



## **Leveraging on Stakeholder Involvement to Create a Student Success Culture Through Institutional Capacity Assessment at a University in South Africa**

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**Abstract:** Institutions of higher education face the ongoing challenge of fostering a culture that empowers students to excel academically, professionally, and personally. Such a culture requires a common understanding among all university stakeholders on what constitutes student success and how this can be achieved, and the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) is one tool that can be used to establish this. Using the quantitative methods, this paper discusses how the ICAT helped one South African university assess its capacity for enabling student success and identify strengths and areas for improvement. A structured survey (the ICAT tool) was administered to gather data from institution staff and stakeholders, applying mixed methods, which combined qualitative and quantitative insights to evaluate institutional capacity comprehensively. Results show that completing the self-assessment tool enabled institutional executive management, academic support staff, and academics to evaluate their institution's capacity to improve student success. Through ICAT, the university gained several benefits: insight into the key capacities for student success, stakeholder engagement across all areas of the institution using a common framework to share opinions and identify perception gaps, prioritization of areas for improvement, and the development of strategies to build and strengthen student success interventions.

**Keywords:** Student success, Student support, Stakeholder engagement, ICAT.

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## **Leveraging on Stakeholder Involvement to Create a Student Success Culture Through Institutional Capacity Assessment at a University in South Africa**

Efforts to promote student success in higher education institutions (HEIs) have underscored the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive academic culture. Stakeholder involvement is critical to student success initiatives in any institution of higher learning. By involving various stakeholders – including academic staff, administrative assistants, students, and outside partners – plans to improve student outcomes are more likely to consider the whole university community's needs, viewpoints, and expertise. This article investigates how a South African institution might foster a culture of student achievement by utilizing stakeholder involvement through an Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT).

South Africa's higher education system faces difficulties due to systematic inequalities that resulted from apartheid, socioeconomic gaps, and differing degrees of academic readiness. The historical and socioeconomic background of South Africa makes these difficulties especially acute. A comprehensive strategy that includes stakeholder involvement and institutional capacity building is needed to address these concerns. The ICAT offers a strong framework for assessing and enhancing the institutional capabilities required to promote student achievement. The ICAT provides actionable insights for capacity development by methodically evaluating important domains like leadership, governance, financial management, human resources, and service delivery. This allows for the identification of strengths and areas for improvement. This study explores how a South African university can leverage the ICAT to engage stakeholders and foster a sustainable culture of student success. It examines the outcomes of the capacity assessment, evaluates the roles and contributions of various stakeholders in the assessment process, and assesses their impact on institutional strategies and student success initiatives. This study aims to provide a model for other academic institutions operating in similar environments by highlighting the mutual benefits of stakeholder engagement and institutional capacity evaluation.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a review of relevant literature on student success, stakeholder involvement, and institutional capacity assessment; second, an outline of the research design and methodology; third, a presentation of findings from the case study; and finally, a discussion on the implications for policy and practice. Regarding policy, the findings emphasize the need for a more inclusive and collaborative approach to student success initiatives. Regarding practice, they highlight the importance of leveraging stakeholder involvement and using tools like ICAT for capacity development.

## Literature Review

### Student Success in Higher Education

Promoting student success has been a significant focus of most higher education institutions for several decades. Literature has revealed that student success in higher education is a multifaceted concept ranging from academic achievement, personal development, and post-graduation outcomes (Engle and Tinto, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2005; Tinto, 2012). The fact that more students from a broader range of backgrounds are enrolled in higher education institutions and that this trend is expected to continue has brought greater attention to this issue (NCES, 2014; Trow, 2007). Furthermore, most university dropouts occur during or after their first year of study (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Willcoxson et al., 2011). Understanding student success, especially in their first year, is crucial because obtaining a degree has been associated with cognitive, social, and economic benefits for individuals, their families, and society at large (De Koning et al., 2013; Mayhew et al., 2016). Student success in higher education is a comprehensive and multidimensional construct encompassing various aspects of a student's academic and personal development. It goes beyond academic achievement to include persistence, graduation, and post-graduation outcomes such as career readiness and lifelong learning. Central to student success is holistic development, which integrates academic, emotional, and social growth. Factors such as institutional support, student engagement, and the availability of resources and opportunities play critical roles in fostering student success initiatives. Effective teaching practices, robust student advising systems, student counselling, and inclusive campus environments are essential in supporting students' journey through higher education. In addition, student success is not just about acquiring knowledge but also about developing skills, resilience, and a sense of belonging created by the institution, which empowers students to thrive both during their academic careers and beyond.

In order to promote student success and retention, Tinto (2012) highlighted the importance of institutional support, which includes engagement opportunities, academic advice, and mentoring. Institutions that foster a sense of belonging and community amongst their students tend to have higher student success rates (Tinto, 2012). According to Kuh et al. (2005), institutions that adopted student-centred learning approaches, such as active learning, collaborative projects, and experiential learning, enhanced student engagement and academic performance.

The socioeconomic background of students also significantly impacted their success. Engle and Tinto (2008) discussed how financial aid, scholarships, and support services are critical in helping economically disadvantaged students succeed. Furthermore, Kuh (2008) identified high-impact educational practices, such as undergraduate research, service learning, and internships, as crucial for fostering deep learning and personal development, thereby enhancing student success.

In the South African higher education context, student success is influenced by unique socio-economic and historical factors. The literature highlighted key themes such as historical inequality and equity, financial constraints, academic preparedness, and institutional intervention or support (Badat, 2010; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Mwangi et al., 2018; Themane & Mabasa, 2022; Vambe et al., 2025; Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Letseka and Maile (2008) specifically examined the impact of historical inequalities and the need for equity in higher education.

Academic underpreparedness remains a central challenge. According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013), South Africa's higher education quality council,

underpreparedness manifests in various ways, from struggling in the formal curriculum to difficulty with adjusting to independent study and a university environment. “It takes different forms in different subject areas but the common feature in all settings is that what the students know and can do – attainments that were good enough to gain them entry to higher education – do not match the expectations of the institution (CHE, 2013, p. 57).” Research consistently highlights how the current South African school curriculum fails to adequately prepare learners for the demands of tertiary education (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Jansen, 2011; Mabulana, 2025). This mismatch between curriculum in schools and the expectations of higher education, sometimes referred to as “the articulation gap,” is problematic in that high school education does not end where higher education begins (Chauke & Malatji, 2024; Moyo, 2020; Nthabiseng et al., 2024; Tewari, 2016; Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). This misalignment between the learning requirements of higher education programs and the actual knowledge and competencies that the students bring from the schooling system leaves many underprepared. As the CHE (2013) concluded, what can be said with confidence is that many students entering universities are underprepared for the traditional forms of higher education at present offered in South Africa.

Songca et al. (2021) revealed that these historical inequalities originate from the differentiation and diversification along the lines of race and ethnicity, resulting in the advantages of historically white institutions and the disadvantages of historically black institutions. Badat (2010) argued for the importance of improving student success among traditionally disadvantaged groups to address these disparities. Letseka and Maile (2008) discussed the impact of historical inequalities and the need for equity in higher education, arguing that addressing past disparities is crucial for improving student success among previously disadvantaged groups. According to Scott et al. (2007), financial constraints remained the most significant barrier to student success in South Africa among the more disadvantaged. The authors advocated for increased financial aid and support services to help students from low-income backgrounds.

Further, Badat (2010) highlighted the varying levels of academic preparedness among students entering university. The need for foundational programs and academic support to bridge the preparedness gap was also emphasised. Mwangi et al. (2018) examined the efficiency of institutional interventions, such as tutoring, mentoring, and supplemental instruction, in enhancing student success. They found that targeted support services are essential for improving retention and graduation rates.

### **Institutional Capacity Assessment**

Institutional capacity assessment in higher education is essential for evaluating and enhancing institutions' overall effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. Numerous frameworks, approaches, and effects on institutional performance and student outcomes are covered in the research on this subject. Lusthaus et al. (2002) provided a comprehensive framework for organisational assessment that includes examining organizational motivation, capacity, and performance to help institutions identify their strengths and areas needing improvement. These frameworks provide a structured approach to identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Kaplan (2000) highlighted the importance of capacity building, emphasising the development of internal capacities to address opportunities and challenges from the outside world. Kaplan's work emphasised the significance of organisational learning and innovation in capacity evaluation. In their discussion of the function of quality assurance in institutional capacity assessment, Harvey and Williams (2010) emphasised the necessity of ongoing process

improvement to uphold institutional responsibility and high educational standards. According to Schofield (1998), benchmarking is an essential instrument for evaluating an institution's capabilities since it enables organisations to analyze their performance against best practices and make necessary adjustments. The importance of strategic planning and implementation in institutional capability evaluation was examined by Bryson et al. (2006). According to their research, organisations with strong strategic plans are more likely to accomplish their objectives and improve overall performance. Amaral and Magalhães (2002) investigated the connection between institutional capability and governance structures, pointing out that the resilience and flexibility of institutions depended on efficient governance. In his emphasis on the value of leadership development in capacity building, Sullivan (2004) made the case that institutions need strong leadership to be guided through times of transition and to ensure sustainable development. In their discussion of the vital role that faculty development played in enhancing institutional capacity, Bland et al. (2005) stressed the clear correlation between faculty skill development and professional advancement and the institution's capacity to fulfil its educational mandate. The majority of the literature on the Institutional Capacity Assessment in Higher Education provided a comprehensive overview, highlighting issues such as frameworks, quality assurance, performance impacts, continuous development and the importance of capacity building and leadership development (Amaral & Magalhães, 2002; Bland et al., 2005; Bryson et al., 2006; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Kaplan, 2000; Lusthaus et al., 2002; Schofield, 1998; Sullivan, 2004).

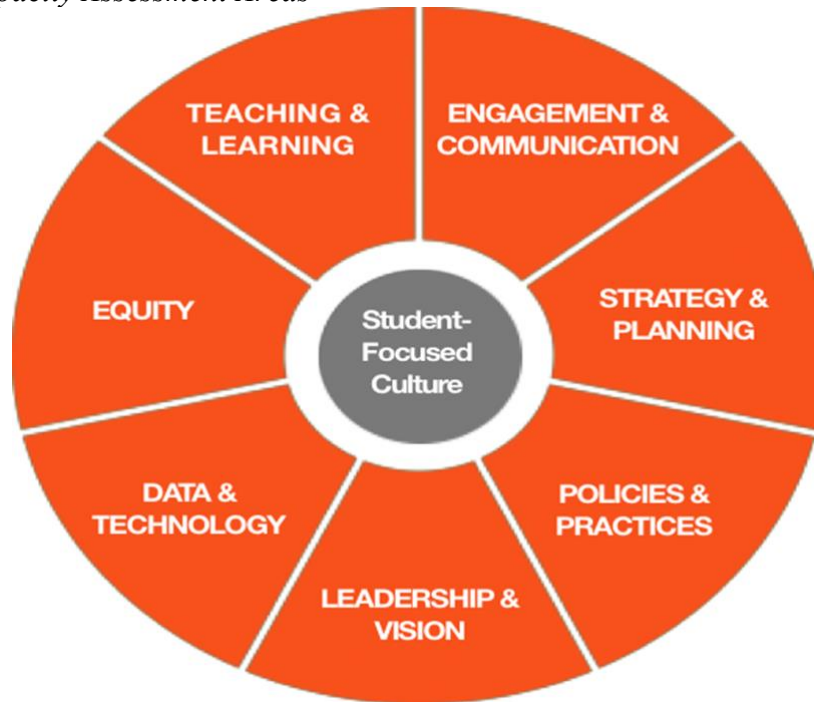
In South Africa, institutional capacity assessment is crucial for addressing historical disparities and promoting equitable access to quality higher education (Songca et al., 2021). The significance of institutional capability evaluation in promoting fairness and transformation in South African higher education was examined by Badat (2010). It entails evaluating an institution's capacity to offer accessible and inclusive education to all societal groups. The importance of governance and leadership in institutional capability was emphasized by Cloete et al. (2004). Steering organizations toward their strategic goals and raising overall performance requires effective leadership. The effect of financial management on institutional ability at South African institutions was investigated by Kraak (2004), who showed how sustainability and the effective use of resources depend on sound financial practices. Lastly, in evaluating institutional competence, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2004) emphasized the need for quality assurance systems.

### **The importance of the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) in Creating a Student Success Culture**

Historically, educational institutions have relied on traditional metrics such as test scores and graduation rates to measure success. However, these metrics often fail to capture educational quality and effectiveness's complex and multifaceted nature (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Consequently, there has been a shift towards more comprehensive approaches considering a broader range of factors, including leadership quality, staff competencies, resource allocation, and organisational culture. The ICAT is pivotal in fostering a culture of student success by providing a comprehensive framework to evaluate and enhance institutional capabilities across critical domains such as leadership, governance, financial management, human resources, and service delivery (Lusthaus et al., 2002), as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Institutional Capacity Assessment Areas*



*Note.* Archive, Siyaphumelela a Saide initiative. Retrieved from <https://siyaphumelela.org.za/surveys24.php>

By systematically identifying strengths and areas for improvement, ICAT empowers institutions to develop targeted strategies that address specific challenges impeding student success, promoting a data-driven approach to decision-making and resource allocation (Kaplan, 2000). Furthermore, ICAT facilitates stakeholder engagement, involving faculty, staff, students, and external partners in a collaborative process that builds a shared commitment to creating an environment conducive to academic, social, and personal student development (Bryson et al., 2006). This comprehensive assessment tool enhances institutional effectiveness and cultivates a supportive, inclusive, and responsive educational culture that prioritises and actively promotes student success (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

In the context of this study, the ICAT is used to help one university in South Africa assess its capacity to enable student success and identify strengths and areas for improvement.

### **Theoretical Framework: Stakeholder Salience Model**

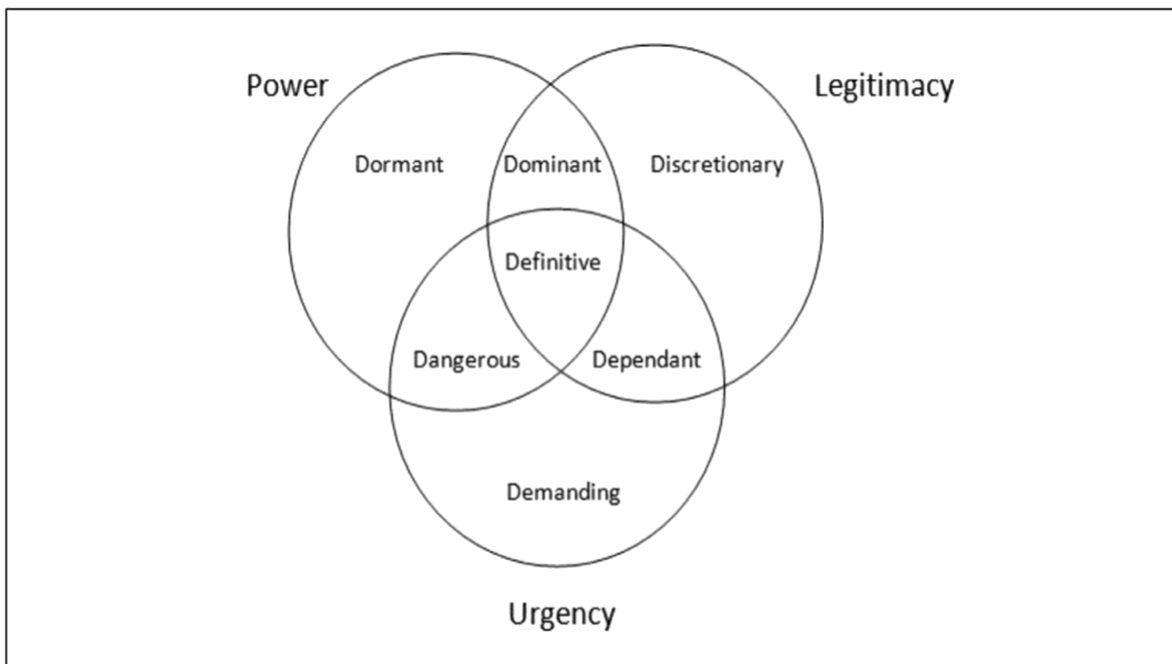
Stakeholder involvement entails collaborating with individuals and utilising available resources to facilitate collective efforts toward achieving shared objectives and goals (Bartle, 2007). Duke and Gansneder (1990) argued that involving stakeholders in school decision-making is essential, not just for democratic reasons but because educational innovations rarely succeed without their participation. In higher education, stakeholder involvement remains equally crucial to ensure that institutions stay responsive to community needs and adaptable to changing societal demands. This study is premised on the Stakeholder Salience Model as proposed by Mitchell et al. (1997). The stakeholder salience theory asserts that managers of organisations and projects should consider the interests of individuals or groups affected by the organisation (Gupta et al.,

2020; Shafique & Gabriel, 2022) and is used as a guide to help managers identify and prioritise stakeholders and their interests (Crane, 2020).

The model provides a framework for prioritizing stakeholders based on three key attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. Power refers to a stakeholder’s ability to influence the organization, legitimacy is the perceived appropriateness of their relationship with the organization, and urgency reflects the time-sensitivity, that is, the time interval in which the response to a request produces a useful effect (Bores, 2022; Del Águila & Del Sagrado, 2023; Raha et al., 2021; Shafique & Gabriel 2022; Van Dijkstra et al., 2021). The model identifies seven types of stakeholders by varying combinations of these attributes, ranging from latent stakeholders, possessing only one attribute and having low priority, to definitive stakeholders, possessing all three attributes and requiring immediate attention (Covin et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2020; Kafiriri & Razavi, 2021). This model helps organizations identify and respond effectively to stakeholders based on the significance of their claims, ensuring resource allocation aligns with strategic priorities. Figure 2 gives an overview of the Stakeholder Salience model (Mitchell et al., 1997).

**Figure 2**

*The Stakeholder Salience Model*



*Note.* Mitchell, Agle, and Wood, 1997.

In applying the Stakeholder Salience Model to the context of higher education, Kezar and Lester (2011) emphasised the importance of collaborative governance, where stakeholders, including students, staff, and external partners, are actively involved in decision-making processes. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. Bringle and Hatcher (2002) emphasized that community engagement strengthens stakeholder involvement and encourages higher education institutions to collaborate with community stakeholders and local partners to enrich student learning and enhance institutional relevance. According to Etzkowitz

and Leydesdorff (2000), partnerships between universities and industry stakeholders are vital for driving innovation and economic development, aligning educational programs with labour market needs to prepare graduates for their careers. Lizzio and Wilson (2009) highlighted the importance of student participation in institutional governance. Engaging students in decision-making processes empowered them and led to more effective and inclusive policies.

In South Africa, stakeholder involvement in higher education is crucial for addressing the country's unique socioeconomic and historical challenges caused by apartheid. Badat (2010) discussed the need for inclusive stakeholder engagement to address the historical inequities that have shaped South African higher education. Engaging diverse stakeholders ensures that policies and practices are equitable and inclusive. Jansen (2002) also observed the role of stakeholders in policy development and implementation, emphasising the importance of involving government, academia, and civil society in shaping higher education reforms. Further, Cele (2004) highlighted the importance of amplifying student voices in institutional governance. Ensuring students actively participate in decision-making processes is crucial for creating a responsive and inclusive educational environment. Bender (2008) stated that fostering social and economic growth requires forging strong relationships between academic institutions, local communities, and business sectors. These collaborations help coordinate academic curricula with societal and economic demands to support students throughout their academic journey and beyond.

## **Methodology**

### **Present Case Study**

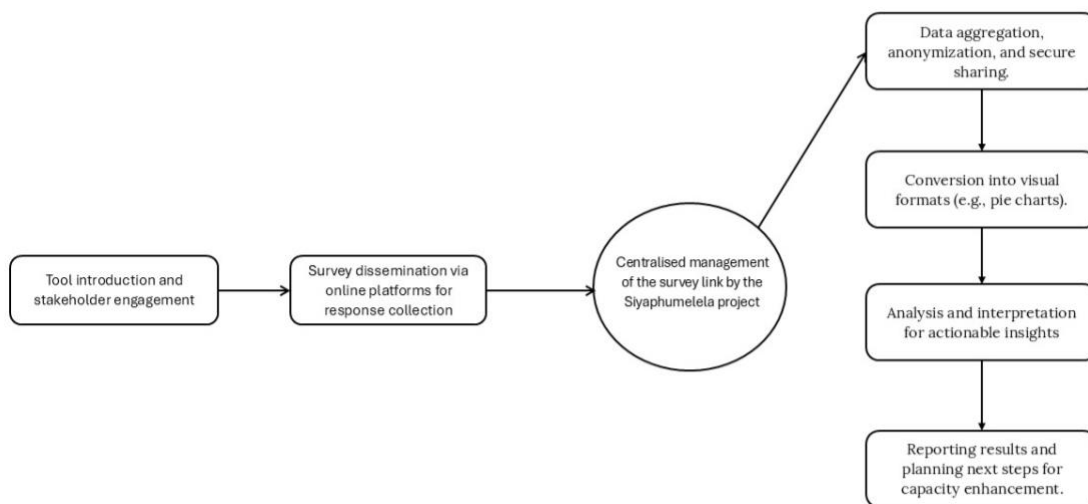
The setting of this present case study is the South African higher education system, a landscape marked by significant inequalities among institutions, driven by their diverse geographic locations, levels of resourcing, and distinct cultural, racial, and political histories (Leibowitz et al., 2015; Leibowitz et al., 2017). Under the oppressive regimes of apartheid and colonialism, these social inequalities were deeply entrenched and permeated all facets of social life, including the higher education system (Songca et al., 2021). This systemic exclusion particularly marginalised black individuals and women, reflecting and reinforcing the broader societal injustices of the time (Badat, 2010). Even after thirty years of democracy, the lingering effects of apartheid continue to shape the landscape, leaving student experiences at historically black universities—often situated in rural areas—deeply challenging. These institutions remain marked by isolation, neglect, and inadequate resource provisioning, creating environments that fall short of the educational ideals envisioned for a democratic South Africa (HSRC, 2005; Ndebele et al., 2017; Songca et al., 2021).

Walter Sisulu University (WSU) faces the challenge of enhancing student success despite the socioeconomic inequalities and historical inequities that characterise the students and the region. To address these challenges, WSU embarked on a strategic initiative to leverage stakeholder involvement through the ICAT. WSU has a diverse student population, many of whom come from underprivileged backgrounds with varying levels of academic preparedness. The university recognised that improving student outcomes required a comprehensive approach that involved all stakeholders, students, faculty, administrative staff, and other internal partners. To this end, WSU adopted the ICAT to assess its institutional capacity and identify areas for improvement to foster a supportive environment that promotes student success.

### Research Design and Data Analysis

The ICAT survey utilizes various methods to analyze data tailored to its specific implementation and objectives. It is primarily designed to assess an institution’s capacity across key domains, including teaching and learning, institutional effectiveness, and student success. In the context of this case study, the data analysis procedure followed a systematic approach, comprising the following stages: Tool presentation, survey dissemination via remote link management by the Siyaphumelela Project, data aggregation, data conversion and visualization, and stakeholder feedback and next steps, as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*Survey Procedure*



*Note.* Diagrammatic representation of methodology by the authors

### Tool Presentation

The objective of the tool presentation was to introduce the ICAT to key institutional committees and stakeholders for buy-in and awareness. Comprehensive presentations were developed to communicate the tool’s purpose, methodological structure, validation process, and its significance in driving institutional improvement. The tool was presented at high-level forums, including faculty boards, the Institutional Management Committee (IMC), and senate meetings, with a focus on demonstrating its role in systematically assessing institutional strengths and gaps. Emphasis was placed on how the survey data would directly inform strategies to enhance teaching quality, learning outcomes, and operational efficiency across the institution.

### Survey Dissemination via Newsdesk

This step was aimed at ensuring all relevant stakeholders were informed and provided access to the survey link. An email communication introducing the survey, its purpose, and completion instructions was drafted and disseminated through the university’s Newsdesk platform, which is an online platform for sharing communication. The email included the survey link, managed by the Siyaphumelela project. The Siyaphumelela project is a South African higher education project funded by Kresge Foundation from the USA with the aim to: 1) improve capacity to

collect student data and integrate it with Institutional Research, Information Communication Technology, academic development, student services, planning and academic divisions, 2) create South African models of universities using successful data analytics to improve student outcomes, 3) create greater awareness and support for evidence to improve student success in South Africa, 4) create and highlight a shared vocabulary and consensus on especially effective practices to improve student success and 5) enlarge the cadre of experienced institutional researchers versed in data analytics to support student success. In addition, stakeholders were provided with a deadline for completing the survey. The administrator in the Siyaphumelela project centralised and streamlined data collection to ensure secure and efficient data handling. The university collaborated with the Siyaphumelela project to manage the survey link. The Siyaphumelela project ensured that the link remained active, functional, and accessible to participants until the closing date and monitored the progress of survey completion.

For the institution to have better perceptions of the various salient stakeholders as well as to align interventions and address gaps to reflect the actual experiences of all stakeholder groups, data on various stakeholder identities were captured on the survey. Rather than relying on aggregated data that may mask important disparities, this breakdown provides actionable intelligence to strategically allocate resources, address role-specific needs, and foster evidence-based improvements where they matter most. Table 1 displays the various categories of salient stakeholders who participated in the survey in order to give a picture of the stakeholders who have embraced the integrated student success initiative.

**Table 1**

*Participants by stakeholder category and role*

<b>Participant function</b>	<b>Number</b>
Executive Management	5
Academic Staff	36
Student Development and Support Services	6
Student Academic Support	10
Peer Learning Support	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Through data analysis, we derived actionable insights from the survey data. Data aggregation and visualization were conducted through the descriptive research approach, which relies primarily on low-inference, low-assumption methods that use no or minimal statistical adjustments with basic frequency analysis presented through figures as a particularly useful tool (Loeb et al., 2017). Under descriptive research, graphs, charts, and tables can be used to display descriptive statistics in a way that is easy to understand and interpret in this approach (Alabi & Bukola, 2023; Ghanad, 2023; Wolniak, 2023). Pie charts were used to identify patterns, strengths, and areas requiring improvement.

## Results

This section presents the key findings that emerged from our analysis across the main areas of the evaluation. The capacity levels are categorized into four tiers: Level 1 represents a minimal capacity level where foundational structures are in place but require significant strengthening. Level 2 indicates that basic capacity has been established, though further development is still needed. Level 3 reflects a strong and well-developed capacity level, demonstrating consistent effectiveness. Finally, Level 4 signifies an exemplary capacity level, where best practices are fully institutionalized and serve as a model for excellence.

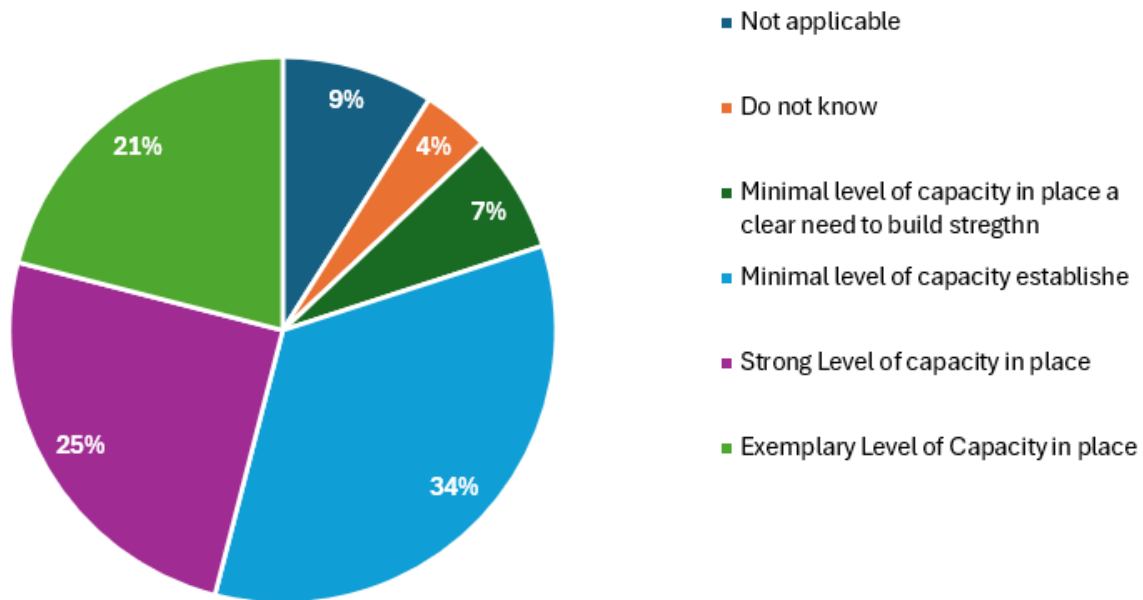
From the identified themes for the study, more than half of the participants felt either a strong or exemplary level of capacity had been developed for the following six themes: 1) the extent to which professional development meets the needs of academics, 2) demonstration of evidence-based, innovative, and reflective teaching practices, 3) integration of teaching excellence in university hiring retention and promotion policies and practices, 4) provision of career guidance services, 5) integration of academic and non-academic support for students, and 6) provision of personalized student support services. Meanwhile, fewer than half of the participants believed that either a strong or exemplary level had been achieved in the following four themes: 1) instructional practices that acknowledge the diversity of student backgrounds, 2) evidence-based data-driven interventions, 3) application of aligned research-based instructional practices, and 4) responsiveness to basic student needs that might affect their performance. These four dimensions, which participants feel need further capacity, are critical for student success. Three of them relate directly to issues that may affect student performance, while the fourth relates to scholarly teaching informed by research, which has a bearing on the effectiveness of the teaching.

### **Application of Aligned Research-Based Instructional Practices**

The first question in Figure 3 examined whether applied, research-based instructional practices align with the institution's vision and goals for student success. In alignment with the institution's vision and mission, applied, research-based instructional practices are essential for fostering academic excellence, addressing diverse learning needs, and promoting continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

**Figure 4**

*Application of aligned research-based instructional practices*



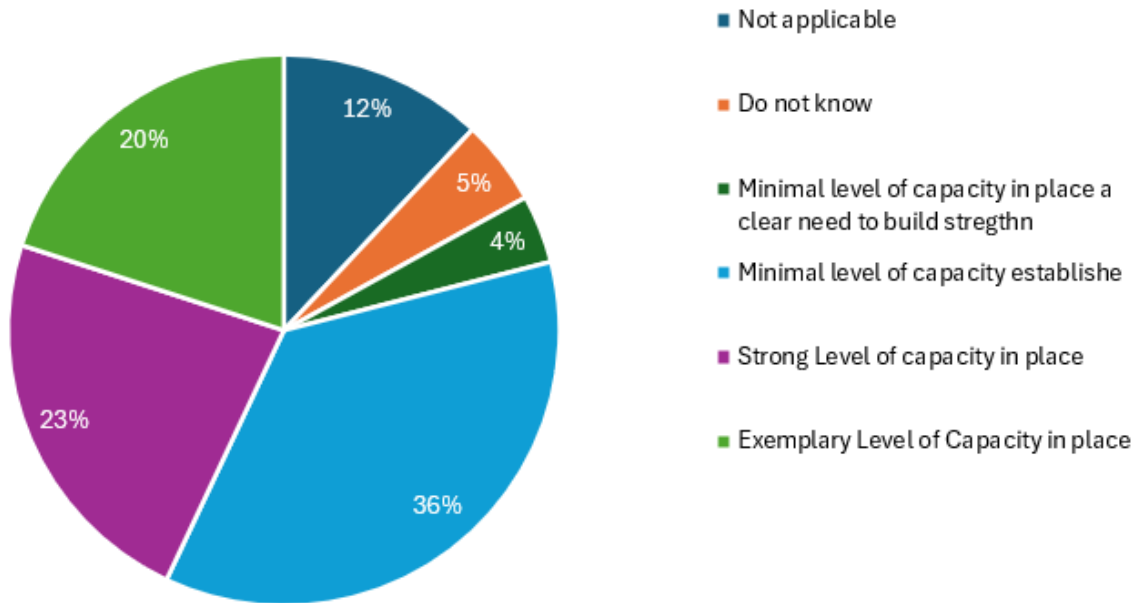
From the findings, 25% of the 36 participants felt that a strong level of capacity had been established to enable academic staff to apply research-based instructional practices that align with the institution's vision and goals for student success, with 21% of the participants citing an exemplary level of capacity in place. Findings further suggest that while there is a substantial foundation (80%) for enabling academic staff to apply research-based instructional practices, the quality and depth of implementation vary. The fact that only 46% of the participants rated the capacity as strong or exemplary suggests that while progress has been made, there is still significant room for improvement. The institutions may need to focus on enhancing the consistency and effectiveness of these practices to ensure they are fully embedded across departments and adequately support the institution's vision for student success. This could involve targeted professional development, better resource allocation, or stronger alignment between institutional policies and teaching practices.

### **Instructional Practices that Acknowledge the Diversity of Student Backgrounds**

Looking at the diversity of students at the institution, there was a need to understand instructional practices that acknowledge the diversity of student backgrounds, which is crucial because it ensures that education is inclusive, equitable, and effective for all learners. At this institution, students come from varied cultural, social, economic, and educational contexts, which influence how they engage with and understand the material. Figure 5 presents the feelings of the participants in this area.

**Figure 5**

*Instructional practices that acknowledge the diversity of student backgrounds*



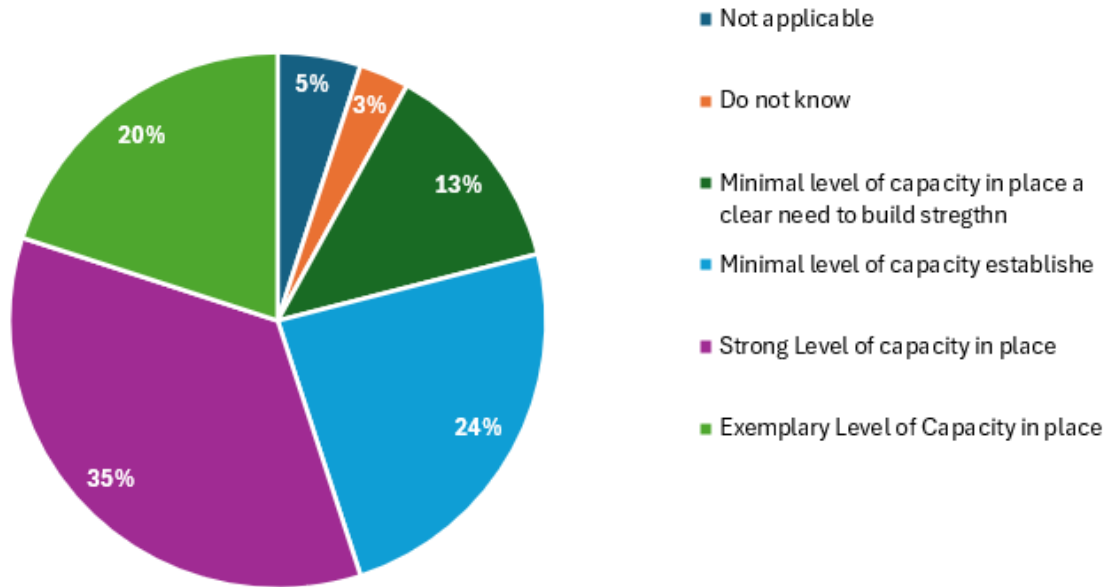
In response to the question on whether instructional practices acknowledge student diversity, 36% of participants indicated that only a minimum level of capacity had been established, while only 20% reported an exemplary level of capacity in place. This suggests that while efforts to incorporate diverse teaching methodologies are underway, they may not yet be fully developed or implemented effectively across the institution. There is a need for further emphasis on building capacity, providing professional development, and embedding inclusive practices to ensure all students' diverse backgrounds are comprehensively addressed, thereby promoting equity and inclusivity in learning environments.

### **The Extent to Which Professional Development Meets the Needs of Academics**

One question examined whether professional development that meets the needs of academics is essential for effective teaching practices. Figure 6 presents participants' responses to this question.

**Figure 6**

*The Extent to which professional development meets the needs of academics*



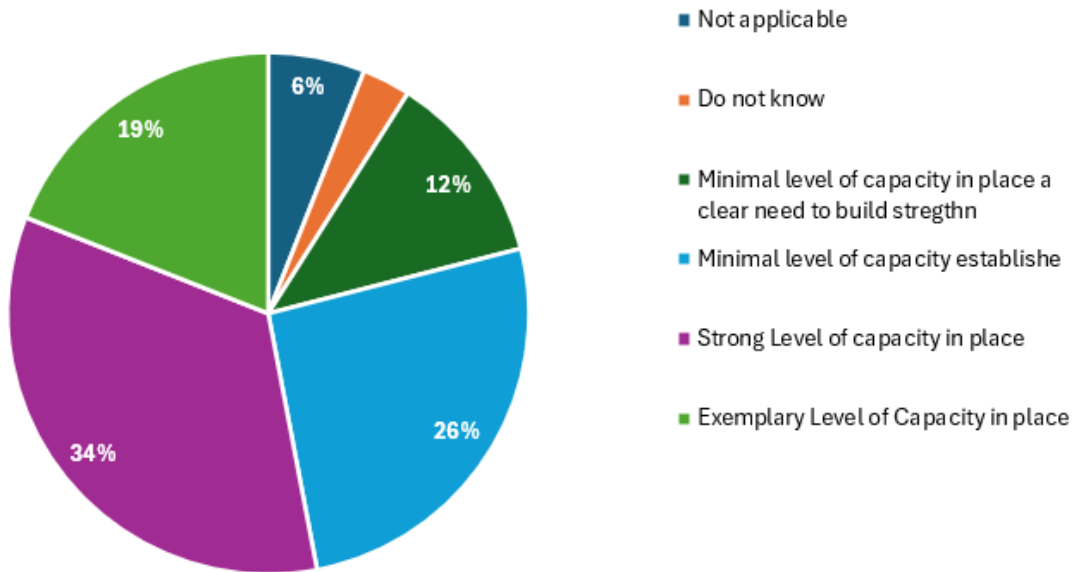
From Figure 6, 35% of participants felt that a strong level of capacity had been established to address the professional development needs of academics at various stages of their careers, with 20% citing an exemplary level of capacity in place. The finding suggests that while professional development support is available, it may not fully meet all academics' diverse and evolving needs, particularly across different career stages. The institution should aim to strengthen these efforts by tailoring professional development opportunities, ensuring equitable access, and focusing on practical, evidence-based training to enhance teaching quality and career advancement.

### **Demonstration of Evidence-Based, Innovative, and Reflective Teaching Practices**

Demonstrating evidence-based, innovative, and reflective teaching practices is crucial for enhancing student success, nurturing professional growth, and staying attuned to the dynamic evolution of education. Figure 7 presents the participants' responses in alignment with this inquiry.

**Figure 7**

*Demonstration of evidence-based, innovative, and reflective teaching practices*



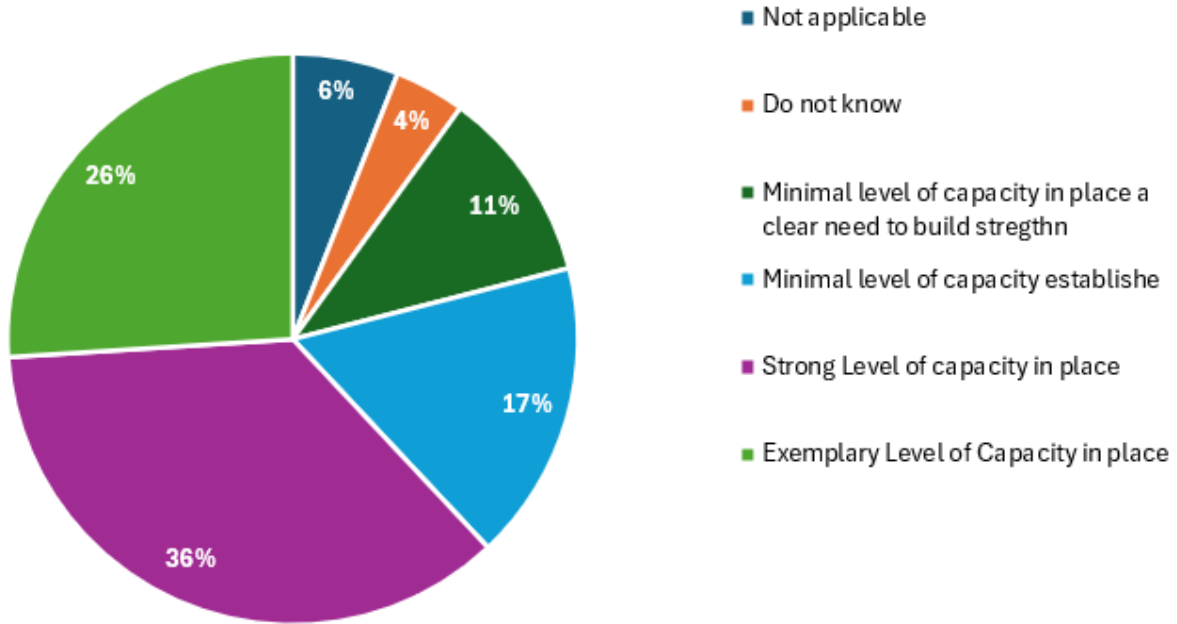
The results show that only 34% of respondents believed there had been some degree of progress in building the necessary capacity to enable academics to effectively demonstrate evidence-based, innovative, and reflective teaching practices. Furthermore, only 19% percent of those surveyed felt that the level of capacity established was exemplary, suggesting that more needs to be done to capacitate and empower academics to enable them to adopt advanced and effective teaching strategies.

### **Integration of Teaching Excellence in University Hiring, Retention, and Promotion Policies and Practices**

In line with the university's strategic goals, excellence in teaching is one of the institution's focus areas; integrating teaching excellence into university policies will foster a teaching-focused culture that benefits students, enhances faculty development, improves institutional quality, and supports the university's overall mission to provide a top-tier educational experience. Figure 8 shows the feelings of participants when asked about the integration of teaching excellence in university hiring, retention, and promotion policies and practices.

**Figure 8**

*Integration of Teaching excellence in university hiring, retention, and promotion policies and Practices*



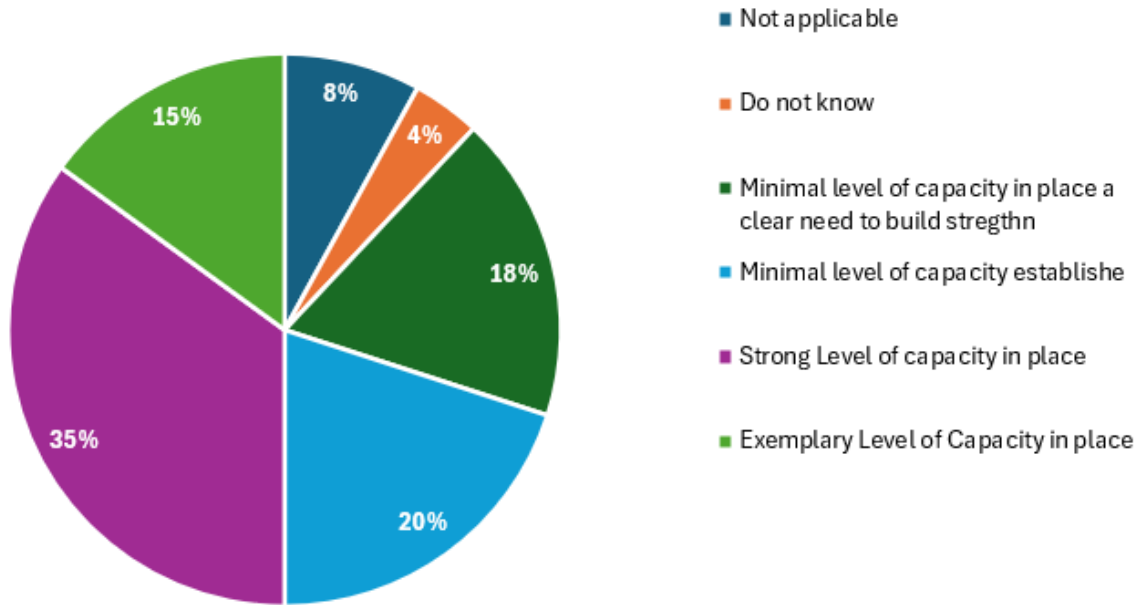
From the responses, 36% of participants felt that a strong level of capacity had been established to ensure that teaching excellence was integrated with university hiring, retention, and promotion policies and practices, with 26% reporting an exemplary level of capacity. This implies that a majority (62%) of participants believed this capacity was not just in place but advanced. This suggests that the institution is successfully fostering a strong focus on teaching quality within its academic workforce management practices.

### **Provision of Personalised Student Support Services**

An institution dedicated to fostering academic success, retention, engagement, and holistic development strongly emphasises personalised student support services. Figure 9 illustrates the participants' responses regarding the provision of these services.

**Figure 9**

*Provision of personalised student support services*



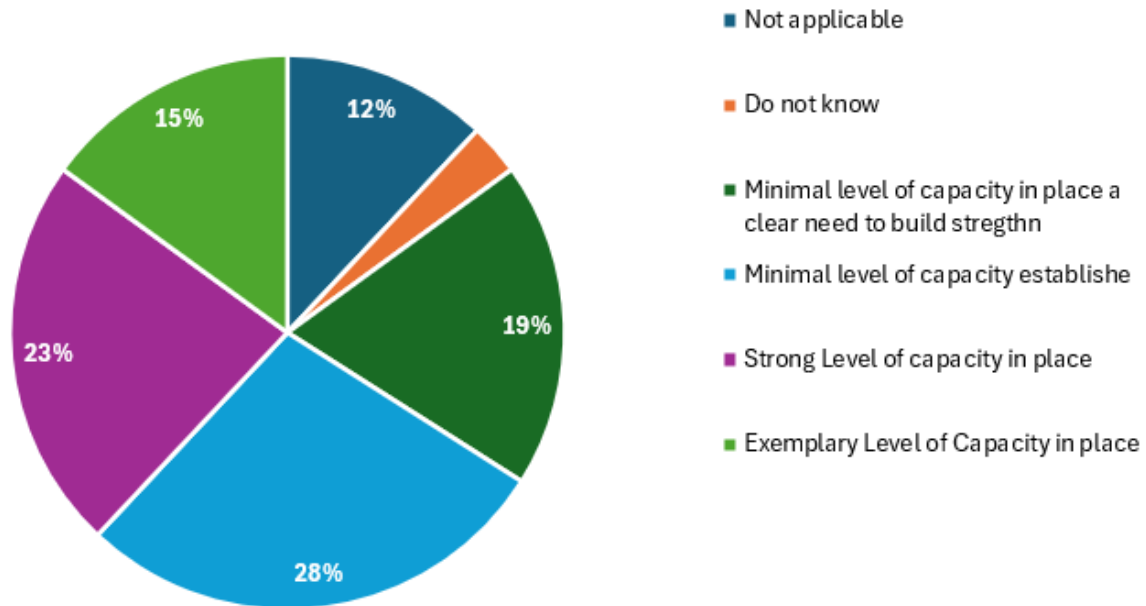
From Figure 9, 50% of participants felt that either a strong level or exemplary level of capacity has been established, and the institution had redesigned university processes so they are more personalized in order to better support students. The fact that only half of the participants felt that the level of capacity established was either strong or exemplary reflects that while the institution is on the right track in creating a more personalized environment for student support, more still needs to be done to improve personalized student support services.

**Responsiveness to Basic Student Needs that Might Affect Their Performance**

Responsiveness to basic student needs is one of the key indicators under the ICAT survey. Figure 10 shows participants' feelings on the extent to which the institution's interventions are responsive to basic student needs.

**Figure 10**

*Responsiveness to basic student needs that might affect their performance*



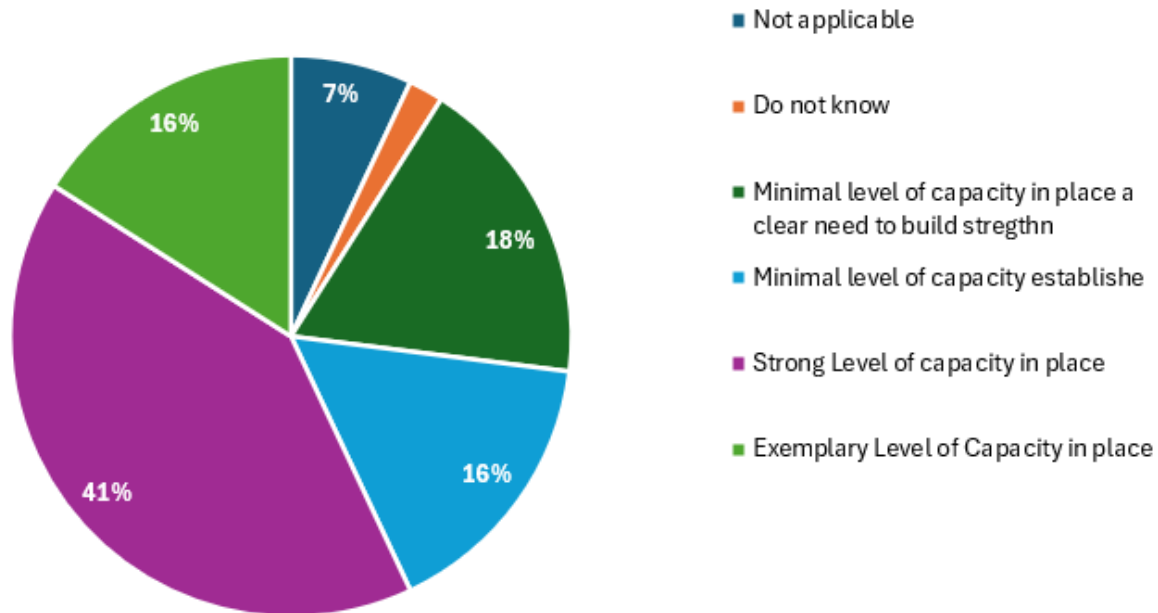
From the findings in Figure 10, 51% of participants felt that either a strong or exemplary level of capacity had been established to address basic student needs that might affect their attendance, class participation, and overall university engagement. These respondents believe the institution has made commendable efforts to address basic student needs, suggesting that the institution is proactive in supporting students by tackling challenges such as financial difficulties, mental health issues, or other personal circumstances that may affect their academic involvement. However, since 44% of the participants did not agree that adequate capacity had been developed to address these basic needs, the university should identify this as a priority area for improvement.

### **Integration of Academic and Non-Academic Support for Students**

One of the challenges faced by higher education institutions is overcoming the silo mentality that separates academic and non-academic departments in providing student support. One survey question addressed this issue by examining efforts to foster a more collaborative working environment. Figure 11 presents participants' responses.

**Figure 11**

*Integration of academic and non-academic supports for students*



16% of participants reported that a strong level of capacity had been established, indicating that the institution is working to integrate academic and non-academic supports for students. Meanwhile, 41% reported an exemplary level of capacity. Together, these results suggest that a majority (57%) of participants believe the institution has developed the capacity to provide a more holistic and interconnected support system that addresses both academic needs (e.g., tutoring, course advising) and non-academic needs (e.g., counseling and career services). Overall, this indicates that the institution is on track toward creating a more unified and supportive environment for student success.

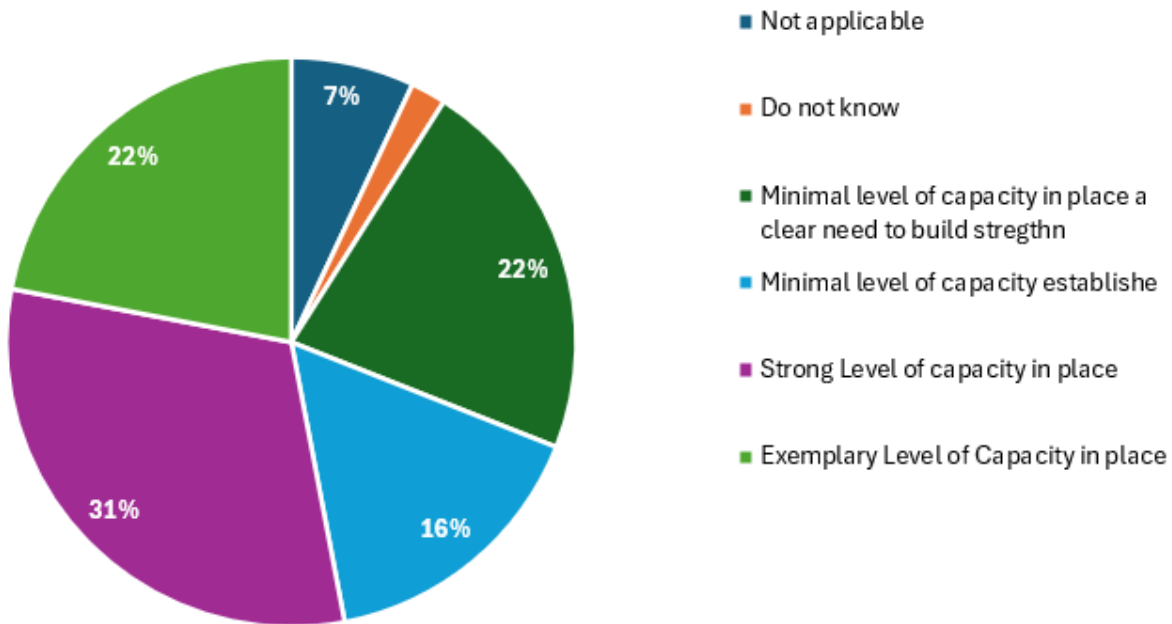
This holistic approach ensures that students receive the right support at the right time, whether they are struggling with academic challenges or personal issues. It dismantles the barriers between academic and non-academic departments, fostering collaboration and enabling more seamless, timely interventions. For instance, in the DLT model, staff from various units collaborate with student affairs; when a student is identified as at risk, the shared data allows for prompt action. If a student is facing mental health difficulties, their academic performance may suffer, but with access to both counselling and tutoring, they can better navigate the emotional and academic challenges they face.

### **Provision of Career Guidance Services**

Figure 12 presents participants' responses to a question regarding the provision of career guidance services at the institution, with their responses on this matter detailed below.

**Figure 12**

*Provision of career guidance services*



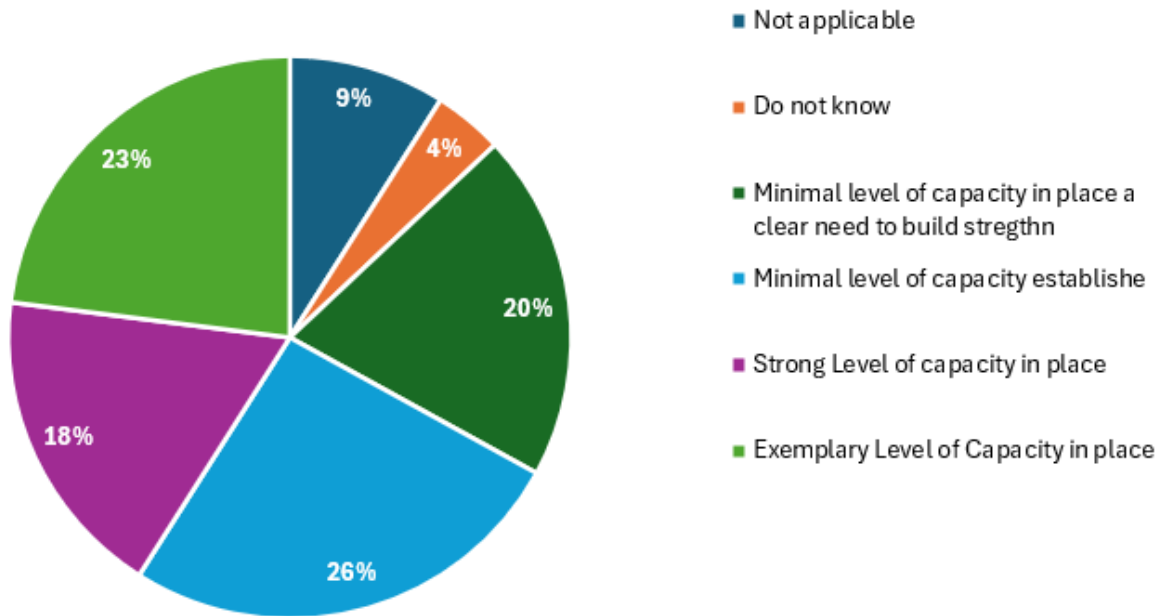
From the findings, 22% of participants felt that an exemplary level of capacity had been established and that the institution provides guidance to help all students make informed career choices, with 31% reporting a strong level of capacity in place. This indicates that the institution recognizes the importance of supporting students' career development from an early stage. The finding that 47% did not agree that adequate systems are in place to guide students in making informed career decisions from the outset highlights the need to better promote these initiatives among all university stakeholders to ensure broader participation in student career guidance.

**Evidence-Based Data-Driven Interventions**

A question was posed to assess whether participants believe the institution is utilising evidence-based, data-driven interventions for student support and institutional practices. Figure 13 illustrates the participants' responses on this matter.

**Figure 13**

*Evidence-based data-driven interventions*



From the above findings, 44% of participants felt that either a strong or exemplary level of capacity had been established, and that data was regularly used to improve instructional practices. This indicates that while the ideal has not yet been reached, the institution has started actively leveraging data to enhance teaching and learning. By establishing the Student Tracking Unit in the Directorate of Learning and Teaching (DLT) in 2021, the institution has made significant strides in building a data-driven university. These efforts are focused on addressing key areas that require targeted student interventions, ensuring a more proactive and informed approach to student success. Overall, this reflects that while the institution has made strides in integrating data into its instructional practices, efforts need to be made to reach more of the stakeholders who work with student data.

### Discussion

The findings reveal a complex landscape of institutional capacity for supporting instructional practices, professional development, student services, and policy alignment.

### Research-based Instructional Practices

Research-based instructional practices have laid a solid foundation for aligning teaching with institutional goals. However, the gap between general and exemplary capacities, as shown in the results, suggests an opportunity to enhance the quality and consistency of these practices across departments. Training in culturally responsive pedagogy could be a strategic focus to strengthen diversity in teaching practices. There is a need for further emphasis on building capacity, providing professional development, and embedding inclusive practices to ensure all students' diverse backgrounds are comprehensively considered, thereby promoting equity and inclusivity in learning environments. The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) provides

an opportunity to ground instructional practices in research. Major and Braxton (2020) showed that a scholarly approach to teaching entails being familiar with the latest ideas in one's subject, being informed by current ideas for teaching that subject, and reflecting on one's teaching practice and the student learning. SoTL work provides a space for disciplinary academics to expand their knowledge about teaching and learning and empowers them to transform and extend their knowledge of university teaching and learning (Behari-Leak, 2024).

### **Data-driven Personalised Services are Vital for Student Success**

Data-driven personalised services are critical for fostering student success, particularly in diverse educational contexts such as WSU. The ICAT survey highlights the importance of institutional capacity in utilising data effectively to enhance student outcomes. By leveraging scalable solutions like the implementation of an early warning system using predictive analytics, the university can identify at-risk students early, allowing for timely and tailored interventions that meet their unique needs (Ifenthaler et al., 2021). At WSU, where students often come from varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds, early detection of struggling students using predictive analytics offers a powerful tool to bridge gaps in academic performance and support retention efforts (Ndebele et al., 2017; Songca et al., 2021).

For example, data patterns derived from learning management systems, well-being records, student academic background records, digital literacy, attendance records, and assessment results can help pinpoint students who may struggle academically or socially (Mbaleki et al., 2023). This enables the institution to allocate resources more effectively, such as offering targeted tutoring, counselling, or peer mentorship programs. However, achieving these outcomes requires significant infrastructure and human capital investment. Integrating analytics tools and dashboards, alongside comprehensive training for academic staff and student support staff, can empower educators and administrators to make informed decisions that directly improve teaching quality and student engagement. Using data-driven insights into teaching practices, WSU can enhance the alignment between its instructional strategies and the diverse needs of its student population (Ifenthaler et al., 2021).

While implementing an early warning system using predictive analytics is a promising approach, the results from the ICAT survey underscore the need for more inclusive and holistic strategies. These strategies must account for the university's unique demographic and cultural context, ensuring that interventions address academic challenges and support students' social and emotional well-being. Such integration fosters a more equitable learning environment where all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have the opportunity to thrive.

### **Integrated Approach**

One of the challenges identified in higher education is the need to break down the silo mentality that separates academic and non-academic departments in supporting students. Reviewing academic support programmes across several countries, Kezar and Holcombe (2018) found that although numerous interventions have been developed to support students, few are comprehensive or connect existing initiatives into an integrated framework that links curricular innovation with out-of-class support for first-year students. They further argue that integrated programs combining curricular and co-curricular supports may be more effective in serving historically underserved students.

Findings from this study similarly indicated that most respondents believe the institution has made significant progress in developing the capacity to integrate academic and non-academic

support for students. This suggests an ongoing institutional effort to create a more holistic and interconnected system that addresses both academic needs (e.g., tutoring, course advising) and non-academic needs (e.g., counselling, career services).

A new model initiated in the university under study (Directorate of Learning and Teaching (DLT) Strategic Plan 2024) has seen academic support staff in DLT, which is a centralised academic support directorate in the university, being redeployed to faculties to provide integrated academic support at the faculty level. This move enhances integration, fostering collaboration between academic support staff and academic staff. Reporting on communities of practice (CoP) initiative that sought to improve the culture of learning and teaching at an Australian university, Bridge et al. (2024), found indications that these CoP promoted collaboration by functioning as loci of cross-institutional consultation and coordination, which bridged “the divide between academic, policy, administrative and support units, therefore holds promise in facilitating cross-institutional understanding and collaboration” (p. 38), providing the basis for an enhanced student experience. In addition, Bridge et al. (2024) found that the CoPs increased connectivity through improved collaboration between academic departments and centralised policy and support units and created spaces in which shared understandings of key concepts and policy details could be negotiated.

Other studies have also foregrounded the issue of integrated student academic support services. Tinto (2012) observes that “too often, institutions invest in a laundry list of actions, one disconnected from another. The result is an uncoordinated patchwork of actions whose impact on student retention is less than it could or should be” (p. 5). Reporting on an academic advising student support initiative conducted at two universities in Australia, Picton et al. (2024) argued that to achieve a whole university approach to advising, a focus on embedding a shared philosophy of supporting and developing students across all university activities is needed, where facets of advising are the integrated responsibility of all staff and areas of the university. Picton et al. (2024) further recommend that universities should devote time to developing staff understanding of roles and responsibilities within a whole university approach. Consultation and regular discussion among academics, institutional policymakers, administration, and support units help to forge a stronger sense of identification with the institution and to overcome perceptions that policies are centrally imposed, which is sometimes the source of academic resistance (Bridge et al., 2024; Hewett et al., 2017; Stensaker, 2015).

### **Responsiveness to Basic Student Needs that Might Affect Their Performance**

Responsiveness to basic student needs is crucial because it directly impacts students' ability to succeed academically. Students face a range of challenges, from financial hardship and housing insecurity to mental health struggles and family responsibilities (Camelia & Ramona, 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; Nurmalitasari et al., 2023; Thielking et al., 2019). If these needs are not addressed, they can hinder a student's focus, motivation, and overall well-being, ultimately affecting their academic performance. In this study, the lower percentage of 38% that reported either a strong or exemplary level of capacity in place in this responsiveness highlights the need for robust initiatives, including accessible food security programs, mental health support, and financial aid. Capacity building of those working with students is key to ensuring interventions to mitigate these challenges are effective. While the importance of tailoring support services to meet the needs of diverse student cohorts is recognised, findings by Kilmartin et al. (2024) highlighted the need to provide ongoing professional development to support practitioners in the delivery of nuanced support services to students.

In their study in the context of Australia, Li and Carroll (2017) identified the strong need to provide support to students from vulnerable groups from an early stage to prevent such students from dropping out relatively early in their courses. This is because, as Thielking et al. (2019) noted, over half of the student respondents from their study reported a moderate to high level of financial stress in relation to being able to afford study and living costs.

With regard to career guidance and counselling as a personalised service, the fact that 38% of respondents in this study felt minimal capacity had been built in this area means that the university needs to flag this as an area for improvement. Early career guidance is critical in preventing misalignment between student aspirations and academic paths, and the institution should consider embedding career counselling within the curriculum. In this regard, Camelia and Ramona (2018) contend that factors leading to university dropout may be psycho-pedagogical, including a lack of counselling services. To conclude, responsiveness to students' basic needs student needs that influence their performance requires the university to adopt the four fundamental principles of academic support: inclusivity, personalisation and integration, developmental focus, and student-centredness (McIntosh, 2023; Picton et al., 2024).

### **Integration of Teaching Excellence in University Hiring, Retention, and Promotion Policies and Practices**

Teaching excellence is a cornerstone of effective higher education, yet its recognition within academic hiring, retention, and promotion policies often lags behind research output. While many academics feel empowered to adopt innovative and reflective teaching practices, institutional policies must explicitly reward and incentivise these efforts to embed them within the culture of teaching excellence. This involves establishing clear, measurable criteria for evaluating teaching excellence and aligning it with the frameworks used to assess research productivity (Olsson & Roxå, 2017). From the responses in this study, some level of capacity has been established to ensure that teaching excellence is integrated with university hiring, retention, and promotion policies and practices. This suggests that the institution is successfully fostering a strong focus on teaching quality within its academic workforce management practices.

Embedding teaching excellence into hiring, retention, and promotion policies ensures a holistic approach to academic success. It shifts the focus toward creating a supportive environment where teaching innovation and student engagement are encouraged and rewarded, fostering a culture of continuous improvement in higher education. Results from a study to qualify the impact of receiving a National or Regional United States Department of Agriculture Teaching, Extension, and Research Award (TERA) on teaching identity by Bethel et al. (2021), suggested that departmental and college level administrators can foster subcultures that promote teaching excellence through providing access to professional development opportunities, support for peer mentoring and evaluation, and revised promotion and tenure policies that recognize teaching effectiveness as a productivity metric.

Literature indicates that some universities have established strong frameworks to foster teaching excellence. For example, Sanders et al. (2020) advanced that initiatives which include teaching fellowships and awards, promotion and reward systems, professional development opportunities, and schemes for professional recognition have contributed directly or indirectly to the development of teaching excellence within the higher education sector. However, there is a clear need for tailored professional development programs that cater to academics at different stages of their careers. For instance, early-career lecturers and adjunct faculty often face unique challenges, such as limited mentorship access or reduced professional growth opportunities.

Tailoring development initiatives to address these needs can help bridge gaps and promote equity among academic staff (Van der Sluis et al., 2022).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has provided valuable insights for the university to leverage in implementing effective student success initiatives. Discussions on the institutional capacity assessment process and its results by the internal stakeholders are essential for the development of management policies and institutional planning. The results provide a structured approach to identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and foreground the importance of capacity building, emphasizing the development of internal capacities to address opportunities and challenges facing organisations. The following implications are drawn from the findings.

### Implications For Policy

The institution should prioritise evidence-based strategies to foster teaching excellence and inclusive practices, ensuring these efforts are aligned with broader institutional goals. This alignment will create a more cohesive and impactful approach to student success and institutional growth.

### Implications For Practice

Academics and administrators require ongoing support and collaboration to effectively address the diverse needs of students, optimise resource allocation, and innovate teaching methodologies. Strong communication and joint efforts will be key to meeting these challenges and enhancing student outcomes.

The findings highlight notable achievements while also identifying strategic areas for improvement. Addressing these areas will elevate the overall quality of education and enrich the student experience, creating a more inclusive and supportive academic environment for student success at the university under study.

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