

# Speech and language pathology students' perception of the student support services at a higher education institution in East London, South Africa

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## Background

Student support services (SSS) are implemented in many higher education institutions to alleviate and overcome hindrances to academic performance. Despite these measures, students still struggle to adjust to universities due to the gap between their expectations and the reality of university life. Consequently, poor academic achievement, distress as well as high drop-out rates are observed. Speech-language pathology (SLP) is a four-year bachelor's degree equivalent to honors degree; it entails theoretical and clinical training as well as conducting research simultaneously. This course is new at the UFH, and no research has been conducted to understand students' coping mechanism as well as support services offered by universities.

## Methods

This was a descriptive cross-sectional survey aimed to determine Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) students' perceptions of the SSS at an HEI in East London. An ancillary aim was to identify factors that encourage or hinder students from accessing the support services offered in their institution. An online questionnaire was used to collect the data using Google Forms and convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for this study.

## Results

A total of 62 SLP students across the first to the final year completed the survey. Almost two-thirds (61%) of the participants reported having experienced some form of mental health issue. However, majority (87%) had not consulted SSS. The latter was mainly due to lack of awareness of SSS, not knowing where SSS offices are (75%) and limited access to SSS (80%). In addition, most students also reported self-managing issues and cultural beliefs as reasons for not accessing SSS.

Specific to departmental support, most students (55%) reported they were never allocated a mentor and reiterated the need for departmental support, which is currently unstructured or not known. Nevertheless, the positive aspects of SSS included visibility of SRC at the first-year orientation.

## Conclusion

There is a need for developing culturally and contextually oriented SSS, especially for Health Sciences students considering their workload and proneness to mental health issues. Findings from this study pave the way to improve the development and structure of SSS in HEIs in the rural contexts like the Eastern Cape.