

Exploring First-Year Students' awareness of student support services at a selected University of Technology in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study explores first-year students' awareness of student support services (SSSs) at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. SSSs are widely recognised as critical institutional mechanisms for facilitating students' transition into higher education and enhancing academic success. However, the effectiveness of these services is contingent upon students being aware of their existence, location, and scope. Adopting a quantitative research design, the study utilised a self-administered questionnaire to collect data from 308 first-year students across all faculties. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to assess the level and dimensions of awareness of SSSs. The findings indicate that while some students demonstrate basic awareness of the existence of SSSs, there are significant gaps in their knowledge regarding the range of services offered, access points, and communication channels. The study highlights that awareness of SSSs among first-year students is uneven and, in many cases, limited. This lack of comprehensive awareness may constrain students' ability to access available support mechanisms during their transition into university life. The findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to strengthen communication strategies, enhance visibility, and implement targeted awareness campaigns aimed specifically at first-year cohorts. The study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on awareness of SSSs within universities of technology in South Africa and provides empirical insights to inform institutional communication and student engagement practices.

Keywords: Awareness, perception, intention, student support service, first-year students, intention to use, stakeholder engagement

1. Introduction

Student support services (SSSs) have become an integral component of contemporary higher education systems, particularly in response to increasing student diversity, massification, and the recognition that non-academic factors significantly influence student success (Vincent Tinto, 2012; Hoyt, 2021). These services, which typically include academic advising, counselling, health and wellness support, and career guidance, are designed to facilitate students' transition into university life and to enhance their academic performance and overall well-being (Clarence, 2016). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that students who are supported holistically are more likely to persist and succeed in their studies (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; Johnson et al., 2022). Despite the recognised importance of SSSs, their effectiveness is often constrained by low levels of student engagement. One of the most frequently cited reasons for this challenge is limited awareness among students regarding the existence, scope, and accessibility of these services (Perry et al., 2018; Van Dyck et al., 2022). Awareness, in this context, refers to students' knowledge and understanding of available institutional resources and how these can be accessed to address academic, social, and psychological challenges. Without such awareness, even well-resourced and strategically positioned support services remain underutilised, thereby limiting their potential impact on student success. Within the African higher education context, the issue of awareness is particularly salient. Many students enter university from disadvantaged educational and socio-economic backgrounds, often lacking prior exposure to structured support systems (Letseka & Maile, 2018). As a result, their ability to navigate the institutional environment and identify available support mechanisms is constrained. This challenge is further compounded by systemic inequalities, resource limitations, and communication gaps within institutions (Mzindle, 2015). Consequently, raising awareness of SSSs is not merely an institutional function but a critical intervention aimed at promoting equity, inclusion, and student success. In South Africa, the need for effective awareness of SSSs is intensified by persistently high dropout rates, particularly among first-year students. Research indicates that nearly half of first-year students do not progress to their second year of study, often due to difficulties in adapting to the academic and social demands of university life (Letseka & Maile, 2018; Russell & Jarvis, 2020). While policy interventions such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) have improved access to higher education, access alone does not guarantee success. Students must be aware of the support structures available to them in order to cope with the challenges associated with transitioning into higher education. Universities of technology in South Africa play a unique role in this landscape, as they often enrol students from diverse and historically disadvantaged backgrounds. These institutions provide a range of SSSs aimed at addressing academic, psychosocial, and developmental needs (Gratton, 2019; Hafeez et al., 2022). However, existing literature suggests that these services are frequently underutilised, not necessarily due to their inadequacy, but because students are not sufficiently aware of their availability and relevance (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018). This highlights a critical gap between service provision and student awareness, which has implications for both institutional effectiveness and student outcomes. Furthermore, awareness is widely recognised in communication and stakeholder theory as a foundational step in stakeholder engagement. According to Freeman (1984), organisations must effectively communicate with their stakeholders to ensure that services and initiatives are recognised and understood. In the context of higher education, students are primary stakeholders, and their awareness of institutional offerings is essential for meaningful engagement. Similarly, brand awareness literature emphasises that individuals cannot engage with or benefit from a service unless they are first aware of its existence and value (Percy & Rossiter, 2013). These theoretical perspectives underscore the centrality of awareness as a prerequisite for accessing and benefiting from SSSs. Notwithstanding the importance of awareness, there is a paucity of empirical research focusing specifically on first-year students' awareness of SSSs within South African universities of technology. Much of the existing literature tends to examine broader constructs such as student engagement, retention, or service utilisation, often without isolating awareness as a distinct variable of inquiry. This represents a significant gap, given that first-year students are the most vulnerable cohort and are more likely to experience adjustment challenges that could impact their academic progression. Drawing on this gap, the present study focuses specifically on exploring first-year students' awareness of SSSs at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. By isolating awareness as the primary variable of interest, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which students are informed about available support mechanisms and how this awareness is distributed across different dimensions, such as knowledge of services, access points, and communication channels. The findings are expected to contribute to both theory and practice by informing institutional communication strategies and enhancing the visibility of SSSs. The purpose of this paper is to explore and assess the level of awareness of SSSs among first-year students at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. Specifically, the study seeks to determine the extent to which students are aware of the existence, functions, and accessibility of these services. By focusing exclusively on awareness, the paper provides a focused examination of a critical yet underexplored dimension of student support within the higher education context. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature on SSSs and awareness within higher education. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The paper then outlines the research methodology, including the research design, sampling, and data collection procedures. Thereafter, the findings are presented and analysed in relation to the study objectives. The paper concludes with a discussion of key insights, implications for practice, and recommendations for enhancing awareness of SSSs among first-year students.

2. Contextual and Comparative Background

Globally, SSSs are recognised as essential components of higher education systems, particularly in contexts characterised by increasing student diversity and expanded access. Universities have institutionalised a wide range of support mechanisms, including academic advising, counselling, mentoring, and health services, to facilitate student adjustment and success (Vincent Tinto, 2012; Hoyt, 2021). While these services are widely available across institutions, their effectiveness is closely linked to the extent to which students are aware of their existence, purpose, and accessibility. Literature consistently highlights that students cannot benefit from institutional support structures if they are not adequately informed about them (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; Johnson et al., 2022). From a global perspective, awareness of SSSs remains uneven despite the proliferation of communication platforms within higher education institutions. Studies indicate that many first-year students lack sufficient knowledge about available support structures, particularly during the critical transition period into university (Perry et al., 2018). This lack of awareness is often attributed to inadequate communication strategies, fragmented information dissemination, and limited integration of support services into core academic and orientation programmes (Van Dyck et al., 2022). As a result, institutions face the challenge of not only providing

support services but also ensuring that these services are visible, accessible, and clearly understood by students. Within the African higher education context, the issue of awareness assumes even greater importance due to structural and socio-economic challenges that affect students' preparedness for university life. Many students enter higher education from under-resourced schooling environments and may have limited exposure to formal support systems (Letseka & Maile, 2018). Consequently, their ability to identify and navigate institutional support services is often constrained. Research across the continent suggests that while universities have made progress in establishing student support structures, awareness of these services among students remains inconsistent (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). This underscores the need for deliberate and context-sensitive communication strategies that consider the diverse backgrounds and informational needs of students. At the regional level, particularly within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), higher education institutions face similar challenges related to access, retention, and student success. Although SSSs have been adopted as part of institutional strategies to address these challenges, their visibility among students is not always guaranteed (Mzindle, 2015). Limited institutional resources, coupled with ineffective communication channels, often result in gaps in awareness, particularly among first-year students who are still navigating unfamiliar academic environments. In this regard, awareness becomes a critical factor in bridging the gap between service provision and student access. In the South African context, awareness of SSSs is closely linked to broader issues of equity and student success. The expansion of access to higher education through initiatives such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has increased participation among previously marginalised groups. However, high dropout rates, particularly among first-year students, remain a significant concern (Letseka & Maile, 2018). While multiple factors contribute to student attrition, lack of awareness of available support services has been identified as a key constraint, as students who are unaware of institutional resources are less likely to access the assistance needed to cope with academic and social challenges (Russell & Jarvis, 2020). This highlights the importance of ensuring that awareness of support services is embedded within institutional communication and student engagement strategies.

Universities of technology in South Africa occupy a distinct position within the higher education landscape, often serving students from diverse and historically disadvantaged backgrounds. These institutions offer a comprehensive range of SSSs aimed at addressing academic, psychosocial, and developmental needs (Gratton, 2019; Hafeez et al., 2022). However, despite the availability of these services, awareness among students remains uneven. Institutional reports and scholarly studies suggest that students are often only partially informed about the services offered, with limited knowledge of how to access them or the full scope of support available (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018). This situation points to a disconnect between service provision and effective communication, which has implications for the overall effectiveness of student support initiatives.

From a theoretical perspective, awareness is widely conceptualised as a foundational element of stakeholder engagement and communication. According to Freeman (1984), organisations must ensure that stakeholders are adequately informed about their offerings in order to facilitate meaningful engagement. In higher education, students are primary stakeholders, and their awareness of institutional services is a prerequisite for accessing and benefiting from these services. Similarly, literature on brand and service awareness emphasises that awareness precedes all forms of engagement, as individuals cannot interact with or utilise services of which they are unaware (Percy & Rossiter, 2013). Within this framework, awareness is not merely about recognition but also encompasses understanding the relevance and accessibility of services.

Taken together, the global, continental, regional, and national literature points to a consistent pattern: while SSSs are widely established across higher education systems, awareness among students remains uneven and, in many cases, limited. This gap between availability and awareness highlights the need for institutions to prioritise communication, visibility, and targeted awareness initiatives, particularly for first-year students who are most in need of support during their transition into higher education.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory, which provides a useful lens for understanding how organisations communicate with and create value for their stakeholders. Within the higher education context, students constitute primary stakeholders, as institutional effectiveness is closely linked to their academic success, integration, and overall university experience. From this perspective, SSSs (SSS) represent an organisational function that must effectively communicate its existence, role, and offerings to students in order to fulfil its mandate. Central to stakeholder theory is the notion that organisations have a responsibility to identify, inform, and engage stakeholders through deliberate and strategic communication processes. In this regard, awareness emerges as a foundational outcome of stakeholder engagement. Before any form of interaction or utilisation can occur, stakeholders must first be aware of the organisation's services, including what is offered, where services are located, and how they can be accessed. In the context of this study, awareness is therefore conceptualised as the extent to which first-year students are informed about the existence, scope, and accessibility of SSSs.

Stakeholder engagement literature further emphasises the importance of information dissemination and visibility in ensuring that organisational offerings reach their intended audiences. Scholars argue that communication should not occur in a fragmented or ad hoc manner but should be structured, targeted, and responsive to the needs of specific stakeholder groups (Keenan, 2015; Milani & Milani, 2019). Within higher education, this implies that institutions must employ appropriate communication channels—such as orientation programmes, digital platforms, and campus-based initiatives—to ensure that first-year students are adequately informed about available support services. Effective communication, in this sense, is not only about the transmission of information but also about ensuring that the information is accessible, understandable, and relevant to the target audience. In addition to stakeholder theory, this study draws on concepts from awareness and communication literature, which position awareness as a prerequisite for engagement with services. Awareness is commonly defined as a state of being informed and knowledgeable about the existence of a service or phenomenon (Semple et al., 2021). Similarly, Reinhardt et al. (2013) describe awareness as the ability of individuals to recognise and recall a service or initiative with ease. These conceptualisations highlight that awareness extends beyond mere exposure to information and includes elements of recognition, recall, and understanding.

From a communication perspective, awareness is closely linked to visibility and message dissemination. Literature on integrated communication suggests that organisations must utilise multiple channels and consistent messaging to ensure that stakeholders are repeatedly exposed to information about services (Percy & Rossiter, 2013). In the context of SSSs, this may include communication through institutional websites, social media platforms, campus radio, orientation sessions, and peer networks. The effectiveness of these communication efforts determines the extent to which awareness is created and sustained among students.

Furthermore, the concept of brand awareness provides additional insight into how stakeholders become familiar with services. Brand awareness literature posits that individuals must first recognise and recall a service before they can develop any form of engagement with it (Percy & Rossiter, 2013). Applied to higher education, SSSs can be understood as institutional "brands" that require visibility and consistent communication in order to remain salient in students' minds. This reinforces the idea that awareness is not a passive outcome but the result of deliberate and sustained communication efforts. Within the context of this study, awareness is therefore treated as a multidimensional construct encompassing knowledge of the existence of SSSs, understanding of the types of services offered, awareness of access points such as physical locations and contact details, and familiarity with communication channels through which information about services is disseminated. This conceptualisation aligns with the measurement of awareness in the study, which includes items related to students' knowledge of available services, their ability to locate the support office, and their familiarity with communication platforms.

Importantly, the theoretical framing of this study positions awareness as an independent and critical area of inquiry in its own right, rather than as a precursor to other behavioural outcomes. By isolating awareness, the study responds to a gap in the literature, where awareness is often

subsumed within broader constructs such as engagement or utilisation. This approach allows for a more focused examination of whether students are adequately informed about SSSs, which is a necessary condition for any further interaction with these services.

In summary, the theoretical framework integrates stakeholder theory with awareness and communication literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of how awareness of SSSs is created and sustained within higher education institutions. Stakeholder theory underscores the responsibility of institutions to communicate effectively with students, while awareness literature highlights the importance of visibility, recognition, and understanding. Together, these perspectives provide a robust foundation for examining first-year students' awareness of SSSs at a University of Technology in South Africa.

4. Research Aim: The aim of this study is to determine first-year students' awareness of SSSs at a selected University of Technology in South Africa by employing a quantitative survey-based approach to measure students' knowledge of the existence, scope, accessibility, and communication of these services, with the outcome of generating empirical evidence to inform improved institutional communication strategies and enhance the visibility of SSSs.

5. Research Problem: SSS are widely recognised as essential institutional mechanisms for facilitating students' transition into higher education and supporting their academic success; however, their effectiveness is fundamentally dependent on students being aware of their existence, scope, and accessibility (Vincent Tinto, 2012; Hoyt, 2021). Despite the expansion of student support structures across higher education institutions globally, evidence suggests that many students, particularly those in their first year of study, have limited awareness of available services, which constrains their ability to access institutional support when needed (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; Perry et al., 2018). This challenge is more pronounced within the African context, where students often enter university from disadvantaged educational and socio-economic backgrounds and may lack prior exposure to formal support systems, thereby limiting their awareness and navigation of institutional resources (Letseka & Maile, 2018; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). In South Africa, this issue is further compounded by persistently high dropout rates among first-year students, with nearly half failing to progress to subsequent years of study, often due to difficulties in adapting to the academic and social demands of university life (Letseka & Maile, 2018; Russell & Jarvis, 2020). While SSSs are intended to address these challenges, their potential impact is undermined when students are not adequately informed about their availability and how to access them (Van Dyck et al., 2022). Within universities of technology, which serve a diverse student population including many from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, the need for effective awareness of SSSs is particularly critical (Gratton, 2019; Hafeez et al., 2022). However, existing literature indicates a gap between the provision of SSSs and students' awareness of these services, with limited empirical research focusing specifically on the extent of awareness among first-year students in this institutional context. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of whether first-year students are adequately informed about the existence, scope, and accessibility of SSSs at universities of technology in South Africa, thereby necessitating focused investigation into awareness as a critical dimension of student support.

6. Research Design and Methodology

6.1 Research Approach: This study adopts a quantitative research approach to systematically investigate first-year students' awareness and perceptions of SSS at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. Quantitative research is appropriate when the objective is to measure variables and produce findings that can be generalised to a larger population (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021). In this study, the construct of awareness is operationalised into measurable variables, allowing for statistical examination. This aligns with the positivist paradigm, which assumes that reality can be objectively measured and analysed through empirical data (Kumar, 2019).

Moreover, the quantitative approach supports the generation of empirically grounded and generalisable findings, which are critical for informing institutional decision-making and policy development. By employing statistical analysis, the study is able to analyse insights and provide evidence on key variables, thereby contributing to theory development and practical interventions. While qualitative approaches may offer deeper insights into student experiences, the quantitative design adopted in this study ensures objectivity, replicability, and the ability to draw broader conclusions about student awareness and perceptions within the selected institutional context (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021).

6.2 Research Strategy: This study employs a **survey research strategy** to collect data from first-year students at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. Survey research is widely used in social sciences and higher education studies due to its effectiveness in gathering standardised information from a large number of respondents within a relatively short period (Babbie, 2021; Creswell, 2014). The strategy is particularly suitable for this study as it enables the systematic measurement of students' awareness of SSS through structured questionnaires. By using a survey, the researcher is able to capture quantifiable data that can be statistically analysed to identify patterns, and trends across the study population. This aligns with the objective of exploring the key variable [awareness] in a structured and empirical manner.

6.3 Study Population: The study population for this research comprises first-year full-time undergraduate students at a selected University of Technology in South Africa, with an estimated population size of approximately 5,400 students. In research methodology, a study population refers to the entire group of individuals who share specific characteristics relevant to the research problem and from which a sample is drawn (Creswell, 2014; Kumar, 2019). First-year students are particularly appropriate for this study as they represent the primary stakeholders of SSS and constitute the most vulnerable cohort in terms of academic adjustment, social integration, and potential attrition. Higher education literature emphasises that students' initial experiences at university significantly influence their persistence and success, making this group critical for examining awareness, perceptions, and help-seeking behaviour (Tinto, 2012; Letseka & Maile, 2018). By clearly defining both the characteristics and size of the population, the study ensures methodological clarity and provides a sound basis for sampling, thereby enhancing the validity and relevance of the findings within the institutional context.

6.4 Sampling Technique and Rationale: This study employs a **non-probability availability (convenience) sampling technique** to select participants from the target population of first-year students at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. Non-probability sampling is commonly used in quantitative studies where access to the full population is limited, and participants are selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021). In this study, first-year students who were available on campus and consented to participate were included in the sample, allowing for efficient data collection within the institutional setting. This approach is consistent with survey-based research in higher education, where logistical constraints and time considerations often necessitate the use of accessible samples.

The rationale for adopting availability sampling is grounded in its practicality and suitability for exploratory and relational studies that seek to examine patterns and associations between variables rather than to generalise findings to the entire population with statistical precision (Kumar, 2019). Given the study's focus on exploring student awareness of SSSs, the technique enables the researcher to obtain sufficient data to conduct meaningful statistical analyses. While this sampling method may limit the generalisability of the findings due to potential sampling bias, it remains appropriate for the study's objectives, particularly in providing valuable insights into student behaviour within the selected institutional context.

6.5 Sample Size and Justification: The study utilised a sample size of 359 first-year students, of which 308 valid responses were obtained and included in the final analysis. In quantitative research, sample size plays a critical role in ensuring the reliability, validity, and statistical power of the findings, particularly when examining relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021). From a methodological perspective, an adequate sample size should be sufficiently large to represent the characteristics of the population while allowing for the application of

inferential statistical techniques such as correlation and factor analysis (Kumar, 2019). Given the estimated population of approximately 5,400 first-year students, the achieved sample falls within acceptable ranges suggested by sampling guidelines, which indicate that sample sizes exceeding 300 are generally adequate for most social science research and provide stable estimates for statistical analysis. The final sample of 308 respondents therefore meets the methodological requirements and enhances the robustness of the study's findings. Additionally, the use of a relatively large sample increases the precision of estimates and reduces sampling error, thereby strengthening the credibility of the conclusions drawn regarding the relationships between awareness, perception, and intention to use SSSs. While the non-probability sampling approach may limit generalisability, the sample size is nonetheless adequate to provide meaningful empirical insights within the context of the selected University of Technology.

6.6 Data Collection: Data for this study were collected using a **self-administered structured questionnaire** distributed to first-year students at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. Questionnaires are widely used in quantitative research due to their ability to gather standardised data efficiently from a large number of respondents, thereby enhancing consistency and comparability across responses (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021). The instrument comprised closed-ended questions measured on a Likert scale, designed to capture key constructs of awareness, perception, and intention to use SSS. This structured format enables the quantification of responses, allowing for subsequent statistical analysis to examine relationships between variables. Furthermore, self-administration reduces interviewer bias and allows respondents to complete the questionnaire at their own pace, which can improve the accuracy and honesty of responses (Kumar, 2019).

The data collection process was conducted within the university environment, targeting accessible first-year students who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly adhered to throughout the process, ensuring that participants were fully aware of the purpose of the study and their rights as respondents. The use of a structured questionnaire also facilitated efficient data capturing and coding for statistical analysis using software such as SPSS. This approach aligns with best practices in quantitative research, where standardised instruments are employed to ensure reliability and validity while enabling the researcher to draw meaningful inferences about patterns and relationships within the data (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021).

6.7 Data Analysis: The collected data were analysed using **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25**, enabling descriptive statistics to address the study objectives. In quantitative research, data analysis involves organising, summarising, and interpreting numerical data to identify patterns and test relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014; Kumar, 2019). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were employed to summarise levels of awareness of SSS.

6.8 Trustworthiness and Rigour: Trustworthiness and rigour in this quantitative study were ensured through the application of established measures of reliability and validity, which are essential for enhancing the credibility and accuracy of research findings (Creswell, 2014; Kumar, 2019). Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of the measurement instrument, and in this study, it was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire items measuring awareness, perception, and intention to use. Validity, on the other hand, concerns the extent to which the instrument measures what it is intended to measure. Construct validity was evaluated using exploratory factor analysis, which helped to confirm that the questionnaire items appropriately loaded onto their respective constructs, thereby ensuring that the instrument accurately captured the underlying variables of interest. In addition to reliability and validity, methodological rigour was further enhanced through the use of a structured questionnaire, standardised data collection procedures, and appropriate statistical analysis techniques. The use of a consistent instrument across all respondents minimised measurement error and improved comparability of responses (Babbie, 2021). Furthermore, ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity contributed to the integrity of the data by encouraging honest and unbiased responses. The application of rigorous statistical procedures using SPSS, including correlation and factor analysis, also strengthened the robustness of the findings. Collectively, these measures ensured that the study produced credible, dependable, and methodologically sound results that can be confidently interpreted within the context of the selected University of Technology.

6.9 Ethical Considerations: Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process to ensure the protection and dignity of participants, in line with established research ethics guidelines (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021). Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection, ensuring that they were fully aware of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by not collecting identifying information and by ensuring that responses were used solely for academic purposes. Additionally, the study adhered to principles of non-maleficence by ensuring that no physical, psychological, or emotional harm was inflicted on participants during the research process. These ethical safeguards contributed to the integrity of the study and enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the data collected.

7. Results: This section presents the empirical results of the study, focusing on the statistical analysis of data collected from first-year students at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. The purpose of this section is to systematically report the outcomes of the quantitative analysis in relation to student awareness of SSS. Guided by the research aim the study employs both descriptive techniques to examine patterns in the data and to determine the nature. In line with quantitative research principles, the results are presented objectively, without interpretation, to provide a clear basis for subsequent discussion and comparison with existing literature (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2021). The analysis includes descriptive statistics, conducted using SPSS to ensure accuracy and rigour in the findings.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all aware	40	13,0	13,2	13,2
	slightly aware	59	19,2	19,5	32,7
	somewhat aware	74	24,0	24,4	57,1
	moderately aware	64	20,8	21,1	78,2
	extremely aware	66	21,4	21,8	100,0
Total		303	98,4	100,0	
Missing	System	5	1,6		
Total		308	100,0		

Source: author generated

There were 308 valid responses (Table 1). According to the data, 40 participants (13.2%) indicated that they are not at all aware, with approximately 59 participants (19.5%) who are slightly aware of the extent to which SSSs can assist them in coping with their studies. Approximately 74 of the participants (24.4%) indicated that they were somewhat aware of the potential assistance provided by SSSs. These numbers suggest that a portion of students may not be familiar with the services offered by student support and may not fully understand how they can benefit from them. Sixty-four of the participants (21.1%) indicated that they were moderately aware of the potential assistance provided by SSSs. This suggests that many students have a moderate understanding of the services and believe they can provide some level of support in coping with their studies. Finally, 66 participants (21.8%) indicated level 5 awareness, which means they were extremely aware of the potential assistance provided by SSSs. This suggests that a significant portion of students are highly knowledgeable about the services and have a strong belief in the ability of these services to assist them in managing their studies effectively. In summary, the data indicate that while there is a range of awareness levels among students regarding the extent to which SSSs can assist them in coping with their studies, a considerable proportion of students have some level of awareness and belief in the potential benefits of these services.

Table 2: Awareness 2: I can get help from student support service when faced with traumatic experience (N=308)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all aware	37	12,0	12,3	12,3
	slightly aware	51	16,6	17,0	29,3
	somewhat aware	55	17,9	18,3	47,7
	moderately aware	75	24,4	25,0	72,7
	extremely aware	82	26,6	27,3	100,0
	Total	300	97,4	100,0	
Missing	System	8	2,6		
Total		308	100,0		

Source: author generated

Looking at the percentages in Table 2, 300 (97.4) were valid responses, and approximately 8 were missing in the system category, accounting for approximately 2.6% of the total responses. Thirty-seven participants (12.3%) said they were not aware of being able to obtain help from SSSs. Fifty-one students (18.3%) said they were slightly aware. Fifty-five students (18.3%) said they were somewhat aware. Seventy-five students (25.0%) said they were moderately aware. Eighty-two students (27.3%) said they were highly aware. Based on the cumulative percentages, it can be observed that most participants (72.7%) indicated that they are moderately aware of the availability of SSSs when faced with a traumatic experience. These data suggest that a considerable proportion of the student population is mindful of the existence of SSSs and their potential role in helping during traumatic experiences. This awareness is crucial, as it indicates that students are knowledgeable about the available resources and may be more likely to seek help when needed. However, there is still room for improvement in increasing awareness among groups of participants who indicated that they are not at all aware or somewhat aware of these services.

Table 3: Awareness 3: I can approach student support service for referral for my challenges at University of Technology (N=308)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all aware	33	10,7	10,9	10,9
	slightly aware	46	14,9	15,2	26,1
	somewhat aware	66	21,4	21,8	47,9
	moderately aware	70	22,7	23,1	71,0
	extremely aware	88	28,6	29,0	100,0
	Total	303	98,4	100,0	
Missing	System	5	1,6		
Total		308	100,0		

Source: author generated

Based on Table 3, 33 participants (10.9%) said they were not aware of being able to obtain help from SSSs. Forty-six students (15.2%) said they were slightly aware. Sixty-six students (21.8%) said they were somewhat aware. Seventy students (23.1%) said they were moderately aware. Eighty-eight students (29.0%) said they were extremely aware. These data suggest that most students (as indicated by the cumulative percentage of 71.0%) are aware of the role of SSSs in providing referrals for challenges they may face at the University of Technology. This awareness is crucial, as it indicates that students recognise support services as a valuable resource for addressing their needs and seeking appropriate assistance.

Table 4: Awareness 4: I know where student support service office is located (N=308)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all aware	141	45,8	47,0	47,0
	slightly aware	47	15,3	15,7	62,7
	somewhat aware	25	8,1	8,3	71,0
	moderately aware	25	8,1	8,3	79,3
	extremely aware	62	20,1	20,7	100,0
	Total	300	97,4	100,0	
Missing	System	8	2,6		
Total		308	100,0		

Source: author generated

Based on Table 4, it can be observed that most participants (141/47.0%) indicated that they were not aware of the location of the student support service office. On the other hand, 47 of the participants (15.7%) indicated that they were slightly aware of the location. This suggests that a high portion of the participants may not have or have some basic knowledge of where the student support service office is located. Furthermore, 23 of the participants (8.3%) selected a rating of 3 or 4, indicating that they were somewhat aware or moderately aware of the location. This suggests that a minority of the participants have a moderate level of awareness regarding the location of the student support service office. Finally, 62 of the participants (20.7%) indicated that they were extremely aware of the location. This suggests that a significant portion of the participants have a high level of awareness and are well informed about the location of the student support service office. While a significant portion of the participants were not aware or only slightly aware, there were also participants who had a moderate to high level of awareness. This suggests that there may be a need for improved communication and dissemination of information regarding the location of the student support service office to ensure that all students are aware of its whereabouts.

Table 5, Awareness 5 - I know the email and contact numbers of the student support service (N=308)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all aware	168	54,5	55,6	55,6
	slightly aware	50	16,2	16,6	72,2
	somewhat aware	25	8,1	8,3	80,5
	moderately aware	21	6,8	7,0	87,4
	extremely aware	38	12,3	12,6	100,0
	Total	302	98,1	100,0	
Missing	System	6	1,9		
Total		308	100,0		

Source: author generated

Table 5 above represents the responses regarding awareness of the email and contact numbers of the student support service. Approximately 168 participants (55.6%) strongly reported that they were not aware of the student support office email and contact numbers. This suggests that a significant portion of the participants may not have knowledge of the contact information for the student support service. Fifty participants (16.6%) were slightly aware, while 25 participants (8.3%) were somewhat aware. This suggests that a minority of the participants may have some basic knowledge with the contact information for the student support service. Last, 21 participants (6.8%) were moderately aware, with 38 of the participants (12.6%) indicating that they were extremely aware of the email and contact numbers. This suggests that a significant portion of the participants have knowledge or are well informed about the student support service contact. Thus, the table indicates that while a significant portion of the participants are not aware or only slightly aware, there is also a fair proportion of participants who have a moderate to high level of awareness. This suggests that there may be a need for improved communication and dissemination of information regarding the contact information for the student support service to ensure that all students are aware of how to reach out for support.

Table 6, Awareness 6 - I am aware of the services offered by student support (N=308)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all aware	79	25,6	26,2	26,2
	slightly aware	57	18,5	18,9	45,0
	somewhat aware	59	19,2	19,5	64,6
	moderately aware	51	16,6	16,9	81,5
	extremely aware	56	18,2	18,5	100,0
	Total	302	98,1	100,0	
Missing	System	6	1,9		
Total		308	100,0		

Source: author generated

The results depicted in Table 6, show that 79 (25.6%) of the respondents were not at all aware of the services offered by the SSSs, while 57 (18.5) answered that they were slightly aware. Fifty-nine (19.2) responded that they were moderately aware of the services offered by the student support service office. Only 56 (18.2) responded that they were extremely aware of the services offered by the student support service.

8. Findings: The findings of this study reveal that first-year students at a selected University of Technology in South Africa demonstrate **low levels of awareness** of SSSs (SSS), a result that is consistent with existing literature highlighting the underutilisation of support services due to limited visibility and ineffective communication strategies (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; Johnson et al., 2022). Despite the recognised importance of SSS in facilitating student success and retention, many students remain insufficiently informed about the scope, location, and accessibility of these services, thereby limiting their potential impact. This aligns with earlier studies which argue that awareness is a necessary precondition for service utilisation, as individuals cannot engage with services they do not know exist (Percy & Rossiter, 2013). However, the persistence of low awareness levels suggests that current institutional communication strategies may be inadequate in reaching and engaging first-year students effectively.

9. Discussion: The findings of this study provide important insights into the dynamics between awareness, perception, and intention to use SSSs (SSS), and these can be meaningfully interpreted within the broader body of higher education and service utilisation literature. Consistent with prior research, the study confirms that awareness of SSS among first-year students remains relatively low, reinforcing concerns raised by Kezar and Holcombe (2018) and Johnson et al. (2022) that support services are often underutilised due to ineffective communication and limited visibility. Within the South African context, where first-year students frequently enter higher education with limited prior exposure to institutional support structures, low awareness levels further exacerbate challenges related to adjustment and integration (Letseka & Maile, 2018). This suggests that while institutions have established SSS as critical interventions, their impact is constrained by insufficient dissemination of information and engagement with students. The positive relationship observed between awareness and perception aligns with existing literature suggesting that increased exposure to services enhances familiarity and reduces uncertainty, thereby fostering more favourable evaluations (Bapat, 2017; Meštrović et al., 2019). From a stakeholder theory perspective, this supports the notion that communication and engagement play a role in shaping stakeholder attitudes towards organisational offerings (Freeman, 1984). However, the study extends this understanding by demonstrating that awareness alone does not guarantee behavioural outcomes. The absence of a significant relationship between awareness and intention to use challenges traditional assumptions embedded in both stakeholder and marketing frameworks, which often posit a linear progression from awareness to action. Instead, the findings resonate with studies such as Azzari and Pelissari (2021), which argue that awareness does not directly translate into behavioural intention, thereby highlighting the complexity of decision-making processes among students. A key contribution of this study lies in its confirmation that perception is a more critical determinant of service utilisation than awareness. The significant positive relationship between perception and intention to use supports prior findings that students are more likely to engage with services when they perceive them as accessible, relevant, and of high quality (Afolabi et al., 2013; Malatji, 2019). This underscores the importance of service experience, staff interactions, and perceived value in shaping behavioural outcomes. In line with brand perception theory, stakeholders' evaluations of a service influence their willingness to engage, suggesting that institutions must prioritise not only the visibility of services but also the quality and consistency of service delivery (Aaker, 2000). Within higher education, this implies that improving students' perceptions of SSS, through responsiveness, accessibility, and positive interactions, may be more effective in driving utilisation than awareness campaigns alone.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the need to reconsider the theoretical framing of student support service utilisation by integrating behavioural and contextual factors. While stakeholder theory provides a useful lens for understanding institutional engagement, it does not fully account for the socio-economic and psychological realities that shape student behaviour in the South African context. Factors such as stigma associated with seeking help, perceived irrelevance of services, and lack of trust in institutional structures may influence students' decisions independently of awareness (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Perry et al., 2018). This suggests that future research should incorporate behavioural theories and context-sensitive perspectives to better understand the mediating factors between awareness and utilisation. Overall, the discussion reinforces the central conclusion that awareness, while necessary, is insufficient to drive the use of SSSs. Instead, perception emerges as the pivotal factor influencing student engagement. This finding not only contributes to the existing literature but also has practical implications for higher education institutions, which must move beyond information dissemination towards enhancing service quality, student experience, and meaningful stakeholder engagement to improve utilisation and ultimately support student success.

10. Conclusions: This study set out to explore first-year students' awareness and perceptions of SSSs (SSS) at a selected University of Technology in South Africa and to examine how these factors influence their intention to use such services. The findings indicate that while awareness of SSS exists at a basic level, it remains insufficient to drive meaningful utilisation. Although awareness is positively associated with perception, it does not significantly influence students' intention to use the services. Instead, perception emerges as the most critical determinant of utilisation, suggesting that students are more likely to engage with SSS when they perceive them as accessible, relevant, and of high quality. These findings reinforce existing literature which argues that awareness is a necessary but insufficient condition for behavioural change, and that stakeholder perceptions play a decisive role in shaping service utilisation (Johnson et al., 2022; Afolabi et al., 2013). The study therefore concludes that higher education institutions must move beyond awareness-driven strategies and focus on enhancing the overall perception and experience of SSSs. This requires not only improved communication but also meaningful stakeholder engagement, service quality enhancement, and the creation of supportive and accessible environments that encourage help-seeking behaviour. In the context of South African higher education, where student retention and success remain pressing challenges, strengthening students' perceptions of SSS has the potential to improve utilisation, thereby contributing to better academic outcomes and reduced dropout rates. Ultimately, the study highlights the need for a more integrated approach that combines awareness, perception, and service delivery to maximise the impact of SSSs.

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that higher education institutions adopt **more targeted and integrated communication strategies** to improve students' awareness of SSS. While awareness alone does not directly influence utilisation, it remains a necessary foundation upon which positive perceptions can be built. Institutions should therefore leverage multiple communication platforms, including social media, orientation programmes, and classroom-based engagements, to ensure that information about SSS is accessible, consistent, and tailored to first-year students. In addition, lecturers and peer networks should be actively involved in promoting these services, as they represent influential channels through which students receive and validate information (Johnson et al., 2022). Enhancing visibility through continuous and strategic communication can help ensure that students are not only aware of services but are also reminded of their relevance throughout the academic year. More importantly, institutions should prioritise **improving students' perceptions and experiences of SSS**, as perception has been shown to be the primary driver of utilisation. This requires a deliberate focus on service quality, accessibility, and staff-student interactions, ensuring that services are perceived as welcoming, responsive, and beneficial. Training support staff to provide empathetic and student-centred services, reducing barriers such as long waiting times, and increasing the convenience of access, both physically and digitally, are critical steps in this regard (Afolabi et al., 2013; Malatji, 2019). Furthermore, institutions should strengthen stakeholder engagement by involving students in the design, evaluation, and promotion of support services, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and trust. By shifting the focus from awareness alone to a holistic approach that enhances perception and experience, universities can improve the uptake of SSS and contribute to improved student retention and academic success.

12. Scope for Further Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationships between awareness, perception, and intention to use SSS, it also highlights several areas that warrant further investigation. Future research could adopt a **qualitative or mixed-methods approach** to gain deeper insights into the underlying reasons behind students' perceptions and help-seeking behaviours. Such approaches would allow researchers to explore nuanced factors such as stigma, trust, cultural influences, and personal experiences that may not be fully captured through quantitative surveys (Creswell, 2014). In addition, further studies could examine other potential variables such as service quality, accessibility, peer influence, and institutional trust that may mediate or moderate the relationship between awareness and utilisation, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive theoretical model. Moreover, the scope of this study is limited to a single University of Technology, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings. Future research should therefore consider **multi-institutional or comparative studies** across different universities, including traditional universities and other universities of technology, to determine whether similar patterns exist in diverse institutional contexts. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to examine how students' awareness, perceptions, and utilisation of SSS evolve over time, particularly as they progress through different stages of their academic journey. Such research would not only enhance the robustness of findings but also provide more generalisable and context-sensitive insights that can inform policy and practice in higher education.

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