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Student Perceptions vs. Institutional Actions: Analysing Discrepancies in Academically At-Risk Follow-Up Survey Responses at a University in South Africa

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Abstract
This study examines the discrepancies between student perceptions and institutional actions regarding at-risk student follow-up processes in higher education. Underpinned by the Self-Efficacy Theory, data were collected from 230 conveniently selected academically at-risk students at a South African university through a semi-structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended and open-ended items. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis. The research highlights gaps in communication, support delivery, and perceived effectiveness of interventions. Findings reveal that 72.41% reported not being identified, while 27.59% reported being identified as needing support. Further, 59.38% of those contacted show a positive level of engagement, and the 40.63% who reported receiving no contact points show inconsistent numbers of support interventions. In addition, findings reveal that while institutions report structured follow-up protocols, students often experience inconsistent or unclear engagement, leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement. The study underscores the need for improved transparency, tailored support, and proactive communication to align institutional efforts with student expectations. Recommendations include enhanced feedback mechanisms, staff training, and student-centred intervention strategies to bridge the perception-action divide and improve academic outcomes.

Introduction
In higher education, identifying and supporting at-risk students, those in danger of academic failure or dropout, is a critical institutional responsibility. Many universities implement early alert systems, academic advising, and targeted interventions to mitigate risks and improve retention. However, despite structured protocols, students often perceive these efforts as inconsistent, impersonal, or ineffective. This discrepancy between institutional actions and student experiences raises important questions about communication gaps, implementation challenges, and the efficacy of support systems. Existing research strongly emphasises the critical role of timely and targeted interventions in enhancing student success and retention. Seminal works by some scholars have shown that proactive academic support, such as early alert systems, mentoring, and supplemental instruction, can significantly reduce dropout rates and improve learning outcomes (Rajasekar, Pallathadka & Charles, 2025; Taylor, 2025; Adebola, 2021). However, while much of the literature focuses on the design and implementation of these interventions, far less attention has been given to how students perceive and

experience them. This gap is particularly concerning because institutional efforts, no matter how well-structured, may fall short if students are unaware of available support, find it inaccessible, or question its relevance to their needs.

Emerging studies suggest that student perceptions of institutional support play a crucial mediating role in the effectiveness of retention strategies (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010). For instance, if students view follow-up communications as impersonal, inconsistent, or untimely, they may disengage from support services altogether, regardless of their potential benefits. Conversely, when students perceive interventions as responsive and meaningful, they are more likely to actively participate, leading to better academic outcomes. Despite these insights, there remains a lack of systematic research examining the specific discrepancies between institutional actions (e.g., outreach protocols, advising practices) and student interpretations of those actions.

Understanding these perceptual gaps is not merely an academic exercise—it has direct implications for policy and practice. Institutions invest substantial resources in at-risk student initiatives, yet without alignment between administrative efforts and student experiences, these investments may yield suboptimal results. By investigating where and why these disconnects occur, this study seeks to provide actionable insights for refining retention strategies, ensuring that support systems are not only well-designed but also effectively communicated, accessible, and student-centred.

This study investigates the differences between student-reported experiences and institutional follow-up actions through an analysis of survey responses from at-risk students. By comparing administrative data with student feedback, we identify key areas of disconnect, such as communication breakdowns, perceived lack of personalisation, and delayed responses, that may hinder intervention effectiveness. The findings aim to inform policy and practice, helping institutions bridge the gap between their support mechanisms and student expectations to enhance engagement, satisfaction, and academic success. In the following section, we present an overview on the review of related literature, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

The Importance of Interventions for Academically At-Risk Students

A robust body of empirical research has firmly established the critical importance of early, targeted interventions in promoting retention and academic achievement among at-risk student populations. Ground-breaking work by Tinto (1993) laid the theoretical foundation for contemporary retention strategies through his Student Integration Model, which posits that both academic and social integration serve as vital predictors of persistence. His longitudinal studies demonstrated that structured, institutionally supported interventions could reduce first-year attrition rates by as much as 15-20% by facilitating these dual integration processes. This theoretical framework has been operationalised and expanded through subsequent large-scale research, most notably by Kuh et al. (2006) in their comprehensive National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) studies. Their findings revealed that institutions implementing multifaceted support systems - particularly those combining proactive advising (with required first-year meetings), learning communities (showing 8-12% higher retention rates), and supplemental instruction - achieved significantly higher levels of student engagement and six-year graduation rates. The most effective institutions in their study demonstrated that such interventions worked best when implemented as interconnected systems rather than isolated programmes. Contemporary research has further refined our understanding of effective intervention strategies. Lindo et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of 37 institutional case studies, identifying three key characteristics of successful early alert systems: (1) implementation within the first 6-8 weeks of term, (2) involvement of multiple campus stakeholders, and (3) mandatory follow-up protocols. Similarly, Mayhew et al.'s (2016) longitudinal study of 25,000 students demonstrated that personalised, behaviourally nudged feedback interventions could improve course completion

rates by 11-14%, with particularly strong effects for first-generation and underrepresented minority students.

However, this wealth of research on intervention design has largely focused on institutional implementation factors while neglecting critical student-centred variables. Emerging scholarship suggests that even the most meticulously designed retention initiatives often fail to account for three crucial mediating factors:

- **Student awareness:** Many at-risk students remain unaware of available support services due to ineffective communication channels
- **Accessibility barriers:** Structural obstacles (scheduling conflicts, transportation issues, digital divides) frequently prevent service utilisation
- **Perceived value:** Students often discount interventions they view as irrelevant to their specific needs or circumstances

This implementation-perception gap represents a significant challenge in retention work, suggesting that institutions must adopt a more holistic approach that considers both the design of interventions and how they are received by their intended beneficiaries. Recent work by Baker et al. (2022) proposes a "student-ready college" framework that flips traditional retention paradigms, emphasising institutional responsibility for creating accessible, visible, and student-centred support systems rather than placing the onus solely on students to seek help.

Student Perceptions of Institutional Support

An increasingly robust line of inquiry in higher education research has focused on examining student perceptions of academic support services, uncovering significant disjunctures between institutional objectives and students lived experiences. This body of work challenges traditional assumptions about student support by demonstrating that programme effectiveness depends fundamentally on students' subjective interpretations and valuations of the services offered.

Baker and Griffin's (2010) critical ethnographic study of academic support programmes at six institutions revealed a troubling paradox: even programmes with substantial funding and theoretically sound designs often failed to achieve their intended outcomes when students perceived them as impersonal or irrelevant to their specific needs.

Notably, studies on at-risk student interventions (Larson et al., 2019; Robinson & Hope, 2020) indicate that:

Communication gaps—Students often report unclear or inconsistent messaging regarding available support services, with many perceiving such support as either inaccessible or difficult to locate.
Accessibility barriers—Some interventions are logistically difficult to access (e.g., inconvenient timing, lack of digital access).
Perceived stigma—Students may avoid seeking help due to fear of being labelled as "struggling."
These findings suggest that institutional follow-up processes must be not only well-structured but also student-centred to ensure uptake and effectiveness.

The Discrepancy Between Institutional Actions and Student Experiences

Despite the widespread adoption of retention initiatives across higher education institutions, there remains a significant gap in scholarly attention to the critical disjuncture between institutional follow-up protocols and student perceptions of these interventions. This oversight is particularly noteworthy given the growing body of evidence suggesting that programme efficacy depends as much on student reception as on institutional implementation. The existing literature reveals several concerning

patterns that merit closer examination. Habel and Whitman's (2016) landmark study provides compelling evidence of this perception-implementation gap, demonstrating that while university records meticulously documented extensive outreach campaigns (averaging 4.2 contacts per at-risk student), nearly 42% of surveyed students had no recollection of receiving any intervention. This startling discrepancy suggests systemic failures in communication modalities or message framing that prevent institutional efforts from registering with their intended audience.

Further complicating this picture, Jones et al. (2018) conducted a controlled comparative analysis of different outreach methods, finding that generic email communications had an abysmal 11% engagement rate among at-risk students, while personalized outreach strategies (incorporating name-specific references and tailored content) achieved a 63% response rate. Their mixed-methods analysis revealed that students frequently perceived automated messages as institutional "check-box" exercises rather than genuine offers of support. Perhaps most troubling are the findings of Tanes and Arnold (2020), whose longitudinal study demonstrated that early warning systems - often touted as proactive retention tools - frequently backfire due to student misinterpretation. Their research identified that 68% of recipients interpreted these warnings as indicators of impending failure rather than as opportunities for support, triggering defensive avoidance behaviours rather than help-seeking.

These collective findings underscore a fundamental truth in student retention work: the mere existence of intervention systems guarantees nothing. Institutions must adopt a more nuanced understanding of how their well-intentioned systems are received, interpreted, and acted upon by students. This requires moving beyond simple implementation metrics to develop sophisticated assessment frameworks that capture: Student awareness and recall of interventions, Emotional and cognitive responses to outreach attempts, The perceived utility and accessibility of offered supports, as well as the cultural and psychological barriers to help-seeking behaviours

Only through such comprehensive evaluation can institutions hope to bridge the troubling gap between designed interventions and lived student experiences, transforming retention efforts from bureaucratic exercises into genuinely impactful support systems**.**

Toward a More Responsive Support System

Contemporary research in student support services strongly advocates for a paradigm shift toward more student-centred approaches in at-risk interventions. This emerging perspective emphasises three critical dimensions of effective support systems. First, scholars highlight the importance of establishing genuine two-way communication channels (Karp & Bork, 2022), where students are not merely passive recipients of institutional directives but active participants in co-creating their support pathways. This dialogic approach ensures that intervention strategies are informed by students lived experiences and actual needs, rather than being solely based on institutional assumptions.

Second, researchers underscore the necessity of moving beyond standardised, one-size-fits-all communication to implement tailored messaging strategies (Varney, 2021). This requires institutions to develop sophisticated systems that can deliver context-specific guidance based on a comprehensive understanding of individual students' academic trajectories, learning styles, and personal circumstances. Such personalised approaches have been shown to significantly increase student engagement with support services compared to generic alerts or mass communications.

Third, and perhaps most fundamentally, recent studies emphasise the need to reconceptualise academic support as an integral component of the learning ecosystem rather than a remedial measure (Quaye et al., 2019). This involves deliberately designing interventions that normalise help-seeking behaviours and position academic support as a standard resource available to all students, thereby reducing the stigma often associated with utilising such services. By implementing these three

principles - dialogic engagement, personalised communication, and destigmatization - institutions can create more equitable and effective support systems that truly meet the needs of at-risk students.

While existing literature establishes the value of interventions and acknowledges perceptual gaps, few studies directly compare institutional records of follow-up actions with student-reported experiences. This study fills that gap by analysing survey responses from at-risk students alongside institutional intervention logs, identifying specific areas where communication and support delivery can be improved.

The Case Study

To identify susceptible students and modules, the case study institution uses an "At-Risk Framework" that divides risk indicators into academic and non-academic areas. Prior academic failure or dropout histories, as well as patterns in module performance, are important factors. Up until 2021, at-risk kids were identified manually; now, with the implementation of Powerhead's analytics platform, automated, data-driven identification of these pupils is possible through early identification using the early warning system (EWS). By giving lecturers more control over intervention design, this change guarantees context-specific assistance that is in line with identified concerns. By combining localised remediation with the recently developed advanced analytics, the framework improves accuracy in addressing attrition, a tactic that has been demonstrated to increase retention in comparable institutions (Kuh et al., 2022; Baker & Jankowski, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by Self-Efficacy theory popularized by Albert Bandural (Bandura, 1977). The theory provides a useful framework for exploring how academically at-risk students perceive and respond to university support interventions. According to the theory, individual's beliefs in their capabilities to successfully perform tasks impact their motivation, persistence, and academic outcome (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 1996). Contextually, students' perceptions of institutional follow-up actions, such as academic advising, counseling, and support communication, may shape their confidence in overpowering academic challenges. Where the perception of students indicates delayed support systems, impersonal, or ineffective, their academic self-efficacy may drop, leading to reduced engagement and persistence. On the other hand, a timely and personalized institutional intervention may strengthen students' belief in their capability to excel academically, as supportive educational environments have been found to positively influence academic self-efficacy and student achievement (Høigaard et al., 2015; Pajares, 1996). Therefore, Self-Efficacy Theory as applied in the current study helps explicate the discrepancies between students' perceptions and institutional actions by highlighting the role of supportive educational environments in fostering students' confidence, motivation, and academic success. The choice of this theory in the current study is informed by the result of a study which revealed that Self-efficacy was linked to sustaining motivation, overcoming fear of failure, supporting self-study, and guiding academic choices (Şahin, 2025).

Method

This section outlines the approach followed in achieving the objectives of the study. It discusses the study design, population, sample and sampling size, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

Study design

This study employs a research approach that involves both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine discrepancies between institutional follow-up actions and student perceptions among those identified as academically at-risk. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of institutional practices and students lived experiences.

This dual approach enables the collection of measurable outcomes while also capturing nuanced student perspectives on the support they receive.

Study population

This study focuses on undergraduate students who were identified as academically at-risk during the 2023–2024 academic year through the institution's Early Warning System, part of a broader At-Risk Framework incorporating both academic and non-academic indicators, at a public university in South Africa. The 2023–2024 academic year was chosen for this study the institution only introduced a data-driven initiative in 2021 and began piloting the Early Warning System (EWS) in 2023, leaving no institutional data available for previous years. The scope was focused on examining student experiences and perceptions with institutional follow-up actions after being flagged.

Sampling and sample size

The sample consisted of students across various levels of study and academic programmes who had been flagged by the system. A web-based, self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data, allowing students to reflect on their interactions with institutional support processes. The sample aimed to capture a range of perspectives, ensuring that the analysis reflected both the diversity of the at-risk cohort and the variation in institutional responses. A minimum response threshold of 5% was set to ensure that the data would be sufficient to observe meaningful patterns and support credible interpretations of the discrepancies between institutional actions and student experiences. Besides, this percentage was considered sufficient to capture diverse student experiences and identify patterns relevant to the research objectives which aligns with the concept of information power coined by Malterud et al. (2016). The concept focuses on data saturation in yielding the high information needed to respond to the objectives of the study.

Table 1 below analyses the participants' profiles.

Table 1: Respondents Demographical Profile

Faculty	**Target Population (8234)**	**No Responded (230)**
Engineering, Bult Environment & Information Technology	2096	56
Management & Public Administration Science	2428	77
Economics & Financial Services	661	18
Law, Humanities & Social Science	215	05
Medicine. & Heath Science	11	0
Natural Science	209	15
Education	2604	59
First Year Status		
Yes	2710	98
No	5524	132
Sex		
Female	4463	132
Male	3761	98

Data collection

This study employed a self-administered, web-based questionnaire as its primary data collection tool, selected for its cost-effectiveness, ease of distribution, and robust security measures. The tool ensured participant anonymity and convenience, reducing participation barriers. Survey design captured both quantitative data (e.g., satisfaction scores, resource usage frequency) and qualitative data (e.g., open-

ended suggestions), enabling a dual analysis of at-risk students' challenges and needs. The questionnaire was not piloted due to time and logistical constraints associated with the study. This is acknowledged as a limitation, as piloting could have enhanced the refinement of items. However, care was taken to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions through expert review and alignment with the study objectives. This was further strengthened using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to support the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Participation in the study was facilitated via email invitation, which included information and ethical disclosures. Besides, a follow-up reminder was sent after two weeks to ensure improvement in the response rates.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and Power BI primarily through descriptive statistical techniques. These included frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations to examine demographic characteristics, service utilization patterns, and trends across participant responses. The analysis focused on identifying patterns and relationships within the data rather than testing hypotheses. Consequently, no inferential statistical tests, such as t-tests, chi-square tests, ANOVA, or regression analyses, were conducted. On the other hand, qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns in participants responses. Thematic analysis entails a six (6) step framework of familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The research team integrated findings from both data strands in the discussions and conclusion to align with the study objectives, with a focus on informing institutional policy and support strategies.

Ethical considerations

In line with research practices that involve human subjects, ethical standards were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained through the initial email invitation. Besides, the use of web-based questionnaires ensured participants anonymity and confidentiality. Also, data was securely managed, and participants were pre-informed about the purpose of the study, their rights and willingness to withdraw at any time and how their data would be used.

Results

Overall, student participation in the survey was notably low, with only 230 out of 8,234 students responding, yielding a participation rate of 3.58%. Figure 1 below provides a more detailed analysis of participants' characteristics and summarises student survey results by faculty, gender, and first-year status.

Faculty	Target Population	Number of Respondents	Participation Rate (%)
Total	**8234**	**230**	**3,58%**
Engineering, Built Env and IT	2096	56	3,74%
Mngt and Public Admin Sciences	2428	77	3,15%
Economics and Financial Sciences	661	18	3,67%
Law, Humanities and Social Science	215	5	4,3%
Medicine and Health Science	11	0	0%
Natural Science	209	15	1,39%
Education	2604	59	4,41%
First-Year Status			
Yes	2710	98	2,76%
No	5524	132	4,18%
Sex			
Female	4463	132	3,38%
Male	3761	98	3,83%

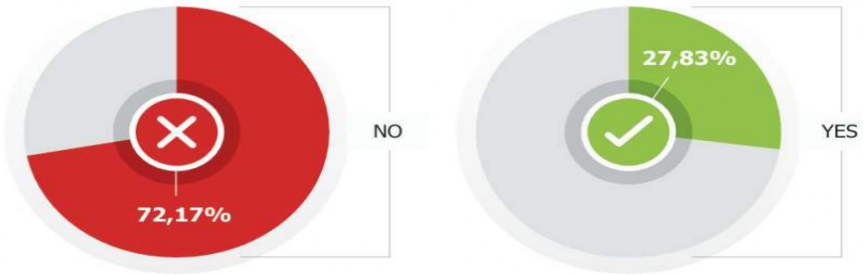
Figure 1: Student Awareness of Being Identified for Academic or Support Assistance

As shown in Figure 1 above, the Faculty of Education recorded the highest number of respondents, with 59 students participating, for a participation rate of 4.41%. Following closely was the Faculty of Law, Humanities, and Social Science, which, despite its small target population, achieved a 4.30% participation rate with 5 respondents.

The Faculty of Natural Science had one of the lowest participation rates, at only 1.39%, while the Faculty of Medicine and Health Science recorded no participation, highlighting serious underrepresentation in that discipline. In terms of student year levels, first-year students had a participation rate of 2.76%, accounting for 98 of the 2,710 students in that group. Non-first-year students demonstrated higher engagement, with a participation rate of 4.18% from 132 out of 3,157 students.

Gender representation showed a slightly higher participation rate among male students (3.83%) than among female students (3.38%). While the difference is minimal, it suggests that male students were slightly more engaged in this survey activity. This figure highlights critical gaps in survey engagement, particularly across some faculties and groups, and signals the need for more effective communication strategies to ensure that all identified at-risk students receive and engage with support initiatives.

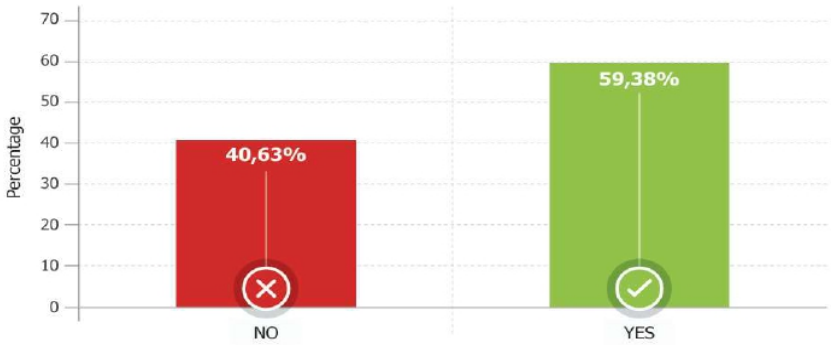
As part of the communication strategies, students need to be notified when flagged as at-risk, enabling them to access and benefit from available support services. Figure 2 shows students' overall responses regarding their identification for academic support interventions. Out of a total of 230 respondents, the majority of 168 students (72.41%), indicated that they were not identified, while only 64 students (27.59%) reported that they had been identified as needing support. On the other hand, 27.59% of students acknowledged being identified, as shown in Figure 2 below.



Responses	Number of Students	Percentage
No	168	72,41%
Yes	64	27,59%
Grand Total	**232**	**100,00%**

Figure 2: Students Identified for Academic or Support Assistance

The analysis from Figure 2 highlights the need to refine student support strategies, ensuring that at-risk learners are both accurately identified and effectively informed about available assistance. After being identified, according to the institution under the case study, students need to be contacted by one of the support service staff, depending on their needs (*WSU, 2022, Student Tracking Framework*). Figure 3 below shows the responses of students identified as at-risk regarding whether they were contacted by institutional support personnel. Of 64 students, 38 (59.38%) reported being contacted, while 26 (40.63%) stated they received no communication or outreach following their identification.



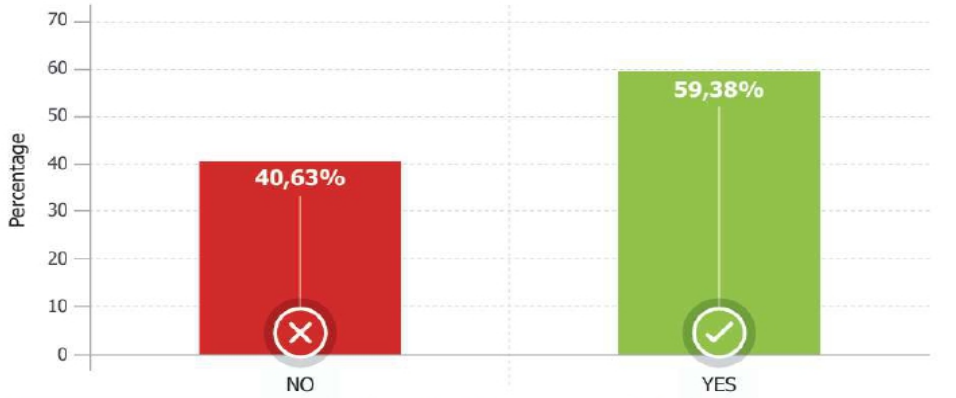
Responses	Number of Students	Percentage
No	26	40,63%
Yes	38	59,38%
Grand Total	**64**	**100,00%**

Figure 3: Students Contacted by the Support Team

This finding suggests that while institutional support systems are in place and functioning for a majority, a significant portion of identified students may still be falling through the cracks. The 59.38% who were contacted reflect a positive level of engagement, indicating that outreach mechanisms are operational. However, the 40.63% who reported receiving no contact points attributed it to an

inconsistency in the application or perception of support interventions. These results highlight the need for more standardised and transparent communication strategies to ensure that all identified students are aware of and benefit from the support services intended for them.

Figure 4 below shows the follow-up communication received by students identified as at risk. Of the 64 students identified, 38 (59.38%) reported being contacted by institutional support personnel, while 26 (40.63%) indicated they were not contacted after identification.

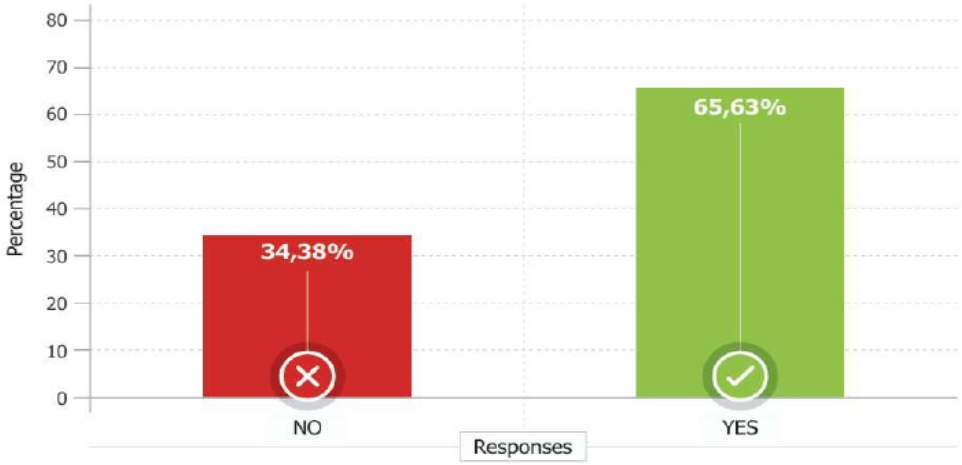


Responses	Number of Students	Percentage
No	26	40,63%
Yes	38	59,38%
Grand Total	**64**	**100,00%**

Figure 4: Students Contacted by Institutional Support Personnel After Being Identified as At-Risk

This data reveals that just over half of the identified students received follow-up support, suggesting that outreach mechanisms are in place and functioning to some extent. However, the fact that over 40% of students did not receive any communication raises concerns about gaps in the support system.

Figure 5 below shows student responses regarding departmental support following their identification as at-risk. Of 64 respondents, 42 students (65.63%) reported receiving support from their respective departments, while 22 students (34.38%) reported not receiving any departmental support.



Responses	Number of Students	Percentage
No	22	34,38%
Yes	42	65,63%
Grand Total	**64**	**100,00%**

Figure 5: Students Who Received Support from Their Respective Departments

These results suggest that most students who were identified for assistance benefited from departmental interventions, reflecting positively on the departments' efforts to provide academic or psychosocial support. However, the fact that over a third of respondents (34.38%) reported not receiving any support points to a need for more consistent practices across departments.

The variation in departmental responses may affect student outcomes and perceptions of institutional care. Therefore, it is essential to establish clear protocols and monitoring systems to ensure equitable and consistent support for students identified as at-risk across all departments.

Institutional Comprehensive Support Services for Student Success

The WSU student tracking system framework states that students in need of help can get it from a variety of support services offered by different departments within the university, each of which is designed to address academic and personal requirements (*WSU, 2022, Student Tracking Framework*).

Amongst these interventions from various support services, we have: *Peer academic leaders (PAL)*: Provide mentorship and assist students in forming productive study habits and in difficult courses. Academic advisor: Assists students in choosing courses, planning their degrees, and pursuing their professional goals to help them navigate their academic journey. These programmes are intended to help students thrive in and out of the classroom by supporting them in their academic endeavours and in managing their general well-being. *The Tutoring services:* Offers individualised academic support after class, with a senior student focusing on subjects that might be challenging for other students. *The Writing Center:* Provides workshops and one-on-one consultations to enhance the student's writing techniques, such as essay structure, referencing, thesis development, research methods and any other writing issues they may face in their academic journey. *Teaching and Learning with Technology:* Aims to offer students support through technology-related interventions and digital literacy initiatives. These efforts assist students in becoming acquainted with the university's technology resources, enabling them to make efficient use of them for their academic achievement. To

foster a collaborative learning atmosphere, **lectures** also actively interact with their students, identifying those who are having difficulty and pointing them in the direction of the right resources for more assistance. In addition to academic help, students can take advantage of academic advising and health services to promote their personal growth and well-being. For students who are struggling with stress, anxiety, or other psychological issues that may impact their academic performance, health services provide counselling and mental health support. Figure 6 below illustrates the variety of academic and student support services accessed by those who were identified as at-risk. This data provides valuable insights into the support structures students rely on and highlights the resources that are most frequently utilised.

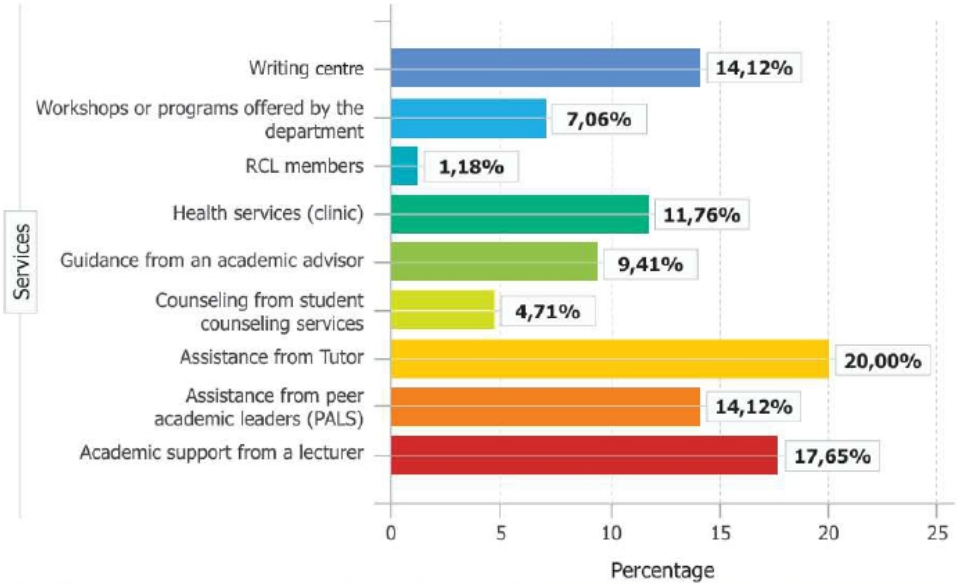


Figure 6: Types of Academic and Support Services Received by Students

According to respondents, the most accessed academic support came from lecturers (23.8%) and tutors (20.95%), emphasizing the central role that academic staff and tutors play in student success. These findings confirm that students primarily turn to individuals directly involved in their learning processes when they need assistance.

Peer Academic Leaders (PALs) also played a meaningful role, supporting 12.38% of students, which reflects the impact of peer-led initiatives in supplementing formal academic support. Similarly, the Writing Centre, used by 14.28%, served as a crucial academic resource for developing writing and communication skills, especially important in assessment preparation and academic success.

In terms of broader student well-being, health services (clinic) were accessed by 9.52% of students, while academic advisors supported 8.57%, and counselling services were sought by 3.8%. Though these percentages are smaller, they still reflect important avenues of non-academic support that contribute to students' overall functioning and success.

A notably small percentage (0.95%) of students reported receiving support from the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) members. This low engagement may reflect a lack of awareness or a misalignment in terminology, as "RCL" is a term typically associated with high school governance. In

the context of higher education, students may confuse RCL with SRC (Student Representative Council), potentially impacting how they identify and engage with student leadership support.

This data highlights areas where further promotion, clarification, or enhancement of student support services may be necessary, particularly around underutilized resources such as counselling and student leadership structures. Strengthening communication and outreach regarding the full spectrum of support options can ensure more holistic assistance for at-risk students.

Overall Academic Feedback

Students were invited to provide overall academic feedback on the support offered by the faculty in an open-ended format. The open-ended responses provide valuable insights into the support available and students' experiences during this process. Several recurring themes emerged from the analysis, including Motivational and Academic Support, Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health, Overwhelming Study Load and Academic Pressure, and the Role of Support Systems in Student Resilience.

The feedback highlights both positive aspects and challenges faced by students, offering crucial information on the effectiveness of various support services. For instance, one student expressed:

> *"I was thinking in that time I will be fine but not I'm not sleeping because I think about everything. I don't know what happened to me but it's part of growing. The support I have is about how to be a student and don't think too much like me."*

This quote reflects the emotional struggles and the importance of guidance in managing student life and mental health.

Student Experiences and Feedback

Many students reflected positively on their first-year experience at WSU, highlighting the support systems that helped them adjust and succeed academically. For example, one student shared:

> *"Well my WSU first year experience was one of the best experiences starting from the writing centre where they gave us support and guidance on how we are expected to write our assignments, which helped us improve our year marks. Support and guidance from my lectures, tutors and PALs was the best. I'm looking forward to better improve myself in my second year."*

Other students emphasized the motivational and emotional support they received, which was critical in managing academic pressures:

> *"The academic advisor was giving motivational advice and how academics can be so hard sometimes, which leads to anxiety."*
>
> *"Academic lecture helped me by motivation and advice on how to gain confidence and focus. Tutor through their efforts to make every student to understand. They're passionate and willing to help at all times."*

These reflections illustrate the important role of academic and emotional support in fostering student confidence and resilience during challenging times.

Focusing on Lecture and Tutor Contributions

Lectures and tutors are fundamental to fostering student achievement. To maximize their impact, universities should invest in ongoing professional development that enhances their structural skills and keeps them updated with the latest subject knowledge and equips them to engage with. Additionally, institutions must consider workload management to avoid staff burnout and ensure consistent, high-quality academic support.

Enhance Peer Support Structures
Peer-led learning initiatives play a vital role in supporting students' academic progress. Expanding these programmes and providing comprehensive training for peer leaders can boost their capacity to offer meaningful academic guidance. Well-prepared peer mentors help cultivate a supportive learning environment, which positively influences student retention and academic success.

Increase Awareness of Counselling Services
The limited use of counselling services among students may reflect challenges such as a lack of visibility, stigma around seeking mental health support, or accessibility issues. Institutions should prioritise raising awareness of available mental health services through proactive communication strategies. These services must also be approachable, inclusive, and tailored to the needs of a diverse student population

Leverage Writing Centres
Writing Centres offer valuable assistance that helps students improve academic writing, yet their potential remains underutilised. Increasing visibility and access to these centres through extended hours, broader promotion, and more integrated support can ensure more students benefit. Strengthening these services can play a key role in improving academic outcomes across all faculties.

Address the Gap in Departmental Workshops
Only 5.7% of students reported participating in workshop or programmes offered by their departments, suggesting limited engagement with these potentially valuable learning opportunities. From the student perspective, this may reflect a lack of awareness, perceived relevance, or accessibility of these initiatives. To better support students, departments should consider offering workshops that align more closely with students' academic pressures, career aspirations, and personal development goals. Clear communication, flexible scheduling, and incorporating student feedback into the planning process can help ensure that these offerings feel meaningful and responsive to student needs ultimately encouraging greater participation.

Health Services Integration
With nearly 10% of students reporting access to health services, the data highlights a growing recognition among students of the importance of well-being in their academic journey. From the student perspective, health challenges both physical and mental can significantly affect their ability to perform academically and stay engaged. There is an opportunity to adopt a more holistic and student-centred approach by integrating health services with academic support systems. When students experience coordinated care through collaboration between health providers, academic advisors, and student support units, they are more likely to feel understood, supported, and empowered to succeed both personally and academically.

Discussion
The finding that two-thirds of students perceive departmental support positively affirms the critical role academic units play in fostering student success. This corroborates the result of Høigaard et al. (2015) that supportive educational environments have been found to positively influence academic self-efficacy and student achievement. From the student viewpoint, such embedded support is often more approachable and relevant, as it is situated within their day-to-day academic environment (Kuh et al., 2022). However, the substantial minority who feel unsupported reveals a structural gap that institutions cannot afford to ignore. Harper and Quaye (2021) frame this as "structural exclusion," while Jack (2019) notes that first-generation students often experience a "cultural mismatch" when it comes to seeking help. Students may feel overwhelmed or unsure about navigating institutional systems, supporting Padilla's (2022) finding that digital overload leads many at-risk students to miss

key opportunities. Temporal challenges may also play a role, especially for working students who, as Lole et al. (2023) found, often cannot access services during conventional hours.

Students' heavy reliance on lecturers and tutors underscores how critical human connection is to their academic experience. This resonates with Tinto's (2017) interactionist theory, which emphasises the role of faculty-student interaction in fostering academic belonging. From a student perspective, lecturers and tutors often become their most immediate and trusted sources of help, particularly when other systems feel impersonal or inaccessible. However, this may also signal "support inequity" (Karp & Fletcher, 2023), where students lean heavily on teaching staff due to underdeveloped or fragmented institutional support structures. The implication is that institutions may be placing an unsustainable burden on frontline academic staff.

Peer Academic Leaders were positively received by those who engaged with them, reinforcing Dawson et al.'s (2022) assertion that peer mentoring boosts self-efficacy and confidence. However, participation levels suggest underpromotion or insufficient integration into the student experience, particularly when compared to institutions reporting higher participation through structured programmes (Keup, 2021). From the student perspective, peer support can be powerful, especially when it is relatable and easily accessible, yet its potential remains underutilised.

The low engagement with counselling services presents a concerning disconnect. Students may avoid these services due to stigma (Eisenberg, 2021) or because they perceive the support as culturally unresponsive, echoing Lui et al.'s (2022) findings. From a student lens, mental health services may feel disconnected from their lived experiences or too formalised, highlighting the need for more approachable, relatable, and inclusive mental health interventions that normalise help-seeking behaviour.

Writing Centre engagement, while appreciated by users, remains limited. This supports Lunsford's (2023) "embedded advantage" theory—students respond well when support is integrated directly into their academic workflows. Yet the low participation in departmental workshops points to a missed opportunity. Students may not see the immediate relevance of such programmes or may be unaware of them entirely. Kuh et al. (2022) argue for the importance of "high-impact practices," and from a student perspective, workshops that are engaging, well-promoted, and clearly tied to academic or career outcomes are more likely to gain traction. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to offer support but to design it in ways that students perceive as immediately valuable and accessible.

The open-ended responses reveal four key themes with important implications:

Motivational Support and Faculty Commitment
Students highlighted how the enthusiasm and dedication of their lecturers positively shaped their academic journey. This supports Qualan's (2022) concept of "pedagogical caring ", which emphasises the importance of emotional support in retaining students. Furthermore, many expressed the need for strategies to boost self-confidence, aligning with Bandura's (2021; 1977) self-efficacy theory that highlights the role of belief in one's own abilities

Mental Health Challenges
Numerous students described experiencing high levels of stress, with some reporting extreme anxiety disrupting their sleep and focus. These reflections align with the findings of Lipson et al. (2022), who discuss the cycle of academic stress and its impact on student mental health, particularly in high-pressure environments.

Structural Barriers

Students voiced concerns over structural obstacles such as limited access to tutors and delays in receiving financial aid. These frustrations mirror Goldrick-Rab's (2016) concept of "administrative burdens," which identifies institutional inefficiencies as barriers that disproportionately impact academically vulnerable students. Thus, this negates the finding in a study that found supportive institutional environment as a bedrock to students' positive outcome (Høigaard et al., 2015).

Resilience Through Support

Despite various challenges, students who accessed counselling and writing centre services reported feeling more supported and capable of continuing their studies. This affirms Rendón's (2023) validation theory, which emphasises the empowering effects of affirming and inclusive academic support structures.

Conclusion

Student feedback indicates that institutional support plays a vital role in shaping their educational experience. Many acknowledged the positive impact of supportive lecturers, tutors, advisors, and mental health professionals on their ability to cope with academic demands. Co-curricular and first-year transition programmes also provided crucial assistance. However, ongoing issues such as inconsistent tutor availability, service delays, and resource disparities continue to hinder student success. Financial instability and unaddressed mental health needs, combined with delays in academic results processing, further obstruct timely interventions. To better meet student needs, institutions must improve the availability, accessibility, and responsiveness of their support systems.

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