roberts, Boldy, and Dunworth (2015) who conducted research in Australia on the appropriateness of the psychological support services available. The researchers posit that students could be made more functional by provision of a more student-centered service structure and delivery. Psychological support services offered by institutions should accommodate the entire student cohort enrolled. Research conducted by Darmody and Fleming (2009) showed that part-time students received inadequate support services which emanates from such important services being offered during normal college hours. Young (2009) purported that some African students view seeking psychological help as a western practice that does not exist in their African culture. This calls for drastic transformation of counseling services by contextualizing it to the students' culture. As indicated in the research, South Africa students attending public institutions are in dire need of psychological support services.

Psychological counseling theories used in institutions should revolve around the students' background and context. The students' context has to determine the psychological programmes to be used. McMahon and Watson (2010, p. 450) point out that "South Africa has been against the continued over-reliance on the adoption of counselling models from abroad that do not suit the local context."

The practitioners responsible for administering psychological support services should have the necessary knowledge and expertise. Institutions should take cognizance of the important role of psychological support staff. Their job description will assist in determining the core focus areas. Burkard, Gillem, and Martinez (2012) further indicated that psychological support services staff spent more time on non-psychological issues and were deprived of an academic calendar with important dates for providing psychological support.

There are obstacles that coerce students to refrain from utilizing psychological support services. There is no uniformity on the use of psychological support services by students. Ibrahimovic and Potter (2013) asserted that there is a clear boundary with regard to academic achievement between low-income students and those from higher income families. Students from low-income families may not explore the full range of psychological support services available basing their judgments on false assumptions about their competence and their fear of outcomes on decisions. Maree and Maree (2010) conducted research that indicates that a lack of vision and a unified career counseling strategy

are inherent in institutions. In the context of South Africa, it can be argued that career patterns favor previously privileged groups at the expense of the majority. This further highlights inadequate coordination, lack of information, and the need for strategic policy leadership in this field. Avery, Howell, and Page (2014, p. 1) noted,

the paradox that students from economically high status backgrounds have the least need for psychological support services and yet they enjoy the most access to psychology practitioners and at the same time they also supplement the institution's resources by engaging private practice.

They further bemoan the restricted availability and accessibility of college psychological support services, more especially to those from low-economic status which sums up the inadequacy of psychological support services.

Lack of qualified personnel is one of the obstacles that interferes with the provision of psychological support services to students. The document, SSS Framework (DoE, 2009) points out that most SSS in TVET colleges suffer from inadequate capital and human resources for the provision of SSS, including psychological support services. Workload is one of the challenges that affects provision of psychosocial support to students. This is supported by Brock (2010) who asserted that there is major concern in public institutions on the counselor–student ratio. The ratio is unfavorable with the practitioner having to attend to a large number of students which compromises the quality of services being offered.

Psychological support services should be easily accessible to students and the institutions should have a clear map on how this can be done. Russo-Glercher (2013) indicated that in tertiary institutions students are unaware of the availability of psychological support services. Golardi (2013) also states that although a number of support services are available to all students, they may not be accessible at the time and place convenient for students. The above discussion highlights the obstacles that hinder the use of psychological support services. Institutions should do more to create awareness of this crucial service.

McDonough (2005) asserted that counselors' jobs have been compromised. Counselors view resolving students' psychological issues as their core business, but they are forced to take up administrative duties. This indicates the need to respect and draw up a job description that focuses on provision of psychological support services.

Methodology

The study was conducted on one of the TVET colleges in the KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa. The TVET college is one of the 50 government sponsored colleges aimed at bridging the skills gap in South Africa. The researchers sought to explore the effectiveness of psychological support services offered by a TVET college in South Africa to its students. In order to get in-depth information on the provision of psychological support services to students at TVET colleges, the interpretivist paradigm was employed for this investigation. In the words of Smith (2008) "interpretive inquiry, as is the case with all other forms of qualitative inquiry, focuses on understanding (interpreting) the meanings, purposes, and intentions (interpretations) people give to their own actions and interactions with others" (p. 459). In line with the interpretive paradigmatic tradition, the qualitative approach was used. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) asserted that the qualitative approach allows for rich narrative descriptions, thus enabling the researcher to comprehend the context in which the study is being conducted. By way of design, the case study research was used in this study. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) pointed out that "a case study involves an in-depth study of a programme or event for a specific period" (p. 135). They further noted that "a case study is suitable for learning more about a phenomenon which is little known or when it is a poorly understood situation" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 135). A case study was an ideal design as it facilitated a profound understanding of the main components of the psychological support unit that are vital for improved academic performance.

In order to understand the effectiveness of the psychological support services in the academic lives of students, the researchers sought to select participants who made use of the psychological support services. A total of 30 students were conveniently selected to take part in the study, six students from each of the five campuses. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) defined convenience sampling as opportunity sampling that involves the selection of participants who are accessible to the researchers. In this study, accessibility to the participants and their willingness to take part in the study was crucial since participation in the study did not receive enough support from the patrons of psychological support services in the college. There the researchers had to rely exclusively on those who were available and willing to participate in the study. Data collection represented an important phase in this investigation. In order to generate rich data, the researchers utilized focus group interviews with the participants. Madriz (2000) contended that “the focus group is a collectivistic rather than individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences and beliefs”(p. 836). The focus group interview therefore is an interaction between research participants on mutually relevant topics. In this study, the researchers undertook five focus group discussions comprising of six students from each of the five campuses of the college. The researchers steered the proceedings and used an interview guide to avoid departure from the main research questions. The various interviews were voice-recorded, and additional notes were written down during the interview.

To deduce meaning from the data generated there was the need to analyze the data. Data analysis is an integral part of qualitative research and constitutes an essential stepping-stone toward both gathering data and linking one’s findings with higher order concepts (Van den Hoonaard & Van den Hoonaard, 2008). In order to present the results in a comprehensible manner, the thematic data analysis method was employed. According to Ayres (2008), “thematic analysis is primarily a descriptive strategy that facilitates the search for patterns of experience within a qualitative data set; the product of a thematic analysis is a description of those patterns and the overarching design that unites them” (p. 867). In order to arrive at themes that encapsulates the data generated, the researchers first of all had to embark on thematic coding. “Thematic coding is the strategy by which data are segmented and categorized for thematic analysis” (Ayres, p. 867). Ayres further noted that “thematic coding is a strategy of data reduction ... which enrich and complicate data through the inclusion of analytic insights and inquiries used” (p. 867). Various themes emerged through the coding process. Categories and sub-categories were assigned to each of the themes after which related data were grouped under each of the identified themes and sub-themes. Verbatim accounts were presented in order to keep the original words of the participants and as a result maintain the flavor of the conversations.

Findings

The findings were derived from the focus group interviews with the students from the college’s five campuses. The findings are grouped under the following themes in line with the objectives of the study:

- Nature of psychological support services,
- Factors compelling students to seek psychological support services;
- Effectiveness of psychological support services rendered to students; and
- Students’ views on ways of enhancing psychological support services rendered to them.

Nature of psychological support services

Under this theme, the nature of psychological support services is delved into. In order to get a picture of how students are psychologically supported in the college, the researchers asked the students to indicate the nature of psychological support services rendered to them. There was consensus among the participants that the psychological support services rendered to them

comprised academic support, career guidance, and also health and wellness issues. The comment from one of the participants below was supported by all other participants:

I think the support include academic, counselling, career guidance, and health and wellness issues.

Factors compelling students to seek psychological support services

Many factors compel students to patronize psychological support services in different institutions of higher learning. In this study, the researcher sought to find out the push factors for students to seek psychological support. The researchers brought these issues up for discussion with the participants. One of the participants had this to say:

I needed a strategy to cope with the heavy workload in my classes. It was overwhelming and becoming difficult for me and I had no option than to seek help from them (psychological support personnel).

From the discussions with the students, their health and wellness was identified as one of the factors that push them to seek psychological support. The quote below illustrates this notion:

As you are hearing, as we are here as diversified students. We are not the same, as students we are not the same. Some students suffer from many diseases and they need assistance on coping strategies.

Another participant offered a different reason for seeking psychological support as follows:

Yeah, as adult students we kind of get affected when have break ups in our intimate relationships. It affects me personally, and I won't function at all. That's when I really need psychological help.

One of the participants pointed out that depression compels students to seek psychological help. This is underscored by the following response:

Stress, what do you call it? Depression, I suffer from depression and I can't rely on tablets. I needed emotional support from the college.

The above statement is supported by one of the participants when he noted that:

I also had some problems adjusting to this new environment. I was not coping at all at that time. So I had to seek help from them (psychological support personnel).

From the foregoing, it is evident that the students sought psychological support in order to cope with the many exigencies that they encountered in the course of their studies. Notable among them is inability to cope with stress (depression and environmental), emotional issues, and load of work.

Effectiveness of psychological support services rendered to students

The participants were asked by the researchers to discuss the benefits of utilizing psychological support. One of the participants noted that:

When you got personal problems and there is no help, one is always absent. But here at the college, we have some people who listen to our problems and advise us. They are really helpful.

To support on improved pass rate, one of the participants weighed in by saying the following:

If we look at the bigger picture, many students who pass their exams say that they have received student counselling. That is what made me to go for the services. It has helped me to focus on my studies and I have seen some improvements in my performance.

Provision of psychological support improves student retention. This is supported by the statement that follows from one of the participants.

In my opinion this (provision of psychological support services) has helped us like studying and not to quit school. Look at the NVC programmes, students always drop out. They need motivation, assist them to deal with their problems and those services are helping a lot with that.

On improvement of academic performance, one of the participants reported that:

If you find someone who can help you with any issues bothering you, you tend to focus more on your studies and you will be able to concentrate in class. Many of us are getting such help.

From the findings, it can be noted that improved academic support, improved college certification rate, improved student attendance, reduction in student attrition, and enhancement of college reputation are some of the benefits derived.

Ways of improving psychological support services rendered to students

Here, the focus of the discussions was to solicit for the views of the students on ways in which psychological support services can be improved. The students made mention of a number of strategies. *Recruitment of more qualified staff.*

In the focus group discussions, the participants identified recruitment of more qualified staff, registered with the relevant professional organizations.

A person that is registered, what is it? The council of psychologists HPCSA, yes that council, when the person knows how to deal with confidentiality issues of the students, a person that knows how to counsel students.

Another participant had this to say:

I really feel though we have a referral system in place that we need to have more people in campuses working to make sure the assessment is done at campuses.

In concurring with the above statement, another participant weighed in by reporting that:

If we can have more people in an ideal world having 5 counsellors per campus that would really make a huge difference.

Dissemination of information

The participants when asked by the researchers on how to improve the provision of accessibility of psychological support services pointed out the need for information to be disseminated timeously. One of the participants shared their view as follows:

Students should be informed in a formal way about the services that are here at the college

Correspondingly, another participant had this to say:

Most of us are not aware that there is counselling because there was no orientation. How am I supposed to know that?

Another participant had this to say in view of the above statement:

I think the college should have an awareness campaign, where they inform us of these things. I mean psychological issues, we are not aware, even sports we only see notices around. No formal communication.

The researchers identified a number of strategies from the students' viewpoints that can be implemented in order to improve the provision of psychological support to students in TVET college. These include linkages with other key stakeholders, recruitment of additional qualified staff, and dissemination of information.

Discussion

The college does offer to its students a number of psychological support services. The services are offered either internally or externally depending on the nature of the problem being presented by the

student. Psychological support services are part of the non-academic SSS. Tamuliene (2014) identified two categories which are academic support and non-academic support. Academic support relates to support directly linked to academic performance. The researchers asked the students to explain the nature of psychological support services rendered to them.

The findings revealed that the most common factors that students present for psychological support include bereavement, family issues, academic pressure, depression, students' health status, low socioeconomic status, relationships, and depression, trauma, and anger issues. Cilliers, Pretorius, and Van der Westhuizen (2010) indicated that students are faced with mental and social challenges that interfere with their pursuit of academic success. The researchers asked students on issues that they present for psychological support. The findings identified academic pressure, student's health status, relationships, and depression as the main factors that compel students to seek psychological support.

Benefits can also be derived if psychological support services are effectively provided to students in TVET colleges. The participants were asked by the researchers on the benefits of utilizing psychological support. From the findings, it can be noted that improved academic support, improved college certification rate, improved student attendance, reduction in student attrition, and enhancement of college reputation are some of the benefits derived. In the focus group discussion, some of the participants noted that provision of psychological support services improves attendance. It was evident that the college's psychological support service was understaffed and is deprived of qualified personnel. This compromised the quality of services offered to the students. The Framework for Further Education and Training Colleges (DoE, 2009) underscores that most SSS in TVET colleges suffer from inadequate capital and human resources that allow for adequate provision of SSS, psychological support services included. It can be noted from the findings that insufficient and unqualified staff undermined the provision of psychological support to needy students.

The role and commitment of college management is also questionable. Management lacks commitment to the provision of psychological support. The Framework for Further Education Training Colleges (DoE, 2009) on challenges facing TVET colleges SSS structure confirms that key individuals and institutions regard the SSS as peripheral and not as a core service. There is over reliance on the SSS committee members who carry out psychological support duties during their administration time. These committee members are full-time academic staff. When asked by the researchers on college's role on the provision of psychological support services, the students indicated dissatisfaction on commitment shown by management.

The significant role played by psychological support to ensure the successful completion of courses is also undermined by the institution. Russo-Glercher's assertion (2013) agrees that in tertiary institutions students are generally unaware of the availability of psychological support services. The student support structure puts emphasis on other extracurricular activities such as sports at the expense of psychological support, a service which is vital to students' academic success. The researchers asked if information is disseminated on the availability of psychological support services during induction or orientation. It can be deduced that little is done by the college to ensure that students are informed of the availability of psychological support services.

The researchers found out that the college does provide psychological support services which are accessible at the college's five campuses. The psychological support services are administered by SSS members at campus level and referrals are made to the Student Development Practitioner (SDP) based at central office. External referral services are utilized if the SDP does not have the capacity to handle the students' psychological issues. It is evident from the findings that psychological support services are accessible to the learners. From the focus group discussions, the participants pointed out that there are quite a number of challenges on accessing psychological support. However, there are quite a number of challenges the students experience in trying to access psychological support. Golardi (2013) postulated that although SSS are available to all students, the main challenge is that they might not be accessible at the time and place convenient for students. The researchers findings underscored the poor referral system, working outside normal working hours, students' different cultural background, SDP/student

ratio, staff shortages, dual roles of SSS staff, operational times, and inadequate on-site counseling as some of the challenges identified by staff that hinder the effective accessing of psychological support by students.

It is necessary to establish networks with other key stakeholders if the institution's psychological support system is to be improved. Key stakeholders include other TVET colleges, DoH, and professional bodies such as Health Profession Council of South Africa and Psychological Society South Africa. Maree (2012) conveyed the importance of adhering to the various bodies that govern how professionals should conduct themselves. The establishment of partnerships would foster the sense of sharing information on best practices and on how to improve the existing structure and human resources. One of the participants noted that: Recruiting more staff will improve the practitioner–student ratio and also improves the provision of psychological support services. Brock (2010) opined that a major concern about the counselor–student ratio exists in tertiary institutions. The above notion is supported below by one of the participants: The research findings pointed out the need for information to be disseminated timeously. Miller et al. (2011) accentuated that students should be involved in college pre-programmes such as orientation as this does assist in alleviating anxieties and accelerates the student integration process into the college environment.

Conclusion

This article explored the effectiveness of psychological support services rendered to students at a TVET college in South Africa. Government sees the establishment of TVET colleges in South Africa as a viable approach to promoting the acquisition of skills relevant for the increasingly industrializing nation. With this in mind, academic progression of the students must be ensured. In order to achieve this, students must among other things be relieved from the many socio-psychological strains that may confront them. The argument has been made that psychological support is very crucial to the academic progress of students. Relying on the systems theory, which in Keys and Lockhart (1999) view expands our understanding of the individual's psychological development that positions the individual within the context of relationships and interactions with other people, the study has revealed that the provision of psychological support services in the college was effective for a myriad of reasons. Improved college certification rate, improved student attendance, reduction in student attrition, and enhancement of college reputation were noted as some of the benefits accruing from psychological support services in the college.

Implications for practice

This study has an implication for student psychological support practices in colleges the world over bearing in mind how the psychological well-being of students has the tendency to affect their academic performance. An important finding emanating from this study is that student counseling which formed part of psychological support services in the college enhanced the academic performance of students. This makes psychological support a necessary and sufficient condition in students' quest for academic excellence. Based on the views on students on ways to enhance psychological support services in the college, the article recommends that there should be establishment of collaborations with key stakeholders. This is apparent due in part to inadequate qualified personnel who can provide psychological support to the large number of students in the school. Dissemination of information regarding psychological support should be easy accessible to all the students in the college. It is the belief of the researchers that such ease of information would lead to increased patronage by the student body.

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