

TVET Student Support Services: A Report on Service Use and Service Gaps

Bhutan Education & Skills Training (BEST)

March 2024



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ACRONYMS

BEST	Bhutan Education and Skills Training
CSO	Civil society organisation
CZC	College of Zorig Chusum
FGD	Focus group discussion
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
IDI	International Development Institute
IZC	Institute of Zorig Chusum
JWPTI	Jigme Wangchuk Power Training Institute
KII	Key informant interview
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MoESD	Ministry of Education and Skills Development
NIZC	National Institute of Zorig Chusum
PWD	People with disabilities
RDTC	Rural Development Training Centre
RENEW	Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women
RGoB	Royal Government of Bhutan
RITH	Royal Institute for Tourism and Hospitality
TTI	Technical Training Institute
TTIC	Technical Training Institute Chumey
TTIK	Technical Training Institute Khuruthang
TTIR	Technical Training Institute Rangjung
TTIS	Technical Training Institute Samthang
TTIT	Technical Training Institute Thimphu
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses the state of student support services in the TVET sector in Bhutan. It explores the current use of student support services, gaps in services, ease of accessing services, and satisfaction with services among TVET trainees. Special focus is given to the experience of female trainees and trainees with disabilities. The intent is to provide insight into existing student support services as Bhutan embarks on TVET reform. Findings from the report can inform decision-making in the Bhutan Education and Skills (BEST) project. BEST is a five-year project (2022-2027) funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by a Canadian-Bhutanese partnership involving Humber College, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD), and RENEW. The BEST project contributes to TVET reform through a set of end-to-end interventions at the institutional, industry, community, and national levels.

The study was designed and implemented through a collaborative process that included Data Focals at each of the 10 public TVET institutes and the monitoring and evaluation team at Humber College. A mixed-methods approach was used for data collection and analysis. Overall, 711 TVET trainees responded to an online survey; 115 trainees, trainers, and non-teaching staff participated in focus group discussions; and 26 key informants were interviewed. Participants in the study represented all 10 public TVET institutes and came from all 20 dzongkhags.

Findings

i) Current use of student support services: Findings from the study show that 91% of trainees believe current student support services play a vital role in their TVET institute. A large majority, 81%, are aware of the kinds of support services available. Trainees are most likely to avail career services (47% of trainee respondents), followed by academic advice (44%), health services (22%), and counselling (20%). One fifth of trainees, 20%, avail student support services frequently, while 18% avail a service regularly, 36% rarely, and 16% never. Trainee satisfaction with individual support services ranges from a high of 83% who are satisfied with career services to a low of 68% who are satisfied with counselling. Seventy-eight percent of trainees are satisfied with academic advice and 72% are satisfied with health services.

With some minor exceptions, there are no notable differences in the use student support services across genders or TVET institutes. There are, however, clear differences in the use of services by trainees with disabilities compared to those without a disability. Trainees with disabilities were less likely to agree that support services play a vital role in their TVET institution, less aware of available support services, less likely to consistently avail them, and more likely to report dissatisfaction with individual services.

ii) Current gaps in student support services: Almost half of trainee respondents, 48%, reported that there currently are gaps in existing services or services that are missing. There were no significant gender differences and only minor differences across different TVET institutes. Trainees with disabilities were slightly more likely to report missing services.

The kinds of gaps or missing services that were reported were generally consistent across trainees, trainers, and principals. Three broad categories of missing services or gaps in services were identified. First, the most frequently reported gap is effective counselling and mental health support. While counselling is an existing service, respondents identified a lack of professionalized counselling in the context of significant stigma that surrounds accessing counselling. The result is a lower use of counselling services and less satisfaction with it when compared to other support services. The findings

further illustrate that counselling is just one tool for addressing mental health. Respondents identified expanded games and sports, the expansion of student clubs, and more cultural activities as support services that would positively influence mental health.

The second gap in services most often identified relates to physical health and safety. Respondents spoke of insufficient medicines and first aid supplies on campus, a lack of proper sick rooms, and the lack of healthy food. In terms of safety, lack of lighting on campus, the need for curtains on women's rooms and washrooms, and a better process for finding drugs and weapons on campus were identified. The third service gap that was frequently reported focused on issues within trainee hostel accommodations. Water problems including shortages, lack of hot water, and lack of filters, were often mentioned. So, too, was better heating in the hostels. Multiple respondents also pointed to the limited number of toilets and issues with many of them being located outside.

iii) Ease of accessing student support services: A full 80% of trainee respondents reported that it is easy to avail student support services at their TVET institute. Again, there are no gender differences and only minor differences across TVET institutes. Trainees with disabilities, however, were less likely to agree that it is easy to avail services. Overall, while this suggests that accessing services is not a major issue, with the exception of access for trainees with disabilities, respondents recommended improvements be made to the flow of information on how to access individual services. Most often recommended was the creation of a single Student Support Service Focal person at each institute to act as an information resources. Multiple respondents also suggested creating support mechanisms for the Focal person, such as Student Support Services Committees and linkages to outside civil society organisations like RENEW.

iv) Gender and student support services: Three quarters of respondents, 75%, reported that their TVET institute has support services specific to the needs of female trainees, while 6% stated their institute does not, and 19% indicating they do not know. These quantitative findings, however, mask a more subtle and complex reality that emerges from the qualitative data. Respondents – including trainees, trainers, and administrators – tend to define gender-related support services as the provision of the same services to females and males without discrimination. This reflects an assumption that student support service should promote *gender equality*, or the equal access to services and resources. Yet the qualitative data illustrate that female trainees experience needs in their education experience that are specific to their gender. These include women's health issues and the need for female-focused career counselling given the unique challenges female graduates face in the labour market. This requires student support service focused on *gender equity* that address the different needs women face.

v) People with disabilities and student support services: Trainees with disabilities face a more challenging situation than any other category of trainee. They are more dissatisfied with individual services, less likely to avail services, less aware of available services, less likely to view student support services as playing vital role in their TVET institution, and often viewed as unsuitable for technical work. Adding to these challenges is a comparative lack of existing support services for trainees with disabilities. Just over half of respondents, 57%, stated that their institute provides student support services to trainees with disabilities. Almost one third, 29%, did not know while 14% said that such support services do not exist at their institute. Trainees with disabilities were less likely to report that such services exist when compared to those without a disability. There was also significant variation across TVET institutes ranging from a high of 86% of respondents confirming their institute has such services versus a low of 23%.

Compounding the challenges faced by trainees with disabilities are general attitudes and perceptions of disability. It was not uncommon for respondents to state that there are no trainees with disabilities in the TVET system. This is a reflection of disability being understood by many as solely involving physical disabilities. Issues of physical access to TVET are therefore paralleled by attitudinal and informational issues that need to be addressed.

vi) Overall trainee satisfaction with student support services: Overall satisfaction with student support services was high with 78% of trainee respondents reporting satisfaction. Around 4% reported dissatisfaction and 18% were neutral. Females were more likely to report satisfaction than men (82% versus 76%). Trainees with disabilities were noticeably less likely to report satisfaction than those without a disability (60% versus 77%). There was also significant variation across TVET institute, ranging from a high of 86% reporting satisfaction to a low of 50%.

Key themes

Seven overall themes emerge from the findings of this study. These themes can be used to inform the BEST project's activities focused on student support services.

i) Overall trainee satisfaction with student support services is relatively high: There currently is a fairly solid foundation of student support services within the TVET sector that engenders satisfaction among trainees. Nonetheless, almost half of respondents also report that there are service gaps that need to be filled. These gaps are key areas for BEST to address.

ii) Effective counselling is a critical gap: Counselling is the least availed student support service, has the lowest level of satisfaction when compared to other services, and is the most reported service gap. Greater professionalization of counselling is needed to address this situation. This will not only require financial resources but needs to be accompanied by strategies that address the current stigma that surrounds counselling.

iii) An integrated approach will strengthen the support of mental health: Professionalizing counselling is only one means to address mental health challenges on campus. Counselling should be one component of an integrated approach where expanded games and sports, student clubs, and cultural activities all supplement counselling by contributing to positive mental health.

iv) Streamlining information will strengthen access to student support services: Access to student support services is currently quite good. Yet it can be improved by streamlining information through the designation of a single Student Support Services Focal and other supports at each institute that act as a resource for trainees to better understand how to access each individual support service.

v) Student support services should address gender equity in addition to gender equality: Female trainees have specific needs that currently are not addressed effectively. While student support services should continue to promote gender equality through the provision of existing services without discrimination, this should be bolstered by the addition of services that promote gender equity. Such services would recognise the different challenges and barriers female trainees face and respond to them accordingly. Developing student support services that promote gender equity in addition to gender equality will also contribute to fulfilling the vision of Bhutan's national gender policy.

vi) A comprehensive approach to support services for trainees with disabilities is needed: trainees with disabilities face significant obstacles. While lack of physical access and other relevant support services within TVET institutions is a key issue, it is paralleled by challenges related to lack of information on available services and attitudinal issues that overlook the breadth and complexity of disability. To respond to all of these issues, a comprehensive approach – addressing physical, informational, and attitudinal needs – is necessary as part of the TVET reform process. Such a comprehensive approach will be consistent with the RGoB's *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019*.

vii) Career services are a potential tool for responding to inclusion challenges in employment: Female trainees and trainees with disabilities face a challenging labour market as both are often viewed as unsuitable for technical work. A component of the BEST project focuses on changing societal and industry mindsets on women and people with disabilities. This is, however, a long-term process. Accordingly, the development and provision of career services that are specific to women and people with disabilities is needed. Providing women and PWD with tools and strategies for navigating a challenging labour market will, alongside the long-term process of changing mindsets, begin to lay a foundation to assist vulnerable groups in more successfully moving from education to employment.

1. Introduction

Bhutan is undertaking a process of reforming its Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system. The reform process focuses on four components – people, product, place, and process – as a means to ensure future TVET graduates are work ready, can secure dignified work, and ultimately contribute to Bhutan’s economic growth.¹ The International Development Institute (IDI) at Humber College in Toronto, Canada, is supporting the reform process through the Bhutan Education and Skills Training (BEST) project. BEST is a five-year initiative (2022-2027) that is funded by Global Affairs Canada. BEST focuses on interventions at the institutional, industry, community, and national levels.

A key component of BEST’s work is to strengthen student support services within the 10 institutes that make up the public TVET system. Effective support services such as counselling, academic advice, health services, and career counselling will provide meaningful support to TVET trainees that increases the likelihood of academic and post-graduation employment success.

The purpose of this study is to explore the current nature of student support services prior to relevant BEST interventions at the institute level. As such, it complements the larger BEST baseline study that identifies the initial conditions in the TVET sector as a starting point to measure change over the life of the BEST project. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyses the current use of student support services by TVET trainees, perceived gaps in student support services that need to be filled, and overall trainee satisfaction with existing services. A key component of this analysis is a focus on issues of inclusion. In particular, the study explores the nature, use, and gaps in support services for women as well as support services for people with disabilities (PWD). The findings of the study can be used to shape the nature of BEST interventions that seek to strengthen student support services.

The report is structured in the following manner. The next section outlines the methodology used in the study. It details the collaborative approach to research design, the research questions that frame the study, and the specific mixed methods used in data collection and analysis. Section 3 provides a profile of the participants in the study. Section 4 begins the analysis by focusing on TVET trainees’ current use of existing student support services. As part of this analysis, differences in the use of services across gender, TVET institute, and disability/ability are presented. Current gaps in student support services or the kinds of services that are missing are analysed in section 5. Section 6 moves to an exploration of the processes for accessing student support services and the ease of availing them. Sections 7 and 8 analyse inclusion issues. The nature and use of support services intended to support the specific needs of females are explored in section 7. Section 8 does the same for services intended to support PWD. Overall trainee satisfaction with student support services is explored in section 9. The final section brings together seven key themes that emerge from across the study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

The methodology for this study was designed through a collaborative process. It involved a research team made up of Data Focals from each of the 10 TVET institutes and the monitoring and evaluation

¹ Norbu Wangchuk. (2021). Preparing the Technical and Vocational Workforce, *The Druk Journal*, vol. 7, issue II.

(M&E) team from the BEST office in Canada. A three-day training session was held in Thimphu involving all Data Focals and other stakeholders from the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) and civil society organisations (CSOs). Through the training, Data Focals applied their learning to the co-design of the methodology with the BEST M&E lead. A key part of this process was the identification by Data Focals of Bhutanese values that need to underlie the ethical implementation of monitoring and evaluation activities like this study. These values were used as a foundation for undertaking the research.

2.2 Research questions

The research questions that guide this study are the following:

- i) What is the nature of the use of existing student support services by TVET trainees?
- ii) What kinds of needed student support services are currently missing?

As part of these research questions, special attention was paid to existing and missing student support services for female trainees and trainees with disabilities.

The first methodological decision made by the research team was to use a mixed-methods approach to answer the research questions. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse data. Such mixed methods help lessen the potential methods-induced bias that is characteristic of quantitative and qualitative methods when used individually. Mixed methods therefore generate more comprehensive and valid findings.

Next, it was decided that the quantitative and qualitative data collection methods would be used *sequentially*, meaning quantitative data were collected first followed by qualitative data. This differs from using them *concurrently*, or at the same time. While there are benefits to either a sequential or concurrent approach, the sequential approach allows the collected quantitative data to be analysed so it can inform the collection and analysis of qualitative data.

2.3 Data collection methods

The three-day training session was further used to design the specific data collection tools for implementing the mixed-methods approach. The nature of data collection tools was decided upon and each tool was then designed. The tools were designed to collect data from a range of key TVET stakeholders involved in the provision or use of student support services. This included trainees, principals, trainee leaders, trainers, and non-teaching staff. Data collection methods included the following:

- i) *Online survey of TVET trainees:* An online survey was sent to the entire population of 3,308 trainees enrolled in the 10 public TVET institutes in 2023. The survey was primarily quantitative in nature and focused on TVET trainees' current use of student support services, the process of accessing these services, perceived gaps in student support services, and trainees' overall satisfaction with support services. Data Focals from each TVET institute administered the survey to trainees from their institute and the results automatically uploaded to Kinaki, an M&E software housed at the BEST project office in Canada.

A total of 711 trainees responded to the survey, representing a response rate of 21.5%. This response rate falls within the range of what is generally considered acceptable.²

ii) *Focus group discussions (FGDs)*: In order to more deeply explore the experiences of TVET trainees and their use of student support services, FGDs were undertaken with groups of trainees at each TVET institute. Given the central focus on promoting gender equity in the BEST project, the research team decided to carry out multiple FGDs at each institute that included a mixed group of trainees as well as a female-only group of trainees. Seven institutes also carried out a FGD with trainers and non-teaching staff given the key role they play in providing student support services. The selection of FGD participants at each institute made use of convenience sampling. A total of 115 people participated in the FGDs.

iii) *Key informant interviews (KIs)*: Key informant interviews were used to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of key TVET leaders. This included interviews with TVET institute principals as well as trainee leaders (female and male) at each institute. One institute also interviewed two trainees with disabilities (female and male) and another interviewed a counsellor. A total number of 26 KIs were undertaken.

2.4 Data analysis

The uploaded quantitative data from the trainee online survey was analyzed by personnel from the BEST office in Canada. A series of calculations were run on Kinaki to analyse frequencies for each survey question. In addition, data were disaggregated by gender, TVET institute, and disability/ability for each question in order to analyse how experiences with student support services might differ by these categories.

The qualitative data from the completed FGDs and KIs at each TVET institute were coded by the Data Focals. Deductive coding was used where the Data Focals used a predefined set of codes and assigned these codes to the qualitative data. The pre-defined codes were developed from the objectives of the BEST project. Coded qualitative data from each institute were sent to the M&E lead in the BEST office in Canada. All of the coded data were then analysed through an iterative process that identified key themes that supplement and more deeply explore the results from the quantitative data.

3. Profile of Respondents

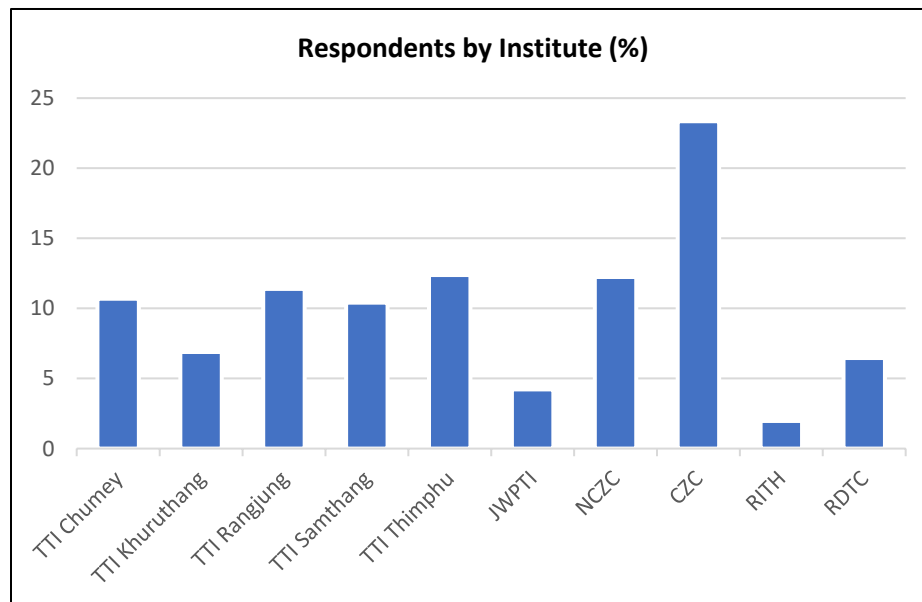
The public TVET system in Bhutan is made up of 10 TVET institutes. Eight of the 10 are Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) that currently offer technical training in areas such as automotive repair, construction, hydropower, ICT, electrical, agriculture, and tourism & hospitality. The remaining two are Institutes of Zorig Chusum (IZC) that provide training in the 13 traditional arts and crafts of Bhutan.

² The literature on online survey response rates provides a variety of target rates, with a range that generally falls between 10-30%. Nonetheless, a [study that reviewed 1,071 online survey response rates](#) in education-related studies found an average response rate of 44.1%.

Public TVET institutions by type and location

TVET Institution	Dzongkhag (District)
Technical Training Institutes (TTIs)	
Technical Training Institute Chumey (TTIC)	Bumthang
Technical Training Institute Khuruthang (TTIK)	Punakha
Technical Training Institute Rangjung (TTIR)	Trashigang
Technical Training Institute Samthang (TTIS)	Wangdue Phodrang
Technical Training Institute Thimphu (TTIT)	Thimphu
Jigme Wangchuk Power Training Institute (JWPTI)	Sarpang
Royal Institute for Tourism and Hospitality (RITH)	Thimphu
Rural Development Training Centre (RDTC)	Zhemgang
Institutes of Zorig Chusum (IZCs)	
National Institute of Zorig Chusum (NIZC)	Thimphu
College of Zorig Chusum (CZC)	Trashiyangtse

A total of 711 TVET trainees completed the online survey, representing all 10 public TVET institutes. The distribution of respondents across the 10 institutes ranged from 2% to 23.4%, with most individual institutes falling between 4% and 12%.

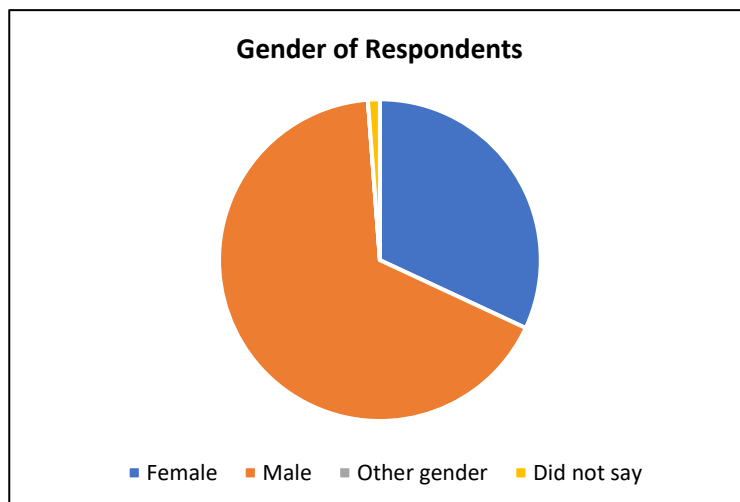


Respondents' home dzongkhag covered all 20 dzongkhags. The highest proportion of respondents come from Trashigang (13.22%) while the lowest are from Gasa (0.14%).

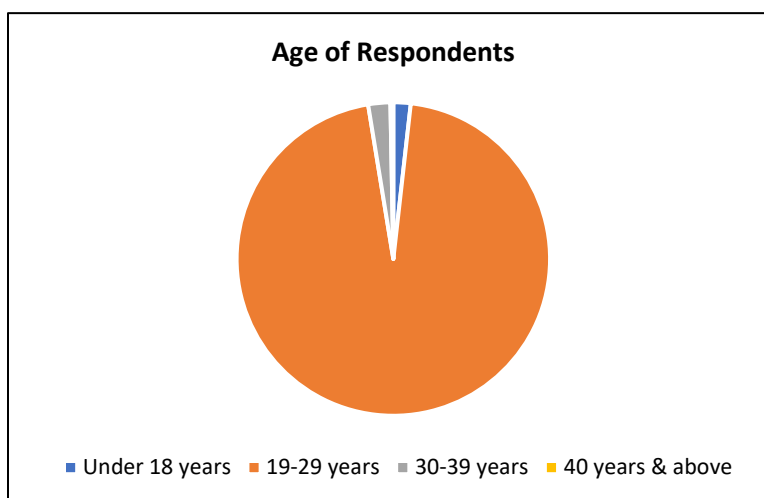
Respondents' home Dzongkhag

Dzongkhag	Percent of all respondents (n)	Dzongkhag	Percent of all respondents (n)
Bumthang	4.92 (35/711)	Samdrup Jongkhar	8.3 (59/711)
Chhukha	4.08 (29/711)	Samtse	3.23 (23/711)
Dagana	3.52 (25/711)	Sarpang	5.91 (42/711)
Gasa	0.14 (1/711)	Thimphu	5.63 (40/711)
Haa	0.56 (4/711)	Trashigang	13.22 (94/711)
Lhuentse	2.53 (18/711)	Trashiyangtse	10.41 (74/711)
Monggar	11.67 (83/711)	Trongsa	1.97 (14/711)
Paro	1.41 (10/711)	Tsirang	3.09 (22/711)
Pemagatshel	7.88 (56/711)	Wangdue Phodrang	2.95 (21/711)
Punakha	2.81 (20/711)	Zhemgang	5.77 (41/711)

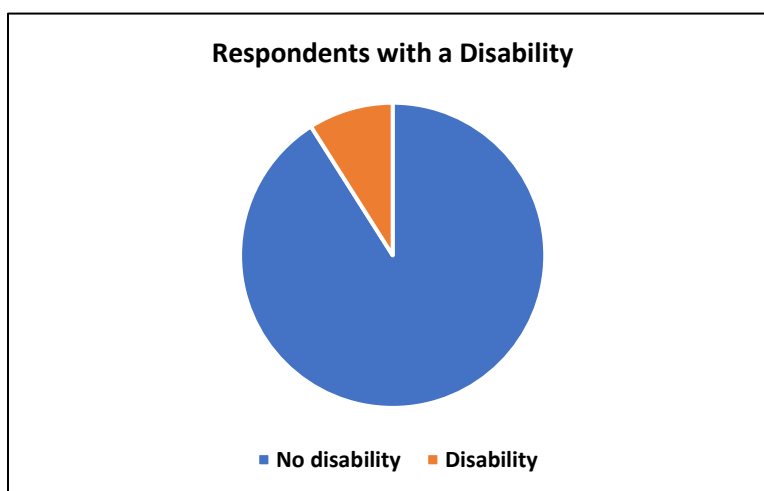
Of these respondents, 32% were female and 67% were male. One percent of respondents preferred not to provide their gender and no respondents identified as another gender. This gender distribution among survey respondents very closely reflects the overall gender distribution for all TVET trainees in 2023, which was 32.5% female and 67.5% male.



The vast majority of respondents, 96.4%, were between 19 – 29 years of age. Those under 18 made up 1.8% of respondents, while 2.3% were between 30-39, and 0.3% were 40-49.



Sixty-three of the 711 respondents reported having a disability, representing 9% of respondents. This figure is striking given the disability prevalence rate at the national level is 2.1%.³ Moreover, data from the MoESD for 2023 show 0.5% of TVET trainees report a disability. Calculation of the prevalence rate at the national level and the prevalence rate in this study both made use of the Washington Group short set questions for measuring disability. The disparity is therefore not related to different methods of measurement being used. The result for this study therefore should be interpreted as a reflection of the particular nature of the sample of trainees who responded to the survey and not representative of trainees as a whole. Nonetheless, the high number of respondents reporting a disability provides good insight into the experience of PWD in the TVET system, a key focus of the BEST project and TVET reform.



³ National Statistics Bureau. (2018). [2017 Population and Housing Census of Bhutan: National Report](#). Thimphu: NSB.

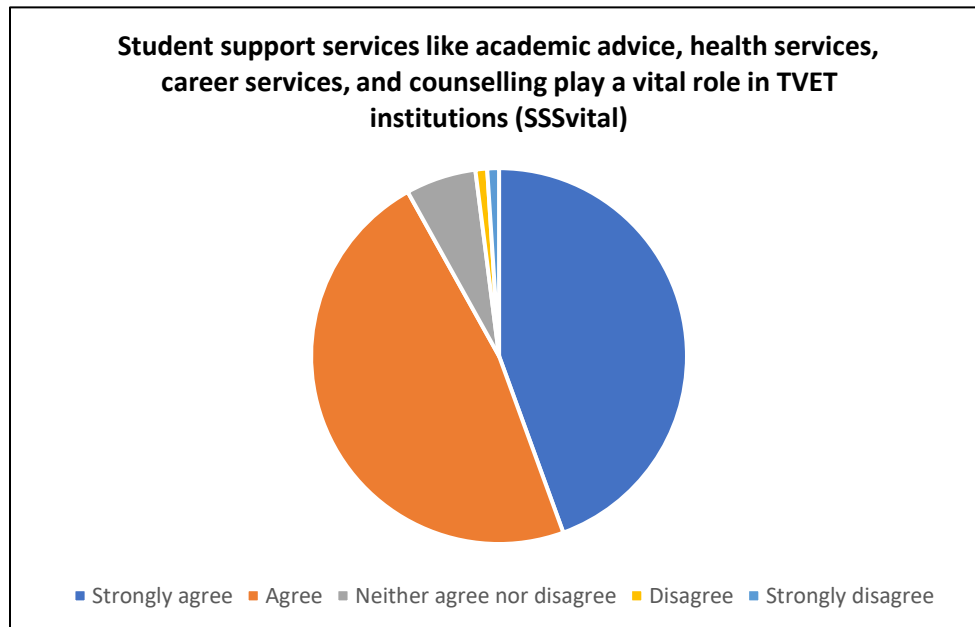
In addition to the online survey that targeted TVET trainees, the 26 key informant interviews involved the participation of TVET principals and trainee leaders from 8 of the 10 institutes. One institute supplemented this with interviews of two trainees with disabilities and another interviewed a counsellor. Overall, 14 KII respondents were male and 9 were female. Note that one institute did not report a gender breakdown for their KIIs.

Focus group discussions were held at each institute with groups of trainers and non-teaching staff, mixed groups of trainees, and female-only groups of trainees. Overall, of the 115 people who participated in the FGDs, 82 were trainees and 33 were trainers or non-teaching staff. Not all institutes reported a gender breakdown for the FGDs but among those that did, 44% of participants were male and 56% were female. This is a reflection of the inclusion of female-only FGDs despite female trainees making up only 32% of the overall trainee population. This was done to ensure significant female representation for the exploration of support services related to female-specific needs.

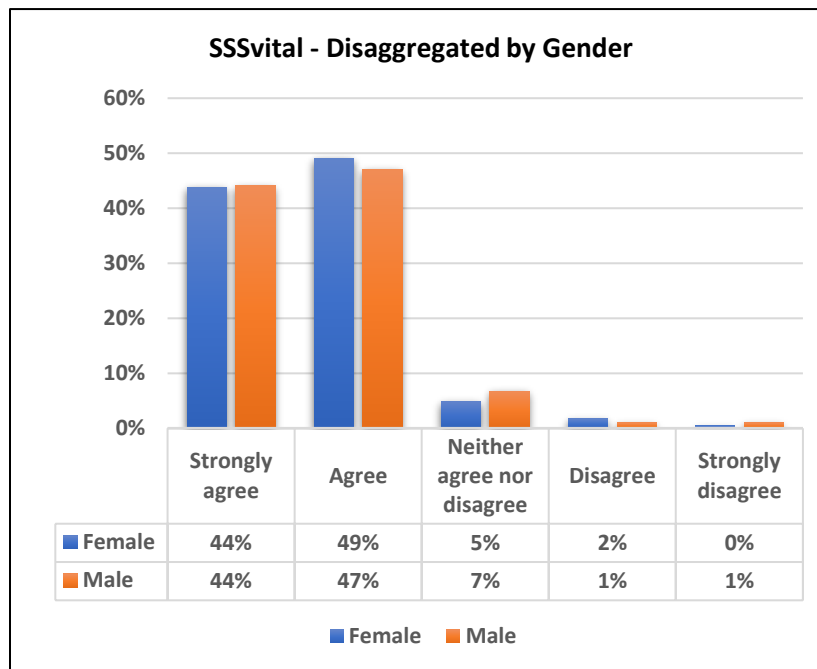
4. Current use of Student Support Services

4.1 Trainee perceptions of student support services

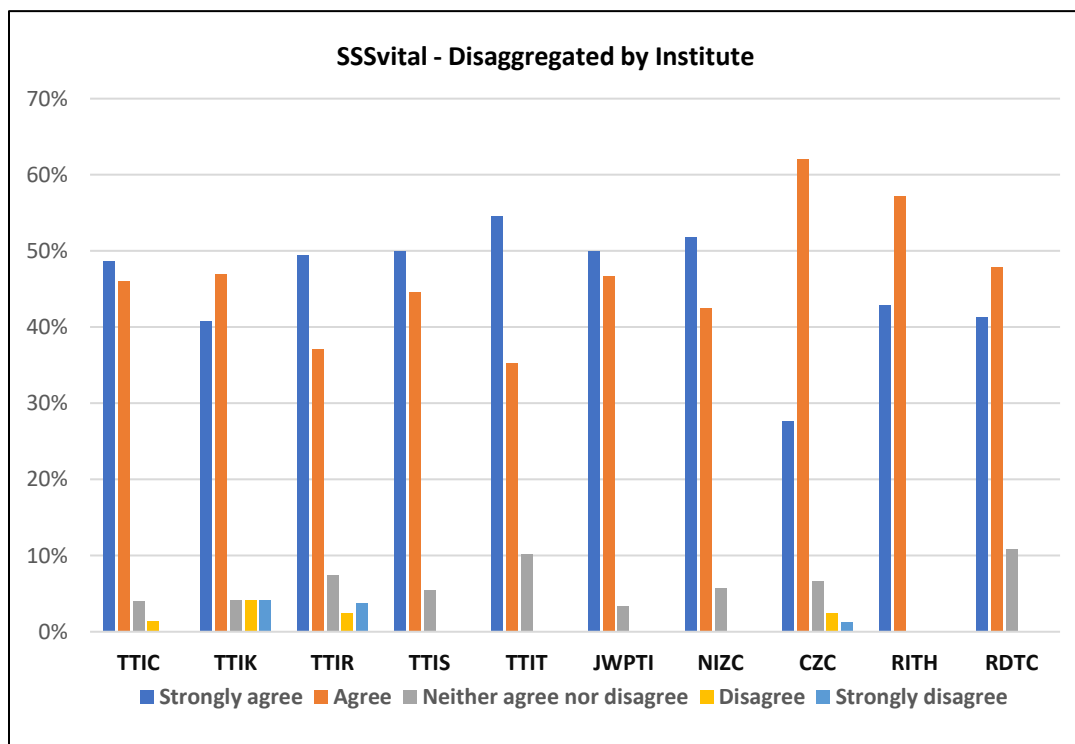
As a starting point, survey respondents were asked whether support services like academic advice, health services, career services, and counselling play a vital role in their TVET institute. An overwhelming majority of 91% of trainees either agreed or strongly agreed that such supports play a vital role.



There were no significant differences between female and male respondents.



When analysing responses across the 10 TVET institutes, there is some variance between respondents who reported they 'strongly agree' versus 'agree', but the overall figure for agreement (both 'strongly agree' and 'agree') is similar at all institutes.



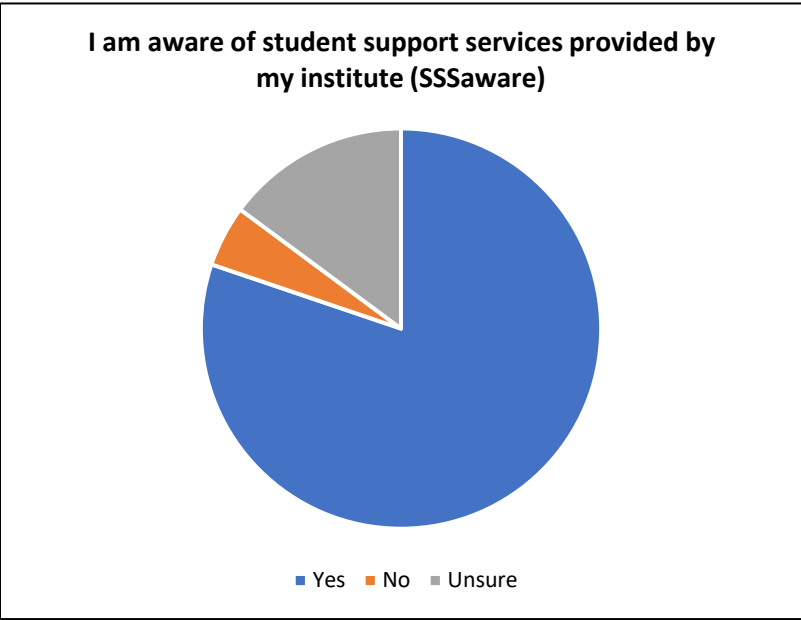
While little difference occurs across genders or institutes, a difference does arise when comparing perceptions held by trainees with disabilities to those who do not have a disability. Forty-six percent of trainees who do not have a disability strongly agree that support services play a vital role in TVET institutions. In contrast, only 29% of those with a disability feel the same. This difference does not translate into a significantly larger proportion of trainees with disabilities who either disagree or strongly disagree that support services play a vital role (5% for trainees with a disability compared to 2% for those without a disability). Rather, trainees with disabilities are more likely than those without a disability to be neutral on the vital role of support services (17% versus 5%).

SSSvital- Disaggregated by Disability/Ability					
Category	#1 - Strongly Agree	#2 - Agree	#3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree	#4 - Disagree	#5 - Strongly Disagree
People with Disability	29% (18/63)	49% (31/63)	17% (11/63)	3% (2/63)	2% (1/63)
People Without Disability	46% (295/ 648)	47% (305/ 648)	5% (35 / 648)	1% (7 / 648)	1% (6 / 648)
Total	44% (313/711)	47% (336/711)	6% (46/711)	1% (9/711)	1% (7/711)

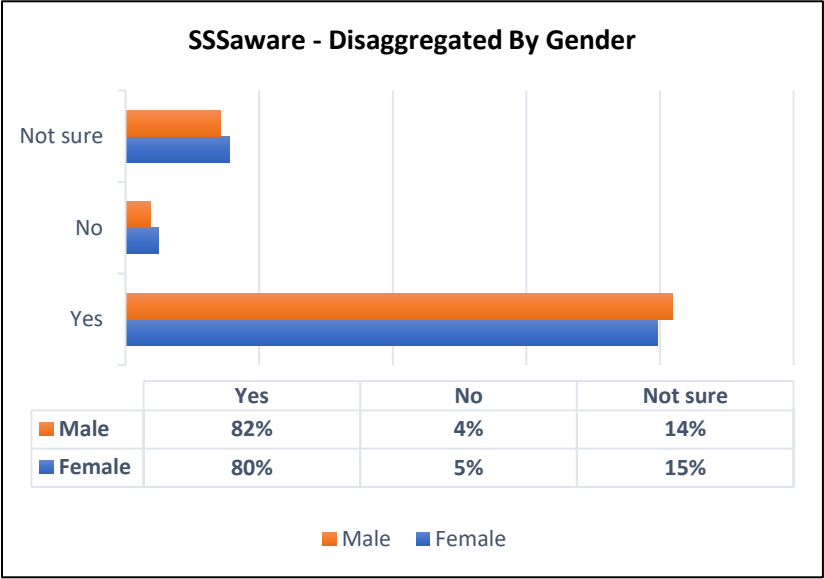
The qualitative data collected through KIIs and FGDs provide further context on the kinds of services that are seen as most vital. The FGDs with mixed groups of trainees overwhelmingly pointed to transportation services provided by their TVET institute as the most helpful and vital service. They often defined transportation as a health service given the critical role they perceive transportation playing when a trainee experiences injury or illness that needs attention at a hospital or a basic health unit (BHU). The female-only FGDs also showed that health services are viewed as most helpful for trainees, although these female trainees focused more on health services generally or mental health counselling specifically. Most TVET principals, trainers, and non-teaching staff similarly outlined their perspective that health services are particularly vital for trainees. They pointed to the importance of health services generally, but also identified services related to pregnancy as well as addressing drug and alcohol use.

4.2 Trainee awareness of existing student support services

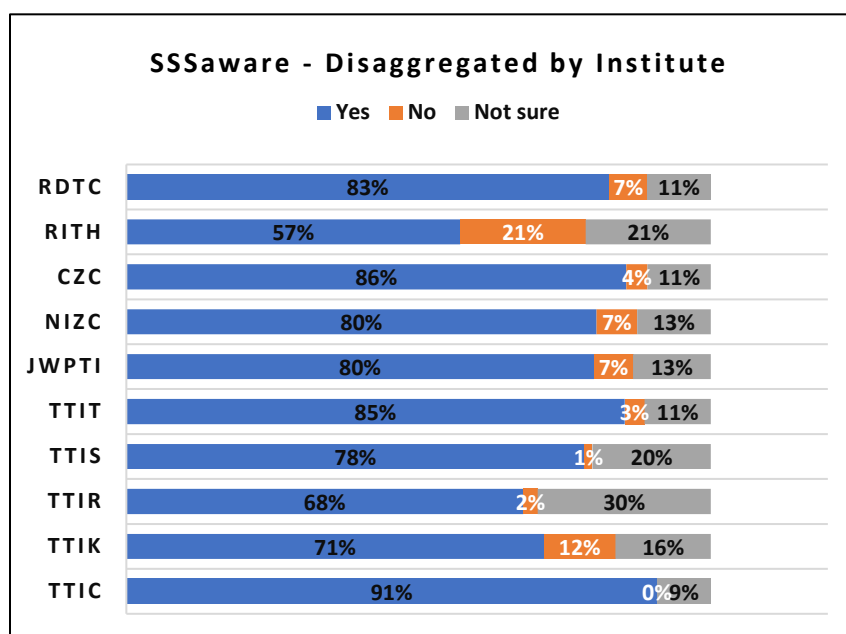
Overall, while 91% of trainees view student support services generally as being a vital part of their TVET institutes, awareness of what support services actually exist is lower, although still high. Eighty-one percent of trainees reported that they are aware of the kinds of support services available at their TVET institute. Only 5% were not aware and 15% were not sure.



There was no notable difference between female and male trainees.



There are differences in trainees’ awareness of available services across different TVET institutes. The level of awareness ranged from 57% - 91% at individual institutions. Across average across all institutes is 78% of respondents who are aware of available services.



Trainees with disabilities were less aware of available services than those without a disability. This is a notable issue as trainees with disabilities will likely be in greater need of support services to successfully complete their education.

SSSaware - Disaggregated by Disability/Ability			
Category	#1 - Yes	#2 - No	#3 - Not Sure
People with Disability	71% (45/63)	6% (4/63)	22% (14/63)
People Without Disability	82% (529/648)	4% (28/648)	14% (91/648)
Total	81% (574/711)	5% (32/711)	15% (105/711)

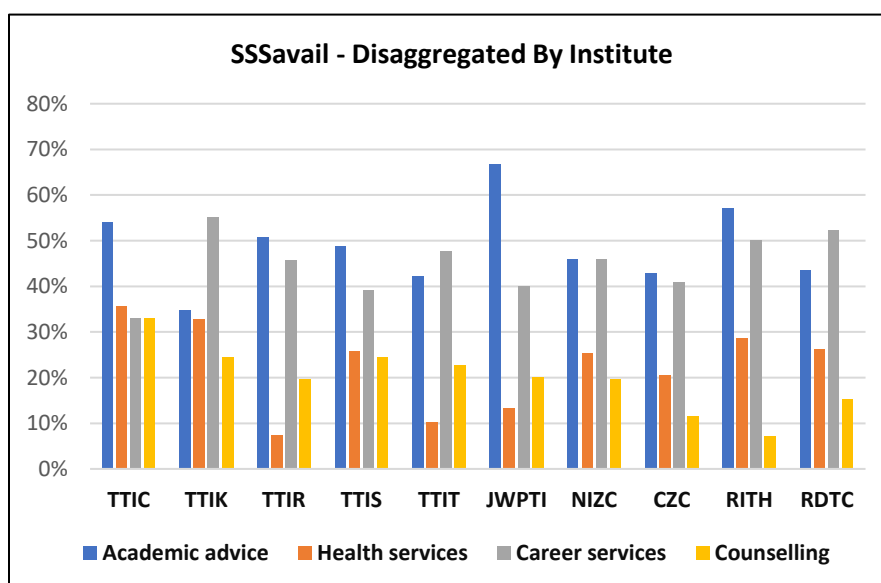
4.3 Types of student support services availed by trainees

In terms of the kinds of support services trainees use, academic advice is availed the most by trainees (48%) followed by career services (44%), health services (22%), and counselling (20%). It is interesting that while health services were most often identified in the KIIs and FGDs as the most helpful and vital service, they are availed less than academic and career services. This is not surprising, however, as academic and career services are critical for all trainees, while health services are needed only when a health issue arises, which will not involve all trainees.

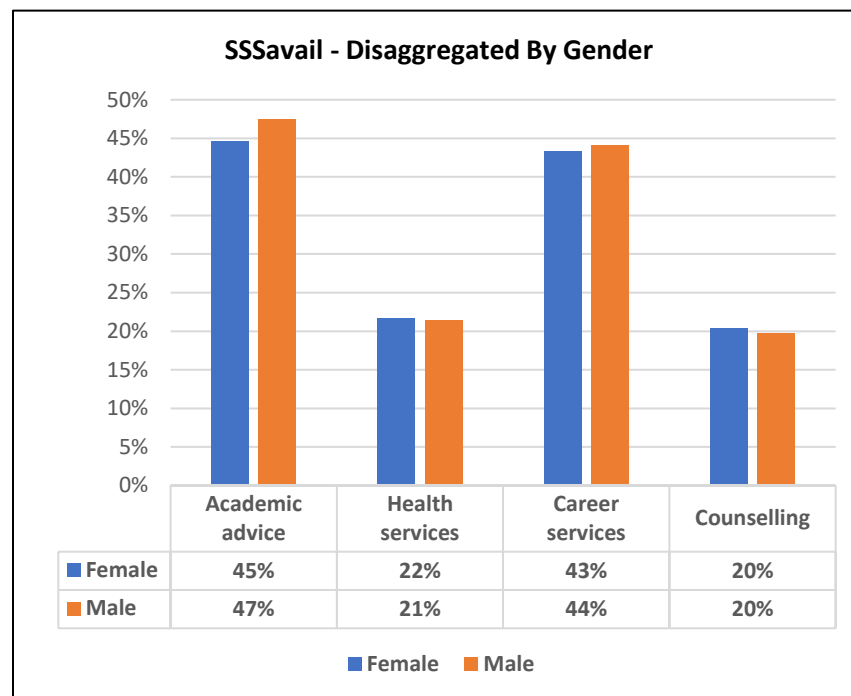
Which student support service have you availed in the past at your TVET institute? (SSSavail)			
#1 - Academic Advice	#2 - Career Services	#3 - Health Services	#4 - Counselling
47%	44%	22%	20%
(331/711)	(311/711)	(153/711)	(141/711)

A critical issue that emerged from the KIs and FGDs relates to the lower use of counselling services when compared to the other student support services. This is not due to counselling having a perceived lack of value. As the section below on student support service gaps will show, quite the opposite is true. Nonetheless, the challenge that dampens the use of counselling services is perceived stigma. Both administrators and trainers as well as trainees made this case. Trainees spoke of not wanting others to know that they require counselling, so they do not seek the service. Principals and trainers confirmed this situation. They outlined how trainees that require counselling tend to not self-identify due to stigma. The result is an often top-down approach where administrators or trainers themselves need to identify trainees who need counselling. This is a critical issue as trainers and administrators pointed to the reality of trainees often experiencing mental health challenges early on in their academic careers.

There were some slight differences in the kinds of support services availed across different TVET institutes. Career services are the most availed support service at TTI Khuruthang, TTI Thimphu, and RDTC. Academic advice is the most availed at the other six institutes. Health services are the least availed at TTI Rangjung, TTI Thimphu, and JWPTI while counselling is used the least at the other seven institutes.



There are no notable differences between female and male trainees in the kinds of student support services they avail.



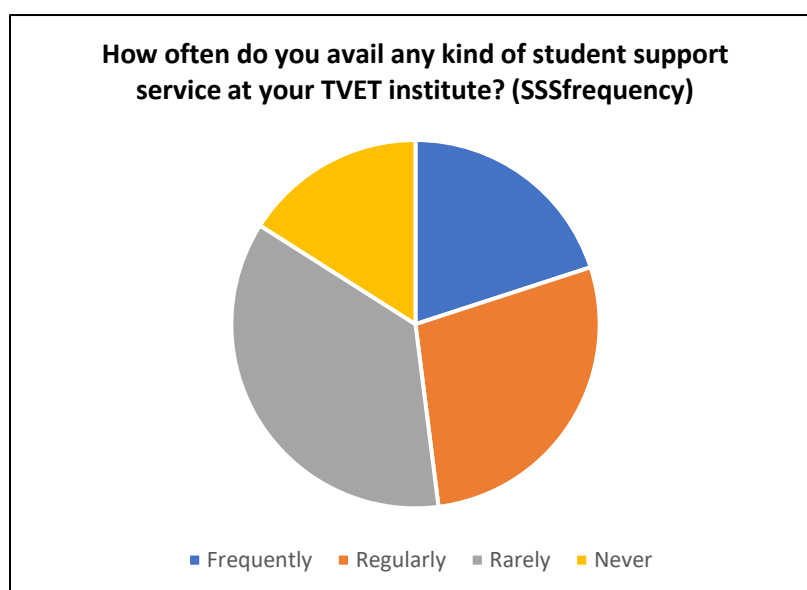
There is a notable difference between trainees with a disability and those without a disability. While almost half of trainees without a disability, 45%, avail career services, only around a third of trainees with a disability, 35%, do so. This represents the largest gap in use between those with a disability and those without across all four categories of student support services.

SSSavail- Disaggregated by Disability/Ability				
Category	#1 - Academic Advice	#2 - Health Services	#3 - Career Services	#4 - Counselling
People with Disability	43% (27/63)	22% (14/63)	35% (22/63)	21% (13/63)
People Without Disability	47% (304/648)	21% (139/648)	45% (289/648)	20% (128/648)
Total	47% (331/711)	22% (153/711)	44% (311/711)	20% (141/711)

This is, again, a critical issue. BEST's baseline study found a common perception among employers that technical work is not appropriate for PWD, including for those who are skilled graduates of TVET institutes. People with disabilities are viewed as helpless and not able to take on technical work.⁴ This represents a significant challenge where employers' mindsets need to be changed. It also means that trainees with disabilities require greater career support in their search for employment. The fact that they are actually less likely to access career services than those without disabilities further complicates this larger challenge.

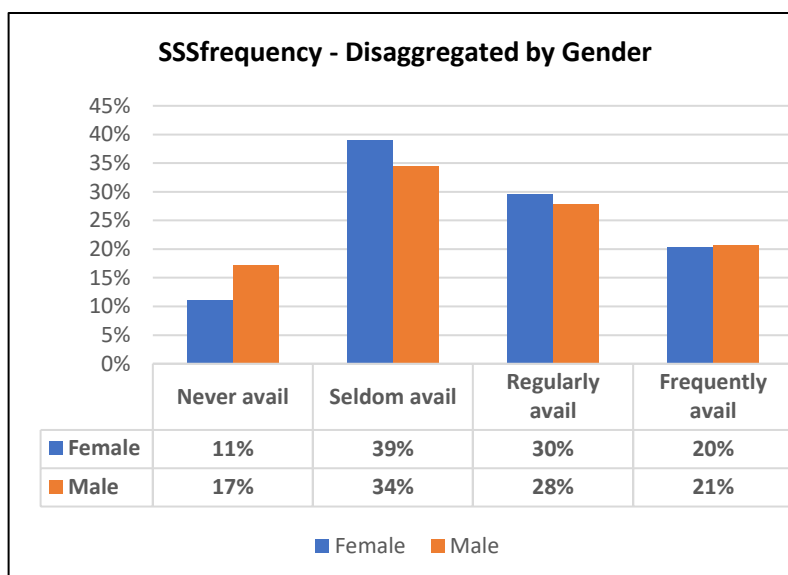
4.4 Frequency of trainee use of student support services

In addition to asking respondents which kinds of student support services they avail, the survey also asked them how often they avail services. Just under half of respondents (48%) avail any kind of support service either frequently (20%) or regularly (28%). Nonetheless, the largest proportion of respondents (36%) rarely avail a support service. The smallest proportion never avail any kind of service (16%).

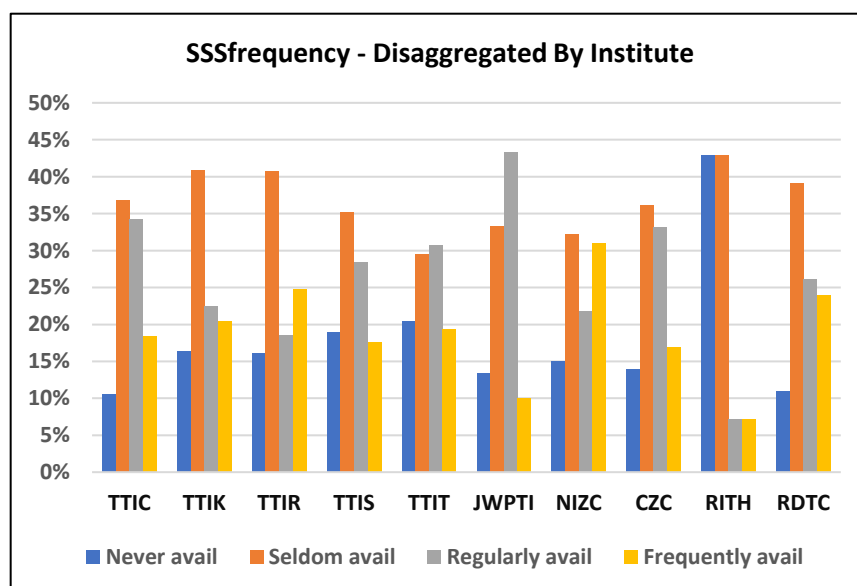


There are minor differences in the frequency of use of services between females and males. Overall, males are slightly more likely than females to never avail a support service (17% versus 11%), while females are slightly more likely than males to seldomly avail a support service (39% versus 34%).

⁴ Bhutan Canada Foundation. (2022). BEST Baseline Data Report.



There are noticeable differences across individual institutes in trainees who never avail a student support service, ranging from 11% to 43% who do not use a service. The average across all institutes is 18% of trainees who never use a service.



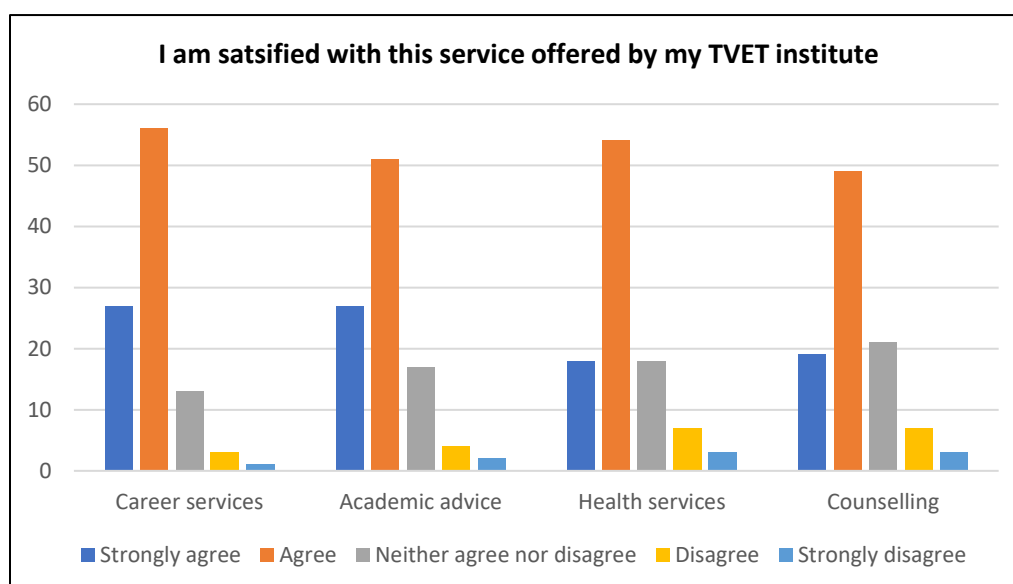
The frequency of use of support services by trainees with disabilities is interesting. As outlined above, trainees with disabilities are less likely to be aware of the support services provided by their institute and are less likely to avail career counselling in particular. At the same time, they are much more likely to frequently avail any kind of student support service when compared to trainees who do not report a disability (30% versus 19%). This suggests that the overall demand for support services by trainees with disabilities is high, with the likely exception of career counselling, yet they are less aware of available services than trainees who do not have a disability.

SSSfrequency - Disaggregated by Disability/Ability				
Category	#1 - Never Avail	#2 - Seldom Avail	#3 - Regularly Avail	#4 - Frequently Avail
People with Disability	10% (6/63)	38% (24/63)	22% (14/63)	30% (19/63)
People Without Disability	16% (106/648)	36% (231/648)	29% (186/648)	19% (125/648)
Total	16% (112/711)	36% (255/711)	28% (200/711)	20% (144/711)

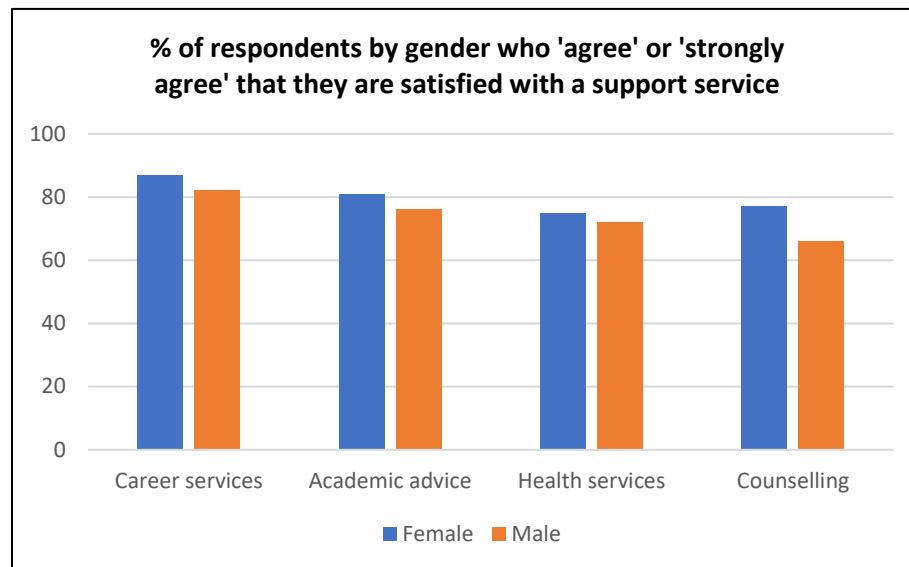
4.5 Trainee satisfaction with specific student support services

Overall, the survey data illustrate that trainees view support services as a vital part of their TVET institute, are largely aware of the kinds of support services available, and, in the case of about half of them, either regularly or frequently avail these services. Some key differences arise when examining the experience of trainees with disabilities versus those without a disability. Some minor differences also arise across TVET institutes. Differences across genders are minimal.

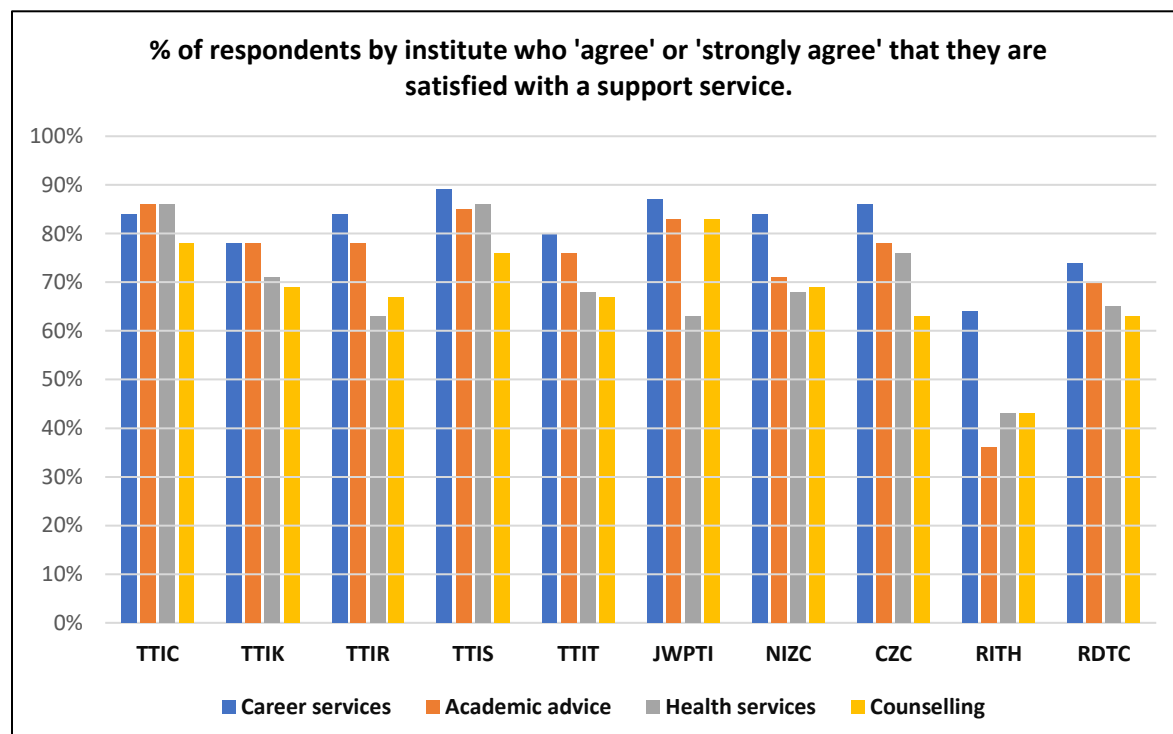
In this context, trainees were asked about their level of satisfaction with individual kinds of student support services. Trainees were most satisfied with career advice services (83% agree/strongly agree they are satisfied), followed by academic advice (78%), health services (72%), and counselling (68%). It is noteworthy that counselling, the least availed student support service by trainees, is also the service with the lowest level of satisfaction, with just over two-thirds agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are satisfied.



In the case of every student support service, more female respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are satisfied with a support service than male respondents. The differences are not large with the exception of counselling where 76% of females indicated satisfaction compared to 66% of males.



There are some minor differences across respondents from different TVET institutes, but fairly similar levels overall of reported satisfaction with each of the categories of support services at 9 of the 10 TVET institutes.



The most notable difference in satisfaction with individual student services arises in the case of trainees with disabilities. These trainees reported far less satisfaction with every one of the four support service types when compared to trainees without a disability. In the cases of academic advice and health services in particular, the proportion of trainees with disabilities who reported satisfaction ('agree' or 'strongly agree') was lower by 20 points or more when compared to trainees without a disability.

Similarly, respondents with disabilities more frequently reported dissatisfaction ('disagree' or 'strongly disagree') when responding to the survey question on whether they are satisfied with individual support services. This again occurred for every type of support service, including academic advice (12% dissatisfaction among respondents with disabilities versus 5% for respondents without a disability), health services (19% versus 8%), counselling services (20% versus 9%), and career services (12% versus 2%).

The following tables outline the differences between trainees with disabilities and those without a disability for each of career advice services, academic advice, health services, and counselling.

I am satisfied with the career advice services offered by my TVET institute.					
Category	#1 - Strongly Agree	#2 - Agree	#3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree	#4 - Disagree	#5 - Strongly Disagree
People with Disability	22% (14/63)	49% (31/63)	16% (10/63)	6% (4/63)	6% (4/63)
People Without Disability	28% (180/648)	56% (366/648)	13% (83/648)	2% (16/648)	0% (3/648)
Total	27% (194/711)	56% (397/711)	13% (93/711)	3% (20/711)	1% (7/711)

I am satisfied with the academic advice services offered by my TVET institute.					
Category	#1 - Strongly Agree	#2 - Agree	#3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree	#4 - Disagree	#5 - Strongly Disagree
People with Disability	21% (13/63)	38% (24/63)	29% (18/63)	6% (4/63)	6% (4/63)
People Without Disability	27% (176/648)	52% (336/648)	16% (104/648)	3% (22/648)	2% (10/648)
Total	27% (189/711)	51% (360/711)	17% (122/711)	4% (26/711)	2% (14/711)

I am satisfied with the health services offered by my TVET institute.					
Category	#1 - Strongly Agree	#2 - Agree	#3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree	#4 - Disagree	#5 - Strongly Disagree
People with Disability	8% (5/63)	44% (28/63)	29% (18/63)	13% (8/63)	6% (4/63)
People Without Disability	19% (125/648)	55% (357/648)	17% (113/648)	6% (39/648)	2% (14/648)
Total	18% (130/711)	54% (385/711)	18% (131/711)	7% (47/711)	3% (18/711)

I am satisfied with the counselling services offered by my TVET institute.					
Category	#1 - Strongly Agree	#2 - Agree	#3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree	#4 - Disagree	#5 - Strongly Disagree
People with Disability	8% (5/63)	49% (31/63)	24% (15/63)	10% (6/63)	10% (6/63)
People Without Disability	20% (132/648)	49% (319/648)	21% (136/648)	7% (45/648)	2% (16/648)
Total	19% (137/711)	49% (350/711)	21% (151/711)	7% (51/711)	3% (22/711)

Overall, the findings to this point on current use of student support services illustrate that there is an overwhelming perception among trainees that such services are vital (91%), with a slightly smaller but still high percentage of trainees (81%) aware of the kinds of services that are available to them. The actual reported use of student support services drops, however, with just under half of trainees availing academic advice (47%) or career services (44%). Less than a quarter of trainees avail health services (22%) or counselling (20%). This is not necessarily negative, as it may be the case that many trainees may not need these services for academic success. Indeed, respondents generally were satisfied with the student support services, including career advice services (83% agree/strongly agree they are satisfied), followed by academic advice (78%), health services (72%), and counselling (68%).

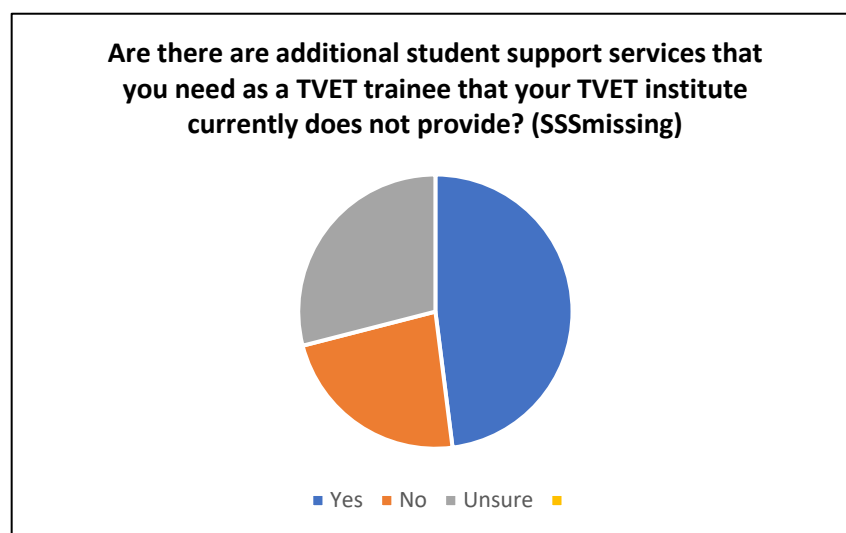
Nonetheless, the findings on current use of student support services point to a clear issue with the use of services by trainees with disabilities. Those with disabilities were less likely to agree that support services play a vital role in their TVET institution, less aware of available support services, less likely to consistently avail them, and more likely to report dissatisfaction with individual services. In addition to this issue specific to the needs of trainees with disabilities, the generally positive data on the use of

student support services by all trainees is paralleled by a significant perception among them that there are gaps in current services or needed services that are missing entirely.

5. Current gaps in Student Support Services

The online survey sent to trainees asked them if there are additional student support services that they need that are currently not provided by their TVET institute. They were also asked an open-ended question on the kinds of student support services that are missing.

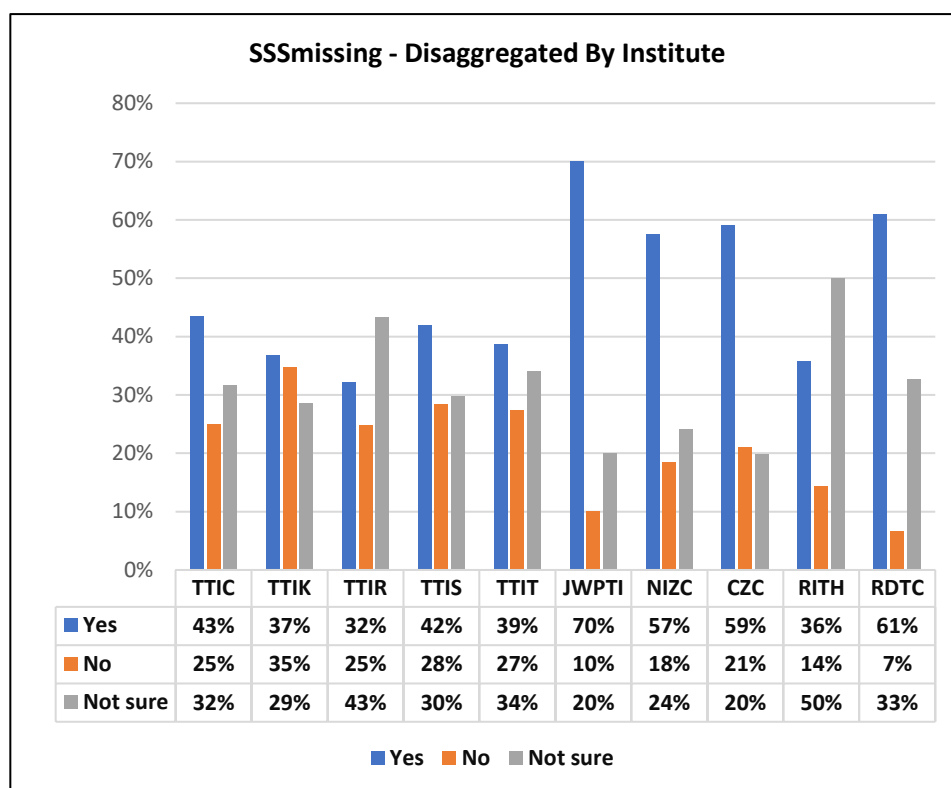
Despite the generally positive overall perception trainees have of existing support services, 48% felt that there are services that are missing, with 29% of respondents unsure, and 23% stating that there are not any missing services.



There is no meaningful difference between female and male respondents when answering this question, with 47% of females and 49% of males stating that there are needed trainee support services that are currently missing. Trainees with disabilities were somewhat more likely than those without one to report that there are support services missing. They were far less likely to report that there are no missing student support services.

SSSmissing – Disaggregated by Disability/Ability			
Category	#1 - Yes	#2 - No	#3 - Not Sure
People with Disability	56%	13%	32%
	(35/63)	(8/63)	(20/63)
People Without Disability	48%	23%	29%
	(309/648)	(152/648)	(187/648)
Total	48%	23%	29%
	(344/711)	(160/711)	(207/711)

There are also differences across different TVET institutes. In six of the 10 institutes, between 32% and 44% of respondents indicated that there are student support services currently missing. In contrast, a much higher percentage of respondents in the remaining four institutes, between 58% and 70%, stated that there are missing services.



An open-ended question in the online survey asked trainees to identify the kinds of student support services that are missing at their institute. This was supplemented by deeper conversations about the nature of missing support services with trainees, trainers, and principals in the KIIs and FGDs. In many cases, the kinds of student support services reported as missing reflected concerns specific to a respondent's individual situation. In these cases, no more than a single respondent identified these missing services. In addition, a fairly significant number of respondents chose to identify gaps in academic issues that are a core part of education programming as opposed to student support services related to academics. While these are beyond the scope of this study, it is worth mentioning them as they came up quite frequently. Key academic gaps mentioned consistently included outdated tools, the need for updated technology in the classroom, insufficient library resources, and weak internet connections that impede studying.

Moving beyond the reporting of missing support services connected to individualized concerns or gaps in academic issues, a clear pattern emerges on the kinds of student support services that are missing. This pattern emerges from all categories of respondents including trainees, trainers, and principals. The main kinds of support services identified as missing or having gaps can be grouped into three categories:

i) effective counselling and mental health support, 2) physical health and safety, and 3) hostel accommodations.

5.1 Effective counselling and mental health support

Previous analysis in this report showed that counselling is availed less often than any other support service, with only 20% of trainee respondents reporting that they used the service. In addition to less frequent use of counselling, respondents also identified the least amount of satisfaction with counselling services when compared to other support services. While overall satisfaction with counselling is reasonably high at 68% of respondents, this lags the 72-83% level of satisfaction reported for other kinds of student support services.

On the surface this may seem to suggest that counselling is viewed as less important or needed than other support services. Yet, as previously outlined, the findings in this study show that the lack of use of counselling is not driven by a lack of interest; rather, it is often driven by stigma. In this context, the gap in current student support services most frequently reported by respondents is counselling. There is clearly a perceived need for it among trainees. The issue, however, is not lack of availability of counselling services. It is the lack of *effective* counselling services. This need for improved counselling was reported across all categories of respondents: trainees, principals, and trainers/non-teaching staff.

Respondents frequently pointed to the need to fill this gap through the recruitment of trained counsellors rather than through designating more counsellors. Some suggested hiring professional counsellors for this role. Others recommended providing counsellor training to TVET trainers. Without counsellors with relevant skills, and combined with the stigma among trainees that already surrounds the use of counselling, trainees are not availing a service that they report as a critical need.

The reporting of a gap in effective counselling rests within a more deep-seated issue with mental health among trainees. The need for effective counselling was often framed by respondents as being necessary to address trainees' mental health. In addition, respondents reported other missing student support services that, in many cases, they also linked to addressing mental health issues. For example, the second most reported gap in student support services after effective counselling was the need for improved games and sports. This included both more types of games and sports as well as improved sports infrastructure. A number of female respondents also pointed to the lack of sports facilities for women in particular. While the connection between games/sports and improving mental health was not always made by respondents, in many cases the link was explicitly made. This role for games and sports in maintaining mental health is important given the stigma that exists around accessing counselling. Games and sports can provide a positive outlet that may contribute to reducing the need to counselling that, in many cases, appears to be avoided due to stigma, leaving mental health issues often unaddressed.

Respondents pointed to other gaps in student support services that, if addressed, may also contribute to promoting better mental health. Several respondents spoke of the need for more student clubs outside of their program area as a way to provide trainees with activities to promote positive emotions and greater trainee connections. More cultural programming was also identified as a vehicle to promote cultural pride that, in turn, could potentially assist in promoting positive mental health, including lowering drug use. Programming specific to raising awareness of drug abuse was also identified as a gap that should be filled to better address mental health among trainees.

When addressing mental health issues, some respondents went beyond identifying gaps in student support services and raised attitudinal issues. These trainees reported that they felt like they were treated like children within their TVET institute. They believed that more positive relationships rooted in mutual respect among all TVET stakeholders would build greater confidence among trainees and lessen self doubt. This sentiment was not widespread among trainee respondents, but it was raised by a notable number.

5.2 Physical health and safety

Physical health and safety issues were the third most reported category of missing support services after effective counselling and improved games and sports. A common concern is limited access to medicine and first aid equipment. Existing medicine and first aid boxes require more medicine as well as greater diversity in the kinds of medicines available to trainees. Several respondents from institutes in more remote areas mentioned the necessity for more first aid equipment on campus as the BHUs are quite far away. One principal suggested that a designated dispensary is needed on campus beyond just medicine and first aid boxes. Several trainees also mentioned the need for a medical allowance for medicine and other health needs that cannot be addressed through what is available in the medicine and first aid boxes.

In addition to a gap in available medicines and first aid equipment, numerous respondents reported a lack of proper sick rooms. While sick rooms do exist, respondents stated that they need to be better located and set up in a manner that allows for effective recovery and limited transmission of illness to other trainees. For cases of serious illness, multiple respondents pointed to a gap in the availability of late-night transportation to a medical facility.

A small number of respondents, including both trainees and non-trainees, reported a current gap in the availability of healthy food. Both improved food ingredients and better sanitisation of kitchens were pointed to as needs at some institutes.

In addition to specific health services that are missing, multiple respondents discussed the need for training to be provided to their institute's health Focal as the Focal often does not have a proper background. Several trainees suggested the creation of first aid clubs to support the health Focal to better address the breadth of health issues that emerge at individual institutes.

A number of services related to physical safety were also reported as currently missing. Some of these were specific to individual TVET institutes, such as one institute where proper streetlights are needed. More frequently mentioned was the need for a process for checking for drugs and weapons, as well as a drug testing service. Several female respondents mentioned the need for curtains for their rooms and washrooms. While not a missing service, a number of female respondents also states that their TVET institutes need to better enforce existing policies around males entering female hostels.

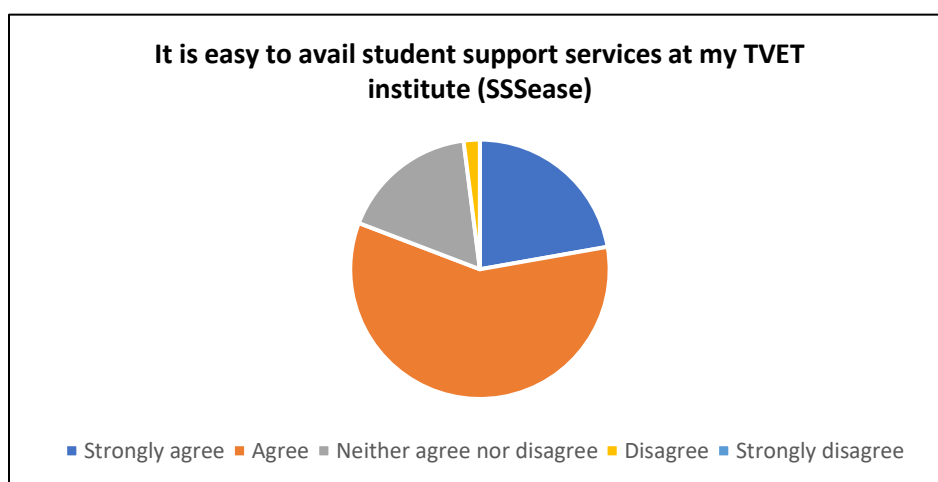
5.3 Hostel accommodations

Several gaps in services related to the nature of hostel accommodations were consistently raised by both trainees and other stakeholders. Water problems were frequently reported. This includes problems with water shortages, the need for effective water heaters, and a lack of water filters. Better heating in hostels is a further issue, and was further raised as a problem within some classrooms. The limited number of toilets was another gap raised as was the need to improve existing toilets and washrooms.

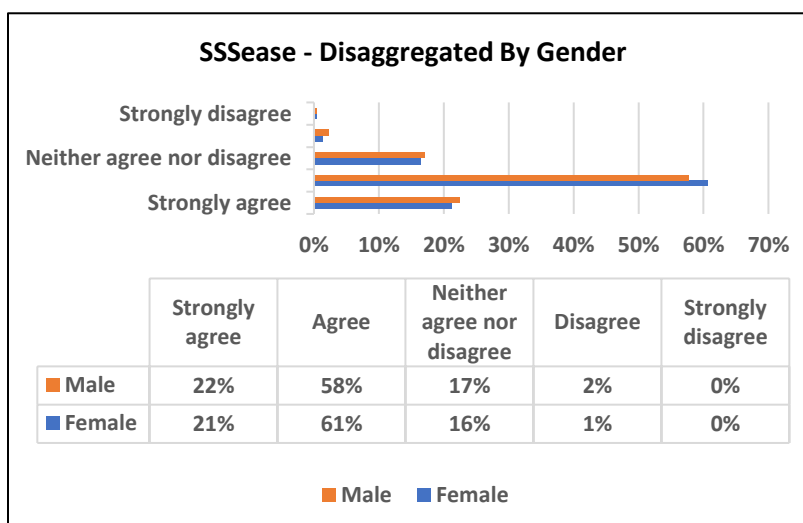
Several respondents further mentioned the need for washrooms that are not located outside of their hostel as they are currently difficult to access at night. Lastly, a few respondents reported the need for proper clothes washing and drying machines in hostels.

6. Ease of accessing Student Support Services

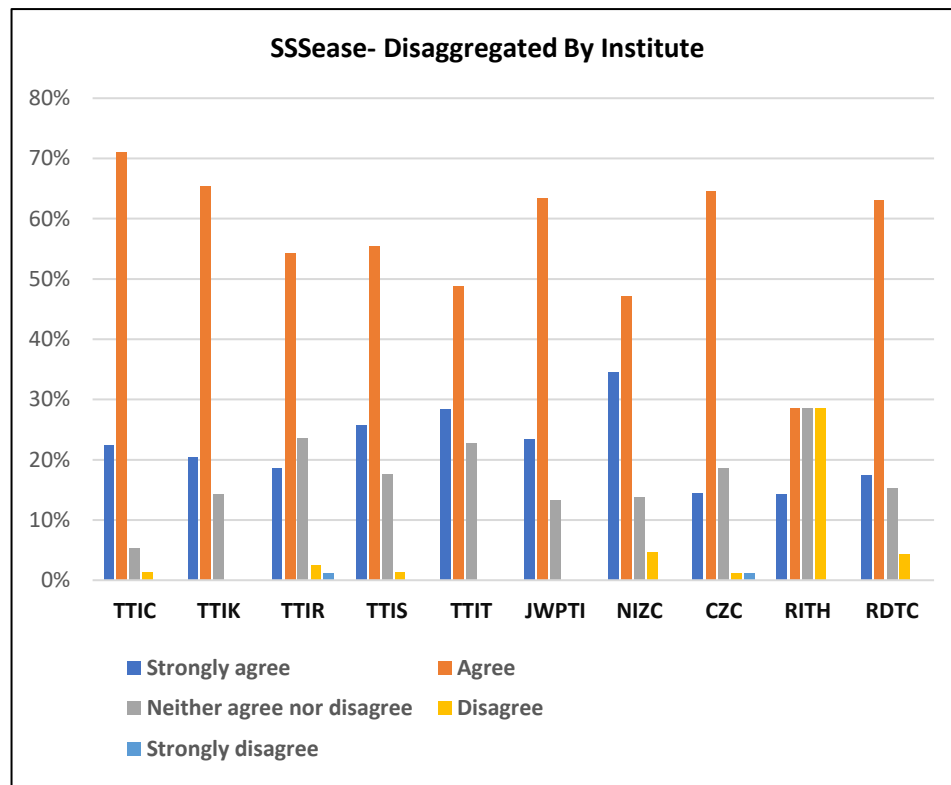
Both the use of current student support services as well as existing gaps are important for understanding the current state of such services. Also important is understanding the process of accessing student support services. The quality of existing services is eroded if it is difficult to access them. In order to better understand trainees' experience with accessing student support services, the online survey asked about the ease of accessing services. A full 80% of respondents stated they strongly agreed (22%) or agreed (58%) that it is easy to avail support services at their TVET institute. Only 2% disagreed with 17% remaining neutral. Less than 1% of respondents strongly disagreed.



There are no notable differences between female and male trainees, with 82% of females and 80% of males either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that it is easy to avail support services at their institute.



Similarly, there is relatively little difference in responses from respondents based on their home institute, with a few minor exceptions.



There is a noticeable difference in ease of access to services between respondents who have disabilities and those who do not. Trainees with disabilities were considerably less like than those without one to agree or strongly agree that it is easy to avail support services (71.4% vs. 81.2%). They were also more likely to be neutral (23.8% vs. 16.4%)

SSSease – Disaggregated by Disability/Ability					
Category	#1 - Strongly Agree	#2 - Agree	#3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree	#4 - Disagree	#5 - Strongly Disagree
People with Disability	22.2%	49.2%	23.8%	3.2%	1.6%
	(14/63)	(31/63)	(15/63)	(2/63)	(1/63)
People Without Disability	22.1%	59.1%	16.4%	2.2%	0.3%
	(143/648)	(383/648)	(106/648)	(14/648)	(2/648)
Total	22.1%	58.2%	17.0%	2.3%	0.4%
	(157/711)	(414/711)	(121/711)	(16/711)	(3/711)

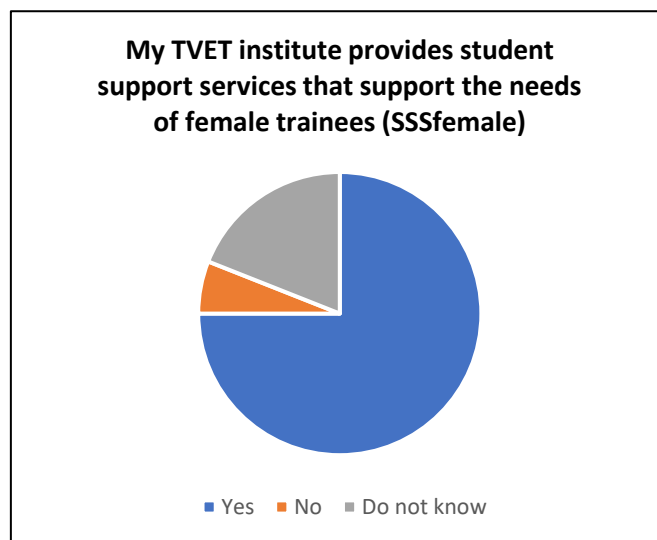
Despite the overall figure of 80% of trainees who report that it is easy to avail support services, data collected through the KIIs and FGDs demonstrate that there are some notable challenges in the process of accessing services. A key issue is the diverse, and sometimes unclear, set of processes for accessing support services. There are differences across institutes in how trainees access services. There are also differences within individual institutes in accessing different kinds of student support services. When asked to identify the process for availing support services, responses from both trainees as well as trainers/administrators included various processes, including contacting the course coordinator, reporting to the matron or warden, informing the captain, contacting the concern-in-charge, reporting to the counsellor, contacting higher management and, in some cases, a combination of several of these. In most cases, there was a different person or people to contact for each kind student support service.

This diversity of processes may in itself not be a negative thing. Different kinds of student support services may require different contact people and processes. Indeed, in the case of some institutes, respondents indicated that the processes for accessing support services work fine. But in other cases some trainees mentioned that there is not enough information on the proper process. This creates the need to do research to figure out how to access a specific service. A key issue pointed out by some trainees is the frequent lack of a single student support services Focal person who could act as a resource for information on accessing all types of support services. A second issue was further identified by trainers. As they are frequently designated as a Focal for a support service, they need to multitask and do so in ways for which they may not have proper training or enough time. Principals are often aware of this challenge and the need to designate staff Focals effectively to smooth out the process of accessing support services. Yet this is often not possible given resource constraints. This is all complicated by a third issue, discussed above, where trainees often lack confidence for seeking out some support services or fear being stigmatized if they do so.

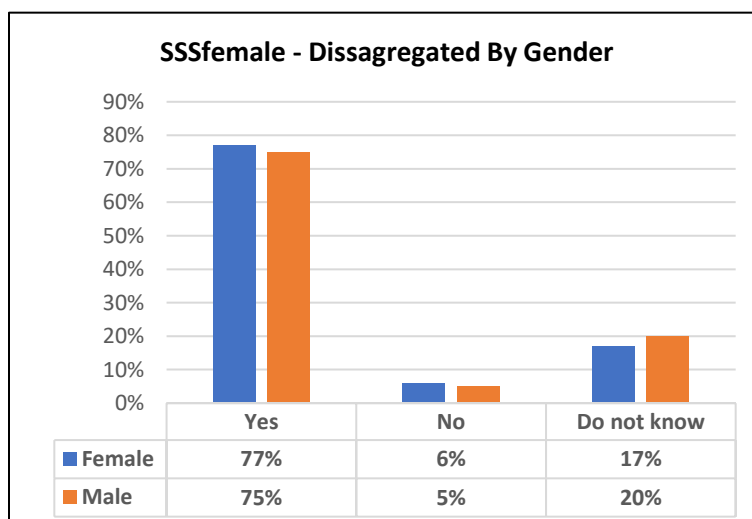
In light of these issues, participants in the KIIs and FGDs offered recommendations for how to improve the process of accessing student support services. Not all participants provided recommendations, but those who did represented both trainees as well as trainers/principals. Significantly, the recommendations were quite consistent across these categories of respondents. The responses can be broken down into three strategies. First, multiple respondents recommended that one overall Focal be designated at their institute to oversee all student support services. In a few cases, the suggestion was for two Focals, one male and one female. The intent is not for one or two overall Focals to provide all support service, but to be the source of information on how to access each service. Second, additional support systems should be set up to support the Focal(s) at each institute. Most frequently mentioned was a Student Support Service Committee that could provide input and support. A number of trainees suggested such a committee could also contribute to creating more positive and respectful relationships that address the perceived lack of respect trainees receive. Several respondents went further. They recommended the creation of a Student Support Centre at each institute that would house the student support services Focal person and information on accessing services. A few others recommended strengthening relationships to relevant CSOs like RENEW as a means of supporting the delivery of support services. The third recommended strategy is to further clarify and improve communication on student support services through developing a Terms of Reference (TOR) for support services and increase information dissemination on how to avail support services on platforms like Facebook. Overall, all of these strategies would streamline access to information on how to avail student support services.

7. Gender and Student Support Services

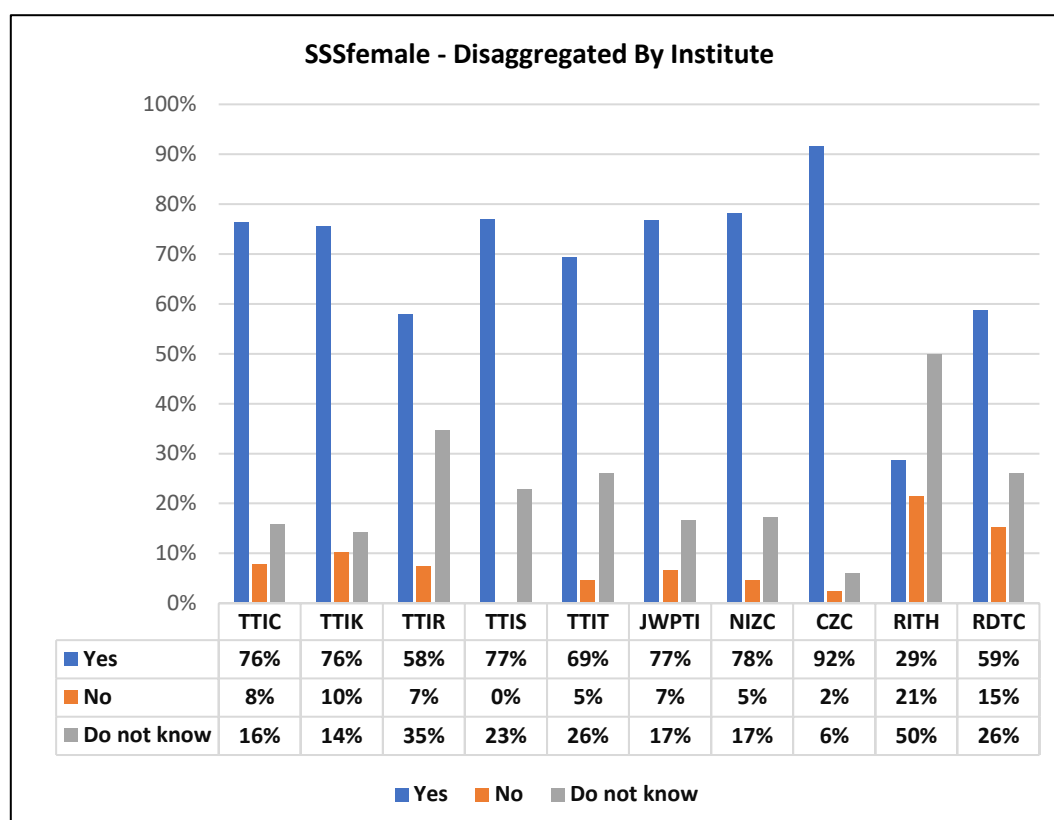
A key concern of the BEST project is ensuring TVET is accessible to females and that their specific needs are met during their time as trainees. The findings above demonstrate that, for the most part, there rarely are notable differences between female and male trainees with respect to the perception and use of existing support services. To more deeply understand the experience of female trainees, the online survey asked trainees whether their TVET institute provides support services that support the specific needs of female trainees in particular. Three-quarters of respondents, 75%, stated that their institute does provide support services specific to females. Only 6% stated their institute does not, while 19% did not know.



Female respondents were slightly more likely than male respondents to report that their institute does provide support services specific to women. There is no difference in the response rate from trainees with disabilities compared to those without.



Institutionally, a majority of respondents in 9 of the 10 institutes reported that their institute provides student support services for women.



On the surface, the 75% figure of respondents who report that their institute has support services for the needs specific to female trainees is positive. Qualitative data from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions, however, illustrate that the situation is more subtle and complex. When discussing support services for females, KII and FGD participants frequently referred to the main gender-based support service as the existence of female-only hostels. Few other kinds of specific female focused support services were identified. In fact, it was common for respondents – both female and male as well as trainees and trainers/administrators – to conceptualize gender-based support services as the provision of the same services without discrimination. Both females and males receive the same kinds of student support services without favour to either.

Providing the same student support services free of discrimination is critical. Yet the findings from this study also show that there are needs specific to females that require active support beyond the non-discriminatory provision of existing support services. For example, female trainee respondents spoke of the need for games and sports that are more relevant to women. They also reported the need for more diversified food that addresses the specific nutrient needs of females.

The most reported need specific to women that requires support was related to menstruation. This was reported in far greater frequency than any other issue. Many female respondents spoke of the need to

be able to purchase quality sanitary pads on campus.⁵ A number mentioned having to use toilet paper in the absence of available sanitary pads. Others suggested that not only should sanitary pads be easily available on campus, but that they be provided for free. Similarly, others spoke of the need for easily accessible emergency sanitary pads. In addition to issues of access, some female respondents discussed the need to be able to more discretely dispose of sanitary pads. Still others mentioned that dark school uniforms are needed in cases of accidents during the school day. Putting additional support services in place to respond to this issue in all its forms would address a concern that is of great importance to many female trainees.

Another critical gender-based issue requiring more effective support for females also emerged from the FGDs. Several respondents spoke about the need for career counselling that is specific to women. This reflects a key concern that has emerged in the TVET sector. A community survey of 414 people representing 19 of the 20 dzongkhags was undertaken for the baseline study of the BEST project. It found that very positive attitudes exist within Bhutanese society about ensuring females have access to TVET. Yet alongside these positive attitudes, the baseline study also found that there remain gendered societal expectations around women's domestic and employment roles.⁶ Societal support exists for women's access to TVET, but women who graduate with technical skills are still expected to take on domestic duties and gendered employment roles. In terms of the latter, many female TVET graduates reported being assigned non-technical administrative jobs once they found employment with a technical company in response to customers' perceptions that technical work is only for men. In this context, the TVET Tracer Study of 2021 found that 64% of female TVET graduates experienced challenges in finding employment.⁷ Female TVET graduates therefore face a very different job market than male graduates. Career counselling that recognizes this difference and provides strategies to navigate it effectively is critical for employment success among female TVET graduates.

Overall, this discussion of relevant student support services for female trainees points to an assumption that weaves through many of the responses received in the KIIs and FGDs. Existing student support services for females are frequently defined in terms of the provision of support services without any discrimination. The same support service is delivered in the same way to both females and males. The underlying assumption is that support services in the TVET system should promote *gender equality*. In other words, support services should ensure both females and males have the same services and resources. This is a critical step in fostering more opportunities for women as it counters gender discrimination. Yet, the fact that female trainees face gender-specific challenges, such as women's health issues and entering a job market where women's roles are perceived differently than men's, means support services that promote *gender equity* are also required. While gender equality ensures equal resources and opportunities, gender equity recognizes that women face different challenges and different barriers requiring different levels or kinds of support in order to achieve the same outcomes as men.

⁵ While other menstrual hygiene products such as tampons and cups are available in the market, the most used and accessible product is the sanitary pad.

⁶ Bhutan Canada Foundation. (2022). BEST Baseline Data Report.

⁷ Department of Technical Education. (2021). [TVET Graduates \(TTIs/IZC/CZC\) Study of Bhutan: Tracer Study Report for 2020 Graduates](#). Thimphu: DTE, MoLHR, p. 79.

The findings from this study therefore illustrate that a greater focus on gender equity is needed if student support services in the TVET system are to serve female trainees more effectively. This is consistent with the RGoB's national gender policy of 2020. The policy recognizes that formal equality of females and males is necessary but not enough. In contrast, the policy promotes a society that practices gender equity, which it refers to as "substantive equality". Substantive equality is defined in the policy as taking into account "fairness and equity in providing a broader framework of equality, which recognises differences and disadvantages."⁸ Incorporating support services specific to the unique needs of female trainees will contribute to addressing the policy's vision.

8. People with Disabilities and Student Support Services

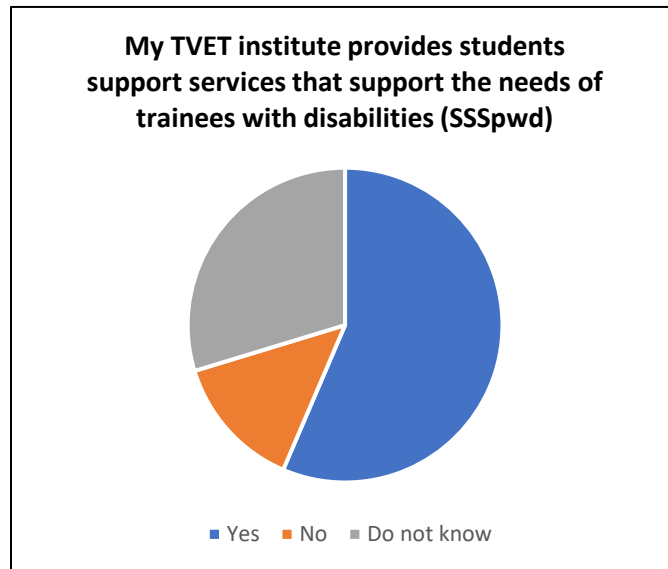
A component of the TVET reform process and the BEST project is increasing access to TVET for people with disabilities (PWD). This is consistent with the RGoB's *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019*, which recognizes that the lack of marketable vocational training available to PWD limits their opportunities in a way that ultimately increases marginalization.⁹ Section 7 of the policy further recognises that increasing access to education for PWD requires removing not just physical barriers, but informational and attitudinal barriers as well. This is significant as trainees with disabilities potentially face more diverse kinds of challenges. Student support services that address the range of physical, informational, and attitudinal issues related to the educational experience of PWD are therefore critical.

The findings outlined in previous sections of this study confirm that trainees with disabilities face significant issues in the use of support services. Indeed, the most notable difference in the quality of experience in using student support services occurs between trainees with disabilities and those without. Trainees with disabilities consistently face a poorer experience in every aspect explored in this study. They were significantly less likely to strongly agree that support services play a vital role in their TVET institution. They were also less aware of available support services and far less likely to consistently avail them. Trainees with disabilities also were less likely to avail career counselling despite the additional employment barriers they face. Overall, they also were less likely to report satisfaction across every category of student support service while more likely to report dissatisfaction. Clearly, TVET trainees with disabilities face considerable challenges.

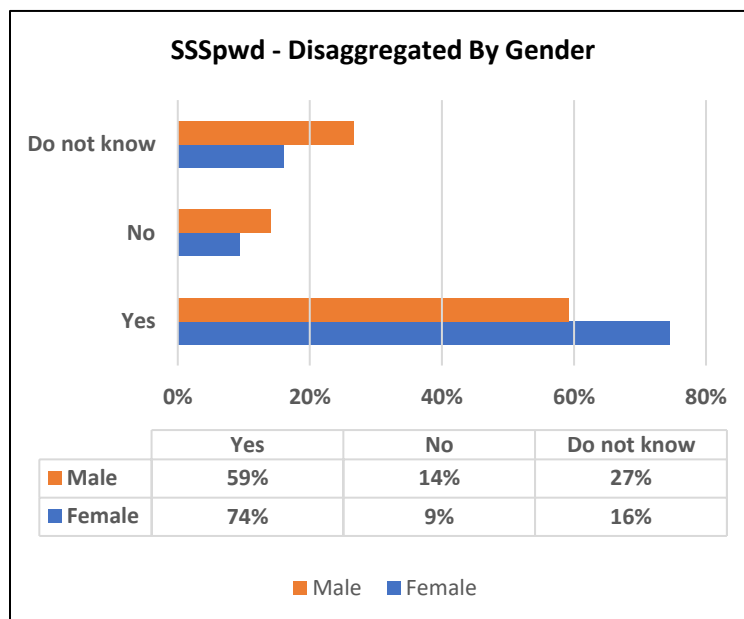
In order to further understand the current situation of trainees with disabilities, all respondents were asked in the online survey whether their TVET institute provides services that support the needs of trainees with disabilities. Just over half of respondents, 57%, stated that their institute does provide such services. Almost one third, 29%, did not know while 14% said that support services for PWD do not exist at their institute.

⁸ National Commission for Women and Children, RGoB. (2020). [National Gender Equality Policy 2020](#). Thimphu: NCWC, pp. 18-19.

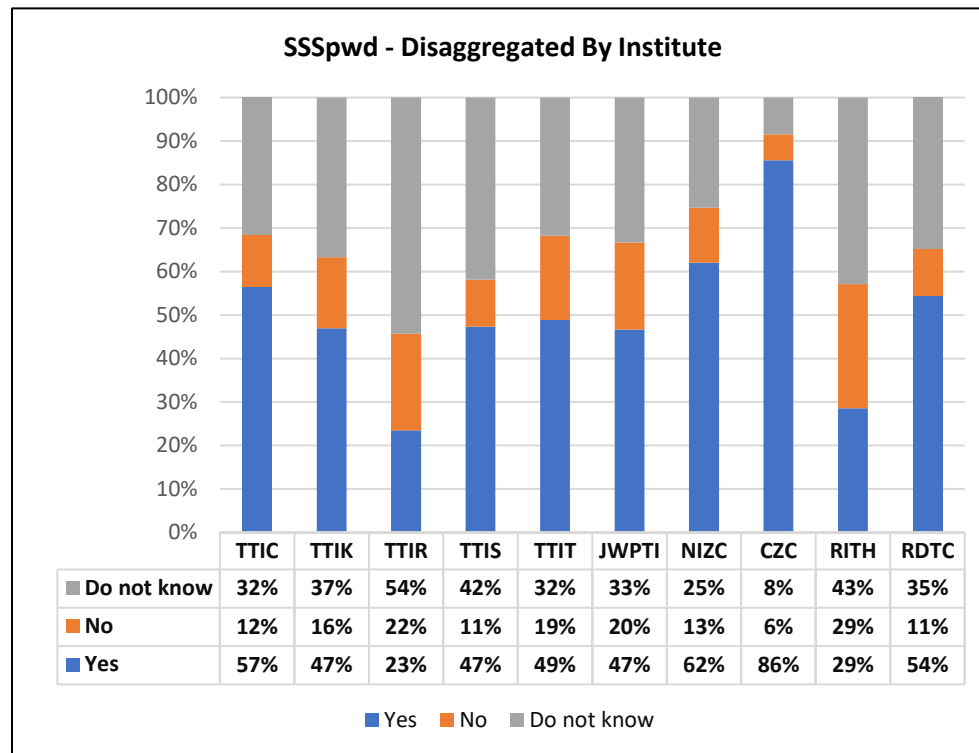
⁹ Research & Evaluation Division, GNH Commission Secretariat. (2019). [National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019](#). Thimphu: GNH Commission Secretariat, pp. 7-8.



Female trainees were noticeably more likely than male trainees to report that their institute has support services for PWD.



When analysing responses disaggregated by TVET institute, fairly significant differences arise. Across the 10 individual institutes, respondents reporting that their institute has services for PWD ranges from 23% - 86% of respondents.



Differences also emerge when comparing the responses of trainees with disabilities to those who do not have a disability. Only 46% of trainees with disabilities stated that their institute has support services for PWD compared to 58% of trainees without a disability. Surprisingly, trainees with disabilities were also more likely to not know if support services for PWD exist at their institute when compared to those without a disability (35% versus 29%).

SSSpwd – Disaggregated by Disability/Ability			
Category	#1 - Yes	#2 - No	#3 - Do Not Know
People with Disability	46%	19%	35%
	(29/63)	(12/63)	(22/63)
People Without Disability	58%	13%	29%
	(373/648)	(84/648)	(191/648)
Total	57%	14%	30%
	(402/711)	(96/711)	(213/711)

The fact that over a third of trainees with disabilities do not know whether their TVET institute provides support services specific to their needs is concerning, particularly as they face the greatest challenges in accessing and using support services. The physical barriers that exist for PWD are therefore paralleled by an information barrier.

The challenges, however, run deeper. Qualitative data from the KIIs and FGDs illustrate three key issues. First, administrators from some TVET institutes report that there are few or no formal student support services specific to trainees with disabilities. In most cases, there was a recognition that this is an issue and that there not only needs to be direct support services created, but updated infrastructure and training for TVET trainers in special education needs (SEN). This will require significant resources. Second, and more concerning, it is not uncommon for respondents to believe that there are no trainees who have disabilities within the TVET system. Third, even in cases where it is understood that there are trainees with disabilities, this is usually defined primarily in terms of physical disabilities. The kinds of existing support services reported therefore include such things as paved pathways, hostel rooms on the ground floor with an attached toilet, and the provision of chairs during prayers. Trainees with invisible disabilities, or those that are not immediately visible, therefore appear to have little formal support available. The common perspective on the nature of disability as solely a physical issue is therefore an attitudinal challenge that exists alongside the physical and informational barriers. Increasing and improving formal support services for trainees with disabilities is therefore one of the most pressing issues to emerge from this study. As is referenced in the RGoB's *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities*, these student support services should address the combined physical, informational, and attitudinal issues that act as barriers to the success of trainees with disabilities.

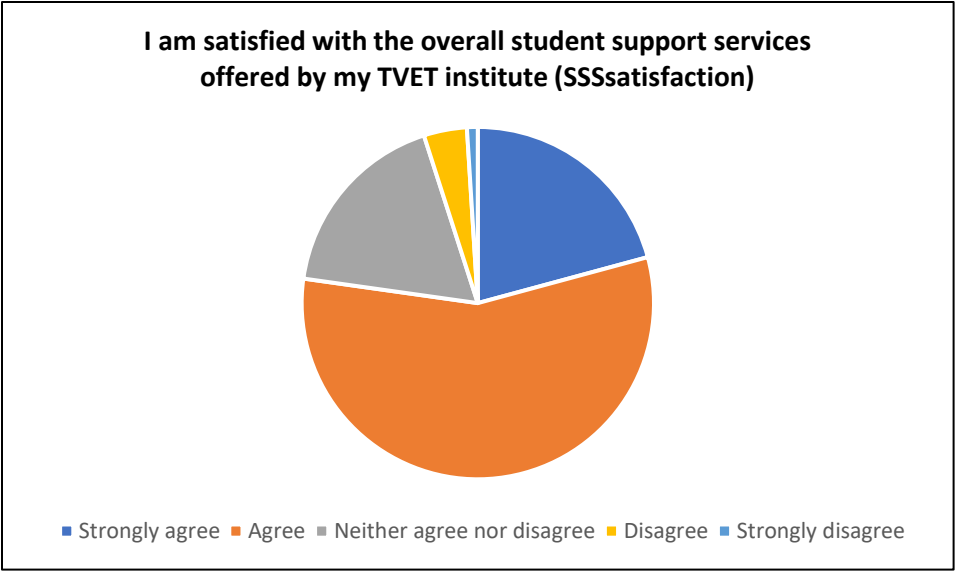
9. Overall trainee satisfaction with Student Support Services

The findings to this point illustrate that an overwhelming majority of trainee respondents view student support services as vital and are aware of the kinds of services available to them. Respondents are also generally satisfied with individual support services including academic advice, career services, health services, and counselling. Just under half of respondents have availed academic advice or career services, while around a fifth have availed health services or counselling. Respondents generally feel that accessing these services is not difficult, although they provided a number of recommendations to address information gaps.

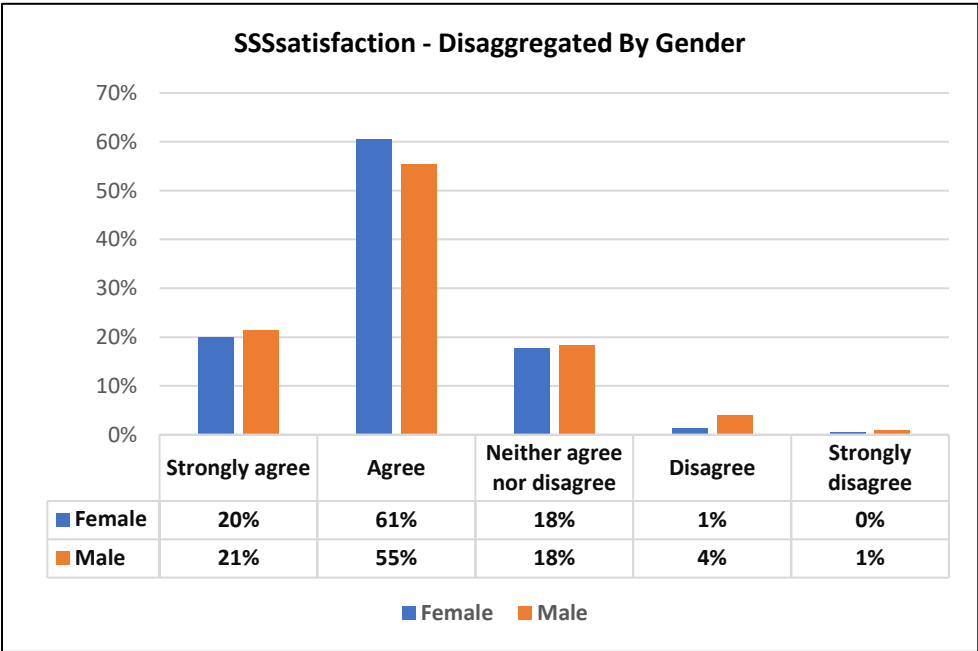
At the same time, around half of trainee respondents reported gaps in existing student support services. Effective counselling and mental health support were most frequently reported. Physical health and safety and a range of issues related to hostel accommodations were also frequently reported as gaps.

These generally positive findings are accompanied, however, by some very clear challenges related to the nature or lack of student support services that respond to the specific needs of women and trainees with disabilities.

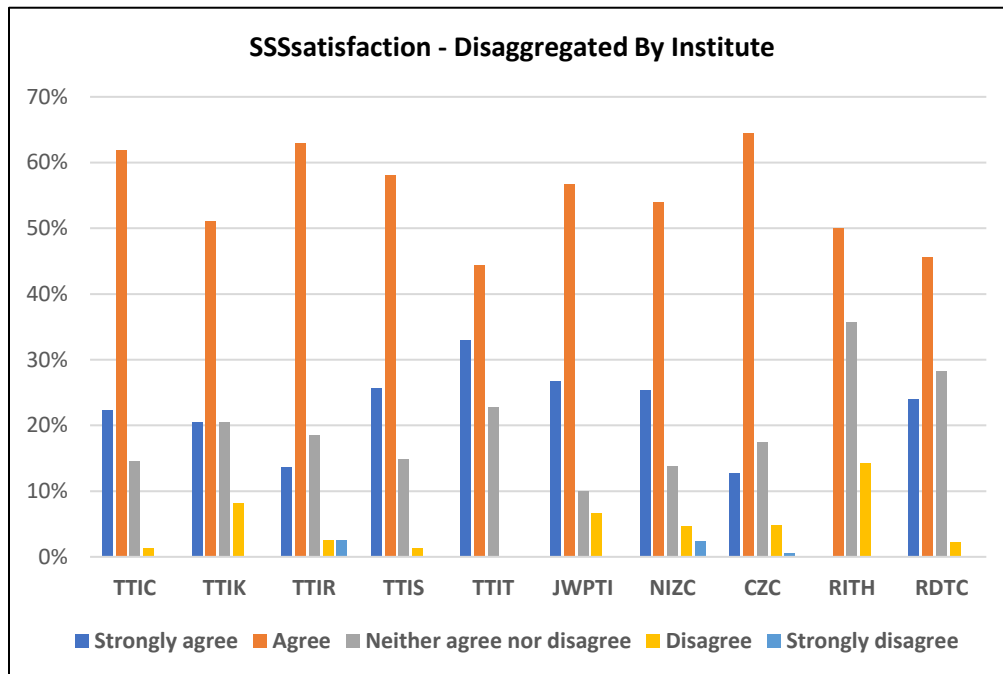
In this broad context, the online survey asked trainees whether they are satisfied with the overall student support services offered by their TVET institute. Overall reported satisfaction was high with 78% of respondents either strongly agreeing (21%) or agreeing (57%) that they are satisfied with these services. Only 5% of respondents disagreed (4%) or strongly disagreed (1%). Respondents who were neutral made up 18%.



This overall level of satisfaction with support services remains largely the same when comparing female and male respondents. Females were slightly more likely to be satisfied than male respondents (82% agree/strongly agree they are satisfied versus 76% of males).



At the institutional level, the percentage of respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed that they are satisfied with the overall support services offered by their institute ranged from 50% to 85% across the 10 TVET institutes.



Difference again arise when comparing trainees with disabilities and those who do not have a disability. While 79% of trainees without a disability either agreed or strongly agreed that they are satisfied with student support services overall, only 60% of trainees with a disability reported overall satisfaction. The largest difference is between those who 'strongly agree' that they are satisfied, with only 8% of trainees with a disability versus 22% of those without a disability reporting strong agreement.

While a greater percentage of respondents with disabilities are neutral in their satisfaction with support services (27% versus 17%), they are also more likely to report dissatisfaction. Only 4% of respondents without a disability disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they are satisfied with overall student support services. In contrast, 13% of respondents with disabilities reported such dissatisfaction. This is consistent with the previously reported levels of satisfaction with individual support services where, in the case of each support service, respondents with disabilities were more likely to report dissatisfaction.

SSSsatisfaction – Disaggregated by Disability/Ability					
Category	#1 - Strongly Agree	#2 - Agree	#3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree	#4 - Disagree	#5 - Strongly Disagree
People with Disability	8% (5/63)	52% (33/63)	27% (17/63)	11% (7/63)	2% (1/63)
People Without Disability	22% (143/648)	57% (371/648)	17% (112/648)	3% (18/648)	1% (4/648)
Total	21% (148/711)	57% (404/711)	18% (129/711)	4% (25/711)	1% (5/711)

Overall, a common theme found throughout this study again emerges. Overall satisfaction with student support services is high with some minor differences occur across genders and across the 10 TVET institutes. The exception is trainees with disabilities whose experience with student support services is noticeably less satisfactory.

10. Key Themes

A number of key themes have been discussed in this study. This section brings them all together with the intent of providing information that can inform the implementation of related BEST activities.

10.1 Trainee satisfaction with student support services is relatively high

A key finding from this study is that there is a significant level of satisfaction among trainees with existing student support services. Not only do 91% view such services as vital, 81% are aware of the kinds of services available to them, and 78% report overall satisfaction. This is paralleled by relatively high rates of reported satisfaction with individual student support services. Survey respondents who either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that they are satisfied with individual services ranged from a high of 83% for career advice services to a low of 68% for counselling. Satisfaction with academic advice was reported by 78%, while 72% were satisfied with health services. The findings therefore suggest that there currently is a fairly solid foundation of student support services within the TVET sector.

Some caution, however, needs to be used in interpreting these results. Almost a quarter of the respondents (23%) to the online survey came from CZC. The percentage of respondents from the other nine institutes ranged from 2-12%. The overall level of satisfaction is therefore likely somewhat biased towards the experience of trainees at CZC.

Another issue to note is that although overall satisfaction is high, almost half of respondents, 48%, also report that there are service gaps that need to be filled. These gaps are key areas for BEST to address.

10.2 Effective counselling is a critical gap

The findings illustrate that counselling is the least availed student support service across the TVET sector and that trainees report the lowest level of satisfaction with it compared to other services. This reflects

the reality that effective counselling is viewed as the greatest gap in current student support services. Respondents consistently outlined the need for professional counsellors or for appropriate training for trainers who are designated as counsellors. This will require financial resources. Moreover, any move to professionalising counselling services will only be successful if it is accompanied by strategies that de-stigmatize the use of counselling by trainees.

10.3 An integrated approach will strengthen the support of mental health

Filling the reported need for effective counselling services is necessary to address the mental health needs of trainees. These needs are considerable and, according to trainers and principals, often start early in trainees' academic careers. The findings in this study further show, however, that counselling is just one tool for addressing mental health. Respondents pointed to a range of needed support services that can positively influence mental health. Improved and expanded games and sports were most frequently mentioned. So, too, was the expansion of student clubs and increased cultural activities. Direct services, such as increased drug abuse programming, were also viewed as necessary to reduce destructive behaviours that may emerge from poor mental health.

These findings all point to the need to address mental health through an integrated approach. Pairing support services like counselling and drug abuse programming that respond to negative mental health with support services like sports, clubs, and cultural activities that foster positive mental health will provide a holistic approach to supporting mental health. It is likely that other kinds of support services also can play a role in addressing mental health. Mapping out existing support services and the potential roles they might play should be a first step in developing an interrelated and integrated approach to supporting mental health.

10.4 Streamlining information will strengthen access to student support services

A large majority of respondents to the online survey – 80% - reported that it is easy to access existing student support services at their TVET institute. At the same time, it was felt that there was room for improvement. The main issue is the need to streamline information so trainees can better understand how to avail each service. Given that different support services reportedly have different processes for accessing them, or had different people responsible, numerous respondents indicated the need to designate a single Student Support Services Focal (or two Focals, one male and one female). The intent is not for these Focals to provide all services, but to be an information resource for trainees so they can better understand how to access individual services. Other respondents recommended providing support to the Student Support Services Focal as well given that they would likely be an existing staff person already fulfilling a full-time job. Student Support Services Committees were suggested as one means of support, as was connecting TVET institutions with relevant CSOs that could provide support.

Designating a single (or two) Student Support Services Focals at each institute and creating support structures for them like Student Support Services Committees are strategies that likely do not require considerable human or financial resources. Doing so, however, will help streamline information for trainees, further supporting the ease of accessing student support services.

10.5 Student support services should address gender equity in addition to gender equality

Current student support services are characterized as using an anti-discrimination approach. They are delivered to both female and male trainees without favour to either gender. In addition, the findings

generally show that there are few differences across genders in the use of and satisfaction with existing student support services. This suggests that the TVET system has made notable strides in promoting gender equality where both women and men have equal access to the same services and resources.

Yet it also masks a more nuanced situation. The findings also show that there are needs specific to female trainees, including women's health issues and access to meaningful employment, that currently are not addressed effectively. While support services should continue to promote gender equality through the provision of services without discrimination, this should be bolstered by the addition of services that promote gender equity. Such services would recognise the different needs and barriers female trainees face and respond to them accordingly. Developing student support services that promote gender equity in addition to gender equality will contribute to fulfilling the vision of Bhutan's national gender policy.

10.6 A comprehensive approach is needed to support trainees with disabilities

The most consistent finding in this study is the challenging situation faced by trainees with disabilities. Some care needs to be taken when interpreting these results as the prevalence of disability is much higher among trainees who responded to the online survey than in the TVET trainee population as a whole and in Bhutanese society overall. Yet, what remains critical is that in every section of the report – student support services use, access, and satisfaction – trainees with disabilities face greater challenges than other trainees. This is further complicated by the more difficult labour market they face upon graduation. At the same time, TVET holds the potential to be a vehicle for providing PWD access to education and meaningful employment. Both the BEST project and the larger TVET reform process recognise this and have identified PWD as a key stakeholder in the reform process. Addressing the need for student support services that are specific to PWD can play a key part of this. Doing so, however, must confront several barriers identified in this study.

First, few student support services currently exist that are specific to the needs of PWD. In addition, over a third of trainees with disabilities (35%) lack information on whether their institute has services specifically for them. Addressing these issues is something the BEST project can clearly do by working with TVET institutes to design services specific to PWD and developing information campaigns to increase information on their availability. More concerning, however, is a second barrier: many respondents believe that there are no trainees with disabilities in the TVET system. Third, a notable number of respondents understand disability solely in terms of physical disabilities. Awareness of hidden disabilities appears to be quite low for many.

The first barrier discussed above incorporates physical challenges, such as needed services that provide physical access within TVET institutes to PWD, as well as informational challenges given the lack of knowledge about available services. The second and third barriers are attitudinal. BEST activities focused on improving support services for PWD will need to take this into account. A comprehensive approach – addressing physical, informational, and attitudinal needs – is not only necessary for effectively supporting PWD, but also consistent with the RGoB's *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019*. Such a comprehensive approach will require interventions that increase the kinds of student support services for trainees with disabilities, improve the dissemination of information on the availability of these support services, and change attitudes on the nature of disabilities. BEST is in a position to engage in all of these.

Part of increasing services for trainees with disabilities will be improving physical access. This is beyond the scope and funding of the BEST project. It is necessary for BEST to continue to coordinate with funders that are providing funding for physical access to ensure a comprehensive fit across all interventions within and outside of BEST. This will more effectively respond to the physical, informational, and attitudinal barriers that currently exist.

10.7 Career services are a potential tool for responding to inclusion challenges in employment

Female trainees face a labour market that is different from male trainees, So, too, do trainees with disabilities face a different labour market than those without disabilities. In both cases, they are often viewed by employers as less appropriate for technical work. TVET graduates who are female or who have disabilities therefore face a more challenging search for meaningful employment and a higher likelihood of economic marginalization.

A key focus of the BEST project is to change mindsets about TVET in Bhutan. This includes changing perspectives within industry about hiring qualified women and PWD. Changing mindsets, however, is a long-term process. Accordingly, the development and provision of career services within TVET institutes that are specific to women and PWD is needed. Providing women and PWD with tools and strategies for navigating a challenging labour market will, alongside the long-term process of changing mindsets in industry, assist vulnerable groups in more successfully moving from education to employment. The results of such a strategy will likely not be immediate. But it is essential to lay a foundation now, including career counselling specific to women and PWD, that can be built upon in the longer term to progressively increase economic opportunities for vulnerable groups.

