RESEARCH ARTICLE

Envisioning my best future self: Integrating positive psychology and prospection in student affairs practice

Om my beste toekomstige self te visualiseer: Die integrasie van positiewe sielkunde en prospeksie in studentesakepraktyk

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ABSTRACT

Students' psychological well-being constitutes a critical issue that necessitates support and dedicated intervention from student affairs professionals. Positive psychology, focusing on future-oriented prospective thinking, offers valuable insights and methods relevant to student affairs. This article leverages the principles of positive psychology, particularly prospection, and reports a qualitative study that explored how 45 university students (26 females and 19 males; age range: 18-23) conceived of their best future selves. Phenomenological analysis revealed a dynamic interplay between students' optimistic visions of personal and professional success, and the pressing need for practical strategies to realise these aspirations. By integrating and leveraging positive psychology, particularly prospection-focused methodologies, practitioners can support students in envisioning their futures more clearly and translating ambitious visions into tangible outcomes, thereby fostering individual and collective growth.

KEYWORDS

Best possible selves, hope theory, mental health, positive psychology, prospection, qualitative research, student affairs, student counselling

OPSOMMING

Die sielkundige welstand van studente is 'n kritieke kwessie wat ondersteuning en toegewyde intervensie van professionele persone in studentesake vereis. Positiewe sielkunde, wat onder meer op toekomsoriëntasie fokus, bied waardevolle insigte en metodes wat relevant is vir studente-aangeleenthede. Hierdie artikel is gefundeer in die beginsels van positiewe sielkunde, spesifiek prospeksie, en rapporteer oor 'n kwalitatiewe studie wat ondersoek het hoe 45 universiteitstudente (26 vroue en 19 mans; ouderdomsgroep 18-23) hul beste toekomstige perspektief gevisualiseer het. Fenomenologiese analise het 'n dinamiese interaksie tussen studente se optimistiese visies van persoonlike en professionele sukses, en die dringende behoefte aan praktiese strategieë om hierdie aspirasies te verwesenlik, onthul. Deur positiewe sielkunde te integreer en te benut, veral prospektief-georiënteerde metodologieë, kan praktisyns studente ondersteun om hul toekoms duideliker te visualiseer en ambisieuse visies in tasbare uitkomste te vertaal, wat gevolglik individuele en kollektiewe groei bevorder.

SLEUTELWOORDE

Beste moontlike self, hoopteorie, geestesgesondheid, positiewe sielkunde, prospeksie, kwalitatiewe navorsing, studentesake, studentevoorligting

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Introduction

Higher education is a high-stakes environment where students' past, for example, the quality of schooling experiences; the present, such as daily socio-economic stressors; and future uncertainties, for example, ambiguity regarding employment prospects, converge (Anderson, 2016; Coetzee & Schreuder, 2021; Van Zyl, 2016). Given the ubiquity of past, present, future, and a multitude of other stressors, students' psychological well-being has become a critical variable that deserves attention (Auerbach et al., 2016; Grøtan et al., 2019). Therefore, mental health services, often delivered via university counselling centres, have become indispensable (Bantjes et al., 2023; Blokland & Kirkcaldy, 2022; Cerolini et al., 2023). However, Eloff and Graham (2020) indicate that mental health support needs among university students exceed the available resources at many South African university counselling centres. Consequently, student affairs professionals and others have recognised the urgent need for mental health support among university students (Blokland & Kirkcaldy, 2022; Torok et al., 2022).

While addressing students' mental health needs remains essential, it is also critical to acknowledge the pressing need to assist young people in developing their talents and strengths (Anderson, 2016; Blokland & Kirkcaldy, 2022). Thus, while traditional psychology is vital for addressing mental health needs, it has largely neglected the study of strengths, positivity, and communal factors that promote thriving (Mason, 2019). Seligman and colleagues identified the limitations of traditional psychology and heralded a new era through the formal establishment of positive psychology (PP) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001; Seligman et al., 2005). PP offers a unique perspective on alleviating distress and enhancing flourishing, making it a valuable lens for considering the evolving complexities of higher education (Guse & Vermaak, 2016; Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2016).

PP is based on the work of various humanistic and existential psychologists (Seligman et al., 2005). Frankl, an early yet often unacknowledged proponent of a PP-based worldview, argued that one of the grand goals of psychology should be to assist humans in establishing meaningful visions of the future (Frankl, 2006). Lopez (2013), a seminal figure in the modern-day study of hope, indicates that a life vision should be augmented by agency and pathways thinking (problem-solving) as anchors that can assist people in remaining steadfast in their future goal pursuits while dealing with stressful experiences. Hence, in contrast to the causal deterministic focus of traditional psychology, PP emphasises the fundamental human capacity to make decisions and is motivated by a future-directed evaluative landscape of possibilities, referred to as prospection, versus being the product of one's past (Frankl, 2006; Lopez, 2013).

Prospection, or the cognitive process of thinking about the future, is a powerful tool for guiding and motivating present actions and reframing past experiences (Christian et al., 2013; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). Research suggests that prospection, particularly through the lens of best future selves (BFS), can positively affect student motivation, well-being, and success (Hardy, 2022; King, 2001). The concept of BFS refers to the process by which individuals prospectively envision their ideal future selves by emphasising aspects such as values, hopes, and ambitions (King, 2001). Despite the

potential value of prospecting and BFS, limited South African and African research has investigated these concepts and their utility from a student affairs perspective.

The current author's search of the *Journal for Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA), a flagship journal on student affairs, revealed no hits. Subsequently, the search was extended beyond JSAA to identify relevant literature on the intersection of prospection, positive psychology, and student affairs within South African and African contexts. A systematic search strategy was employed across several databases (EBSCOhost, Sabinet, and Google Scholar) using the keywords 'prospection', 'best future selves', 'positive psychology', 'student affairs', 'South Africa' and 'Africa' in various combinations. Despite using broad and specific search terms, no pertinent hits were found. This highlights a gap in the existing knowledge base and paves the way for examining prospection within the context of South African student affairs.

In light of the aforementioned arguments, this article examines the importance of incorporating PP principles into student affairs research and practices. It also suggests that PP principles and the concept of prospection can help shape effective interventions, thereby contributing to student affairs practices. As a first step towards this goal, this article reports a qualitative study exploring BFS prospections among South African university students.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, the theoretical perspective is presented by which the study was guided. Second, the methodology that guided the qualitative study is discussed. The qualitative findings, and insights to guide future research and practice follow thereafter.

Theoretical perspective

The field of PP, also referred to as the study of what makes life worth living, has attracted significant interest since its inception (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). PP is based on the proposition that personal strengths can be mapped, developed, and utilised to enhance well-being and prosocial behaviour (Seligman et al., 2005). Prosocial behaviour fosters altruism, contributes to building robust and resilient communities, and is related to higher levels of well-being (Damon et al., 2003; Kakulte & Shaikh, 2023). Moreover, prosocial behaviour can inspire transcendental motivation that promotes social harmony and collective resilience (Damon et al., 2003; Frankl, 2006). Another critical feature of PP is the focus on the potentialities that exist in the future, also referred to as prospection.

Prospection, which refers to the cognitive process of envisioning the future, is a critical component of human motivation (Bulley, 2018). Prospection enables individuals to imagine potential scenarios and outcomes, set goals, and take constructive steps towards realising their BFS (Bulley, 2018; Christian et al., 2013; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). For university students who are bound to encounter stressors during their academic studies, cultivating a positive future orientation can promote wise decision-making and well-being (Lopez, 2013; Terblanche et al., 2021; Oyserman et al., 2006). Hence, prospection can serve as a foundation for resilience, which refers to the capacity to bounce back from stressors and challenges by drawing on internal and external resources (Maniram, 2022; Musiello et al., 2024).

The concept of BFS represents a specific facet of prospection that involves imagining and envisioning one's ideal future self, a version of oneself that has realised one's full potential and thrives in all aspects of life (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; King, 2001). By connecting the present self to a positive future vision, individuals can establish a dynamic tension between where they are (current self) and where they want to go (future self) (Frankl, 2006). This dynamic tension can enhance motivation and enable students to manage stressors proactively by remaining solution-focused rather than hyper-reflecting on stressors and challenges during the university journey (Frankl, 2006; King & Mitchell, 2015).

Bieleke et al. (2020) caution that merely fantasising about a BFS may be an insufficient strategy to attain positive outcomes. Oyserman and colleagues echo this sentiment and contend that a person's self-concept should include a positive perspective of the future and strategies that promote goal achievement (Oyserman, 2004; Oyserman et al., 2006). Thus, BFS should encompass a vision of the future and incorporate practical strategies for its attainment, which closely aligns with hope theory (Lopez, 2013; Snyder, 2002).

Individuals with high levels of hope can visualise desired outcomes, recognise several possible pathways to attain those outcomes, and have the drive and perseverance to achieve their goals (Marques et al., 2017; Snyder, 2002). The construct of hope comprises three key elements: a vision of the future, pathways thinking, and agency (Lopez, 2013). Visioning the future has been described as critical for success in various life domains, including student success (Marques et al., 2017; Snyder, 2002; Voigt et al., 2024). Pathways thinking refers to the perceived capacity to manage stressors and challenges by generating numerous workable paths to desired goals (Lopez, 2013). The third element of hope theory, agency, involves goal-directed determination and the capacity to move from intention to action. Gollwitzer and colleagues argue that goals paired with implementation intention plans are more easily achieved than vague goal intentions without action (Bieleke et al., 2020; Gollwitzer, 1999). Thus, a vision, pathways thinking, agency and persistence, or grit, are required to realise ambitious goals (Duckworth, 2016).

Grit encompasses the intersection of passion and perseverance (Duckworth, 2016). Individuals with high grit report a high commitment to long-term goals and perseverance when encountering setbacks and challenges (Mason, 2018). Previous research has pointed to positive relationships between hope, grit and pursuing prospective aspirations (Duckworth, 2016; Marques et al., 2017; Snyder, 2002). Additionally, the willingness to embrace challenges as learning opportunities, referred to as a growth mindset, has been related to positive academic outcomes (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2006).

Dweck's (2006) mindset theory states that individuals can have either a growth or fixed mindset regarding their capabilities. Students with a growth mindset believe their abilities can be developed through grit and the application of strengths, whereas those with a fixed mindset regard their abilities as statuelike and unchangeable. Numerous empirical studies have supported the broad applicability and benefits of mindset

interventions in academic contexts (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2006; Terblanche et al., 2021).

Prospection, hope, grit, and growth mindsets are internal strengths that can enhance students' resilience (Bulley, 2018; Dweck, 2006; Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Mason, 2018). In addition to internal strengths, external factors such as social support and university support programmes are important in promoting a resilient student body (Maniram, 2022; Musiello et al., 2024). In an academic context, students can be assisted in developing internal strengths and accessing external resources through student affairs-related support programmes or interventions (Adler et al., 2016; Terblanche et al., 2021).

By integrating the concepts of prospection, BFS, hope theory, and mindset, researchers and practitioners working in student affairs and, specifically in university counselling centres, can devise interventions to assist students in cultivating a positive future time orientation, empowering them to pursue and realise their best future selves (Mason, 2019; Meevissen et al., 2011; Terblanche et al., 2021). Such interventions, which could be offered online or in-person, could involve goal-setting activities, implementation intention plans, and the development of strategies to overcome setbacks and obstacles (Gollwitzer, 1999). This holistic approach, grounded in PP principles, holds promise for enhancing South African university students' academic and personal well-being as they navigate the challenges of higher education (Adler et al., 2016; Anderson, 2016). Moreover, interventions can be offered to students at scale, addressing the critical need for mental health support within higher education (Adler et al., 2016; Eloff & Graham, 2020; Terblanche et al., 2021). A first step towards developing prospection-based interventions would be understanding university students' conceptions of their BFS.

Goal of the study

Given the transformative potential of prospection and the limited existing research in the South African student affairs context, this article reports a qualitative study that explored university students' conceptions of their BFS. The following research question guided the study: How do university students conceive of their BFS, and in what ways do these conceptions reflect their goals, aspirations, and strengths?

Research method

Research design, context and ethics

This qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological design, which lends itself to offering an empathetic understanding of the participants' lived experiences and qualitative conceptions of their BFS (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Giorgi, 2009). The study was conducted at a South African residential university, which has a diverse population comprising a mix of genders, races, and languages, reflecting the broader demographic makeup of South Africa. The data used in this study were part of a more extensive investigation into engineering students' academic and personal well-being, and the university granted permission to conduct this study (Ref. number: REC/2019/11/003).

Data collection and sample

The data for this study were collected through narrative sketches and semi-structured individual interviews. A phased approach was followed, and the insights obtained through narrative sketches were used to identify and formulate topics for further exploration via qualitative interviews.

A total of 125 first-year engineering students (female = 51, male = 74, age range = 18-23) completed narrative sketches, described by Giorgi (1985) as documents that allow participants to depict their stories and perspectives on a specific qualitative phenomenon. The instructions for the narrative sketch were as follows:

> *Imagine yourself at the end of your university journey. You have completed your studies and are embarking on your career. Be as specific and descriptive as possible and share your BFS in as much detail as possible. There are no wrong answers. Should you wish, you can use the following prompts to guide you in drafting your BFS narrative:*
> * *What are your goals?*
> * *What do you aspire to be and do?*
> * *What kind of person have or are you becoming?*
> * *Is there room for further growth?*
> * *What are your strengths?*
> * *Are you contributing to your community and the world? If so, how are you contributing?*
> * *When you look back on your journey, what are the key strategies, skills, resources, and capacities that you have employed to realise your BFS?*

The participants' narrative sketches ranged from one to seven handwritten or typed pages. After analysing 40 narrative sketches, saturation was determined. However, five additional narrative sketches were analysed to ensure saturation. Hence, 45 narrative sketches were included in the sample (females = 26, males = 19, age range = 18-23).

The narrative sketches included an open invitation to participate in qualitative interviews. A total of 28 students indicated an interest in the interviews. However, only 11 students responded to the follow-up inquiries and participated in the qualitative interviews (female = 7, male = 4, age range = 18-22).

The purpose of the interview process was to explore three broad topics that emerged from the narrative sketches: (1) participants' conceptions of their BFS; (2) strategies, skills, and resources required to achieve and realise their BFS; and (3) the role of the university, with specific reference to student affairs services, to promote the realisation of students' BFS. Open-ended questions were posed to the students, and the interviews aimed to explore their thoughts and perspectives on the three mentioned topics. The interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed, lasted 30-45 minutes.

Data analysis

A two-pronged approach to data analysis was followed. First, a cursory analysis of the narrative sketches was conducted. This included reading and rereading the narrative sketches and reflective memoing to identify topics that should be explored in greater depth (Henning et al., 2011). Second, narrative sketches and interview data were

collectively analysed. The collective data analysis process was managed using Atlas. ti version 7, and I followed four interrelated and iterative steps (Giorgi, 2009; Henning et al., 2011). First, I immersed myself in the data by reading the narrative sketches and qualitative interview transcripts multiple times. Second, the data were coded by attaching labels to the words, phrases, and sentences. Third, the codes were combined into meaningful units and transformed into qualitative descriptive themes and subthemes. Fourth, the emerging qualitative interpretation was presented (Henning et al., 2011; Giorgi, 2009).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines were adopted for qualitative research to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Specifically, I used the following methods to strengthen the trustworthiness of the qualitative interpretation: collecting rich data through narrative sketches and conducting follow-up qualitative interviews; fully describing the research method and procedure; ongoing reflective practice through writing qualitative memos; participant verification of the emerging qualitative analysis, including quotes to substantiate interpretation; and an external coder with experience in conducting social science research among engineering students verified the qualitative coding process and subsequent interpretation.

The external coder agreement process was managed by incorporating a dependability check during the coding phase. Given the inherently subjective nature of qualitative research, we emphasised achieving a shared understanding and interpretation of the data. This approach ensured that each code was clearly defined and consistently applied across the dataset. The process was iterative and collaborative, involving a review of the context for each data fragment and ensuring that each code accurately captured the meaning conveyed by participants. Disagreements were minimal and resolved through in-depth discussion and consensus-building, enhancing the dependability and consistency of the coding process. Below is an example of the dependability check and process that guided the discussion.

The process began with initial coding, where the qualitative data were systematically broken down into smaller fragments, such as direct quotes, and labelled with descriptive codes that accurately encapsulated their content. For example, the quote "I see myself as a highly accomplished engineer who will leave a permanent mark on the world" was coded as 'Aspirational vision for professional success'. This was followed by focused coding and grouping, in which the codes were reviewed and organized into broader patterns or categories, revealing deeper meaning within the data. The code 'Aspirational vision for professional success' was grouped into a more specific category, namely 'Optimistic picture of BFS'. Finally, the categorised codes were used to develop themes, aligning with the overarching theme 'Aspiring forward: Cultivating prospection and hope in student journeys'.

Qualitative findings and discussion

The qualitative analysis revealed an overarching theme: 'Aspiring forward: Cultivating prospection and hope in student journeys'. This theme highlights the interplay between broad, optimistic dreams and the necessity for practical strategies to realise these

aspirations. Furthermore, the overarching theme encompasses three subthemes: (1) an optimistic picture of BFS, (2) redrafting, an ongoing process of prospecting, and (3) from fantasising to hope-based BFS. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the qualitative interpretation and indicates the overarching theme existing at the intersections of the subthemes.

Figure 1: Integrated representation of the qualitative themes
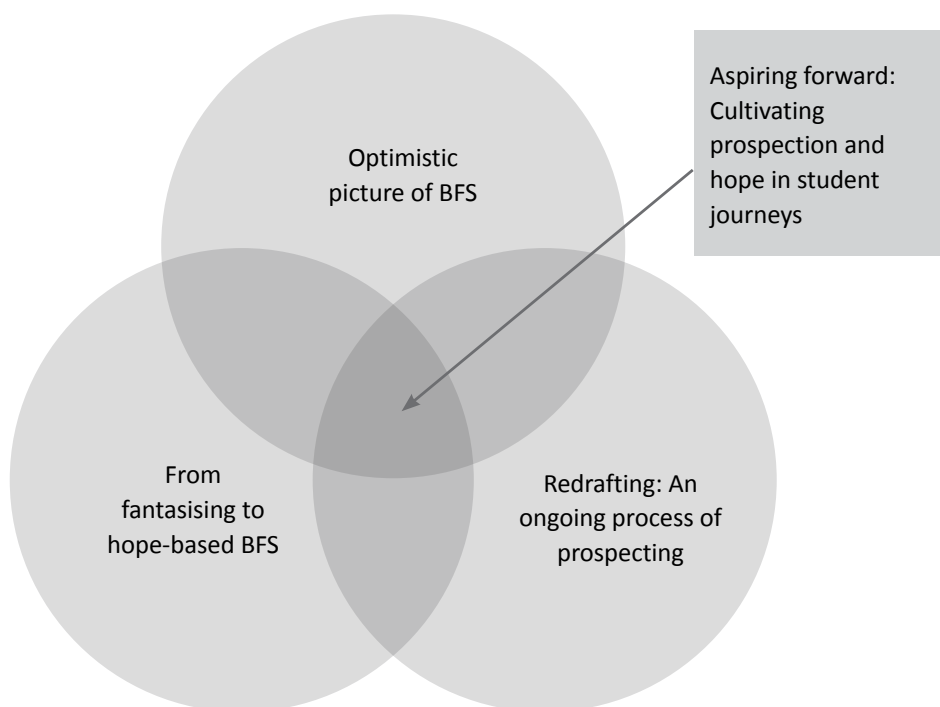
The three subthemes shown in Figure 1 are discussed below. An integrated theme (Aspiring forward: Cultivating prospection and hope in student journeys) synthesises the key qualitative themes. Selected verbatim quotes are included to substantiate the interpretations and ellipsis (...) at the beginning or end of particular quotes indicates that participants included additional information during the interviews before and after the verbatim quotations. To enhance readability, insignificant text, such as 'uh's' and 'ahs', were deleted, and basic grammatical and syntactic errors, such as incorrect punctuation and word choice, were corrected. The referencing system in parentheses denotes the data collection method (NS = narrative sketch, I = interview), participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), gender (M = male, F = female), and age.

Optimistic picture of BFS

The majority of participants envisioned and narrated grand prospective visions. Amongst others, participants envisioned achieving significant milestones in their careers ("*I see myself as a highly accomplished engineer who will leave a permanent mark on the world*" [NS, P#36, M, 22]), obtaining high-paying and fulfilling jobs ("*… this is a dream job … earn a salary that sustains me and my family*" [NS, P#9, F, 19]), and gaining recognition in their fields ("*I am an expert … people look up to me*" [NS, P#34, M, 18]). These narrations highlight students' deep-seated hopes and aspirations. Moreover, they are indicative of hopes to be recognised ("*I want to be somebody … want to matter …*" [NS, P#2, F, 18]), respected ("*My work earned international recognition … I am respected for finding solutions to climate change*" [NS, P#43, M, 19]) and financial independence (" *… no worries about money … have enough to care for my family*" [NS, P#37, M, 20]). From the perspective of human capital theory, these qualitative quotes are indicative of the belief that access to higher education promotes social mobility and access to greater financial incentives (Du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014). The latter is particularly insightful considering the socio-economic struggles faced by a large subsection of South African university students (Van Zyl, 2016). Subsequently, higher education is regarded by many as an avenue for living an empowered and financially sustainable life.

In addition to personal and financial aspirations, numerous participants pointed to the ambition to make societal contributions. Participant 28, a 22-year-old male, indicated in his narrative sketch that he endeavours "*to contribute to society … developing sustainable technologies that look at global challenges … climate change, energy poverty, access to clean water.*" This participant's wish for societal contribution was echoed by other participants ("*As a graduate, I am responsible to my institution and South Africa*" [I, P#9, M, 21]) and took the form of giving back through professional capacities as future engineers ("*… as an engineer I can focus on solving the energy crisis*" [I, P#8, M, 18]), volunteer work ("*Offer my time to help young girls and young women to enter the STEM field*" [NS, P#13, F, 20]), and social causes ("*I take a stand against GBV … will use my influence as a professional to create awareness*" [NS, P#20, F, 20]).

From a PP perspective, participants' prosocial prospections point to their desire for personal mastery and to serve others through purposeful engagement (Frankl, 2006; Seligman et al., 2005). Hence, there was an emphasis on maintaining a balance between personal mastery and societal contribution, which is crucial for fostering social harmony and collective and personal resilience (Damon et al., 2003; Kakulte & Shaikh, 2023).

Furthermore, prospective visioning creates internal alignment between a person's values, motivations, and aspirations (Frankl, 2006; Voigt et al., 2024). This internal alignment could help students develop greater clarity concerning their goals, establish a coherent sense of self, and aid in creating awareness of values as authentic sources of meaning and motivation (Hardy, 2022). Consequently, students' prospective visions could serve as a source of motivation, propelling them to pursue their academic goals.

Redrafting: An ongoing process of prospecting

The students agreed that continuously envisioning and redrafting their future goals, aspirations, and dreams was paramount. Specifically, the participants consistently described their redrafting process as a source of motivation. One participant mused, "*I regularly revisit my goals to ensure they align with my vision*" (I, P#10, M, 22). Participant 18, an 18-year-old female, wrote that her journey had been one of "*continuous growth and change … fuelled by a clear vision and willingness to become better and better*" (NS). Another participant narrated: "*As I look to the future, I remain committed to my goals, motivated to take up challenges*" (NS, P#39, M, 18).

These quotes illustrate participants' emphasis on redrafting their BFS descriptions as a source of motivation. Researchers agree that visioning is a critical element of motivation, intimately linked to sustaining hope (Lopez, 2013; Voigt, 2024). With reference to hope, participants' proactive stance towards life's challenges points to a sense of agency to pursue and realise important life goals (Lopez, 2013). A hopeful orientation is crucial within the university context, where students deal with a multitude of stressors and are required to navigate their way towards entering the uncertain future world of work (Coetzee & Schreuder, 2020). Additionally, by redrafting their BFS, participants' grit in relation to pursuing long-term goals became evident (Duckworth, 2016). One participant noted, "*Even when I have setbacks, I see them as opportunities to set goals and aspirations*" (NS, P#13, F, 20).

Dweck's (2006) growth mindset principles are helpful in understanding and interpreting participants' qualitative responses. Specifically, participants exhibited a growth mindset by viewing their aspirations as dynamic and malleable. One participant reflected, "*I believe my goals can always be improved; I just need to put in the effort*" (I, P#3, F, 19). Other participants agreed and pointed to the importance of remaining open to ongoing learning ("*I am a lifelong learner… our lecturer explained that as an engineer you must learn from mistakes*" [I, P#7, F, 18]) and demonstrating a belief in the potential for development and improvement ("*All students have talents … it can be developed … being bad at maths isn't a death sentence … can improve and develop*" [I, P#10, M, 22]). A growth mindset promotes pathways thinking and agency. Moreover, by adopting a growth mindset, participants embrace the need for agility and change, which promotes well-being (Dweck, 2006, Lopez, 2013).

Participants' responses also defined prospection as a dynamic and iterative process (Hardy, 2022). Such a dynamic process of reimagining one's future self, based on experiences and lessons learned, aligns closely with the PP focus on future potentialities that can be realised through commitment, passion, and perseverance (Duckworth, 2016; Frankl, 2006). Taken together, these elements underscore the transformative potential of continuously envisioning, refining, and redrafting one's BFS, which ultimately contributes to student well-being. The following quote summarises this sentiment: "*Using my imagination, I can set bigger goals for my future … the stronger my motivation*" (I, P#5, F, 21).

From fantasising to hope-based BFS

In this theme it is argued that participants' narratives reflect high aspirations. For example, one participant envisioned "*leading a team at an internationally renowned firm*" (NS, P#30, M, 20). This hopeful outlook enhances well-being by providing direction and purpose (Terblanche et al., 2021). However, the prospective BFS were often underdeveloped and lacked definite strategies to achieve these goals. Following a series of prods and reflective questioning, one participant indicated, "*I don't know how I will achieve this for sure … if I believe in myself, I can do it*" [I, P#4, F, 19]). This highlights a gap between the idealistic exuberance of participants and the concrete actions and plans needed to realise their BFS.

From a theoretical perspective, grit (passion and perseverance for long-term goals) was evident as students described their commitment to their BFS. One participant stated in the description of her BFS, "*Even when I have setbacks, I can see myself growing and developing*" (NS, P#16, F, 18). References to a growth mindset, characterised by a belief in the potential for continuous improvement and learning, were also detected ("*I believe I can achieve my goals just needs effort"* (NS, P#23, F, 20). Although grit and a growth mindset are crucial for student success (Marques et al., 2017; Snyder, 2002), they must be paired with actionable plans to be truly effective (Gollwitzer, 1999; Lopez, 2013).

In light of these findings, the role of student affairs is pivotal. By leveraging PP principles – hope (agency and pathways thinking), grit, and growth mindset – in addition to assisting students in drafting and redrafting their BFS, student affairs can play a crucial role in helping students not only envision their prospective futures but also aid in concretising the practical steps needed to bridge the gap between aspiration and realisation (Mason, 2019; Meevissen et al., 2011). Hence, student affairs practitioners can assist students in establishing dynamic tension between their current and future selves and paving the journey with action steps and strategies.

During the interviews, participants were asked about the possible modes of delivering interventions. Most participants indicated that webinars or online workshops could be used to facilitate interventions. Aspects such as turning lofty visions into practical implementation intention plans and developing actionable plans to deal with diverse constraints could equip students with the necessary tools to translate their high aspirations into reality (Bieleke et al., 2020; Gollwitzer, 1999). Additionally, delivering intervention programmes through online platforms could offer the added benefit of scalable services, thereby alleviating the pressure on counselling centres to address the critical need for mental health support.

Aspiring forward: Cultivating prospection and hope in student journeys

The qualitative analysis and subsequent discussion revealed that participants held ambitious aspirations and desires for personal mastery and prosocial contributions. These ambitious goals highlight the role of higher education as a force for social mobility and economic empowerment, especially against the backdrop of South Africa's challenging socio-economic landscape (Du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014; Van Zyl, 2016). Participants' prosocial motives and dedication to personal mastery and purposeful

engagement indicate a foundation for resilience and collective growth (Damon et al., 2003; Guse & Vermaak, 2011). Moreover, students' prospective visions encompass their values and can serve as an essential source of motivation and solace during stressful times (Frankl, 2006).

Further analysis showed that students continuously revised and refined their BFS, an activity that fuels hope and optimism. This iterative process underscores a proactive approach to life's challenges integral to enhancing well-being. The participants' anticipated perseverance and passion reflected grit, while a growth mindset emerged through their belief in dynamic aspirations and continuous self-improvement.

However, the levity of ambitious aspirations ought to be grounded in the gravity of concrete strategies and plans (Hardy, 2022). In recognising this gap, student affairs can play a pivotal role by applying PP principles to guide students in transforming aspirations into actionable plans. The participants highlighted webinars and online workshops as relevant platforms for developing strategies to bridge the gap between their dreams and reality.

The participants' lived experiences underscored the importance of fostering hope and prospection, which are essential for promoting student well-being (Marques et al., 2017; Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2016). Student affairs can support students in aspiring forward by working at the intersection of drafting and redrafting a BFS vision and moving beyond fantasising toward concrete and actionable strategies.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to leverage the principles of PP with a specific emphasis on prospection and explore students' conceptions of their BFS. The findings revealed a complex relationship between students' aspirational visions and the necessity for actionable strategies. More specifically, the qualitative findings indicated that while students narrated ambitious BFS descriptions, they struggled to translate these lofty ambitions into tangible outcomes. Hence, there is a misalignment between BFS and the strategies required to concretise their goals. However, this misalignment between BFS and actionable strategies serves as a springboard for student affairs professionals to offer support and intervene through structured guidance. Amongst other things, student affairs professionals can draw on hope, grit, and mindset theory to devise interventions that guide students from conceptualising BFS to operationalising strategies.

The findings and recommendations should be read with certain limitations in mind. First, the study was conducted at a single South African university, which suggests the need for caution when extrapolating the principles identified to different settings. Additionally, the focus was on engineering students, a demographic with unique perspectives and challenges that may differ from those of a broader student population. Time-related constraints also limited the ability to observe participants' prospective conceptions, such as evaluating redrafted versions of their BFS narrations across time.

Future research should focus on developing prospective hope-based interventions for university students. The longitudinal impact of these interventions on student well-being and success should also be explored. Finally, research should explore the

relationship between students' prospective BFS descriptions and their self-reported levels of well-being, potentially utilising diverse participant groups across various disciplines.

Integrating PP within student affairs is a useful framework that professionals can use to support university students in the dynamic higher education context. By embracing PP principles, student affairs professionals can help students translate ambitious dreams into tangible outcomes. By applying PP and integrating prospection with the tangible features of hope, grit, and mindset theory, students can be assisted in establishing a future-directed frame of reference that helps reframe challenges from the past into opportunities in the present. Hence, students' past experiences and actions can be motivated by an ambitious and achievable future vision. As such, students' past strengths, such as instances where they overcame challenges; the present, such as taking constructive action despite discomfort; and future aspirations, for example, the lofty ambitions of their BFS, can converge and promote individual and collective growth within the high-stakes university context.

Ethics statement

Potential conflict of interest

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