

## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Reframing student success: Well-being as an ecological imperative for student affairs in Africa

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## Introduction

A review by Julius and colleagues on the mental health of university students in sub-Saharan Africa paints a sobering picture (Julius et al., 2024). They argue that student mental health is an increasing concern and that formal, campus-wide mental-health policies are urgently needed. Furthermore, they caution that in the absence of relevant policies and support initiatives, efforts will remain, at best, fragmented and delivered only in response to crises (Julius et al., 2024). The data reported by Julius et al. (2024), as well as a growing body of student affairs-related research, remind us that mental health and well-being are neither a peripheral add-on nor simply the remit of counsellors; they are the foundation on which academic aspirations, social belonging, and future leadership are built.

It is against this backdrop that the JSAA issued a call for a special section featuring papers on well-being, hope, resilience and inclusive environments to promote holistic student success. The seven papers assembled in this special edition section respond to the call and demonstrate how researchers and practitioners working in student affairs and related environments are redefining their purpose in terms of well-being.

## Building on the evidence: Why well-being matters

The urgency of this special edition is supported by an emerging body of scholarship that positions well-being as central to student affairs. In their 2018 editorial for the JSAA, Luescher et al. observe that student well-being and mental health have become prominent concerns in higher education. They advocate a systemic approach that illuminates not only the incidence of mental-health challenges but also the contributing factors and their correlation with academic achievement.

A few years after the Luescher et al. (2018) editorial, Eloff and Graham (2020) published the results of their longitudinal study of undergraduate students at a large South African university. They reported a significant decline in psychological, emotional, and social well-being over the course of an academic year. They concluded that interventions should foster self-efficacy, a sense of direction, meaning, and belonging, and argued that investment in well-being should be matched by investment in academic success.

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More recently, Mostert and Du Toit (2024), examining the well-being of first-year students, found that personal problems reduced proactive behaviour towards both strengths use and deficit improvement. Moreover, they reported that strengths use predicted emotional and psychological well-being, while deficit improvement predicted social well-being. Mason (2024) conducted a phenomenological study, highlighting the duality of hope and adversity among university students. He noted that hope emerges as a multifaceted force that guides ambition, fosters a sense of belonging, and provides resilience.

Together, these studies, merely the tip of the empirical iceberg, show that well-being is a dynamic construct shaped by socio-economic realities, cultural contexts, and proactive behaviours. They also demonstrate that student affairs plays a crucial role in promoting the overall well-being and holistic success of university students.

### **This special edition**

This special edition commences with an article from Campbell and co-authors, who adopted Ungar's socio-ecological model to examine resilience, motivation, and persistence among engineering students at a South African university of technology. They demonstrate that resilience is generated through interactions across multiple systems: supportive faculty, nurturing peers, and structured curricula at the micro-level; family and community support at the meso-level; and institutional policies and national challenges, such as load shedding, at the exo- and macro-levels. Far from depicting resilience as an individual trait, they advocate simplified funding systems, empathetic teaching and stronger family–university partnerships to enhance motivation and persistence. This ecological framing echoes Julius and colleagues' call for policies that foster campus cultures that support mental health and resilience (Julius et al., 2024).

In their contribution, Pather et al. employ design thinking to reconceptualise academic advising as a collaborative practice that empowers student agency. Through reflections and focus group discussions, they find that design thinking promotes timely and purposeful sessions, knowledge sharing, reciprocal conversations, and student agency. Their definition of advising emphasises conversations that integrate academic and psychosocial development, positioning students as co-creators of their educational journeys. This approach resonates with Mason's (2024) argument that hope and self-efficacy should be cultivated through culturally sensitive and participatory efforts.

Le Roux offers a scoping review that interrogates how resilience is conceptualised in higher-education research. The review emphasises that resilience emerges from students' ability to access resources in their social and physical environments and that support programs should nurture internal strengths while addressing structural obstacles, particularly within African collectivist contexts. Her focus on socio-ecological factors complements Campbell et al.'s multilevel analysis and speaks directly to Julius et al.'s (2024) call for policies that cultivate resilience across campus ecosystems.

Next, Kekana and colleagues employ photovoice to capture the experiences of health sciences students who remain in residence during university recess. Students reported feelings of isolation, loss of belonging, and insecurity, yet also experienced

moments of reflection and growth. The authors argue for the provision of continuous support services, safe accommodations, and community-building opportunities during recess to safeguard both learning and well-being. Their participatory method mirrors the strengths-based approaches advocated by Mostert and Du Toit (2024) and demonstrates how giving students a voice can surface hidden experiences that inform policy.

Kruger et al. investigated the competencies required by prospective English teachers in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Beyond content and pedagogical knowledge, they highlight a pressing need to cultivate social-emotional skills and personality traits. Adaptability, empathy, and self-awareness have a direct impact on student-teacher well-being, and when integrated into curricula and aligned with support services, they foster resilience and professionalism. Their emphasis on social-emotional competence aligns with Eloff and Graham's (2020) call for interventions that build self-efficacy and a sense of belonging.

Sheokarah explores how final-year student teachers' perceptions of unpreparedness to teach English become disorienting dilemmas that undermine self-efficacy. She finds that initial confidence often diminishes during teaching practice due to gaps between training and classroom realities. Enhancing self-efficacy through mastery experiences, peer modelling and supportive feedback, coupled with targeted counselling, is essential. Her recommendations align with Mason's (2024) argument that hope and agency can be cultivated through early support services and peer networks.

In the final article featured in this section, Khan and colleagues evaluate *Wysa*, an AI-powered mental-health chatbot implemented at a South African university. In contexts where demand for counselling exceeds supply, AI offers accessible, confidential support and shows meaningful engagement across disciplines and age groups. This case study expands the repertoire of interventions available to student affairs and complements Julius et al.'s (2024) call for campus cultures that support mental health through innovative policies.

## **Synthesis and implications for student affairs**

Viewed collectively, the seven contributions build on previous research and advance several propositions. First, well-being and academic success are mutually constitutive. Resilience emerges from interactions among individuals, communities, and institutions. Personal problems and socio-economic stressors undermine proactive behaviours, and hope, when nurtured, acts as a guiding force that supports motivation and a sense of belonging.

Second, agency and self-efficacy can be cultivated through design thinking, reflective practice, peer networks and culturally sensitive support. Third, affective competencies, such as adaptability and empathy, are as vital as cognitive skills. Fourth, innovative methods can surface hidden experiences and extend support. For instance, photovoice empowers marginalised students, and AI-driven chatbots expand mental-health services.

Finally, institutional policies and support structures must recognise the socio-ecological nature of well-being. Without clear policies, mental-health initiatives

become fragmented. Through policies, universities can create inclusive ecosystems that prioritise resilience, address structural barriers and align support services with cultural realities.

## Conclusion

The insights shared through this special edition present a challenge to student affairs professionals. Among other things, we, as a community, are challenged to move beyond deficit narratives and adopt ecological, strengths-based approaches that connect individual aspirations to relational networks and structural resources. Policies should enshrine well-being as a core institutional mandate; integrated support services must be adequately funded; curricula should explicitly develop social-emotional competencies; and collaborations with families and communities should be strengthened. Innovations should be embraced thoughtfully, with attention to ethics and cultural context. Investing in hope, resilience, and inclusive environments is not a luxury but a moral and developmental imperative.

Together, the authors featured in this special edition reveal that hope, resilience, agency, and social-emotional competence are not abstract virtues. Instead, they could serve as practical levers that promote well-being for student success. If student affairs professionals and university leaders heed these insights, thereby creating policies and cultures that centralise well-being, the future may tell a different story: one in which student affairs is recognised as a catalyst for flourishing.

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