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10 Years of Research on Student Affairs in Africa

AFRICAN MINDS

OPEN ACCESS

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)* is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open-access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and ref lective discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in Africa.

Vision and mission

The *JSAA* aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education by publishing high-quality scholarly articles, research and ref lective discussions by academics, professionals, researchers and students about student affairs and services in African higher education.

The *JSAA* strives to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent, and an indispensable resource for national policymakers, the executive leadership of universities and colleges dealing with student affairs, deans of students and other senior student affairs professionals, as well as institutional researchers and academics and students focused on the field of higher education studies and student affairs.

Focus and scope

The *JSAA* considers theoretical, practice-relevant and ref lective contributions from across the scholarly field of student affairs and professional domains of student development/student affairs, taking due cognisance that the scope is broad, f luid and context-dependent.

The scope of *JSAA* is indicated by keywords such as: student affairs, student career development, student counselling, student development theory and research, student discipline, student engagement, student experience, student finances and financial aid, student housing, disability/disabled students, student leadership and governance, student life cycle, student living and learning, student movement, student organisations, student orientation, student policy, student politics and activism, student sport, student support, academic development (and its intersection with the student affairs co-curriculum), graduate attributes, and teaching and learning support. This list of keywords is not exhaustive. Our key focus area is the core functions of student affairs and services in Africa.

Submissions are encouraged from scholars and ref lective practitioners from across the globe. Submissions must be original and relevant to the mission, scope and focus of the journal. Especially encouraged are submissions from African scholars and professionals working in higher education on the African continent. Submissions dealing with student affairs issues from other contexts (e.g. the African diaspora; other emerging economies; developed countries) that are transferable to the African context are also considered for publication. Submissions must be made on the *JSAA* online submission website. Please register, log in and submit your manuscript at: https://upjournals.up.ac. za/index.php/jsaa. For any queries and to contact the editors please email Ms Bronwin Sebonka at bronwin.sebonka@up.ac.za.

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EDITORIAL

10 Years of contributing to the professionalization of student affairs in Africa

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JSAA in a changing field of student affairs

The field of student affairs is continuously evolving to meet the changing needs of students and institutions in the higher education sector. Globally, there is a strong focus on enhancing student engagement and support through programmes, clubs, and extracurricular activities, aiming to foster personal growth, a sense of belonging, transferable skills and competences. Student mental health and wellness have become a priority, with colleges and universities expanding counselling services and providing resources to address the growing mental health challenges among students. Other forms of counselling, advising, as well as peer support, have also moved closer to the centre. Additionally, there is an increasing emphasis on creating inclusive campus environments through diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, which aim to promote equity, social justice, and support underrepresented student populations. Career development and employability are also key areas, with student affairs departments collaborating with career services offices on and off campuses to provide students with resources for career exploration and job placements. Lastly, the integration of technology and digital engagement has allowed student affairs professionals to connect with students through online platforms, virtual advising, and social media strategies. Many of these developments have been enhanced and accelerated by the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Student affairs in Africa mirrors these developments closely as it continues to adapt to the changing needs and expectations of students on the continent. At the same time, student affairs professionals in Africa and the global South more broadly, face unique contextual challenges in their work. Limited financial resources and infrastructure, unequal access to technology, and socio-economic disparities, all pose obstacles to providing comprehensive student support services. Creatively involving students in the provision of student experiences and services is increasingly becoming a recognised feature in African student affairs (Holtzhausen & Wahl, 2022). Additionally,

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addressing mental health needs, promoting inclusivity amidst diverse cultural contexts, and navigating socio-political landscapes, present challenges. Recognition and professional development opportunities tend to be limited. Nevertheless, student affairs professionals in Africa are dedicated to supporting students' holistic development and success, striving to overcome obstacles and provide meaningful support. The changing needs and expectations of students in Africa and the evolving nature of student affairs as a field and profession is also reflected in the publications of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA).

In 2013, JSAA launched with the double issue "The professionalisation of Student Affairs in Africa". Over the years, the topics published in the journal closely reflected changes in the profession. In the earlier years, several issues focused on student engagement, student retention and success; student governance, leadership, and the student movement; student transitions and the first-year student experience; and co-curriculating student affairs. Later tutoring, mentoring and peer support became relevant topics; student residence life and living and learning; student mental health and well-being, and student counselling came into sharp focus. In 2021, JSAA published an issue almost entirely dedicated to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students and student affairs in Africa. Most recently, academic advising became a featured topic. A cursory overview shows that other key sectors of student affairs, including disability services and career services have also received some attention, as well as international perspectives and contributions. Few articles have been published on quality enhancement and over the ten years, there have been no articles specifically dealing with student sport; student clubs and societies (other than student political organisations); student volunteering, and other services that are often at the periphery of student affairs and frequently outsourced, such as student catering.

Since its inception, the editors have made efforts to ensure the high quality of the journal and promote its internationality and Africa-focus. Three years into its launch, JSAA was evaluated by the Academy of Sciences of South Africa and became formally accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training as a bona fide, subsidy generating scholarly journal. It also earned its badges from the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and African Journals Online (AJOL) and became co-hosted by the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Among the African countries from which the journal has published great articles are: Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, Nigeria, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, and, of course, South Africa. However, it is noteworthy that this list excludes North Africa, francophone and lusophone Africa, and contributions from the African diaspora.

New developments anticipating the next 10 years

To commemorate the journal's achievements and the decadal milestone, the editorial executive decided to prepare a special issue that would take stock of the last ten years of research, scholarship, theory and practice reflection. The occasion of the special issue also provides space to announce several exciting developments.

Community of Practice – Student Affairs in Africa Research

To enhance the contribution that JSAA makes to African student affairs, the editorial executive started to consult key stakeholders around the establishment of a community of practice (COP) to support research and scholarship in 2021. A community of practice is a group of people who share a common interest and concern for something that they do, and they create modalities of interaction to learn together how to do this better. A first consultation meeting towards the establishment of a COP focused on developing student affairs research in Africa was held on 23 November 2021 in Pretoria. Participants included student affairs professionals and researchers from a range of universities, including the Nelson Mandela University, New York University (New York City and Shanghai), University of Pretoria, University of Venda, University of the Witwatersrand, as well as the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), and the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) project of Universities South Africa (USAf).

It is envisaged that the Community of Practice for Student Affairs in Africa Research (COP-SAAR) will operate in various ways to support research and publishing on African student affairs by means of mentorship and professional development; webinars and virtual meetings; online and face-to-face research workshops, writing retreats, and events; and the co-production of research outputs, amongst others (see Figure 1).

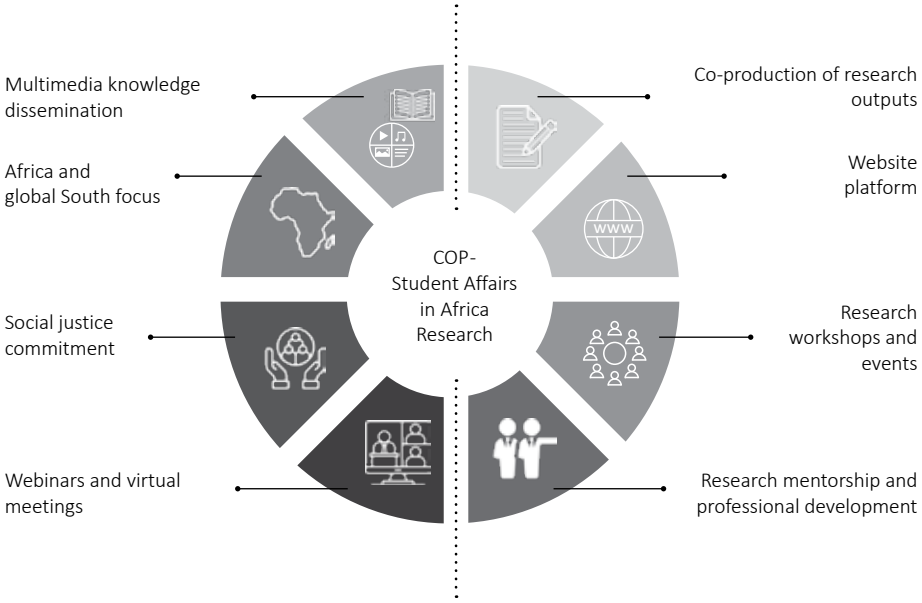

Figure 1: Modalities of the COP-SAAR

Source: Icons by Adrien Coquet Rusma Ratri, Dicky Prayadawanto, Sergey Demushkin, Happy Girl, ProSymbols from Noun Project

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At present, the in itiators of the COP-SAAR are JSAA and the Equitable Education section of the Human Sciences Research Council. Any individuals, organisations and institutions who wish to sponsor, participate in, support, and contribute to the COP-SAAR are cordially invited to contact the editorial executive and join via the JSAA website. The community of practice will officially be launched at the first JSAA general meeting in the second half of 2023.

Website updates, JSAA awards, and downloads

To accommodate the new developments at JSAA, the website has been updated with additional tabs. The 'Community of Practice' tab includes basic information about the COP-SAAR, information about forthcoming and past events, downloads, as well as links to other student affairs journals. Another new tab labelled 'Awards' anticipates the bestowal of JSAA awards for research excellence. As of the end of 2023, the journal will give recognition to the most outstanding contributions in several categories to authors, reviewers, editors and other contributors. Further information will be provided by the end of 2023.

Furthermore, JSAA/COP-SAAR will host its first general meeting towards the end of 2023, including a workshop on scholarly publishing. This will be an open online event intended to celebrate the ten-year anniversary, past, current and future developments and strategy, launch the COP-SAAR, announce the first JSAA research excellence awards, and hold an online workshop. All stakeholders, authors, reviewers, readers, colleagues and friends are cordially invited.

JSAA facelift, article history, and abstracts and articles in other African languages

As evident in this issue of JSAA, the journal's 'look and feel' has been updated for the first time since its inception. This was occasioned by the need to accommodate additional information on an article's title page. First, the history of each article will now be included to disclose when an article was first received and when accepted. Provided that JSAA editors take a developmental approach to editing, and JSAA only publishes two issues per annum, the duration from first submission to acceptance and publication may be quite long. We find that many editors ask for revisions of manuscripts in the vetting stage, that is, before the manuscripts are submitted to peer review, in order to enhance the chances of successful review.

Second, to enhance the accessibility and reach of the journal beyond the anglophone academic world in Africa and beyond, JSAA will forthwith publish all articles with a second abstract and keywords in an official African language other than English. The default language for the second abstract is French, and JSAA is happy to have found in Dr Dominique Mpewa, who is a lecturer in the Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences at the University of Maryland, USA, an expert translation editor to help facilitate this. Authors who wish to publish their second abstract in an official African language other than French are welcome to do so, and they will need to supply their translated abstract with a confirmation from a language professional. Furthermore, JSAA wants to pilot the publication of articles in official African languages other than English.

However, the practicality of this (in terms of language competence of editors, reviewers, copy-editors, and so forth) will need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. In the case where an article is published in an official African language other than English, the default language of the second abstract and keywords will be English.

Articles in this issue

In keeping with the theme of this special issue, there are three contributions (in addition to this editorial) that specifically deal with the ten-year anniversary of JSAA, and particularly its aim to contribute to student affairs professionalization and professionalism. The first is a research article by Angelique Wildschut and Thierry Luescher that analyses ten years of publications in JSAA to identify the professionalization discourse evident in JSAA. Their study finds that publications on the professionalization of student affairs in JSAA strongly draw on the traditional notion that professionals should espouse certain 'traits' such as high-level knowledge and skills, qualifications, and so forth. The article critiques this notion in relation to developments in the sociology of professions. It also looks at the intersection of the professionalization discourse with the discourse on social justice in the journal.

The second article with a ten-year anniversary focus presents four reflective accounts of six JSAA editors, wherein they reflect on their professional pathways into editorship; what they have learned; and how they feel they have contributed to the professionalization aim of the JSAA. The article shows editing as a rewarding and challenging experience, beneficial to the editors and their professional development as well as the authors they work with. It also discusses how the editors' reflections indicate two types of professionalism: one that proceeds 'from within' the emerging profession and another that introduces standards, ethics and procedures 'from outside' in the professionalization process.

The third contribution is a report on a new professional development programme for student affairs practitioners established by Universities South Africa (USAf). The campus report feature describes the launch of the Student Affairs and Student Success professionalization programme developed and organised by USAf's HELM project. It is a sector-wide training programme for student affairs and related staff, professionals, and practitioners, who want to develop their competencies in the field of student affairs, development and support.

In addition to the three contributions dealing with the professionalization topic of this anniversary issue, we are publishing six more research articles and a reflective practice article in this issue. Three articles deal with the student transition into higher education, the first-year experience, and related interventions to support student success. Three reflect on matters related to student challenges, mental health, and well-being, in the context of Covid-19, while the last one tests the trustworthiness of a psychometric instrument, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, for studying student well-being in the African higher education context.

Vuyokazi Mntuyedwa's article explores the benefits of peer group support for first-year students who live in residences to support their transition from school to university.

Using focus group interviews and thematic analysis, she uncovers several benefits of peer group support, including a sense of belonging, academic support, and closer engagement.

The study by Disaapele Mogashana and colleagues evaluates the benefits of life coaching for at-risk undergraduate Chemical Engineering students. The longitudinal study uses one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten students who had participated in the intervention from their first year to their fourth year of study. The results indicate that the intervention enabled students to mediate academic and non-academic constraints.

The next article also deals with first-year students, the transition from high school into university, and interventions to increase the chances of student success. Nokuthula Tlalajoe-Mokhatla and her co-authors study fifteen medical students who participated in a six-month remediation programme. Their study finds that the top five social learning and integration factors were underpreparedness, self-management, alienation, confidence, and academic advice; and self-awareness and self-management were identified as complementary skills that could help address these factors.

The article by Andile Samkele Masuku and colleagues investigates student mental health during Covid-19 using a mixed-method approach. It shows how the different effects of the pandemic impacted students. They include such varied experiences as breadwinner job loss; campus closures and the need to vacate residences; and the move to online-based methods of teaching and learning. It also looks at academic challenges experienced by students in the online and home-based learning environment, and the varied coping mechanisms used by students. A call is made for universities to learn from the experience of the pandemic and provide adequate resources to better support student success.

The Covid-19 pandemic also provides the context for the study of Raisuyah Bhagwan, which explores challenges encountered and support measures implemented by social workers of a South African university to enhance the well-being of students. It employs an integrative body-mind-spirit model as its guiding theoretical framework, semi-structured interviews to collect data, and thematic analysis to analyse them. The study finds that students were profoundly affected by the pandemic. It identified five themes in the data, including academic difficulties; stigmatisation of infected students; caring for the quarantined students and controlling the spread of the virus; support groups for students; and strategies to deal with mental health challenges.

The study by Clarisse van Rensburg and Karina Mostert tests the validity and reliability of psychometric properties of the Satisfaction With Life Scale for studying first-year university students' well-being in a South African university. They find item bias and invariance in several measures and thus advise psychologists and practitioners to take care when applying this or any other concepts and instruments from Western countries. They recommend that the trustworthiness of such instruments should be tested for their transferability and applicability in contexts such as African universities.

A reflective practice account comes from Angelique McConney, who reflects on the insights she gained by using innovative ways to address the mental health needs of

students having limited resources available during the Covid-19 pandemic. She discusses online psycho-educational workshops and peer helpers as student-led initiatives to expand the reach and capacity of mental health support during a period of great stress. This reflective article shares the details of their virtual workshops and the insights gained from the process.

At the same time as JSAA is celebrating its ten-year anniversary, so is the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS), which has been growing alongside JSAA in a quest to strengthen the profession. IASAS held its 2023 summit in Rome, Italy. From the occasion, JSAA publishes here two reports.

Finally, we have included two book reviews, which introduce books that are interesting and relevant to Student Affairs practice in Africa. The first is a collection by international scholars and students who reflect on their experiences in far-away settings. It is entitled: *Crossing Borders, Bridging Cultures: The Narratives of Global Scholars* (STAR Scholars, 2023). The book is edited by Krishna Bista, Bo Zhang, Uttam Gaulee, and Birgit Schreiber, and reviewed by Patricia C. Timmons and Rajendra Bista.

The second book is reviewed by Ronelle Carolissen. She writes about the book *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions* edited by P. Tabensky and S. Matthews (UKZN Press, 2015). The book explores the question of transformation, decolonisation, and related challenges, and confronts the obdurate institutional cultures and structures in the South African higher education sector.

This JSAA 11(1) anniversary issue is a culmination of our commitment to students, institutions, higher education and social justice in Africa. By way of this 10-year anniversary issue, we hope that our readers are emboldened to advance higher education and thus social justice, for a better life for all in Africa.

With kind regards
The Editorial Executive

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SPECIAL ISSUE: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Developing professionalism from within and outside: Reflections of editors of the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa at 10 years

Thierry M. Luescher,[1] Henry Mason,[2] Teboho Moja,[3] Annsilla Nyar-Ndlovu,[4] Birgit Schreiber[5] & Angelique Wildschut[6]

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ABSTRACT

The 10th anniversary of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) is a good occasion to ask in what ways the editors of JSAA think they have contributed to achieving the journal's aim to contribute to professionalizing student affairs in Africa. Using four reflective accounts of six editors of the journal, this article analyses the editors' reflections on their professional pathways and the role the journal played in them; how they contribute to the professional development of their peers by means of their editorship; the challenges they encounter and lessons they have learned; and the visions they have for the future of the journal. By applying Evetts' (2003) notions of professionalism, we identify different types of professionalism signified in the reflective accounts. We find that the agency of the editors combines standards, ethics, and operating procedures of publishing with principles and commitments indigenous to African student affairs. In this regard, the JSAA-led professionalization process combines both elements of professionalism 'from within' and 'from outside'. We further highlight commitments of the editors to well-being (of students, staff, and communities), professional development and excellence, deliberate inclusivity and social justice, and a focus on relevance in the African student affairs context.

KEYWORDS

Academic publishing, higher education, professionalism, professional development, scholarship of practice, student affairs, reflective practice

RÉSUMÉ

Le 10e anniversaire du ***Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*** (JSAA) constitue une bonne occasion de demander de quelle manière les rédacteurs du JSAA estiment avoir contribué à la réalisation

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de l'objectif de la revue visant à professionnaliser les Œuvres Estudiantines dans les universités africaines. En utilisant quatre récits réflexifs de six rédacteurs de la revue, cet article analyse les réflexions des rédacteurs sur leur parcours professionnel et le rôle joué par la revue dans celui-ci; comment ils contribuent au développement professionnel de leurs pairs grâce à leur poste de rédacteur ; les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés et les leçons qu'ils ont apprises ; et les visions qu'ils ont pour l'avenir de la revue. En appliquant les notions de professionnalisme d'Evetts (2003), nous identifions différents types de professionnalisme exprimés dans les récits réflexifs. Nous constatons que l'action des rédacteurs combine les normes, l'éthique et les procédures opérationnelles de publication avec des principes et des engagements propres aux services aux étudiants africains. À cet égard, le processus de professionnalisation dirigé par le JSAA combine à la fois des éléments de professionnalisme « de l'intérieur » et « de l'extérieur ». Nous soulignons en outre les engagements des rédacteurs envers le bien-être (des étudiants, du personnel et des communautés), le développement professionnel et l'excellence, l'inclusion délibérée et la justice sociale, ainsi que l'accent mis sur la pertinence dans le contexte des services aux étudiants africains.

MOTS-CLÉS
Publication académique, enseignement supérieur, professionnalisme, développement professionnel, recherche sur la pratique, services aux étudiants, pratique réflexive

Introduction

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) was established in 2013 and is currently one of the few specialist journals on higher education in Africa. Whereas research into higher education in Africa, and specifically in South Africa, has a relatively long history dating back over 100 years and the *South African Journal of Higher Education* was established as early as 1987, the overall number of publications on higher education in Africa has greatly increased since 2001 (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022; Bitzer & Wilkinson, 2009).

The journal was established to deal with the dearth of student affairs publications and the slow pace of the professionalization of student affairs in Africa. A specialist journal was seen as "an opportunity for developing and sustaining a student affairs profession […] whose time has come" (Tshiwula, 2013, p. v). These comments of the first patron of the journal, Prof. Lullu Tshiwula at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, reflected the vision and mission of the founding editors, who stated boldly on the journal's website:

> *JSAA aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education. It strives to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent […]. (JSAA, 2023)*

With the declared purpose of the journal to contribute to the professionalization of the field of student affairs, several questions arise: What is the meaning of professionalization? By what process do the editors of the journal hope to contribute to achieving this? What forms and levels of professionalism are envisioned that would signify professionalization of the field?

An underlying premise of professionalization is that for a field of practice to be considered a profession, there are certain requirements for the knowledge base, and importantly, the professionalism expected of its practitioners. Editorship represents a very specialized role within a profession; in the context of JSAA, it involves being an actor in the process of professionalization itself. At the same time, editorship comes with its own challenges and needs for professional development to be capacitated for this role. Taking these questions as points of departure, this article presents and analyses a set of reflective accounts by some of the editors of JSAA.

Professionalization and professionalism

The sociology of professions distinguishes conceptually between professionalization 'from within' and professionalization 'from above' (McClelland, 1990) to signal that professionalism can be internally enacted to assert the autonomy of a group of practitioners and contest the power of bureaucracy (Fournier, 1999), or it can be externally imposed (e.g. by regulatory authorities and standard setting bodies) as a means of control. Traditionally, the process of professionalization from within is seen as a more legitimate form of 'professionalism' (McClelland, 1990) as it is driven by practitioners and their clients in a context of professional autonomy. Meanwhile professionalization from outside or 'above' is seen as a method of control, involving the imposition of external standards on a practice and thus limiting autonomy for the benefit of external accountability. As Evetts (2003, p. 408) outlines,

> *where the appeal to professionalism is made and used by the occupational group itself, 'from within', then the returns to the group can be substantial… however, when the discourse is constructed 'from above'/ ['the outside'], then often it is imposed and a false or selective discourse… used to promote and facilitate occupational change (rationalisation)… a disciplinary mechanism of autonomous subjects exercising appropriate conduct.*

In accordance with more recent scholarship (Wilkesmann et al., 2020), these two forms of professionalism are not necessarily seen as dichotomous. Taking the reflections of JSAA editors as data, it should be interesting to show how in an emerging profession the dichotomy between professionalism from within as against professionalism from above/ outside is reflected.

Reflective practice as method

Among the different modalities of publishing in JSAA is the reflective practitioner account, which is defined as an article that intentionally reflects on professional practice and does not need to include detailed consideration of theory and literature, but should rather focus on 'learnings' (JSAA, 2023). In keeping with Luescher's (2018) proposal for how to structure reflective practitioner accounts for JSAA, this article has the following intentions: first, we seek to understand the background of editors, their professional pathways, and their entry into the role of editorship as a process of professional

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development. We also want to understand their reflections on editing a journal as professional practice and agency in a professionalization process.

In this respect, a few current editors of JSAA were asked to produce personal reflective accounts against the following parameters:

1. Professional history and interest in African student affairs research and publishing.
2. First contact with JSAA and professional journey with the journal.
3. Reflection on key personal experiences, lessons learned, and challenges encountered as editor of JSAA.
4. Vision for the journal.

By giving only these pointers (and a word limit), the idea was that, relatively unfettered and unobstructed by existing scholarly and professional literature, the editors would be able to reflect on their professional pathways and roles as journal editors of JSAA. They would thus give a personal and frank account of their professional backgrounds and journeys into and through the practice of scholarly editing, for their own benefit, that of their peers elsewhere, and that of future editors.

Four reflective accounts from six editors were received, comprising of one joint reflection by the founding editors and current editorial executive, Prof. Teboho Moja, Prof. Thierry M. Luescher and Dr Birgit Schreiber, as well as three individual reflections by Dr Annsilla Nyar-Ndlovu, Dr Henry Mason, and Dr Angelique Wildschut respectively. They are presented in full below, followed by an analysis guided by the four original reflection parameters, as well as an interpretation of the findings in terms of the question of what type of professionalization process the agency of the editors signifies.

Reflection 1 by Prof. Teboho Moja, Prof. Thierry Luescher and Dr Birgit Schreiber: The transformative journey of building a journal: Encouraging others to reflect, research, and publish

As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of our *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, it is an opportune moment to reflect on our achievements and outline our vision for the future. Over the past decade, our journal has been dedicated to exploring the unique challenges and opportunities facing students and institutions in Africa, promoting inclusive practices, and driving positive change in higher education. We are writing this reflection jointly as we have been working together for a decade to develop the journal to this point in our aim to contribute to the professionalization of student affairs in Africa and student and institutional success.

Conceptualising the journal and constituting the executive

In the beginning, it was Birgit and Thierry, supported by Tonia Overmeyer at the University of the Western Cape, who jointly developed the idea and conceptualised a first business and launch plan for a journal. The original idea was to develop a platform to publish the proceedings of the 2012 annual conference of the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP). However, this idea rapidly

evolved and JSAA was born in the course of 2012/13 with the realisation that the time for such a specialized journal had come.

Teboho joined the team soon after the basics of JSAA were conceptualised. She says it was easy to join this endeavour as she had been working in the field for decades and had become a professor of higher education and student affairs at New York University in the early 2000s. She knew a lot about the profession of student affairs internationally, in Africa, and in South Africa. To her, the idea of encouraging African practitioners in the field to publish was clearly appealing as it advances the practitioners, the students, and institutional success.

In this manner, the 'core' of the first editorial executive of JSAA was constituted, with Teboho as editor-in-chief, Birgit as book review editor, and Thierry as journal manager. In this triumvirate, each of us brought their respective strengths to bear. Teboho brought her strategic leadership skills, her ability to prioritise, focus the team, her seniority in the field, and her extensive international network. As a senior South African student development professional in the field, Birgit brought her network to the team, her incredible capacity to get tasks done at the highest level of professionalism, and her ability to mobilise resources and strategically employ them. Having published and knowing the student affairs literature to a T, Birgit also became the book review editor of the journal. Finally, as a trustee of an academic publisher, Thierry brought his interests and publishing skills to JSAA. Having trained under a political philosopher and worked in the higher education policy sector he brought both rigorous academic training with him as well as writing for policy and practitioner audiences. He became the journal manager and thereby assumed responsibility for the day-to-day running of the journal, linking up with the technical teams, and triaging all manuscripts from submission via the editors towards publication.

In the editorial executive that was formed in this manner with our diverse origins, skills, experiences, and interests, we have worked together for over a decade to move the journal from an idea to becoming a respected, accredited and indexed, specialized journal in the field of higher education in Africa (Google Scholar, 2023; Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022).

Developing leadership skills and mastering the process of knowledge production in Africa

The journey of leading and developing a professional and scholarly journal from scratch is a daunting one, full of challenges and learning. Each of us in the editorial executive have had similar and unique experiences. Teboho describes stepping into the role of editor-in-chief as an exhilarating and challenging experience and notes how she has come to appreciate the profound impact taking this role can have on one's professional path, whereby the role of an editor moulds individuals into well-rounded leaders, offering a unique platform for personal and professional development.

Each of us has gained immense insights into the complex and challenging process of hand-holding and mentoring budding authors and their submissions to publication. It has been our practice to develop, coach, and mentor practitioners and emerging

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researchers into published authors. Our developmental approach has grown the knowledge base and the pool of researchers and authors on student affairs in Africa, but mainly in anglophone Africa. It is our goal to expand access for scholars in francophone, lusophone, and Arabic Africa as well.

We have worked tirelessly with emerging authors and have enabled a platform for practice – not only as content and knowledge generation in the field of professionalization, but also as practice for reflection, research and writing for publication about the field of professionalization.

At the same time, the process has been transformative for us and left an indelible mark on our respective professional paths. Successfully starting and developing a journal to this point acting as editors, has given us new knowledge and skills in the editing and publishing field, leadership and management skills, and it has greatly expanded our understanding of the profession and our networks within it – in South Africa, Africa and the world. In 2022, we presented a paper at an international conference about the opportunities and pleasures of knowledge creation, editing, and journal management, in the African context, and also reflected on the hurdles and enablers. While much has become easier, especially with open-source knowledge sharing platforms such as the open journals system, it is the laborious process of attracting and encouraging researchers and mentoring them towards final publication that has challenged but also enriched us. And then there are the perennial financial woes. To have done this while upholding gold standard open access has been a formidable task.

A vision for the future: Developing skills, fostering excellence, and prioritising diversity

Over the past decade, JSAA has evolved into a trusted source of knowledge and platform for fostering intellectual discourse that is high in demand as evident in the number of publication requests we receive and the article downloads we record. It has also become a platform in the profession to hone the skills of authoring, reviewing, and editing research in student affairs in Africa. Over the years there have been a dozen guest editors, over a hundred authors and peer reviewers, almost a thousand registered users, and several thousand readers. The journal has recorded over 1,700 citations in the past ten years.

Looking forward, our vision is to continue pushing boundaries, encouraging research, mentoring authors and supporting their publications, and solidifying the position of JSAA as a beacon of excellence and relevance in our field. This ten-year celebration gives us an opportunity to invite the professional community to join us to shape a future that is driven by a commitment to intellectual curiosity, inclusivity, and societal impact.

Our aims and ethical commitments remain relevant and shape our vision for the future: diversity and inclusion are cornerstones of a vibrant and equitable academic community. In the coming years, our journal will prioritise showcasing diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences. We will continue to actively seek contributions from underrepresented groups and regions, amplifying marginalized voices and promoting inclusivity within and access to our pages. We will also continue to struggle to keep

the journal open access for all, so that the ability to pay does not become the criterion of whether a colleague can publish or read JSAA. Furthermore, we continue to work towards enhancing diversity within our editorial board, ensuring that it reflects the richness and complexity of the South African, African and global community of student affairs research and practice.

As a journal committed to intellectual and relevance enquiry, we recognise our responsibility to drive positive societal impact. We will actively seek research that is relevant and addresses pressing social issues in our academic community, issues facing diverse students in diverse contexts, the problems and solutions faced by student affairs professionals across Africa and the world. We want to encourage evidence-based policymaking and its implementation, and contribute to sustainable development. Our goal is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, academia and profession, as we continue to support efforts that contribute to wholesome student experiences, student development and success.

Student affairs professionals are the lifeblood of student living and learning on and beyond our campuses. Over the next decade, our journal will establish mentorship programmes, provide dedicated support, and create platforms for networking and professional development. We will prioritise publishing and promoting the work of African student affairs professionals, recognising their contributions and nurturing their growth. By fostering a supportive environment for professionals in the field, we aim to cultivate the next generation of thought leaders and ensure the longevity of a professionalized community of practice. With all this in mind we are particularly proud of the impending establishment of the 'Community of Practice: Student Affairs in Africa Research' spearheaded by JSAA with support from the Human Sciences Research Council, SAASSAP and colleagues of the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) project of Universities South Africa (USAf).

Our journal's vision is rooted in our commitment to excellence, inclusivity, access, professionalism and societal impact. JSAA will continue to prioritise amplifying African voices in the field of student affairs. We will actively seek contributions from scholars, practitioners, and graduate students across the continent, fostering a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. By highlighting African scholarship, research and practice, we aim to shed light on the unique challenges, innovative practices, and success stories in student affairs that are specific to Africa. This focus will not only contribute to knowledge production but also foster a sense of pride, ownership, and relevance within the African higher education community and will inspire student affairs practitioners, students, and institutions across the globe.

Reflection 2 by Dr Annsilla Nyar-Ndlovu: There is significance in being a journal that represents African higher education

My first contact with the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* was facilitated through Dr Birgit Schreiber, then based at Stellenbosch University, and a stalwart in the field of student affairs. The journal was then hosted by African Sun Media, a Stellenbosch-based publishing house. I served as a guest editor for the journal in 2016, 2018 and

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2020. As such, I went on to develop a cordial relationship with African Sun Media. I was able to supplement my own knowledge about the finer-grained aspects of the editorial process. I also realised the importance of support for the editorial process. In particular, I benefitted from exchanges with Ms Davida van Zyl, who proved to be as detail-oriented as I myself am – all in the quest to produce high-quality writing that is as reasonably error-free as possible.

When the journal moved to the University of Pretoria (UP), I also benefitted from the support of colleagues such as Ms Heather Thuynsma and Ms Makone Maja. Ms Maja was unfailingly patient during my initial (clumsy) attempts to navigate and master the online journal management system. Ms Maja has regrettably since moved on from the journal. I am grateful for all the assistance that I have received thus far from the University of Pretoria.

First-year experience falls within the aims and scope of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa.* As I work primarily in this field, many of the submissions to the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* that are related to this burgeoning field of study, have been assigned to me. First-year experience may be defined as a field of study which focuses on efforts made by institutions of higher education to ease issues of transition and offer various means of support for university students in their first year of study and beyond. Such efforts often take the form of programmes, which are intended to help students excel both socially and academically in the first year of study and beyond, with the overall aim of systematically addressing high rates of student attrition (Barefoot & Gardner, 2018; Greenfield et al., 2013; Tinto, 1993). While the field is well-established internationally, it is less developed in South Africa. Accordingly, an important part of my work with the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is to deepen and strengthen research and scholarship in the field of first-year experience at a national level.

My association with the journal has been helpful in terms of my own professional position in the field of first-year experience. I am able to remain engaged with much of the emerging national literature that is often submitted to the journal for possible publication. I have also been able to bring my own network of first-year experience scholars, both national and global, to the journal. I am glad that the work of two leading global first-year experience scholars, viz. Jennifer Keup and Dallin George Young (both US-based), has been featured in the journal.

Having served as a member of the journal's editorial board for two years now, I am able to critically reflect on some of the learning that has taken place for me. I have long wrestled with the idea of a coherent identity for African scholars, given the sheer diversity of the continent and the longstanding divisions between scholars on the continent. There is no or little established tradition of collaboration at a continental scale. At best, collaboration happens between different regions and not at the broader level of the continent. One may ask: What does it mean to be a journal in Africa, and as such, what does it mean to be an African journal? What would it mean for the journal to have a modern African identity?

One may refer to the debate about higher education in Africa needing to reinvent itself with its own unique historically based identity (Cross & Govender, 2021; Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017; Letseka, 2019; Adésínà, 2005). Most universities in Africa are currently not fit for purpose. In fact, the key role of many African universities was historically about the creation of civil servants for colonial regimes (Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004). This was the classical role for many African universities, and this now needs to change to one that is defined and conceptualised by the continent and those universities themselves. In this way, perhaps the goal of defining and becoming 'African universities' rather than 'universities in Africa' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016, p. 50) can go some way toward being realised.

Regretfully, the submissions from the rest of the African continent have thus far been somewhat limited. This has also made me acutely aware of the need to bring an African perspective to the field of first-year experience, as well as to critically unpack the contours of an African perspective on higher education on the continent. The reality is that much of the leading published literature (i.e. that which is extensively cited and quoted), originates from outside the African continent. Now this is true not only of the field of first-year experience, but of the field of student affairs and higher education more generally.

To my mind, this is only a matter of time. In time, the journal is certain to attract more African contributions. However, this is also about the editorial board being focused and intentional about developing a journal that is more uniquely 'African' (i.e. investing sufficient time in encouraging African contributions, reaching out to various African research consortia, becoming involved in African research networks, and making good use of the existing networks that members of the editorial board already have).

I see value for the journal in serving the interests of African scholarship and representing African higher education. The journal can also do much to convey the reality of African student affairs and higher education as it exists in multiple countries and higher education contexts. Unfortunately, despite many decades of research, literature and activism in the field of decoloniality, the continent still tends to be seen in terms of sweeping generalisations and stereotypes. Two competing discourses about the continent tend to dominate (i.e. that of the 'hopeless continent', characterised by civil war, corrupt leadership, disease, suffering, and then, of late, the resurgence of an 'Africa rising' narrative which uncritically extolls the continent's supposed potential for growth and development). This journal, with its emphasis on critical scholarship and research, can help to eventually steer away from problematic discourses, in order to understand the multi-faceted reality of student affairs, and higher education on the continent. It is hoped that in time the journal can be seen as an epistemic base from which Africans view and understand student affairs and higher education on the continent, particularly in a cross-disciplinary way.

The developmental mandate of the journal is also admirable. Thus far the journal has seen a range of contributions from authors in various fields, locations and career stages. It is possible that in time students and junior scholars will be intentionally

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invited to submit their work, and develop further experience in the world of research, scholarship and publishing.

In summary, it may be worth noting that during my time with the journal, I have also had some personal introspection about the benefits and drawbacks of open access publishing. My personal opinion is that open access publishing is undoubtedly the way of the future. For those of us who are middle-aged higher education professionals, it feels like we have lived through a revolution in academia, and there is undeniable appeal in the widely expanded access and the lack of associated prohibitive costs that comes with open access publishing. However, having observed firsthand the immense labour involved in academic research and publishing, one wonders if it will be possible in the long term to continue to operate without costs. Or if the journal should be considering the pursuit of alternative operating models. Perhaps the ten-year anniversary of the journal might be an opportune time to start this conversation.

Reflection 3 by Dr Henry Mason: Lighting a fire: A personal reflection on the role of student affairs and the JSAA in enhancing holistic student success

As I reflect upon my experience in the field of student affairs, I am reminded of the proverb coined by William Butler Yeats: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." In my professional journey starting from when I completed my internship at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in 2003, I have held steadfast onto the belief that student development and support (SDS) is integral to enhancing student success. Moreover, student affairs is critical if we hope to play a part in preparing future-ready graduates. When we consider that higher education allocates life chances but that only a small percentage of South African adults have a tertiary education, one of the lowest on the African continent, the enormity of our responsibilities as student affairs practitioners becomes palpable (DHET, 2013; Van Zyl, 2016). Hence, delivering impactful services to support students is non-negotiable (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Scott, 2018).

My journey as scholar of counselling and development

As a reflective practitioner who adopts an empirical stance, I draw heavily on scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Hutchings, & Shulman, 1999). SoTL involves conducting research focused on practice, thereby understanding and improving student learning experiences, which are then disseminated, contributing to the broader body of knowledge. In line with the basic tenets of SoTL, I approach my work from the vantage point of scholarship of counselling and development (SoCD), which provides a framework to bridge the apparent divide between academic and practitioner work and nurture an environment where students' personal and academic development needs intertwine with empirically informed practice (Cilliers, 2014). In other words, my work within the student affairs milieu combines research (scholarship) and practice (counselling and development) to foster holistic student success and emphasizes subsequent dissemination of empirical findings.

The notion of holistic student success assumes that students are holistic beings and that efforts to offer SDS-related support ought to address the person as a whole (Cilliers, 2014; Sinclair, 2019). The former implies, *inter alia*, that one should support students in developing cognition-oriented skills to enhance academic success while also considering non-cognitive factors, such as hope, optimism and resilience, as critical metrics within the academic project (Eloff & Graham, 2020; Van Wyk et al., 2022).

Student affairs has been described as existing on the periphery of the academic project (Peltier, 2014). Against such a backdrop, a respected educational and empirical outlet, such as JSAA, creates the launchpad for practitioners to embody practitioner-researcher roles and validate their work via peer-reviewed publications.

Engaging with JSAA

During the latter part of my academic journey, JSAA has been an invaluable resource. My association with JSAA, as a published author and an editorial board member, has been enriching. Engaging in critical discourse and learning from fellow researchers in the field has broadened my perspective and enhanced my scholarship. The journal serves as a conduit for exchanging innovative ideas, best practices, and empirical research, further advancing the student affairs academic project.

Navigating the additional workload of editorial tasks alongside my existing work-related responsibilities has been challenging. However, the rewards outweigh the challenges, as contributing to the JSAA allows me to contribute to the field's growth and address the evolving needs of practitioners, researchers and students. My vision for the JSAA is to become the journal of choice for individuals working in the South African, African, a broader student affairs context. By expanding its publication frequency, the journal could deliver a higher volume of quality reflective and empirical work each year, ensuring its relevance to practitioners and students alike.

In conclusion, my academic journey reaffirmed the significance of student affairs in promoting holistic student success. As an advocate for the SoCD, I firmly believe that student affairs plays an integral role in shaping students into well-rounded individuals who can serve and offer the solutions we, as a country, continent and world, require.

For me, JSAA has fostered professional growth, facilitated critical dialogue, and disseminated knowledge. Moreover, it has forced me out of my comfort zone to consider alternative perspectives and embrace challenges in the field as opportunities for growth. By addressing the challenges and expanding the journal's reach and impact, we can collectively elevate the field of student affairs and meet the diverse needs of our students.

As we continue this journey, may we remember that student affairs is not a peripheral endeavour. Also, let us be reminded that students are not mere metaphorical buckets we aim to fill with facts and figures; instead, we ought to strive collectively to light a flame that ignites the path to educational excellence among student affairs practitioner-researchers and students alike.

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Reflection 4 by Dr Angelique Wildschut: Professionalization with purpose: A personal reflection on the role of JSAA in professionalizing student affairs and services

As a recent addition to the JSAA editorial team, I feel quite privileged to offer some fledgeling reflections on my involvement in the publication. I was approached to consider joining the editorial team only two years ago and I had no hesitation in confirming my willingness to be a part of JSAA. As a sociologist of professions, I was especially interested to engage in one of the key objectives of the journal, which is the professionalization of the field of student affairs and services. As stated, the journal "aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education by publishing high-quality scholarly articles, research and reflective discussions by academics, professionals, researchers and students about student affairs and services in African higher education" (JSAA, 2023). In this regard Ludeman and Schreiber (2020, p. 62) also note that "professionalisation is one avenue for the domain of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) to develop its identity and strengthen its impact in HE in the service of student and institutional success in regions globally", furthermore and almost most more importantly they recognise that "SAS needs to develop local and embedded professionalisation approaches … to inform discourse, theory and practices nationally and internationally".

My journey in relation to SAS

My professional journey has involved scholarship on higher education, particularly in relation to equality of access and labour market outcomes within the South African context. Here the perpetuating disparities in access, navigations through higher education and into the South African labour market have been laid bare multiple times and in multiple ways. In my short three years of experience as research manager in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme in South Africa, research consistently highlighted that while there has been significant progress in extending access to students from the most disadvantaged households, this disadvantage follows these students in the system throughout their higher education experience. This stark reality is true for their academic performance (Wildschut et al., 2020) and in their transitions to the labour market (Wildschut et al., 2019). Finding persisting inequalities in labour market outcomes corresponding with a hierarchy among higher education institutions in South Africa, even while controlling for race and gender, confirms that social inequalities continue to shape access to the best universities as well as the labour market returns to higher education. It is urgent to ensure that all higher education institutions offer quality education to all students. As Marginson (2016, p. 430) notes in highly unequal contexts, such as South Africa, the role of higher education in promoting social mobility requires a "much stronger focus on building more equal institutions with broadly allocated social value".

For me this has put into perspective the critical role of a strong and empowered student affairs and services profession that can act as catalyst for changing the way in which marginalized students are supported across institutions, but also to feed into

processes to change institutional cultures that monopolise advantaged outcomes for some and not others.

Engaging with JSAA

I think the editorial executive felt that my experience in the sociology of professions could also contribute to the journal's development. Since joining I have contributed two pieces to this scholarship together with Thierry Luescher: one to this issue of JSAA, and the other to a chapter in an upcoming edition of *New Directions in Student Services Series*. This exercise allowed me the opportunity to delve deep into the discourse of student affairs as profession and the professionalism established through JSAA over the ten-year period of JSAA's existence. Our study reflecting on the role that JSAA is playing in the professionalization of student affairs in Africa illuminated two core aspects that I feel can guide the journey for the next few years.

Importantly, in our study we found a strong social justice discourse in the journal (stronger than that of profession and professionalism) that undoubtedly draws from and aligns with student affairs' declared developmental and social justice aims (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Schreiber, 2014). At the same time, we also found that the discourse on profession and professionalism draws much more on the traditional notions associated with professionalization (high-skills, knowledge, qualifications, quality assurance, standards) and less so on the notions associated with social justice.

I think the journal has a strong thought-leadership and legitimating role to play in the professionalization of the field. In this regard it is imperative to expand the discourse of professionalization, not only by virtue of empirical and vetted knowledge on student affairs across the world but, as we argue, strengthened critical engagement of the notion of profession and the kind of professionalization that the field wants to reflect. Thus, we urge the journal to robustly engage on the traditional notions of professions and professionalism and how it can be shaped by the social justice context and realities of Africa.

A recent article in the JSAA aims to do exactly that in arguing for a more collaborative and democratic view of professional work that would be a counterpoint to the traditional notions of professionalism that are elitist, paternalistic, authoritarian and detached (Holtzhausen & Wahl, 2022). Such scholarship can help shape and be more reflective of the type of professionalization we seek for student affairs in Southern contexts, a professionalization guided by social justice and not social closure, which tends to be the hallmark of professions the world over.

Discussion: Professionalization through publishing

The unique personal histories, reflections on their careers and pathways, and perspectives on their roles as editors and the contributions that JSAA can make to student affairs in Africa, bring to light the complexities of the student affairs professionalization process. Professionals need to engage with a multiplicity of views and perspectives to move beyond partial truths and embrace a more holistic conceptualisation of student affairs. Through the shared space of a publication like JSAA, student affairs professionals from

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diverse backgrounds can identify, address, and create awareness of critical realities affecting staff and students within the African higher education milieu. As a collective, the editors agreed that the ten-year anniversary of JSAA should highlight unique insights and establish a new foundation in their quest to unify diverse role players under the student affairs umbrella to enhance students' well-being and success. The editors' reflections show in various ways how they view the journal's contributions in this regard, by means of professional development, commitments to peer support in a context of 'excellence', deliberate inclusivity and social justice, and a focus on relevance in the African student affairs context

There is a strong sense of mutual learning in the process of taking the role of editor in all four reflections. Teboho Moja, with all her experience and seniority as a professor of higher education, refers to the immense and transformative experience of serving as journal editor while engaging with emerging and established researchers and practitioners. Jointly with the other two editorial executives, they note how acting as editors has given them "new knowledge and skills", "expanded [their] understanding of the profession" and enhanced "[their] networks within it". Likewise, Annsilla Nyar-Ndlovu indicates how she benefitted from her association with the journal in her own professional position in the field. She speaks of being able to engage with "the emerging national literature" even prior to its publication and having been able to bring her "network of first-year experience scholars, both national and global" to the journal. She also notes how she started out navigating the daunting journey of editorship by learning on the job and receiving guidance and support from publishing professionals, while supporting others in their journeys towards publishing. Henry Mason emphasizes the importance of SoTL and SoSD as avenues to augment practice with rigour through scholarship. As a reflective practitioner, he notes how JSAA has been "an invaluable resource" and describes his work with JSAA as "enriching" through broadening his perspective and enhancing his scholarship. In all cases the learning associated with being an editor required learning about the ethics, standards, and established processes of editorship, the rigours of academic publishing, key processes such as peer review, and so forth, requiring an assimilation into the professional culture characteristic of genuine scholarly publishing.

The other side of the coin is how the editors speak of the developmental mandate of the journal and their role of encouraging and supporting prospective authors to bring a manuscript to the point of publication. Luescher notes how being part of the process of building a field, professionalizing student affairs through research and publication, was appealing to him. Birgit Schreiber and her colleagues aver that they "worked tirelessly with rising authors" in order "to develop, coach, and mentor, practitioners and emerging researchers into published authors". Angelique Wildschut highlights how her motivation as editor is grounded in a commitment to help redressing the legacy of inequality by building "a strong and empowered student affairs and services profession that can act as catalyst for changing the way in which marginalized students are supported across institutions". At the same time, the added responsibility of *pro bono* editing also requires significant sacrifice from the editors. Although not explicitly stated, much of the

editorial work occurs after hours and is, to a great extent, a labour of love, and an ethical necessity for the editors.

Regarding a vision for the journal, the contributors agree on their commitment to the professionalization of student affairs, highlighting African concerns, taking a developmental stance, and the importance of indigenous knowledge being produced via student affairs research and scholarship. They reaffirm their commitment to excellence, inclusivity and open access, professionalism, and societal impact. With respect to the journal's Africa-focus, Nyar-Ndlovu critically asks about the journal's identity: What is involved in being a journal "in Africa" and being an "African journal"? She argues:

> *I see value for the journal in serving the interests of African scholarship and representing African higher education. The journal can also do much to convey the reality of African student affairs and higher education.*

Finally, Mason suggests that a greater impact can be made by increasing the number of issues JSAA publishes a year, and Moja, Luescher and Schreiber's reflection envisions JSAA becoming a platform beyond its current format. They commit JSAA to hosting a community of practice on African student affairs research in the next decade.

Overall, the reflections of the JSAA editors also show how in an emerging profession the dichotomy between professionalism 'from within' and professionalism 'from outside' (or above) can be complementary. On the one hand, there are the insights and learnings the editors gain by working with manuscript authors in the editing process, their commitment to developing their upcoming and established peers, developing the knowledge base of the field while assimilating and upholding the high standards required from scholarly publishing. On the other hand, they also talk of their commitment to the 'clients' of student affairs, namely students, and particularly to student well-being and student success as a greater purpose. They refer to their commitment to professional ethics, professionalism in service to the students, communities and society, as well as the social justice mandate of student affairs, diversity and the journal's Africa-focus.

Conclusion

This article reflects on a collective aim from a multiplicity of perspectives: the quest of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* to contribute to the professionalization of African student affairs. It does so from the perspective of the specialized role of editorship in a scholarly journal within an emerging profession. Through four reflective contributions by six of JSAA's editors, this article shows that editorship comes with a range of challenges and needs for professional development to be capacitated for this role. At the same time, the editors also show how their role is enriching and rewarding, and essentially one of helping their emerging and established peers to become accomplished in an important facet of professional life: conducting research, authoring scholarly articles, and publishing in their field.

The reflections contribute to an understanding of the professionalization process of which JSAA is part involving both forms of professionalism – from within and from outside. As profession insiders, the editors and their journal operate from within and

using an indigenous process to professionalize the field. However, they do not only refer to values, commitments and processes indigenous to student affairs in Africa. They also talk of processes and standards applicable to scholarly editing and publishing that are more or less universal, and professional ethics from beyond the African context. Thus, the multiple learning processes referred to in the reflections are both indigenous and exogenous, involving intrinsic and extrinsic values, principles and commitments. The JSAA-led professionalization process is therefore neither a case of professionalism 'from above', nor one that would be complete if guided only 'from within' (Evetts, 2003). Both have a legitimate role to play as professionals find ways of engaging both external standards and control with an internal improvement drive, here at the case of developing professionalism through publishing.

An underlying emphasis on promoting well-being for all emerged strongly from the editors' reflections. In this context, the concept of well-being should be understood broadly as a positive state experienced by individuals and societies or, with reference to this article, more especially by students and the university community, the local communities they serve and society, to be able to function and flourish. Well-being ought to be conceptualised holistically and emphasize inclusivity; in the case of the editors' reflections this includes, for example, the needs of first-year students entering higher education, the relevance of student development and support initiatives, equitable access to university within a social justice discourse, learning to navigate the challenges of scholarly publishing, and the overall thriving and sustainability of student affairs within an African context.

Ethics statement

All author reflections are auto-ethnographic and informed by their personal ethics of professionalism and truth-telling. All authors agree with the contents of the article. No formal ethics clearance review was conducted.

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SPECIAL ISSUE: RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing student affairs as a profession in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the nature of the professionalization of student affairs and services (SAS) in Africa by analysing the discourses evident and legitimated through the ***Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*** (JSAA). The analysis is driven by three research questions: (1) What is the extent of the journal's engagement with the terms 'profession', 'professionalism', 'professional', and 'professionalization'? (2) How are these focal concepts used in the journal and (3) how do these uses relate to the social justice imperative in SAS? Overall, the analysis shows that the professionalization discourse in JSAA draws strongly on notions that certain professional traits and high-level knowledge and skills must be possessed by SAS personnel for the field to be professionalized. Furthermore, the analysis reflects a stronger social justice discourse than a discourse on SAS as a profession. Finally, this article considers opportunities for a scholarship on the development of SAS as a profession.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, professionalization, professionalism, social justice, sociology of professions, student affairs

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article aborde la nature de la professionnalisation des Œuvres Estudiantines (O.E.) dans les universités africaines en analysant les discours évidents et légitimés à travers le Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA). L'analyse s'articule autour de trois questions de recherche : Quelle est l'étendue de l'engagement de la revue avec les termes profession, professionnalisme, professionnel et professionnalisation ? Comment ces concepts centraux sont-ils utilisés dans la revue et comment ces utilisations sont-elles liées à l'impératif de justice sociale dans les O.E. ? Dans l'ensemble, l'analyse montre que le discours de professionnalisation dans le JSAA repose fortement sur l'idée selon laquelle certaines caractéristiques professionnelles, ainsi que certaines connaissances et compétences de haut niveau, doivent être maîtrisés par le personnel des O.E. pour que le domaine soit professionnalisé. En outre, l'analyse reflète un discours sur la justice sociale plus fort que sur les O.E. en tant que profession. Enfin, cet article envisage les possibilités d'une recherche sur le développement des O.E. en tant que profession.

MOTS-CLÉS

Enseignement supérieur, œuvres estudiantines, professionnalisation, professionnalisme, justice sociale, services étudiants, sociologie des professions

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Introduction: The role of JSAA in professionalizing student affairs in Africa

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) was established in 2012/13 with a launch issue themed 'The professionalization of student affairs in Africa' published in December 2013. The journal boldly states that it "aims to contribute to the professionalization of student affairs in African higher education" (JSAA, 2022). In the launch issue, the editorial executive claimed a "growing interest in the professionalization of student affairs in Africa". They noted recent developments in Africa, including a shift from "on-the-job training" to "high-level skills requirements to enter the profession"; a growing number of graduate programmes focusing on HE studies and SAS; new and existing centres of research to develop a body of knowledge and expertise; a growing number of SAS professional associations; increasing numbers of SAS conferences to share professional reflection on best practice and practice-relevant research, and; a budding of publications on SAS from the continent (Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2013a, p. viii–ix). To support these developments, it was argued that "an independent, international scholarly journal", dealing with "the theory, policy and practice" of the profession, was required (Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2013b, p. 5). Indeed, from the outset, the founding editors declared that this publication would strive to be "the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent" (JSAA, 2021).

To contribute to professionalization, establishing scholarly legitimacy is critical and the JSAA editors embarked on this *inter alia* by seeking to establish "a prestigious editorial executive and international editorial board", publish "high quality content", have "rigorous internal quality controls", and seek "accreditation, patronage, endorsement, and affiliation" (Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2013b, p. 14–15). For a South Africa-based journal, perhaps the most important indicator of such scholarly legitimacy was accreditation by the Academy of Sciences of South Africa, which certified it in 2017 as bona fide scholarly journal included in the South African list of research subsidy-earning journals. Over the years, the journal has been able to attract authors from across the South African and African university landscape and about 10% of contributors from outside the African continent. This is in a context where JSAA is the only specialized journal on SAS in Africa (alongside general higher education and education journals), and one among a dozen or so journals worldwide dedicated to SAS scholarship (most of which are in the global North) (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022). By June 2023, the journal had a citation count of over to 1,700 for 249 items captured on its Google Scholar profile. Over 100 articles had achieved at least three citations with the top three articles respectively having 119, 93 and 58 recorded citations on Google Scholar. Regarding those and other indicators, over the years JSAA has established itself as a respectable building block in the research landscape on SAS in Africa.

To discuss the nature of the student affairs professionalization project in Africa, this article critically analyses the discourses evident and implicitly legitimated in the publications of JSAA over its 10 years of existence (Vol. 1, 2013 to Vol. 10, 2022). We

argue that journals are important platforms for analysing 'efforts to professionalize' as well as 'claims to professionalism' (Evetts, 2013), because they create a discourse around the concept of profession and professionalism by documenting specific collections of cases that illustrate and model ways for the field to professionalize. While there are many other activities and processes that contribute to the wider professionalization project[1], we consider here particularly the role of JSAA, recognised as a scholarly journal in the SAS field.

To start our analysis, we reflect on foundational and conceptual debates in the literature on professions which recognise the importance of the ideological discourse on professions as (re)produced through certain activities and platforms. This is followed by a brief overview of the methodology. We then present our analyses of a sample of articles published in the journal. The first is a bird's-eye view on the extent of engagement with the focal concepts of 'profession', 'professionalism', 'professional', and 'professionalization', which is followed by an in-depth analysis of the discourse on SAS as profession evident in a sample of articles. We also reflect on the social justice aims of the SAS domain and show how these fare in the journal's professionalization discourse. We do so by interrogating the alignment between the professionalization discourse and social justice discourse evident in JSAA. We consider the latter critical for engagement, not least because South African professions have historically used race and gender to exclude Black South Africans (see, e.g. Wildschut, 2011; Walker, 2005; Webster, 2004; Marks, 1994). In the case of SAS, focusing on social justice is perhaps even more important given the declared developmental and social justice aims of the profession (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Schreiber, 2014). Some of the core tenets driving SAS include access, equality, diversity, assessment of student needs, and social justice (Perez-Encinas et al., 2020; Long, 2014). In the final section, we consider opportunities for scholarship on SAS as a profession and how JSAA positions itself in relation to steering this scholarship.

Professions, professionalism and professionalization

The sociology of professions (SoP) was pioneered by writers such as Eliot Friedson and Magali Larson, Andrew Abott and more recently authors such as Julia Evetts and Mike Saks. Despite several collections or case studies of particular professions in particular countries, more comprehensive books on professions are rarely produced, most notable would be the *Sociology of Professions* by McDonald (1995) *Professions and Power* (2016) by Johnson and a *Routledge Companion to the Professions and Professionalism* by Dent et al. (2016). The SoP literature examines professions as a type of occupational group that is successful in wielding forms of privilege, power, and status across a range of societal institutions (notably in relation to the market and the state) over, or at certain points in, time. A profession is commonly understood to refer to an occupational

1 Professionalization can include the development of professional and academic degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level, short courses and capacity building opportunities, scholarship and research and the expansion of discipline-specific journals and books, the building of epistemic communities and developing theories and practices that are globally shared and locally relevant (Schreiber & Lewis, 2020).

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group that performs autonomously, has a particular relationship with society, and its practitioners are governed by a relatively exclusive form of knowledge and a code of ethics. As a profession manages knowledge that other individuals need, there tends to be an asymmetric relationship between professionals and the users of their services. In traditional theories of professions, a strong connection exists amongst the professions, higher education, a scientific knowledge base, and a code of ethics. However, arguments on the complexities of practical and tacit knowledge have come to play a central role in contemporary discussions and engagement about professions. In this respect it is also important to highlight the contested nature of concepts such as profession, professionalism, and professionalization in the course of analysing and interpreting a journal's positioning to their theoretical development.

The SoP literature can be categorised into three stages of development which illustrates why certain areas of investigation became more salient over time and others discarded. The first stage of development, referred to as the **traditional trait approach** (or taxonomic approach), claimed that professions could be defined by cataloguing particular traits and attributes that are not held by other occupations (e.g. Pellegrino, 1983; Wilensky, 1964; Greenwood, 1957). Scientific knowledge and specialized expertise were seen as the defining features in these accounts. The literature was based on two core propositions, namely that professions were distinct from other middle-class occupations, both empirically and analytically, and that the presence of professions in civil society uniquely supported the social order. Saks (2012) noted in this respect that occupations with very esoteric and complex knowledge and expertise of great importance to society were usually seen as being granted a high position in the social system with state sanction in return for protecting the public and/or clients. The medical profession was often used to represent such a prototype.

The SoP theorists of this stage suggested a common professionalization process where relatively few occupations would complete all the steps in the process to achieve the standing of established profession.

The second phase in SoP scholarship, coined the **revisionist triad**, rejected the idea that professions could be distinguished from occupations. Writers did so by showing that rather than distinct differences existing between high-status professions and other occupations, there were many parallels. Often low status occupations (such as garbage collectors or prostitutes) were used to discredit claims that only a limited number of professions were worthy of such a title. Here arguments of the forces of de-professionalization also played a role. For example, Braverman (1974) argued that tasks that would be seen as the preserve of a particular profession were being broken down by managerialist strategies and could easily be performed by other groups, or they became subject to a division of labour that would circumvent the high status of professions. Furthermore, there was also a recognition that professions can be a malevolent force in society with detrimental consequences for order and stratification, exacerbating hierarchies and socio-economic inequities.

While agreeing with many of the critics of the second phase, Abbott (1988) was influential in arguing that the study of professions must recognise them as a system

and focus on how occupational groups define, establish, and maintain boundaries or lay claim to certain jurisdictions. Abbott focused on the activities by which occupational groups asserted jurisdiction to the point that they would gain the right (by society, the market, and the state) to offer 'diagnosis, inference and treatment' on a specific scope of problems. As this view explicitly accommodates changes in the nature of work and new contestations between occupational groups trying to claim parts or entire scopes of practice, his seminal work continues to inform current research in the field (Wildschut & Meyer, 2017).

More recent literature on professions attempts to synthesize the tensions from the first two phases in recognising definitional integrity as important, but being wary of the functionalist implications (Sciulli, 2005). Here arguments are for moving beyond a professional framework (Burns, 2007), focusing more on the micro-level of professionals and their workplaces (Brock et al., 2014) as well as the discourse of professionalism. In this regard the literature further distinguished conceptually between professionalization *from within* and *from without* (McClelland, 1990) to signal that professionalism can be externally imposed (e.g. by regulatory authorities and standard setting bodies) as a means of control as well as internally enacted to assert autonomy and contest the power of bureaucracy (Fournier, 1999). It was considered important to delineate between professionalism that is driven by practitioners themselves striving towards and wanting to deliver a quality service, protect client rights and interests, from the forms of professionalism that are driven by requirements to adhere to quality standards, assurance and organisational targets. This led to the former being viewed as a more legitimate form of professionalism as opposed to the latter which was associated with professional organisations creating, institutionalising and manipulating the discourse of professionalism (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011) to restrict professional autonomy and power. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that these are not necessarily dichotomous (Wilkesmann, 2020).

The scholarship now focuses on professionalism as a value and ideology and continues to debate whether the terms profession and professionalism are useful and theoretically relevant (Adams, 2010; Saks, 2012; Svarc, 2016). This is a debate returned to, most recently in Sak's book, *Professions: A Key Idea for Business and Society* (2021, p. vii), where he asserts the "ongoing importance of professional groups in the modern world in business and beyond". Thus, the terms 'profession', 'professionalism' and 'professionalization' are contested, depending critically on socio-economic and historical development within a specific context. This means that no 'template' or model for successful professionalization can easily be distilled. These terms must be applied in a manner that engages the conceptual gaps, and continuous critique of the nature of professionalization is required to ensure that social and structural exclusions are not recreated or maintained.

Research questions and methodology

Understanding professions requires understanding, first, the role certain actors play in the professionalization processes and, second, the way they may influence new forms

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of professionalism and models of professionalization (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). This article investigates the way the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* has contributed over the first ten years of its existence to the professionalization of SAS in Africa.

Three research questions guide the enquiry: (1) What is the extent of the journal's engagement with the focus terms of 'profession', 'professionalism', 'professional', and 'professionalization'? (2) How are these terms applied in publications in the journal? (3) To what extent does this professionalization discourse relate to the social justice imperative in SAS?

The data for this study are the 10 volumes of JSAA published from 2013 to 2022, which comprise 19 issues and 240 substantive items of publication. Our analysis started by importing the items of publication (including prefaces, editorials, peer-reviewed research articles, peer-reviewed reflective practice articles, campus and conference reports, professional notices and book reviews), into Atlas.ti 9 to run a comprehensive content analysis of the selected focus terms. Atlas.ti offers the advantage of organising, managing, and analysing large quantities of qualitative data.

Our analytic process employed both a deductive and inductive approach to the development and application of codes and themes to condense the selected data. Using Atlas.ti's automated search function, 131 published items were identified that contain our focus terms (i.e. professionalism, profession, professional or professionalization). Of these, 25 publications were selected as the sample for our in-depth analysis by excluding all documents in which these terms were mentioned less than eight times (see Table 1 below). This constitutes the database for the discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis aims to uncover discursive, interactional, and/or rhetorical context (Macmillan, 2005), making explicit the unspoken, lived notions surrounding power (Foucault, 1976) through a "set of methods and theories for investigating language in use and language in social contexts" (Wetherell et al., 2001, p.1). Our focus here is analysing discourse as realised through text, while acknowledging that it is also about objects, subjects, and meaning-making, in reference to other discourses, reflective of a particular way of speaking, and historically located (Parker, 1992).

Our method was to read each contribution closely, paying attention to the deployment of our focus terms to identify what meaning could be discerned from their contextual usage and thus what discourse it established or participated in. We then reflected on whether and how these meanings related to the discourse on professions, as discussed above.

Constructing the discourse of SAS as a profession

The analysis of all 240 substantive items of publication provides a bird's-eye view of the engagement of JSAA in the SAS professionalization discourse. Figure 1 shows that there have been great disparities in the distribution of mentions (over 980) of the term 'profession' and its derivatives between the different volumes and issues of the journal since its inception in 2013. It shows that the JSAA launch issue themed 'The professionalization of student affairs in Africa' accounts for almost a third of all mentions of the search words. This is followed by JSAA's global issue of 2017, 'Voices from across

the globe', which contains 183 mentions, and the 2016 volume on 'Student affairs in complex contexts' (92 mentions). While almost half (7 of 16) of the issues have been guest-edited, only one of the five issues with the most mentions are guest-edited. This suggests that those issues edited by the editorial executive of the journal are more actively engaged in the construction of the SAS professionalization discourse than guest-edited issues. The diagram also highlights an ebb and flow in focus on professionalization across issues.

Deconstructing the SAS professionalization discourse

On the basis of the above analysis, we identified the 25 articles with the most mentions of the focal terms (eight or more mentions) as the sample for our in-depth discourse analysis. This sample is made up of fourteen research articles, seven reflective practice articles, three editorials, and one interview and dialogue article (see Table 1).

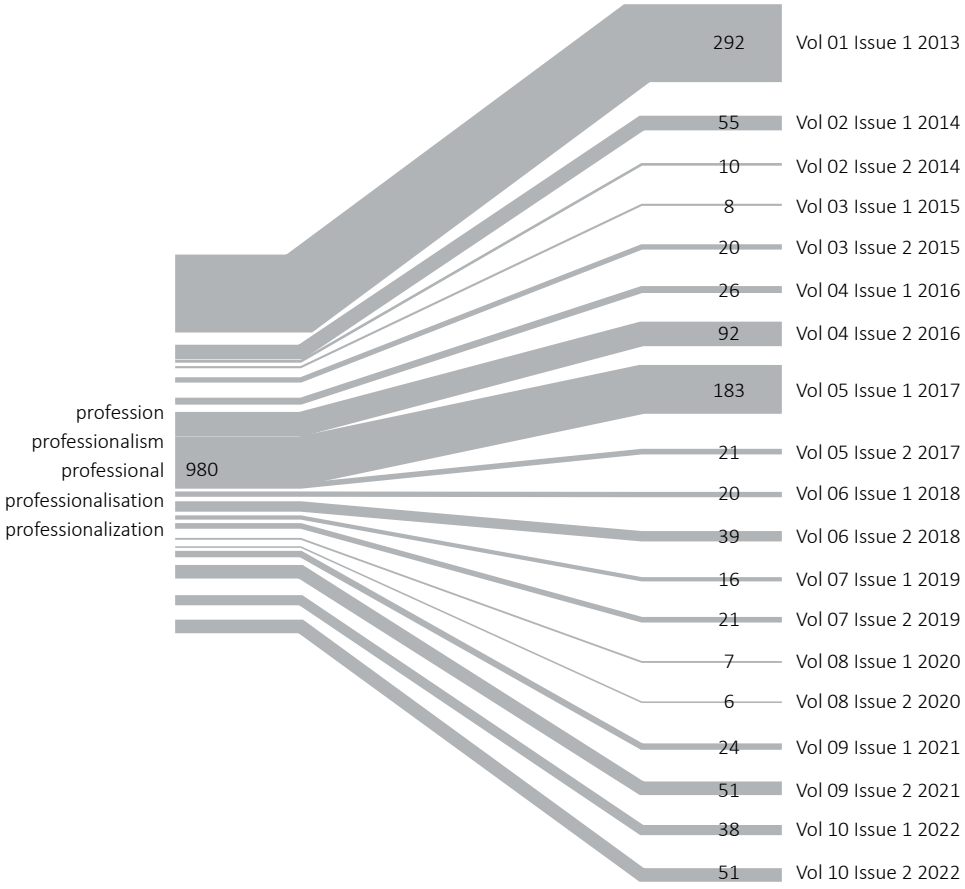

Figure 1: Number of mentions of focus terms by JSAA volume and issue

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Table 1: Sample for analysis

Sample	Publication title	Mentions	Vol. (Issue)	Article type
1	Professionalization of student affairs educators in China: History, challenges, and solutions	104	5 (1)	Reflective practice
2	The role of research and scholarship in the professionalization of student affairs	89	1 (1&2)	Research
3	A proposed model for the continued professionalization of student affairs in Africa	79	1 (1&2)	Research
4	Socialisation and professional identity: Reflections of an administrator's pathway into student affairs in the United States	53	4 (2)	Reflective practice
5	Advocating for standards	50	5 (1)	Reflective practice
6	Enhancing the professionalization of student affairs through assessment	48	1(1&2)	Research
7	Towards a professionalization of student affairs in Africa	41	1(1&2)	Editorial
8	Quality enhancement in student affairs and social justice: A reflective case study from South Africa	26	6 (2)	Reflective practice
9	Mapping African student affairs research during the past interlude (2008–2019) through Bronfenbrenner's lens	25	10 (1)	Research article
10	Keeping up with changing times: Student leaders, resilience, fragility and professional development	24	10 (2)	Research article
11	Professional mentoring in student affairs: Evaluation of a global programme	22	4 (2)	Reflective practice
12	Competency development of Southern African housing officers	18	1 (1&2)	Reflective practice
13	Contextualising student affairs in Africa: The past, present and future	18	2 (1)	Editorial
14	Making known the real: An exploration of academic advising practices in a South African higher education context	13	9 (2)	Research
15	Building South African women's leadership: A cohort model for the Ph.D. in student affairs	11	2 (1)	Research
16	Special guest IASAS edition: Issues and challenges in student affairs and services around the world	11	5 (1)	Guest editorial

Sample	Publication title	Mentions	Vol. (Issue)	Article type
17	Conceptualisation and early implementation of an academic advising system at the University of Cape Town	11	9 (2)	Research
18	Teaching and learning and the first-year experience: Interviews with Brenda Leibowitz and John Gardner	10	4 (1)	Interview and dialogue
19	It's time to unite: A collaborative approach to addressing the needs of graduate students of colour	10	7 (1)	Research
20	Peer leadership as an emerging high-impact practice: An exploratory study of the American experience	9	4 (1)	Research
21	Learning communities for teaching practice school placements: A higher education initiative to promote equity for students with disabilities	9	7 (2)	Research
22	Residence heads as intentional roleplayers in promoting student success	9	7 (2)	Research
23	The challenges of student affairs at Kenyan public universities	8	1 (1&2)	Research
24	Firstyear college students' emotional intelligence and help-seeking behaviours as correlates of their academic achievement	8	6 (2)	Research
25	Campus mental health revisited	8	10 (2)	Reflective practice

First, we considered whether a document attempted to foster a particular perspective and meaning of SAS as profession and SAS professionalization. Does it try to frame an understanding in a particular manner? Second, we considered whether new conceptualisations were proposed that can contribute to the development of the discourse on SAS as a profession or beyond.

Among the 25 contributions, six explicitly deal with the conceptualisation of one or more of our focus concepts; ten do not explicitly deal with conceptualisations of the terms but their content portrays a perspective on what these concepts must mean for SAS; and the remaining nine do not engage with the concepts at all but merely deploy the terms uncritically.

Among the first set of six articles, which explicitly define their profession-related concepts, is the article by Li and Fang published in JSAA 5(1) of 2017. It is entitled 'Professionalization of student affairs educators in China: History, challenges, and solutions' and directly engages with the concept of professionalization. The article frames

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an intervention from central university administrations and the Chinese government as important for the initial success of the professionalization of SAS in China.

Next, the article 'The role of research and scholarship in the professionalization of student affairs' by Carpenter and Haber-Curran published in the 2013 launch issue directly conceptualises what it means to be a professional and what professionalization entails. It discusses scholarly practice, the meaning of being a practitioner-scholar, and therefore the concept of professionalism, emphasizing the importance of professionally conducted, written, and vetted research and scholarship as the most essential components of professional development. They conceptualise scholarly practitioners as those who

> *practice their craft as autonomously as possible by making decisions primarily for the benefit of students, relying upon theory and research, remaining accountable to peers, providing professional feedback, acting ethically, and enacting the values of the profession generally. (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013, p. 8)*

In the same issue, Selznick also engages with the concepts of professionalization and professionalism in his article 'A proposed model for the continued professionalization of student affairs in Africa'. Selznick argues that a model of professionalization ought to be sensitive to the three core dimensions of SAS work (i.e. entering services, supporting services, and culminating services), as well as adaptable to the variety of contexts found within African higher education, to guide the development of the profession.

Pansiri and Sinkamba (2017, Vol. 5 Issue 1) argue for a professional approach to SAS that places emphasis on standards. Their article, 'Advocating for standards in student affairs departments in African institutions: University of Botswana experience', argues that professions must have set standards that guide their work. Furthermore, they assert that professional bodies with established, tried, and tested standards are critical to professional development in the field. This is an important contribution as it is only one of two articles in this set by authors that work in African higher education.

Another article from the launch issue entitled 'Enhancing the professionalization of student affairs through assessment' by Gansemer-Topf puts emphasis on the role of assessment in legitimating SAS as profession. It defines both 'profession' and 'professional' to argue that there are certain characteristics that provide insights into SAS evolution from a mere practice to a profession. This aligns to earlier discussion of an evolutionary view of professionalization from one end of the spectrum of occupational practice to the other side, which is a professionalized state.

The sixth article of the set that explicitly dealt with defining our focus concepts was published in the first issue of 2022 with the title 'Mapping African student affairs research during the past interlude (2008–2019) through Bronfenbrenner's lens'. The authors, Holtzhausen and Wahl, both work in a South African university. Their article critiques the traditional notions of professionalism as elitist, paternalistic, and authoritarian, associated with highly exclusive knowledge, control and detachment. Using humanizing and transformative pedagogy as a framework, they argue for a more collaborative and democratic view of professional work that allows acknowledgement

of the professionalism required in, for instance, student leadership-related work. The article illustrates how SAS practitioners are required to mediate the university's organizational goals in relation to student needs alongside an acknowledgement that university staff and student leaders must embrace their own and each other's full humanity and develop as semi-professionals and peer-educators.

Among the sample of 25 that do not attempt to explicitly conceptualise the focal concepts, there are still articles that make claims on what their authors deem to be professional practice. Prominent are discussions of skills and competencies associated with SAS as profession, considerations of processes or structures that contribute to professionalization, delineation of responsibilities in respect to other fields of practice, as well as arguments that highlight the boundary straddling position of the field and its practitioners. In other words, they establish and elaborate on a taxonomy of traits to define SAS as profession, SAS professionalism and the processes of professionalization required to get there.

In the main, we therefore find in the articles a tendency towards rather uncritical notions of what a profession is and what the professionalization of SAS entails in Africa. Critical engagement with the established scholarly discourses on professions that underpin these key constructs is nearly absent. In the instances where literature on professions is reviewed and drawn on, the 25 JSAA articles apply for the most part approaches that tend to be rejected by mainstream SoP literature. A case in point is the widespread use of the so-called taxonomic approach, which basically establishes catalogues of traits and attributes that a particular profession ought to espouse. While there is heuristic advantage in such applications, it would be important for a journal that is committed to the development of the professionalization discourse to engage with the way this uncritical approach positions SAS scholarship on the professionalization of student affairs and the professionalism of its practitioners.

High-level skills and knowledge as well as social justice

The ongoing, rapid massification of higher education in Africa has led to a diversification of university's student and staff bodies along with many challenges for student affairs in Africa (Luescher, 2020). SAS is challenged to ensure that widening participation and diversity does not exacerbate existing inequalities and/or generate new ones but ensure "equity and inclusion initiatives to address and redress longstanding practices of exclusion and privilege (typically along race, ethnicity, sex, gender and socio-economic class lines)" (Blessinger et al., 2020, p. 85; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020). A SAS profession that does not explicitly acknowledge and involve a social justice mandate would be amiss. Our last concern is therefore a critical analysis of the already identified discourse on SAS as a profession in the JSAA in relation to social justice concerns.

This analysis required two additional rounds of coding. The first identified terms associated with the concepts of high-level skill and knowledge which, as established earlier, are historically considered important aspects of a profession. The related search terms and codes were: 'formal training', 'formal education', 'high-skills', 'university qualification', 'student development knowledge', 'student development

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theory', 'student learning theory', 'advising theory', 'specialized knowledge', and 'professional qualification'. The second set of search terms associated loosely with social justice concerns included 'social justice', 'disadvantage', 'poor', 'inequality', 'equality', 'marginalized', 'access', 'race', 'black', 'coloured', 'female', 'disability', and 'exclusion'. The face validity of these terms was tested through discussion and adjustment between the authors.

The first column of Table 2 gives an indication of the occurrence of the two codes generated by the search. Over the journal life cycle there were a total 2,787 mentions of terms related to social justice. For the notions of high-level skills and knowledge, a much smaller number of mentions (781) leads us to assert that, comparatively, the social justice imperative forms a much larger driver of the general SAS discourse in the contexts of the journal articles. The analysis illustrates well-developed engagement with terms that relate to social justice.

Table 2: Code co-occurrence analysis

Code	Total mentions	Co-occurrence	Co-occurrence coefficient
		Profession* code (980)	
High level knowledge and skill	781	233	0.15
Social justice related	2,787	160	0.04

**Shortened version of code that includes all mentions of the term profession, professionalism, professional, professionalisation and professionalization.*

When we consider code co-occurrence in a cross-tabulation of codes that co-occur in the same paragraph, it appears that the discourse of SAS as profession more actively engages the notions of high-level skills and knowledge (233) in support of its claims than those of social justice (160) (see Table 2, column 2). The code co-occurrence coefficient reflects the strength of the relation between two codes.2 In this regard the relation between the professions-related code is stronger with the high-level knowledge and skill code (0.15) than it is with the social justice related code (0.04) (see Table 2, column 3). This means that the professionalization discourse is much more strongly associated with (relatively uncritical and traditional) notions of high-level knowledge and skills than it is with (critical and engaged) notions of social justice.

A similar insight is also illustrated when considering co-occurrence against the total number of extracts in the particular code: 29.8% of all high-level knowledge and skills codes co-occurred with coding related to SAS as profession, compared to only 5.7% of social justice-related codes. Further analysis shows that discussions in the journal of social justice mostly related to students and less to SAS as profession. Against this

2 The calculation of the code co-occurrence co-efficient is c=n12/(n1+n2-n12), where n12 = number of co-occurrences for code n1 and n2. It ranges from 0 – 0, where 0 would be no co-occurrence of codes and 1 would mean that the two codes co-occur wherever they are used.

finding, it may be useful to consider whether and how the journal would like to position its professionalization agenda in relation to the social justice imperative involved in SAS work, given its powerful role in developing the discourse on SAS as profession in Africa and beyond (e.g. Schreiber, 2014).

Conclusions and way forward

We have shown that in keeping with its establishment rationale, JSAA is developing a discourse on SAS as a profession in Africa which could benefit from more critical engagement. First, our analysis illustrates that the dominant discourse on SAS as profession evident in a sample of JSAA publications builds on rather traditional (and in parts outdated) notions of what a profession is, typically involving catalogues of traits and attributes that a particular profession ought to espouse. Our analysis showed that the discourse on SAS as profession is dominated by notions of high-level knowledge, skills and quality standards (and ways towards building those).

Second (and related to this), the professionalization discourse in JSAA would benefit from more critical engagement with respect to the potential effect of particular routes to professionalization of SAS in Africa on equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice. What will the effect of professionalization be on gender equity, the inclusion of members of historically disadvantaged communities, persons with disabilities, and so forth? As much as there is a well-established social justice discourse in the journal, its intersection with the discourse of SAS as profession is minimal.

Third, we found the wider professionalization discourse in JSAA strongly aligns with the notion of service to students and being governed by professional values internal to practitioners themselves. As indicated earlier, this is sometimes referred to in the literature as professionalization *from within* (Fournier, 1999). Two examples in our sample of JSSA articles that reflect this are Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) and Selznick (2013). There are also several articles that provide evidence of managerialist influences on SAS, such as external standard setting and quality assurance that are illustrative of professionalization *from outside* (Wilkesmann et al., 2020). This is exemplified by Li and Fang (2017), Pansiri and Sinkamba (2017), and Luescher (2018) in their articles referred to above.

Linking to the earlier discussion, this finding is of relevance to further analytical and conceptual development that can be illustrative of how newer and emerging professions are navigating both forms of professionalism in their efforts to professionalize. This could add further nuance to our understanding of how such forms of professionalism are not always diametrically opposed. Reflection on how the tension between professionalism from within and outside plays out within SAS, and particularly its form within the African context, could thus be instructive to this debate.

Lastly, and related to the former assertion, there is an interesting development in the JSAA discourse on professionalization. In the last volume reviewed here, there are two articles, Holtzhausen and Wahl (2022) and Dick et al. (2022) respectively, that recognise a semi-professional role played by student leaders in SAS. Student leaders are often taken as extensions of SAS practitioners in student leadership development, the

residence sector, mentoring practice, and so forth. This raises the question of the unique nature of SAS as profession in the African higher education context and highlights the role that JSAA can play through providing a critical platform for engaging on the nature of SAS professionalization in Africa. The growing collection of scholarship on SAS as profession in JSAA therefore has immense practical and theoretical potential.

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Ethics statement
This desktop study of secondary, published data did not involve research with human subjects and was not submitted for ethics review.

Potential conflict of interest
Apart from their own involvement as editors of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, the authors do not consider any potential conflicts of interest. Both authors conducted this work as researchers employed by the Human Sciences Research Council and research associates of the University of Pretoria and Nelson Mandela University, respectively.

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SPECIAL ISSUE: ON CAMPUS

Student affairs professionalization programme launched in South Africa

'Mateboho Green[1] & Charmain Naidoo[2]

Introduction

The professionalization of student affairs, student development and support services across the South African university sector is critical for the improved success of students and all institutions.

This was the view of those leading the inaugural Student Affairs and Student Success (SASS) capacity development programme. The first session of the SASS programme was hosted in Ekurhuleni, South Africa, from 29 to 30 May 2023. The programme was conceptualised by a consortium of higher education and student affairs experts coordinated by the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme of Universities South Africa (USAf).

The two-day session attracted 50 participants from a range of student support services across South Africa's public universities. The attendees were mostly middle and senior managers from student affairs, student development, student services, administration, libraries, transformation and equity, health and wellness, student residences, marketing and communication departments, and more.

A timely programme with a three-pronged approach

Welcoming the SASS participants, USAf's CEO, Dr Phethiwe Matutu, called the training programme a "milestone event". Her second-in-command and recently appointed Director: Operations and Sector Support, Mr Mahlubi Chief Mabizela, concurred that it was a much-needed intervention, considering how student success, leadership, and governance issues were two key challenges that the higher education sector is currently grappling with.

Dr Oliver Seale, director of HELM echoed the CEO's words, adding that this was a first in South Africa and on the African continent. Dr Birgit Schreiber, the programme leader, asserted that student success is underpinned by intentional and relevant support that addresses not only student and institutional success but also addresses issues in the living and learning contexts that are often less than conducive for meaningful engagement and epistemological access.

The SASS programme was initiated as a direct response to a national training needs assessment survey that HELM carried out among student support professionals working in student affairs, student development, and student support services across the 26

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public institutions in November 2021. The study found that 86% of the surveyed 362 respondents was very keen to take part in a capacity building intervention to enhance their impact on student success. The survey findings, including the expressed needs to develop competencies and skills, led to the design of the SASS programme during 2022.

According to Dr Matutu, USAf anchored its work on three theme clusters: Students, Sustainability and Engagement. In this manner, USAf sought to achieve its vision of "a higher education system that is responsive to South African and global challenges through the growth and development of engaged graduates and through high-quality knowledge production", she said. USAf had further identified sub-themes with a bearing on student growth and development including stability, student funding, accommodation, access and success, employability, and mental wellness. "USAf's work is spread across all these areas, with the latest product – the work of the Transformation Strategy Group – being a research study report with guidelines, titled *Reshaping universities to create a student-centred higher education system in South Africa*", Matutu said.

Leadership and governance are grave concerns

Leadership and governance in higher education were issues of great significance and concern, noted Mr Chief Mabizela. "If you were asked to tell someone who had been out of the country for the past two years what our biggest problem was, you'd be remiss if you didn't mention leadership and governance issues," he said. These issues were playing out everywhere in the public domain, including in the media.

Directly addressing the participants, he said, by virtue of their responsibility for student matters, "you provide leadership at your institutions. Institutional management will consult Student Affairs on matters that relate generally to the governance of students (for example, the Students Representative Council (SRC)."

Mr Mabizela mentioned a USAf report, titled *An Engaged University for a Higher Education System in South Africa*, published in 2022 from the deliberations of the Higher Education Conference of 2021. This report addresses the kind of change that is needed in SA universities to render them engaged institutions, Mabizela said.

"Basically, what kind of graduates do we want to develop and enable? If we are to develop towards making a positive contribution to society, we have to provide leadership. An engaged university means one that is really grounded and is organically involved in issues of society. It is something that the university does or should be doing."

Dr Oliver Seale said that universities in the world, including those in the South African system, have each carved their own excellence niche. Regrettably, however, "we tend to lose that in the ranking system. In our programme, we need to determine how successfully universities are led. It often rests on the Executive Leadership team, who need to galvanise the energies of the academics and administrators to work as a collective, towards achieving the institution's strategic goals", Seale said.

Seale challenged the programme attendees to use their new skills and competences: "We are confident that once you have completed this programme, engaged with your colleagues, and shared your experience over the next six months (June to November

2023), you will be better positioned to showcase your excellence, for the benefit of yourself and your institution."

The HELM director went on to state that before Covid-19, 'change' was the one constant in the higher education system. This had changed, Seale said: "Nowadays, we talk about two constants, 'change and complexity'. Leadership in universities today, is becoming increasingly complex. One thing we learned during the Covid-19 pandemic is that when we work as a collective, we all win. It is about you and your team – or even more importantly, you leading and being led by your team."

Access without support is not a fair opportunity

Dr Birgit Schreiber, the SASS programme leader, emphasized the role student affairs, support and development play in supporting students and shaping a context conducive for student success. Enabling access without support is not a fair opportunity, she argued, and this is where staff in the student affairs, support, and development services play a critical role for students and institutions.

Student success debates have grown beyond student throughput rates in recent years to involve a holistic understanding of the student life cycle, Dr Matutu said. Universities now concern themselves with "how we provide relevant services, shape the living and learning context, and how we engage students in the transformation of their tertiary experience." This therefore underlined the critical role of student affairs, student support and student development functions. It also explained why, globally, staff in these functions are supported and capacitated via professionalization and bespoke development programmes, "which advance their contributions towards institutional objectives for success."

The CEO congratulated all 50 participants on behalf of the USAf chairperson and board of directors for having heeded the call. "We are confident that you will use this opportunity to reflect, learn, and add greater value to our students. It will also be incumbent on you to share the lessons from SASS with your colleagues and peers at your university. Together, we will make the student-centred higher education space more enabling and empowering for ourselves and our students," Dr Matutu concluded.

For more information visit:

https://www.usaf.ac.za/professionalising-student-affairs-development-and-support-services-is-the-key-to-enhancing-student-success-in-higher-education/

https://www.usaf.ac.za/rationale-for-the-inaugural-student-affairs-and-student-success-sass-capacity-development-programme/

https://www.usaf.ac.za/new-sass-programme-hailed-as-forerunner-in-professionalising-universities-student-affairs-and-support-services/

https://www.usaf.ac.za/universities-student-affairs-development-and-support-staff-urged-to-identify-as-professionals-practitioners-and-knowledge-workers/

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the benefits of joining peer groups for first-year students: A case study of a South African university

Vuyokazi Mntuyedwa[1]

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study explored the benefits of peer group support for first-year South African students who live in university residences. A case study design was adopted and data were collected from first-year students via focus group interviews at a selected South African university. Thematic analysis revealed the benefits for first-year students joining peer groups in the residences, such as a sense of belonging, receiving academic support, developing student leadership roles, and involvement in co-curricular activities. In addition, the study highlights the need for implementing student programmes to assist first-year students in transitioning from school to university.

KEYWORDS
First-year students, peer group support, qualitative research, residences, sense of belonging, student affairs

RÉSUMÉ
Cette étude qualitative explore les avantages du soutien par les pairs pour les étudiants sud-africains de première année qui vivent dans les résidences universitaires. Une méthodologie d'étude de cas a été adoptée et les données ont été collectées auprès d'***étudiants de première année*** d'une université sud-africaine. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entretiens collectifs avec des groupes ciblés. L'analyse thématique a révélé les avantages dont bénéficient les étudiants de première année qui rejoignent des groupes de pairs dans les résidences, notamment le sentiment d'appartenance, le soutien académique, le développement de rôles de leadership étudiant et la participation à des activités parascolaires. En outre, l'étude met en évidence la nécessité de mettre en place des programmes étudiants pour aider les étudiants de première année dans leur transition de l'école à l'université.

MOTS-CLÉS
Étudiants de première année, œuvres estudiantines, recherche qualitative, résidences, sentiment d'appartenance, services étudiants, soutien par les pairs

Background and introduction

The desire for social acceptance is a primary human need and is particularly prevalent when students enter the higher education context (Santor et al., 2002). According to Shepherd et al. (2011), students will engage in various activities to satisfy the need

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for belonging. Lawrence (2005) and Krause (2001) add that the need for belonging is particularly prevalent during the stressful transition from school to university. Seminal work by Tinto (1988) indicates that the transition from school to university is a significant challenge that is influenced by students' diverse backgrounds, experiences and expectations. Bojuwoye (2002) agrees and argues that when students leave their homes and families to become part of the university environment, they are confronted with several challenges and adjustments to virtually all aspects of life, including social, academic, psychological, physical and spiritual aspects.

The transition to university comprises three distinct stages (Tinto, 2009, 2012). First, during the separation stage, students have to disassociate from their familial and communal backgrounds as they enter university. Second, as students begin engaging in the university setting, they must establish new relationships with peers and other stakeholders. Third, during the incorporation stage, students may struggle to adapt to the university setting and experience social and academic challenges (Tinto, 2009, 2012). Many universities offer support and other services to assist students in adequately managing the transition period (Mason, 2019). A growing body of literature also indicates that students can benefit from support-related services and programmes, such as orientation programmes (Chigeza et al., 2018; Keup & Barefoot, 2005). Most orientation programmes aim to facilitate students' successful integration into a new and unfamiliar academic and social setting. The first-year programmes also increase students' understanding of their institutions and higher education culture in general (Chigeza et al., 2018; Krause, 2001; Strayhorn, 2019). Peer groups can also enhance the value of student support programmes by emphasizing active involvement and offering a sense of community (Astin, 1985).

Involvement of first-year students in peer groups

Research suggests that students strongly desire peer group affiliation (Henrich et al. 2001; Johnson, 2017; Olalekan, 2016). Aziz et al. (2011, p. 36) describe a peer group as "a source of affection, sympathy, and understanding; a place for experimentation where an attempt to discover the self can be made because persons are separated and independent from their parents". Thus, peer group support can promote a smooth transition from school to university (Castrogiovanni, 2002; Kulaksızoğlu, 2001).

Peer groups can be classified into formal and informal groups. Formal groups are often more structured and focus on academic goals, whereas informal groups provide opportunities for social interaction in, amongst others, university residence contexts. Examples of informal groups are entertainment and dance groups, while formal groups can be study groups and student organisations. Undergraduate peer groups may be described as formal or informal groups based on personal identity; affiliation and a sense of belonging are formed over time (Kuh, 2008).

More research is needed to explore the benefits that peer groups offer first-year university students staying in university residences. Furthermore, qualitative exploration is needed to understand students' lived experiences of participating in peer groups. Moreover, research exploring the benefits of participating in peer groups is needed.

Subsequently, this study aims to draw on qualitative data to better understand the benefits of participating in peer groups during the first-year experience.

Research aim and question

The study explored the benefits of peer support offered to first-year students who live in residences at a South African university. The study was guided by the following overarching research question: 'What are the benefits of peer support groups for first-year South African university students who live in residences?' The study also explored the following four sub-questions: (1) How have students benefited from joining the peer group? (2) Were students' experiences similar in different peer support groups? (3) How did peer groups benefit students in terms of beliefs, values, behaviours and lifestyle choices? (4) Did students perceive academic benefits from peer group support?

Methodology

Research approach and design

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore students' unique perspectives regarding the benefits of peer group support (Tong et al., 2012; Zohrabi, 2013). Furthermore, a case study design was adopted to explore students' qualitative experiences within a particular university setting (Creswell, 2014).

Study participants

This study included 27 first-year students living in two residences at a selected South African university. Participants were purposively sampled from two residences housed in separate blocks on the university campus. The focus groups were diverse, comprising students younger than 21 years of age, presented as females only (eight members), males only (seven members), and mixed gender (ten members).

Procedure and ethics approval

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Researcher Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape (Reference number 13/05/30). The UWC's Department of Student Development and Residential and Catering Services manager granted permission to the researcher to access the residences and meet with the participants. The researcher presented the study's objectives to the participants who provided informed consent. Ethical requirements such as confidentiality, respect for participants, and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to.

Data collection

As a qualitative researcher, I coordinated the focus group sessions. Each of the three focus groups comprised seven to ten participants. I directed the participants to arrange their chairs in a circle and then sit close to one another so that their voices could be audio recorded. The focus group discussions were 30 to 50 minutes in duration, and participants were given the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. The meeting was

scheduled three days in advance. The transcripts were sorted in order to answer the research questions posed by the study.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). First, I familiarised myself with the data by studying the interview transcripts. Next, initial coding was conducted. The coding was done manually by writing notes on the texts, analysing these notes, and using highlighters and coloured pens to indicate potential patterns to identify data segments. Thereafter, I organised the codes into themes. Finally, a qualitative account of the data was presented (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings and discussion

Four themes emerged following the qualitative analysis: (1) gaining a sense of belonging, (2) receiving academic support, (3) developing student leadership roles, and (4) involvement in co-curricular activities. The qualitative themes are discussed in the section below. Verbatim quotes are used to substantiate the qualitative interpretation. Thereafter the article is concluded by summarising the main ideas that emerged from the study.

Gaining a sense of belonging

This study found that gaining a sense of belonging could benefit first-year students when they join peer groups at a South African university residence. Peer group support promoted social integration and promoted a sense of belonging among these students. Furthermore, participants reported joining peer groups to feel a sense of belonging and uplifting their self-esteem. They claimed that belonging is essential to joining a peer group because it influences decisions to engage in academic and social activities. The latter is supported in the literature by scholars who described that sense of belonging is crucial to educational success for all students in higher education (Lemley, 2014; Strayhorn, 2019). Against such a backdrop, Mntuyedwa (2020) calls for universities to establish activities and programmes to address their students' needs. It is further argued that greater support to students could enhance student success (Castrogiovanni, 2002; Letseka, 2009; Mason, 2019).

Similarly, scholars highlight that a sense of belonging could be essential to establish whether students felt respected, valued, accepted, cared for, and included (Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018). Nonetheless, participation in peer-group activities has advantages and potentialities which are often under-reported in popular scholarly discourse. Louw and Louw (2014) found that peer group interaction promotes interpersonal skills, which are vital in adolescent psychosocial development. Hence, a sense of belonging is crucial to the participants because they feel accepted and valued by their peers in university residences.

The following verbatim quotes below support the qualitative interpretation:

I have developed a sense of belonging through daily interactions with my peers in the university student centre where I made many friends … By interacting with diverse students, this took away my anxiety and fear of being rejected. (Focus Group 1)

I think I got a sense of belonging. Since I am away from home and luckily for my peer group, we are in the same programme. We support each other no matter what. (Focus Group 2)

It is important to interact with our peers in residences. Since we come from different backgrounds and diverse communities, we need to know the values of different cultures and properly communicate with each other. This results in mutual respect, and it helps everybody to feel to belong to the university space. (Focus Group 3)

Receiving academic support

The data indicated that joining peer groups could further benefit first-year residence students in receiving academic support. According to the participants, this academic support consisted of assisting each other during their study meetings through advice, which helped them complete assignments and prepare for assessments. A participant in Focus Group 1 provided the following explanation: "*I joined the study group to attain excellent marks… the assistance you get when you do not understand, and there is someone next to you whom you can ask to assist. It becomes easier to study and know your work*".

In most cases, participants acknowledged that they joined academic study groups because their peers led the study groups. These participants explained that the different study groups helped them adapt more quickly to the academic demands of the university. Specifically, a participant in Focus Group 2 reported the following: "*For me, my study group or my peer group that I study with. When I am studying with them my marks get up high[er] than studying alone because I can study and ask for help if I do not understand*".

The qualitative interpretation is supported by literature that suggests students perform better academically when they experience support (Astin, 1985; York et al., 2015). Consequently, peer group support is an important mechanism universities can draw on to enhance academic performance.

Developing student leadership roles

Participants indicated that peer support groups contribute to developing student leadership roles. Specifically, participants indicated that the interactions with other leadership group members helped them develop their leadership roles, make new friends, and build their confidence in public speaking. A participant from Focus Group 3 reported the following:

I learn more about teamwork, how to work with other people, how to handle stressful situations. There were tasks we were allocated to do at some point. It was challenging because we all wanted to do the task, and we could give each other a chance. I have learned more about team building and communication. (Focus Group 3)

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The findings further indicate that participants were interested in serving on the house committee to host meetings and assist their fellow students in residence during the transition period. They attended management meetings to debate residence policy planning. Hence, peer support groups assisted students in developing

> *… leadership skills which … can play a role in a working environment in future you have to know how to deal with a certain group of people because I think it is a beneficial skill that one can have, to know how to work with a different type of people and problem-solving skills. (Focus Group 3)*

These findings align with Astin (1985) and Tinto's (1999) theoretical perspectives, which posit that students learn better when they are socially involved and engaged. Thus, student involvement and engagement are critical focus areas that should be emphasized in university settings (Gilbert et al., 2007).

Involvement in co-curricular activities

The final thematic idea that emerged following the data analysis was that involvement in co-curricular activities could be enhanced via peer group support. In this regard, participants mentioned that they joined peer groups to participate in co-curricular activities to socially integrate during orientation and throughout the year. This interpretation is supported by the following three quotes:

> *Interacting with peers from a variety of groups extends your social circle by increasing the network of students with whom you can associate and develop relationships. Having friends in one racial group can be very boring, and diversity makes the conversation interesting. (Focus Group 3)*

> *The good part is there are always things that are happening here at the university, like functions especially for first-years. You got people to talk to and stuff so like, I do not think they should have any reason to be like an introvert and not talk and be shy and I like talking you know, I got along well. (Focus Group 1)*

> *I have a religious roommate; he is a kind of influence on me to go to church on Sundays. My family is also religious, and my friends on the first floor are also religious people. I get that influence of going to church, yhaaa… (Focus Group 2)*

The qualitative interpretation presented above is consistent with Kuh (2008), who states that co-curricular programmes are widely recognised and promoted as an integral part of the student life experience. The results suggested that co-curricular activities affect joining peer groups. These findings align with Tinto's (1975) student involvement theory, which holds that students should be more involved in campus life activities to adapt quickly to the environment and become more personally developed.

Limitations

The qualitative findings should be read with specific limitations in mind. First, the study was conducted at a specific South African university. Thus, the qualitative findings reflect

the perceptions of a limited cohort of participants. Similar studies at different South African or African universities may elicit diverse qualitative narratives. Second, from the qualitative focus group interviews, it became apparent that some participants were hesitant and shy to express their perspectives.

With respect to these limitations, future research should focus on collecting data from more diverse samples from various university settings. Additionally, researchers could consider utilising in-depth individual interviews to establish a context where participants may be comfortable expressing their opinions freely. This article recommends that a great deal of information and critical skills are needed to ensure that the student affairs office makes appropriate decisions for the effective management of student behaviours. First-year students could benefit from orientation programmes that emphasize peer group interaction.

Conclusion

This study explored positive aspects experienced by first-year students at a South African university when they joined and became part of peer groups. The findings reported in this article suggest that peer groups can offer numerous benefits to first-year students. Consistent with the extant literature, this study affirmed that first-year students join various groups to fulfil unique needs related to social acceptance. Additionally, the study reported that peer groups helped first-year students adjust to university residences. Furthermore, first-year students are more likely to build a support network of peers who may help them in future through cultivating a sense of belonging.

I suggest that first-year students should be informed about the university environment, and participation in extramural activities, which could bring them in contact with social peer support groups, should be encouraged. Finally, I recommend that universities draw on peer support groups as a strategy to enhance a sense of cohesion among first-year university students.

Ethics statement

The researcher followed all ethics protocols in conducting the study.

Potential conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare as the study is based on research done for her PhD.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Harnessing student agency for easier transition and success: The role of life coaching

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ABSTRACT

Research on student support in the global North indicates possible benefits of life coaching interventions in improving students' persistence and well-being. There is emerging research on life coaching interventions and their potential benefits in the South African higher education context, but empirical evidence is scarce. We report results from a longitudinal study that investigated a life coaching intervention to support students. The objective of the intervention was to harness students' agency proactively by equipping them with skills to improve their academic and non-academic lives. Data were gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten students who had participated in the intervention. We used Archer's social realist concepts of structure and agency as our theoretical framework. The results indicate that the life coaching intervention enabled students to mediate academic and non-academic constraints. Concerning academic constraints, it helped students manage the transition from high school, including adjusting to a new workload, time management, learning to collaborate with their peers, and dealing with experiences of failure. Concerning non-academic constraints, the life coaching intervention helped students clarify their goals, increase their self-awareness, cope with negative emotions, and boosted their self-confidence and resilience.

KEYWORDS

Life coaching, student agency, student success, student support, engineering education

RÉSUMÉ

Les recherches sur le soutien aux étudiants dans les pays du Nord montrent les avantages potentiels des interventions de coaching de vie en termes d'amélioration de la persévérance et du bien-être des étudiants. Des recherches émergentes portent sur les interventions de coaching de vie et leurs avantages potentiels dans le contexte de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud, mais les preuves empiriques sont encore rares. Nous présentons les résultats d'une étude longitudinale portant sur une intervention de coaching de vie visant à soutenir les étudiants. L'objectif de l'intervention était de mobiliser de manière proactive l'agentivité des étudiants en les dotant de compétences leur permettant d'améliorer leur vie académique et non académique. Les données ont été recueillies lors d'entretiens individuels semi-structurés avec dix étudiants ayant participé à l'intervention. Nous avons utilisé les concepts réalistes

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sociaux de structure et d'agentivité d'Archer comme cadre théorique. Les résultats indiquent que l'intervention de coaching de vie a permis aux étudiants de mieux gérer les contraintes académiques et non académiques. En ce qui concerne les contraintes académiques, elle a aidé les étudiants à mieux gérer la transition du lycée vers l'université, notamment en s'adaptant à une nouvelle charge de travail, en gérant mieux leur temps, en apprenant à collaborer avec leurs pairs et en faisant face à des expériences d'échec. En ce qui concerne les contraintes non académiques, elle a aidé les étudiants à clarifier leurs objectifs, à accroître leur conscience de soi, à faire face aux émotions négatives et à renforcer leur confiance en soi et leur résilience.

MOTS-CLÉS
Coaching de vie, agentivité des étudiants, œuvres estudiantines, réussite étudiante, services étudiants, soutien aux étudiants, éducation en ingénierie.

Introduction

The expansion of higher education in South Africa has continued steadily for close to three decades since the dawn of democracy. According to the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) 's 2000 to 2016 cohort studies, enrolments for first time entrants rose from 98,095 in the year 2000 to 141,850 in 2016 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). With widening student access, higher education institutions (HEIs) struggle to complement student access with student success (Schreiber et al., 2021; van Zyl et al., 2020). According to the Department of Higher Education and Training report, although there have been some improvements in student success, the overall throughput rates of students remain low, with just over 50% of students entering higher education dropping out, contributing not only to financial wastage, but to unrealised aspirations (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019).

The high dropout rates remain problematic in the South African context, where the academic success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds continues to play a significant role both in achieving the redress and developmental agenda of the country, as well as fostering upward social mobility of graduates (Case et al., 2018; Statistics South Africa, 2017). The biggest challenge remains in the first year, and this is the level at which most student transition interventions have been explored and implemented (McConney, 2021). Many of these interventions have focused on students' transition from high school into higher education. They have contributed significantly to the maturity of the first-year experience literature in South Africa (Nyar, 2020). Some of the interventions that are currently being explored and implemented include, for example, those that focus on peer mentoring programmes (McConney, 2021). Some are exploring different academic advising models in their institutional contexts (Schoeman et al., 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; van Pletzen et al., 2021). Other studies are exploring different ways of enhancing students' well-being and harnessing student agency (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021; Terblanche et al., 2021). And finally, others have adopted a more comprehensive institutional approach using data-informed strategies to effectively provide students with academic and non-academic support in a collaborative way that enables student success (van Zyl et al., 2020). While much of the current research predominantly covers

student transitions at the entry level, Schreiber et al. (2021) call for increased "context-relevant" and "high impact" support interventions research that expands the knowledge base on student transitions into and through to the senior years in their studies. We aim to contribute to answering this call.

In this article, we report findings drawn from a qualitative study conducted four years after a group of extended curriculum programme (ECP) in chemical engineering students participated in a small group life coaching intervention at a university of technology. We investigated how the life coaching intervention had influenced students' agency as they navigated their way through university from the first to the final year of their studies for the diploma in chemical engineering. We provide a brief literature review on life coaching as an intervention in higher education institutions. We then briefly outline the conceptual framework of structure and agency (Archer, 1995, 2003) that we use to frame our findings. Next, we present the methodology that guided the study, followed by the results. We discuss key findings and limitations and conclude by providing avenues for future research.

Literature review

Life coaching

Broadly, life coaching may be defined as "a collaborative, solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and professional life of normal, nonclinical clients" (Grant, 2003, p. 254). Life coaching is a solution-focused practice rooted in positive psychology, and it explores and harnesses a client's strengths. According to Grant (2003), key parts of life coaching are the attainment of goals, personal development, increased self-reflection, and enhanced mental health in nonclinical populations. Extending this definition to a nonclinical student population, academic coaching entails collaboration between a student life coach, often referred to as an academic coach, and a student, and it focuses on the clarification of the student's academic, personal and professional goals and a guided process of attaining them (Capstick et al., 2019). For students, the primary outcome of this collaboration, as Capstick et al. (2019) indicate, is the completion of an academic qualification.

Apart from helping students clarify their goals, the coach's role includes guiding students to overcome internal and external barriers to their success, advising, keeping a student accountable and helping them learn how to self-reflect and self-regulate their behaviour. For example, obstacles that often hinder students' academic success include poor time management, fear of failure, poor stress management and burnout, and procrastination (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021). The student life coach employs various techniques to assist students in overcoming these challenges. Despite the possible benefits that life coaching interventions may bring to the context of higher education, there is a general lack of empirical research on student life coaching interventions (Capstick et al., 2019; Howlett et al., 2021; Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018). Most interestingly, much of the written literature on student life coaching in higher education is based

on studies from the United States and is mainly based on quantitative studies. We will provide a brief review of some of these studies next.

Recent studies of student life coaching in higher education

In their recent study that explored the effects of academic coaching on fostering college students' development of self-regulated learning skills, Howlett et al. (2021) used a randomised controlled trial design on three groups of students who had not been exposed to academic coaching. They found that the life coaching intervention increased metacognition in the treatment groups, and this was found to be the case for both the students coached face-to-face and those coached online. The study by Capstick et al. (2019), which investigated the use of life coaching to support "at-risk" undergraduate students, found that students who had been coached were more likely to be retained and to proceed to other semesters than students who had not been coached. In another study that focused on the use of weekly life coaching to support students with disabilities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programmes at three institutions, Bellman et al. (2015) found that life coaching had improved students' motivation to succeed and improved their self-confidence. Furthermore, it had increased skills such as time management, stress management, prioritisation, and note-taking. To contribute to the already noted benefits of life coaching, the study by Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) found that life coaching contributes to student's satisfaction with the choice of an area of study, helps them become aware of and be in alignment with their values and their connection to their life purposes. A study by McGill et al. (2018) argued for the use of life coaching as a way of supporting marginalized (in this case, students of colour) students' academic journeys because it "improves the student's sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and ultimately, their success." (p. 23). Lastly, and in the context of higher education in South Africa, a study by Mogashana and Basitere (2021) found that life coaching helped students not to drop out of their studies, deal better with experiences of failure and improved their academic performance.

The reviewed studies suggest that the use of life coaching in student populations may improve metacognition, well-being, motivation to succeed, self-confidence and other skills that students need to succeed academically and in life and reduce the chances of dropping out. Although the literature reviewed is limited due to a lack of empirical studies in the field, what was evident, at least at the time of the review, was that apart from one study, no other recorded empirical studies investigated students' experiences of the use of life coaching interventions in higher education in South Africa. It is this gap in local literature and the gap in the qualitative studies literature globally that this study aims to contribute. Next, we present the conceptual framework that guided our research.

Structure and agency: The interplay between potential structural and cultural constraints and enablements and students' personal projects

An investigation into how the life coaching intervention within a programme at a university may have influenced students necessitates an examination of the interaction

between the properties of social structure and human agency. We employ some concepts from the social realist theory, structure, culture and agency, the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995, 2003). Key to Archer (1995)'s morphogenetic approach is the understanding that structure and agency are distinct strata of reality with distinct properties that are irreducible to one another. These properties *emerge* from previous interactions in which structure and agency shape future outcomes. The morphogenetic approach allows a temporary separation between the respective emergent properties of structure, culture and agency to examine the interplay between them. According to Archer (2003), examining structure (social relations that include positions, roles, and material resources), culture (ideas and propositions) and agency (including reflexivity, intentionality, and deliberations) entails examining the interplay between their respective emergent properties and determining how each has changed over time. The study from which data presented in this article were derived traced how students' sense of agency was influenced by a life coaching intervention, a part of the social structure and culture they encountered upon commencing their undergraduate studies in chemical engineering.

The process of tracing how agency was influenced may be described as follows: structural and cultural emergent properties of the context in which students encountered predate them and remain dormant until they are activated by the agents, both individual and as a collective, in search of their own ends (Archer, 1995). According to (Archer, 2003), human beings have things they care about the most; Archer refers to these as their "ultimate concerns". Human beings then devise certain courses of action to achieve their ultimate concerns, which are what Archer (2003) calls "projects". While human beings are in the process of pursuing their projects, they encounter and activate the emergent properties of structure and culture that then act as either "constraints" (or challenges, obstacles, impingements) or "enablements" (or empowerment, assistance). These potential constraints and enablements remain dormant and may remain unexercised until agents' pursuit of personal projects activate them.

Archer (2003) posits "reflexivity" as the most important personal emergent property that allows human beings to mediate the structural and cultural emergent properties they encounter while pursuing their projects. As human beings, our ability to hold internal conversations, consider ourselves in relation to external circumstances, and choose to act in particular ways makes us active agents. Our power to hold internal conversations individually (through our reflexive deliberations) or to devise collective action through corporate agency, is how agency is transformed and reshaped in relation to the conditioning influences of structure and culture. Considering the concepts outlined above, we asked the following theoretical research question: "How has having participated in the life coaching programme influenced students' agency?" Therefore, this article aims to report the findings of our qualitative investigation into the role of a small group life coaching intervention in harnessing students' agency over time. The following section outlines our methodology in answering the stated research question.

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Methodology

We followed a case study methodology as it enabled us to explore "how" life coaching influenced the participants within the context of an ECP in chemical engineering, our unit of analysis, over four years (Yin, 2009). The strength of a case study is that it allows us to do an in-depth investigation within a particular context; however, it has often been criticised for poor transferability to other contexts. We intend to provide all the necessary detail to facilitate the application of the insights drawn from this case study in other contexts.

Research context

The study was conducted with students who had been part of the ECP in chemical engineering at a university of technology. During their first year in 2018, the ECP implemented a pilot life coaching intervention to support its students with psychosocial issues that often affected their academic performance. The life coaching intervention occurred on weekends. Each participant was invited, together with five to seven others, to one entire Saturday and Sunday face-to-face group life coaching programme. The selection criteria included their academic performance in their first class tests and information that students provided in the background information questionnaire that they had completed at the start of the year. The weekend programme was followed by ongoing support from the coach via WhatsApp messaging social media. This article's findings reveal how the life coaching intervention influenced the lives and academic journeys of students whose participation began four years ago. At the time of collecting data for this article, only 10 of the 36 students who had participated in the life coaching programme and were still registered at the university (regardless of whether they were in their final year or not) agreed to participate in our follow-up investigation. All ten are in the final year of their studies. Table 1 below provides important information about each of the 10 participants. Participant data were anonymised using pseudonyms.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

Name	Gender	First time at a university?	Was studying chemical engineering in the ECP their first choice?
Boniswa	Female	No	Yes. She had dropped out of pharmacy at another university.
Ayabonga	Male	No	Yes. He had dropped out of mechanical engineering at another university.
Tebello	Male	Yes	No. Mechanical engineering was his first choice. He had not met the minimum admission requirements.
Thabisa	Female	Yes	Yes.
Benny	Male	Yes	Yes.
Nkele	Female	Yes	Yes. The decision to study at this university was financial.

Name	Gender	First time at a university?	Was studying chemical engineering in the ECP their first choice?
Bulelwa	Female	Yes	Yes. Influenced by chemical engineers she worked with at a pharmaceutical company after completing grade 12.
Siya	Female	Yes	Yes.
Mpumi	Female	No	Yes. She had dropped out of a science degree at a nearby university.
Nosipho	Female	Yes	Yes. She was not aware of other universities offering chemical engineering.

Data gathering and analysis

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with each of the 10 participants. These interviews were conducted by the third author, who had not been directly involved with either the teaching or the coaching of the participants. Participant students completed an informed consent form. The interviews were conducted through audio-recorded Microsoft Teams sessions and were later transcribed and saved using students' pseudonyms. Important to the interview schedule was the breakdown of the overall question "How has having participated in the life coaching influenced your undergraduate journey?" into sub-questions that covered a range of academic and non-academic "challenges" and "the solutions". The breaking down of interview questions in this way was so that data could be analysed using content analysis guided by Archer's (1995) "constraints" and "enablements" in the development and harnessing of human agency.

Transferability and credibility

A case study design was employed. A case study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of a case (Yin, 2009), and establishing trustworthiness has its limitations, such as the non-generalisation of the findings. Although this study's findings are not transferable to ECPs in other engineering departments across institutions with similar contexts, we hope that insights from this study can inform practice in these institutions. On the aspect of credibility, the interview transcripts were read in detail by each author, and the understanding and interpretation of each participant's narrative were discussed in detail. We hope more programmes will explore our efforts in their own contexts.

Ethical clearance and researcher positioning

This article forms part of a more extensive pilot study of which the faculty of engineering at the university where this study took place provided ethical clearance. It is worth noting that the first and second authors were involved as the students' life coach and mathematics lecturer, respectively, during the year in which the intervention was implemented. However, the potential negative impact of their involvement was mitigated by interviews conducted by the third author, who had not interacted with the participants in the capacities of either lecturer or life coach.

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Results

The life coaching intervention aimed to equip students with skills that might harness their agency and improve their ability to overcome academic and non-academic constraints as they navigated their way through their studies. To establish how having participated in the life coaching intervention had influenced students, the results are presented using the two categories that emerged from data analysis. We start by presenting the academic constraints students experienced in the first and subsequent years and how what they learned during life coaching enabled them to mediate these. We then present the non-academic constraints and how students mediated them over the years of undergraduate studies.

Academic constraints and how life coaching enabled students to mediate them

All ten participants reported having experienced academic constraints at the start of their chemical engineering studies. The most notable constraint that affected them academically was managing the transition from high school or another university. For example, Boniswa, having been at another nearby university, and with her nature as "not being social", found it difficult to adjust and seek help from other students when she struggled to use the digital systems at the university. But she indicated that having participated in the life coaching programme helped her to be more social:

> *I want to believe that now I am a social person. I can be able to communicate with other people without being afraid of what other people are going to think. I am now able to express myself better. (Boniswa's interview)*

The second constraint that students experienced in transitioning entailed managing increased workload, pacing in courses, difficulty in understanding some lecturers and time management. Thabisa shared her experience of struggling with time management and how coaching helped her resolve it:

> *It[the challenge] was more of not studying on time and not doing time management, not having a good timetable to keep up on my schoolwork … When we were being coached, I think I had to come up with a nice plan to keep up with my academics. (Thabisa's interview)*

Knowing how to manage time was not only important for students in their first year but became an enablement for some in managing the transition to remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Mpumi shared her challenges during with remote learning, which started during her third year, and how the skills to manage her time and communicate with classmates she had learned during coaching helped her:

> *I was able to manage time, whenever I didn't have data to attend class, I had to manage my time and make a timetable to say ok this time is for catch up and I had to ask people to help me with what was done in class … It[coaching] really helped me with time management and communication. (Mpumi's interview)*

Some students admitted that they found it challenging to collaborate with other students at first, making it difficult to find help with the modules. At first they tried to resolve their academic challenges on their own, but life coaching taught them the value of getting support from their peers. Benny related how he overcame this constraint:

> *I used to be a selfish person and a person who was always on my own, a person who believes that he can do everything by himself but through life coaching I developed a lot of things: how to share, how to assist other people, how to even ask some help from other people because I'd say I used to have pride and this pride had so much negative impact on my life – even academically. (Benny's interview)*

Furthermore, some students indicated that the most challenging part of managing their transition to university was learning how to deal with failure and build resilience. Tebello shared his experience:

> *Academically it was dealing with failure … What I've learned is that most of the circumstances or situations I found myself in I can take myself out of them and the influence that I had on my academics is that whatever challenges that I came across, maybe let's say for example a failure, I knew that I could always bounce back from a failure because it is part of that process I was in. So it [coaching] gave me that skill of resilience I'd say. (Tebello's interview)*

Apart from constraints that students experienced that directly impacted their academics, there were other psychosocial constraints that life coaching seems to have helped them navigate. They are presented next.

Non-academic constraints and how life coaching enabled students to mediate them

As human beings making their way through life, some students are often unclear about their goals. The results indicated that for some, life coaching helped them clarify the direction their lives were taking and set goals for their lives. Thabisa, for example, having learned about goal-setting during life coaching indicated that she wanted to start an NGO in her community after her studies. She found that being clear about her goal helped her find strength during a challenging time in her second year of study when she was struggling with one of her modules:

> *That time [in second year] I did talk with my coach on WhatsApp that I was having difficulty with the module and I think it did help me overcome the challenge that I was having and I pulled myself and still continued because I knew that at the end of the day I have a goal that I need to achieve … So I think my next goals and achievements, or the foundation of it, really came from the coaching because at first I didn't know what it is that I want to do when I get to my third year but now I have a picture of what I would want to do. (Thabisa's interview)*

In another example, Boniswa indicated that coaching enabled her to focus and prioritise things that matter to her:

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> *I was able to prioritise the things that are important to me. I was able to do research about my academics to make sure that I pass. I was able to plan ahead when studying and I was able to do that through coaching. (Boniswa's interview)*

The results also indicate that life coaching may have enabled some students to improve their self-awareness and resilience. Ayabonga, for example, described his experience as follows:

> *We were given the skill of self-awareness. The coach always reminded us that we can always achieve everything that we put our minds to … Another skill would be problem-solving and decision-making. She [the coach] had a positive impact in the way I think and the way I present myself and also the way that I judge situations. (Ayabonga's interview)*

The self-awareness and the ability to reflect upon their circumstances and make decisions about possible actions helped Ayabonga during a very challenging time in when he was confronted by his brother's untimely death.

> *You don't know when death is going to hit your loved one. I was so numb about it but I managed to come back to my senses. I told the coach about it and from that moment she was there for me ... Had she not been there, I mean I was considering taking a gap year or to just stop and deregister or finish the semester and come back the other year. (Ayabonga's interview)*

Siya also lost a sibling, her younger brother, at the end of her first year. She indicated that the experience of grief threatened to affect her second year, but that she had learned a lot about herself and her emotions and how to express them during coaching and this helped her begin to process her grief. She said that although she did not perform as well in her second year as she did in her first year, she was grateful that her support helped her complete her courses that year.

As with Ayabonga and Siya, other students also learned how to understand and deal with negative experiences and emotions. For example, Nkele indicated that she had undergone parental separation back home during her first year. She had been robbed on campus while walking from the library, an experience she found traumatic that year. Nkele reported that, immediately after the robbery, she did not have anyone to talk to but that having access to and contacting the life coach on WhatsApp helped her to "calm down". Apart from overcoming this unfortunate incident, Nkele indicated that life coaching contributed to her understanding of her emotions:

> *Dealing with my negative emotions and taking care of my mental health. I think that's what I got to learn the most about through life coaching. I believe that if I am ok emotionally and psychologically, then I can be able to focus on my academics … So having been made aware of how I can face my emotions and fulfil myself as a whole made it easier for me to balance my studies because you definitely cannot focus on your studies if you as a person as a whole are not doing ok. (Nkele's interview)*

Additionally, the life coaching intervention enabled students to develop self-confidence as all of them mentioned some aspects of their confidence had improved. Bulelwa, for instance, said that when she arrived at university, after having worked at a pharmaceutical company immediately after matriculation, she was not confident that she would succeed primarily because she had struggled with mathematics in high school. Bulelwa had struggled to make friends as she did not have the confidence to do so, but coaching had helped her with it:

> *I am one person who doesn't know how to ask for help. I don't know how to reach out to people. So it[coaching] helped me because I am able now to ask for help if I am struggling with something. I believe in myself more than anything because I had zero confidence in myself, especially in my academics, but now these past few years because of that session and because of the things we were taught there, the things that [the coach] taught us, I am in a place where I am confident. That I can do anything if I put my mind in whatever I want to do – I can do anything. As long as I am willing to put in the work and the effort and know when to ask for help. (Bulelwa's interview)*

Importantly, life coaching seemed to have enabled all the participants to cope better during the remote learning period and persistent lockdowns resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether it was Nkele, who had no space dedicated to study at home, as she shared a room with her siblings, and public libraries were then closed, or Benny, whose fears about the possible death of his family members led to a temporary loss of motivation to study, or Bulelwa, who had to deal with the challenging times of extreme isolation and loneliness and having to live with and face herself daily. Coaching had enabled them with the tools and skills that they used to navigate this potentially constraining period. It was under these unprecedented and unpredictable conditions that they drew on the skills that they gained during life coaching, demonstrating their ability to persist despite the odds.

Discussion

Higher education institutions in South Africa continue to explore academic and non-academic interventions that support students' transitions and promote student success. Our aim in this study was to investigate the use of one such intervention.

The positioning of students within the ECP when they arrived at the university exposed them to the influences of both structure and culture, and their associated emergent properties. The emergent properties of structure and culture, when activated by students seeking to pursue their personal projects of attaining a qualification, provided students with potential constraints (challenges) and enablements throughout their undergraduate studies. To mediate the potential constraints of structure and culture, students exercised their agency by holding reflexive deliberations and acting collectively to provide each other support. Our aim, therefore, was to investigate how having participated in the life coaching intervention during their first years had influenced students' agency during the transition from school and other universities and through to the final year of their studies in chemical engineering.

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The results indicate that students encountered various academic and non-academic constraints during their four-year educational journeys, and that having participated in the life coaching intervention had acted as an enablement or had harnessed their agency successfully by providing them with the skills to mediate the constraints. Concerning academic constraints, the findings indicate that, first, in managing the transition from high school to university, students had to adjust to the new environment and increased workload. We found that having participated in the life coaching enabled them to learn how to manage their time effectively, process their experiences of failure, and collaborate better with their peers. These findings align with the findings by Mogashana and Basitere (2021), who found that life coaching had empowered students' agency with skills such as time management, dealing with failure, collaborating with peers and these skills helped them to mediate the potentially constraining influences of structure at the university during their first year. However, where the present study differs is in that the students drew on these skills to overcome constraints not just in their first year, but that the life coaching intervention had a long-term influence throughout their undergraduate studies. Considering that these were students who had entered the university through the ECP and had therefore not met the minimum requirements for enrolment in the mainstream programme, the fact that they were now in their final semester of the final year in minimum time indicates their strong agency to persist and succeed. The strong commitment to persistence resonates with the findings of the studies by Capstick et al. (2019), who found that life coaching enhances the chances of retaining "at-risk" students and reduces the chances of dropping out. We also found, as with Bellman et al. (2015)'s study which showed that students who had been coached had better time management and stress management skills to succeed in STEM programmes, that the life coaching intervention had equipped the participants with the skills to manage their time and stress successfully and independently. This finding indicates that participants' agency may be harnessed to navigate potential structure and culture constraints better.

Concerning non-academic constraints, we found that the intervention influenced students' agency by enabling them to be clearer about their future goals and aspirations. Life coaching improved the students' self-confidence in their abilities to achieve their goals. Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) report similar findings about students' satisfaction with their choices of study and their connection to students' life purposes; students were motivated to succeed and were looking forward, with confidence, to the next chapters of their lives once they had completed their studies. Moreover, results showed students' increased agency in that they had a greater sense of self-awareness and the ability to handle negative emotions effectively, which is paramount to students' well-being, and, ultimately, their success (McGill et al., 2018). The current study made two more significant findings. First, the results indicate the life coaching intervention has prolonged benefits that continue beyond the year of intervention. Although the participants were coached in the first year, the intervention results suggest that this "enablement" continued to be invaluable to them throughout their studies. Second, the findings showed that life coaching had harnessed students' agency to cope with their studies and lives during one of the most stressful periods of this generation – the

Covid-19 pandemic. The results have shown that students had to overcome various constraints, including learning online and dealing with isolation during hard lockdowns. They had the agency to reach out to one another, collaborate through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and encourage each other to persist. These students were able to exercise their agency, both individually and collectively, to show resilience and dedication to their personal projects, something that they reported had been influenced by, among other things, their participation in the life coaching intervention in their first year. As the results indicated, all the positive influences on students' agency were experienced during and beyond the year of the life coaching intervention.

We argue, therefore, that the use of a life coaching intervention in supporting students may be invaluable and, based on the findings of this study, it could be one of the "high impact" interventions that Schreiber et al. (2021) call for.

Conclusion

This article reports findings derived from a qualitative study that investigated how having participated in a life coaching intervention in the first year at a university had influenced students' agency. Overall, the results indicated that the life coaching intervention harnessed students' agency, which enabled them to overcome potentially constraining academic challenges such as transitioning from high school, adjusting to increased workload, time management, dealing with failure and learning to collaborate with their peers. Concerning non-academic challenges, the results revealed life coaching harnessed students' agency by empowering them to clarify their goals, increased their self-awareness, helped them deal with their negative emotions effectively, improved their self-confidence, and enabled them to be more resilient in dealing with the challenges they faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings highlighted the importance of the life coaching intervention for students, not only as a potentially effective support intervention at the first-year level but as an intervention with the potential of supporting them throughout their undergraduate studies and on life issues beyond their studies.

This article contributes to the literature exploring student transitions in the South African higher education context and to the scant empirical literature globally concerning the use of life coaching for supporting students in higher education. The limitation of data presented herein is that, although there was a significant number of students from the original cohort, some a year or two behind, only those who had reached the final year chose to participate in the study. This limits our findings, as we do not have views of students who repeated some levels of study. We recommend a study including both students who repeated and those who had not repeated classes for richer data on the impact of the life coaching intervention. We further recommend research into the use of life coaching as a holistic student transition support intervention in different university contexts. Inter-institutional collaborative study within similar contexts and intra-institution case studies within different faculties and departments may provide far-reaching understandings of the possible impact that life coaching interventions may have in reducing dropout rates and improving student experiences and success in higher education.

Ethics statement

All ethics protocols were observed by the authors. Ethical clearance was provided by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social learning and integration factors affecting first-year medical students: Views of remedial programme students who failed their first year

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ABSTRACT

Medical students' transition from high school to university can lead to academic and social challenges, disconnection from university life, and possible drop out. Hence, some medical education institutions use remediation programmes to address these transition challenges. This study used a social learning and integration theory to identify factors that affect the social learning and integration of first-year medical students who had completed a six-month remediation programme. A nominal group technique involving 15 participants was used to collect data. Results revealed under-preparedness, self-management, alienation, confidence, and academic advice as the social learning and integration factors that can affect transition. Self-awareness and self-management were identified as complementary skills to address these factors and promote successful transition. In conclusion, students can make valuable contributions to address social learning and integration factors and enhance successful transition. Moreover, universities must also consider designing programmes that will promote successful transition of especially undergraduate medical students.

KEYWORDS

First-year medical students, medical education, remedial programmes, social integration, social learning, student affairs, transition

RÉSUMÉ

La transition des étudiants en médecine du lycée à l'université peut entraîner des défis académiques et sociaux, une certaine déconnexion par rapport à la vie universitaire et éventuellement un abandon. C›est pourquoi certains établissements d›enseignement médical utilisent des programmes de remédiation pour aborder ces défis de transition. Cette étude a utilisé une théorie d›apprentissage social et d›intégration pour identifier les facteurs qui affectent l›apprentissage social et l›intégration des étudiants de première année en médecine ayant suivi un programme de remédiation de six mois. Une technique de groupe nominal impliquant 15 participants a été utilisée pour recueillir des données. Les résultats ont révélé que la préparation insuffisante, l'autogestion, l'aliénation, la confiance et les conseils académiques sont des facteurs

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d'apprentissage social et d'intégration pouvant affecter la transition. La prise de conscience de soi et l'autogestion ont été identifiées comme des compétences complémentaires pour aborder ces facteurs et favoriser une transition réussie. En conclusion, les étudiants peuvent apporter des contributions précieuses pour aborder les facteurs d'apprentissage social et d'intégration et favoriser une transition réussie. En outre, les universités doivent également envisager de concevoir des programmes visant à promouvoir une transition réussie, en particulier pour les étudiants de premier cycle en médecine.

MOTS-CLÉS
Apprentissage social, éducation médicale, étudiants de première année en médecine, intégration sociale, œuvres estudiantines, programmes de remédiation, services étudiants, transition

Introduction

Students who enter the university environment for the first time often experience anxiety, confusion, fear and helplessness (Bojuwoye, 2002; Pandey et al., 2021; Yardley et al., 2018). Transition from high school to university is difficult and many first-year students feel isolated and uncertain (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). A number of factors in the new educational environment may be responsible for these feelings, including leaving home for the first time, managing one's own finances, making new friends and assuming greater responsibility for oneself (Bojuwoye, 2002).

Universities should provide students with nurturing educational and social environments that focus on developing principles of caring, professional attitudes and healthy interpersonal relationships (McLean & Gibbs, 2009). Social integration, as theorised by Tinto (1975), requires the establishment of new social networks and friendships, and contact with academic staff members to ensure successful transition. When students are connected to the academic and social life of the institution, they are more likely to remain enrolled at an institution (McLean & Gibbs, 2009).

Major transitions during university study were reported to occur in specific areas such as knowledge, understanding and skills application, development of autonomy, changes in approaches to learning, social integration and students' self-concept (Whittle, 2018). Experiences resulting from multiple transitions, such as transitioning into medical education directly after high school, then into the remedial programme and later back to the main programme to repeat the year, may affect student's social integration into the university, academic success and ultimately may influence the decision to remain at university (Bojuwoye, 2002; Kebaetse et al., 2018; Tinto, 1975; Whittle, 2018). Moreover, social learning may also be affected by these experiences in the new educational environment, consequently limiting students' learning from each other through observation, imitating and modelling, because of academic struggles (Bandura, 1969). For the purpose of the study reported in this article, the social integration theory (Tinto, 1975) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1969) were combined in a novel social learning and integration theory to identify factors that affect the social learning and integration of first-year medical students who participate in a remediation programme. This novel *social learning and integration theory* is defined as interaction, through

institutional experiences, that can influence how individuals learn from each other through observation, imitation, modelling and persistence.

This study aimed to identify factors that affected the social learning and integration of undergraduate medical students who had failed the first year of study.

Context

The acceptance of first-year students into the medical programme at the University of the Free State (UFS) is based on academic (National Senior Certificate and National Benchmark Test results) and non-academic (including leadership, sport and cultural activities) achievements (University of the Free State, 2022). Upon admission into the medical programme, the Division Student Learning and Development (DSLD) provides students with academic, social and psychological support in order to enhance academic success. In addition, students do a credit-bearing module that facilitates the acquisition of generic skills and graduate attributes, such as problem solving, critical thinking, time management, study methods, test and examination techniques, professional and ethical behaviour, and writing and oral communications skills (UFS, 2022). Medical programme management monitors students' academic progress, and students identified as at-risk academically (those who achieve below 50% in assessments during their first semester of study) are advised to seek support from the DSLD.

Despite these attempts, not all first-year students accepted into the UFS undergraduate medical programme successfully complete the first academic year (Jama, 2016; Kridiotis & Swart, 2017). Students who qualify by only failing two of the six modules are then admitted into a six-month learning development programme (LDP), a remediation programme offered in the second semester of the first year. The LDP offers learning and teaching activities in a smaller group setting focusing on reinforcing students' generic skills and graduate attributes and promotes self-regulation and self-reflection. Modules in the LDP include medical terminology, language skills, biophysics, basic human anatomy and physiology, integrated anatomy and physiology and lifelong learning skills (UFS, 2022). Students who successfully complete the LDP may repeat the first year of the medical programme.

Methods

The nominal group technique (NGT) was used in this study to obtain relevant and reliable qualitative information from a group of participants in a focus group setting (Harvey & Holmes, 2012; Vander Laenen, 2015). The main feature of the NGT is structured face-to-face group discussions. Ideas emerging from the discussion are prioritised, thereby enabling a clear outcome to be reached, which provides a sense of achievement for participants (McMillan et al., 2016; Vander Laenen, 2015). By using this formal consensus development method, equal participation is facilitated and all opinions are allowed and considered respectfully. The influence of dominant personalities and one particular viewpoint is minimised and a variety of ideas are prioritised to highlight the most pressing issues (McMillan et al., 2014). The technique used in this study capitalised on the experiences of medical students who had not completed the first semester of

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study successfully, and had subsequently completed the LDP, with a view to identifying areas of consensus and establishing priorities for change (Harvey & Holmes, 2012).

Nominal groups can involve between two and 14 participants. However, a maximum of seven is recommended per group (McMillan et al., 2016). For this study, all registered undergraduate medical students who had entered the medical programme directly from high school and had failed their first semester, successfully completed the LDP in the second semester and were allowed to repeat the first year, were recruited to participate in the NGT.

Fifteen registered medical students (seven Black males, six Black females, one male of mixed ancestry and one White male, with a mean age of 20 years) who fulfilled the inclusion criteria participated in the NGT. No limitations were set on gender, ethnicity, home language, living conditions, year of birth and relationship status (Engelbrecht et al., 2020). Two questions were put to participants prior to the meeting (McMillan et al., 2016). The technique comprised four key stages. Stage 1 commenced with the participants being introduced to the topic and invited to engage in a silent generation of ideas for approximately 5–10 minutes. Stage 2 required each participant to share one of their ideas with the rest of the group in a round-robin format. Ideas might be elucidated at this stage to enable their listing, although no discussion was to take place at this point. Each of the ideas were recorded and displayed by a facilitator on a flip chart, until all ideas had been listed. In Stage 3, ideas were discussed for the purpose of clarification, categorisation and removal of duplicates. Finally, Stage 4 involved the participants voting on and ranking the ideas listed by the group (Cunningham, 2017; Mullen et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2016).

Two nominal group meetings were carried out simultaneously. Participants were split into two groups of seven and eight participants, respectively. The division into two groups required further comparative analysis, as each group generated a different list of items. A third nominal group meeting including all fifteen participants was scheduled to develop a set of prioritised items derived from each of the two separate group meetings. All participants could vote on both sets of the top five ranked statements derived from the initial group meetings (Vander Laenen, 2015).

The nominal group meetings were facilitated using a guide containing the following open-ended questions:

1. What affected your social learning and social integration during your first year of medical studies in the faculty of health science at the University of the Free State?
2. Kindly determine what set of social learning and social integration skills you used or did not use to help you adapt during the transition process from high school to medical education.

The NGT yields data that can be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In this study, analysis was performed as described by Van Breda (2005) and McMillan (2014). The quantitative data were analysed first. Immediately after the nominal group meetings, an overview of the ideas of each group was compiled, including the ideas with the highest scores and the number of participants who scored a specific idea.

The researcher collected qualitative data from the discussions of statements through text data transcription captured on the flip charts and whiteboards used to record the participants' feedback.

Approval for the study was obtained from the Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSREC; ethics approval reference number HSREC-UFS-HSD2018/1300/2711) of the UFS.

Results

The scores for each statement were obtained according to how participants voted for a statement by assigning points from 5 to 1 (from most to least important) to a selection of five of the listed ideas. The statement with the highest score was regarded as the most important one, with the others ranked according to the number of points allocated.

Table 1 summarises the top five ranked statements indicating factors that affected students' social learning and integration. Five themes were identified during the analysis of the data in response to Question 1.

Table 1: Top five ranked and themed statements pertaining to Question 1: What affected your social learning and social integration during your first year of medical studies in the Faculty of Health Science at the University of the Free State?

Ranking	Theme	Statement	Score
1	Under-preparedness	Learning skills – the time is important and limited, navigating the textbooks and workloads. High school spoon-fed, now suddenly you must take initiative.	39
2	Self-management	Studying long hours ('imitating') using stimulants like other students but not grasping the work.	25
3	Alienation	Feeling like being the only one having problems.	22
4	Confidence	First exposure/poor adaptation – self-sustaining lifestyle. Overwhelmed by all new things on campus, in the course, people, etc.	18
5	Academic advice	Not knowing whose advice to use/too many different resources (books/slides/notes)	16

Table 2 represents the top five ranked statements indicating social learning and integration skills that the students used or did not use to adapt as they transitioned from high school to university education. Two common themes (self-awareness and self-management) emerged from the analysis of the data in response to Question 2 of the study.

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Table 2: Top five themed and ranked statements pertaining to Question 2: Kindly determine what set of social learning and social integration skills you used or did not use to help you adapt during the transition process from high school to medical education.

Ranking	Theme	Statement	Score
1	Self-awareness	Ability to identify own study skills.	37
2	Self-management	Inability to self-manage/not able to say 'no'.	34
3	Self-awareness	Coping mechanisms (unhealthy)/support system that understands your struggle/spiritual.	25
4	Self-awareness	Not recognising the need for help/ too independent.	21
5	Self-awareness	Preparing for class.	20

Discussion

Hayes et al. (2015) assert that successful transition into higher education comprises two pillars: first, changes of the personal context, and second, transitions related to institutional settings. Personal context factors include language barriers, goal aspirations and self-efficacy. Meanwhile, the institutional setting entails students' expectations, social issues and separation from past life experiences. The social learning and integration theory allowed the researcher to address both these pillars concurrently. Hence, of the top five ranked statements derived from the participants, 80% of the challenges experienced during transition referred to personal context changes, rather than institutional context changes. Students' goals, aspirations and self-efficacy appeared to have been the prominent personal context factors highlighted among the participants, which also contribute to determining the success of the transition from high school to university (Bolt & Graber, 2010).

Moreover, 80% of the ranked and themed statements highlighted factors related to social and not academic integration. This finding confirms Tinto's (1975) statement regarding students dropping out due to insufficient integration into the social life of the institution. Note that dropping out in the context of this study refers to dropping out of the main programme to enrol into the remedial LDP, and not necessarily dropping out of the medical programme. Pritchard and Wilson (2003) point out that the major causes of attrition of first-year students involve emotional rather than academic factors, and that emotionally and socially healthy students have a greater chance of succeeding in an education environment.

In this study, all five themes identified, as summarised in Table 1, underlined negative social learning and integration factors that were experienced by medical students during the first year of medical studies. According to social learning and integration theory (as described by Tlalajoe, 2021) that refers to the interaction through institutional experiences, influencing how medical students learn from each other through observation, imitation, modelling and persistence. Students who could not interact with each other due to alienation did not experience the institution positively

because they lacked the confidence to engage in campus activities. They could not learn from each other through observation, imitation or modelling and could not persist because of poor self-management, alienation and lack of confidence to interact with peers, and did not know where to get academic advice (Tlalajoe, 2021).

Under-preparedness was ranked the highest among factors influencing medical students' success in the first year of study. This finding highlights that first-year medical students who entered medical school directly from high school could lack the skill set and emotional tools required to adapt in their new education environment, as asserted by Swaminathan et al. (2015) and Kridiotis and Swart (2017). The participants in this study confirmed being underprepared for university life and academia, which was also observed by Hamid and Singaram (2016). The participants emphasized rapid adjustments required of them and indicated that at school they had been spoon-fed. On the contrary, in the new educational environment, they had to take initiative and master learning skills. When students transition from school to university, they expect teaching methods to be comparable to those applied in high school and are not prepared for a different mode of teaching (Bolt & Graber 2010; Hennis, 2014). Furthermore, Bolt and Graber (2010) confirm that students who were successful at high school but lack the skill of learning independently, do not flourish in the university setting, or do not perform as well as they did in the high school environment (Bolt & Graber, 2010).

The theme ranked second in importance was self-management. The participants found themselves imitating others by using stimulants to study for long hours. Regardless, they could not grasp the content. Although imitating others is encouraged according to the social learning and integrated theory (Tlalajoe, 2021), when students imitated misguided behaviour, it did not yield positive outcomes. Better understanding of oneself leads to improved self-management. Imitating from a distance does not necessarily give a true representation of the actual situation. Hennis (2014) asserted that student's success would depend on their autonomy to acquire new study habits, or to adjust their study skills to suit the demanding semester model in a less intimidating setting.

Alienation was ranked third of five themes. Poor self-management may lead to self-pity, alienation and students believing they are the only ones with general and academic problems. Such alienation may be typical of students who experience problems that they are incapable of solving and do not receive help from other students, leading to both homesickness and loneliness (Othman et al., 2012).

Confidence was ranked fourth, described as students experiencing feelings of lacking confidence on first exposure to the new educational environment and surroundings, including the city, campus, faculty and the medical programme. They experienced the new education environment as overwhelming and reported struggling to develop an independent lifestyle. Participants reported on their institutional experiences as everyday activities with extreme academic demands, leaving them with little or no time for social activities (McLean & Gibbs, 2010). Similarly, Al-Sowygh (2013) reports students feeling overwhelmed and experiencing stress because of the demands of the medical education environment, and perfectionism, fuelled by past academic achievements

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and current high academic demands. This stress leads to students failing to find the information needed for decision-making and early adjustment to the new educational environment of the university, which later poses threats to students which could lead to poor academic progress (Bojuwoye, 2002). Consequently, it is understandable how an individual who struggles with a lack of confidence can battle with self-doubt or timorousness. Hence, the development of behaviours such as not being aware of the requirements of the new educational environment, along with the imitation of study approaches from other learners, or even the paralysing fear of speaking up when facing challenges and wallowing in self-pity.

The final (fifth ranked) theme was academic advice. Students shared their frustrations and confusion about receiving advice from a large variety of academic resources. For example, they reported not knowing who to listen to regarding navigating their academic material, as too many different resources were available. The acquisition of knowledge, skills and professional behaviours and attitudes required of healthcare professionals entails participating in a curriculum of lectures, simulations, supervised practice, mentoring, hands-on experience, and the ability to employ academic resources successfully (Eva et al., 2015). Some aspects of the training process have unintended negative consequences for medical students' physical and emotional health (Asani et al. 2016; Dagistani et al., 2016; Kaufman et al., 2009; Shankar et al., 2014). The negative emotions expressed by the participants serve as an example of some aspects with unintended negative consequences. Holland (2016) reports that despite support systems and professional help being available, students who are struggling and are most in need of assistance, often fail to seek it.

In addition to identifying factors that affected students' social learning and integration, participants reflected on the social learning and integration skills they used or did not use to adapt as they transitioned from high school to a medical education environment. Self-awareness and self-management were identified as themes maturing into a shift in mindset among the participants. These are positive accomplishments and realistic skills needed to successfully transition into a new educational environment.

With reference to Table 2, themes 1 and 3–5 represented self-awareness, indicating that students realised the importance of acting with self-awareness. The statement in theme 1 showed that students became aware of their own study skills. According to the statement in theme 3, they realised the importance of having healthy coping mechanisms such as support systems they could rely on, even on a spiritual level. Regarding the statement in theme 4, they grasped the importance of obtaining help from peers. In the statement in theme 5, they realised the need to initiate their learning by preparing for class. These findings allude to the importance of being aware of the requirements needed to adjust to a new educational environment, such as new study skills, coping mechanisms, recognition of assistance and the importance of initiating one's learning by preparing for class. Moreover, the students realised that they need to act timeously to attend to the requirements, which would possibly lead to positive outcomes in their transition from high school to medical education (Ibañez et al., 2022).

Theme 2 reflected the lack of self-management in this context. The statement in this theme showed that the participants lacked the ability to say 'no' to participating in certain activities, which might stem from wanting to fit in in the new environment. The first year of study for most students is challenging and accomplishing even simple tasks, such as making friends, can prove difficult. Not only is the university perceived as challenging with most students focusing on their academic rather than their social life. However, when some students have trouble with their academic responsibilities, they tend to find comfort in their social setting, thus losing the balance between the academic and social life aspects (Bowles et al., 2014).

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize that challenges resulting in unsuccessful transition may emerge way before students are subjected to academic integration. Indicators such as assessments evaluating the performance of students should point out the necessity of intervention measures if there is a need. In fact, the top five ranked themes in Table 1 clearly accentuated a golden thread of various factors that interlinked and eventually reflected their negative effects through assessment outcomes. Consensus among the participants emphasized under-preparedness, self-management, alienation, confidence levels and academic advice as social learning and integration factors that affect transition among first-year medical students.

Moreover, upon reflecting on the skills required to counteract the social learning and integration factors, the participants leaned strongly towards self-awareness. This could mean that universities should consider deeper investigation of the impact of personal context when setting up support strategies to enhance successful transition. There is a need for quantifiable indicators from a social learning and integration aspect that will allow early intervention in providing support in a new educational environment.

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Ethics statement

The authors ascribe to the highest standards of ethical conduct in all their research. The study was approved by the University of Free State Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSREC-UFS-HSD2018/1300/2711).

Potential conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The psychological burden of the Covid-19 pandemic among students at a university of technology in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The closure of universities as a response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic affects all students and has a far-reaching economic and psychosocial impact, especially for those students who come from marginalized and impoverished contexts. International research reports that students have struggled to cope with learning under unprecedented conditions, including not attending classes on campus. This study aimed to investigate the psychological burden of Covid-19 among students at a university of technology in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. A mixed-method approach was used to collect data from participants. The results revealed that several students struggled to cope, both mentally and academically, with the burden of Covid-19. Negative psychological experiences emerged among students as they faced numerous challenges. Therefore, it is recommended that students must be provided with resources that would enable them to thrive and recover from these negative experiences.

KEYWORDS

Coronavirus disease, mental health problems, pandemic, psychological burden, student affairs

RÉSUMÉ

La fermeture des universités en réponse à la pandémie de Covid-19 actuelle affecte tous les étudiants et a un impact économique et psychosocial considérable, en particulier pour ceux issus de milieux marginalisés et appauvris. Les études internationales montrent que les étudiants ont eu du mal à faire face à l'apprentissage dans des conditions sans précédent, y compris en n'assistant pas aux cours sur le campus. Cette étude avait pour but d'examiner le poids psychologique de la Covid-19 chez les étudiants d'une université de technologie de la province de KwaZulu-Natal en Afrique du Sud. Une approche mixte a été utilisée pour collecter des données auprès des participants. Les résultats ont révélé que plusieurs étudiants avaient du mal à faire face au fardeau de la Covid-19 tant sur le plan mental que sur le plan académique. Des expériences psychologiques négatives ont été observées chez les étudiants alors qu'ils faisaient face à de nombreux défis. Par conséquent, il est recommandé de fournir aux étudiants les ressources nécessaires qui leur permettraient de s'épanouir et de se remettre de ces expériences négatives.

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MOTS-CLÉS
Maladie à coronavirus, œuvres estudiantines, problèmes de santé mentale, pandémie, poids psychologique, services étudiants

Introduction

In late December 2019, a viral outbreak was first reported in Wuhan, China (Xu et al., 2020). Within a matter of weeks, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) had already taken on pandemic proportions globally (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020). The World Health Organization (2020) revealed that the virus, SARS-CoV-2, causes the novel Covid-19 disease. The most likely ecological reservoirs for SARS-CoV-2 are bats, but it is believed that the virus jumped the species barrier to humans from another intermediate animal host. The fact that little is known about this virus, resulted in fear.

The COVID-19 outbreak has affected many people around the globe, with ever-increasing numbers of confirmed deaths (Evans, 2020). This infection has become a pandemic even though countries and organizations have taken various preventive measures, such as social distancing (Rajapakse, 2020). Research has revealed that such measures have caused disruptions to daily routines (Lee, 2020) resulting in profound and a broad spectrum of negative impacts on people's psychological well-being (Ho et al., 2020). Cullen et al. (2020) report that during the outbreak of infectious disease, peoples' psychological reactions play an important role in shaping both the spread of the disease and the occurrence of emotional distress and social disorder, during and after the outbreak.

Furthermore, whilst Covid-19 disrupted public health, the impact on higher education institutions was momentous (Krishnamurthy, 2020). Specific to higher education, the global lockdown of educational institutions has negatively impacted the academic programme for students (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020), with over 90% of the world's student population being affected (UNESCO, 2020). Indeed, Du Plessis et al. (2022) suggest that after the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic in higher education, there is a need for integrated thinking which will forge a way forward. However, Kee (2021) argues that the need for higher education leaders to prepare for a crisis is evident more than ever as the response to Covid-19 has required drastic changes in the way education is delivered. Moreover, the growing trend of high levels of untreated psychological distress among students during the Covid-19 pandemic suggests a need for prevention programmes (Theurel et al., 2022). Thus, this study explored the psychological experiences of students during the Covid-19 pandemic and produced recommendations on interventions that would assist them to deal with psychological issues.

The objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the psychological impact of Covid-19 among students attending a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
2. To identify the mechanisms that students use to cope with the psychological impact of Covid-19.

Covid-19 and higher education

Available research reports that several students experienced some form of psychological distress during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Mudenda, 2022). Within this context, as Nimnee and Halim (2021) argue, Covid-19 has not only affected public health but has had a measurable impact on education as it has culminated in unprecedented learning experiences. The pandemic has negatively transformed the daily lives of students in a variety of ways; including being blocked from physically accessing campuses, losing out on financial and internship opportunities, and forcing them to embrace the use of modern technologies for doing their academic work (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). Further, the pandemic has introduced what has been termed the 'new normal', which, according to Dwivedi et al. (2020), radically transformed the higher education terrain. In this so-called 'new normal', universities shifted from face-to-face learning to a more online-oriented type of learning as one of the prevention measures against the spread of the virus (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Yet, this move presented several challenges. For example, online learning affected student-lecturer and student-student interactions which have historically promoted better in-class engagements (Kumar et al., 2021). UNESCO (2022) has also revealed that the move to online learning affected students' academic performance. Some students dropped out of university because of a lack of consultation between them and their lecturers when they faced difficulties in learning/ understanding content-related material (Sintema, 2020). Linked to online teaching and learning challenges were issues such as internet availability, speed and cost, as well as the availability of devices such as laptops and cell phones that students needed to access learning resources and materials (Mahdy, 2020).

The psychological impact of Covid-19

Kara (2022) confirms that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected not only the physical health of students, but their mental health as well, mostly due to lockdown restrictions and the overwhelming numbers of positive cases reported each day (Jhunjhunwala & Jain, 2022). Historically, health-related pandemics have produced negative psychological outcomes including symptoms of depression, anxiety, the fear of death, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other psychotic symptoms (Taylor, 2022). University students have not been exempted from mental health challenges amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Odriozola-González et al., 2020). For example, some students have experienced reduced motivation toward their studies, pressure to learn independently, and an abandonment of their daily routines (Grubic, Badovinac & Johri, 2020). One study, conducted by Batra et al. (2021), found that there is a need for the development of appropriate public health interventions to address students' emotional and psychosocial needs during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is for this reason that the study reported in this article was conceptualised.

Method

This study employed a mixed-method approach to gather data from university students at one university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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Participants

An invitation to participate in the study was sent through the university's communication channels to 33,000 students. These students were asked to voluntarily complete an online survey. A self-selected sample of 418 students completed the survey. The table below summarises the participants' demographic details.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Gender	Male	41.1%
	Female	57.3%
Race	Black	83.0%
	White	2.3%
	Coloured	2.3%
	Indians	12.3%
Age	18-30	85.6%
	31-40	11.2%
	41-50	2.6%
	51-65	0.6%

Instruments

A survey was used to investigate the psychological burden of the Covid-19 pandemic among students at one university of technology. The questionnaire had four sections. The first section requested students to provide their demographic details. Whereas the second section was based on the students' psychological experiences by investigating how the loss of a job by a primary breadwinner at home affected students, the psychological experiences of students, how the closure of university campuses affected the students, and students' feelings when asked to vacate university residences (qualitative approach). The third section focused on the challenges experienced by students because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This section investigated whether or not students were able to do their academic work during Covid-19, whether students could socialize, and other challenges which they may have experienced because of Covid-19 (quantitative and qualitative approach). The fourth section was based on coping mechanisms that students used to deal with their psychological experiences. This particular section also focused on which programmes students would recommend being implemented to deal with the psychological issues resulting from Covid-19 and the kind of support the university may need to offer students in dealing with such issues (quantitative approach). Students' responses were based on a 5-scale model which ranked their responses on a continuum from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Moreover, since this is a new study and has not been conducted before, the researchers developed the questionnaire; thus, the questionnaire was not adopted from any other previous or known research study.

Procedure

The researchers first directly approached a sample of six (6) students to participate in a pilot study. The purpose of the pilot study was to ascertain the feasibility of the proposed study to the larger student population. The findings of the pilot study were analysed; however, they were not included in this study.

Ethical considerations

After receiving ethical clearance from the Institutional Research and Ethics Committee (IREC), gatekeeper permission was thereafter sought from the University Gatekeeper Permission Committee. All respondents in the study were provided with a letter of information that outlined the purpose of the study and an electronic consent form to sign to participate in the research study. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their details would not be used in the study, as confidentiality would be maintained.

Data analysis

In the process of data cleaning, we found that 418 responses were received, 12 of these were excluded as they did not give consent to participate in the study. A further 23 were duplicates (respondents submitted more than once) and were removed. Therefore, this left 338 usable responses. Data were imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 for analysis. Descriptive and frequency analysis statistical tests were carried out to analyse the data for quantitative data. Data from the open-ended questions were analysed by way of thematic analysis in which the participants' responses were scrutinized and themes were identified.

Results

Section A: Demographics

Table 2 below shows that about 57.3% of the participants identified as female and 41.1% identified as male. The majority (83.0%) of the participants were Black students, with 17% of other races participating in this study. According to the data, a majority (73.6%) of the participants were undergraduate students and the rest (26.4%) were postgraduate students. The majority (85.6%) of the participants were in the age range of 18-30 years, and 58.5% of the students were from urban areas whilst 41.5% were from rural areas.

Table 2: Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Sociodemographic characteristic	%
Gender	
Male	41.1
Female	57.3
Prefer not to say	1.6

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Sociodemographic characteristic	%
Race	
Black	83.0
White	2.3
Coloured	2.3
Indian	12.4
Marital status	
Single	91.4
Married	6.3
Divorced	1.3
Widowed	0.3
Other	0.7
Year of Study	
First-year	24.3
Second-year	18.8
Third-year	19.1
Fourth-year	11.4
Postgraduate	26.4
Age	
18-30	85.6
31-40	11.2
41-50	2.6
51-65	0.6
Dwelling	
Urban	58.5
Rural	41.5

Section B: Psychological effects

Table 3 presents the results of respondents' opinions on being affected by a primary breadwinner's loss of employment because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondents were asked to rate their responses on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), that they were affected emotionally and mentally using five different emotions. The results show that a majority of the respondents were affected by a breadwinner's loss of a job. Most respondents strongly agreed that they were feeling stressed and emotionally drained, with a few indicating being mentally affected (2.6%) and feeling hopeless (2.9%), including a sense of disappointment (3.9%).

Table 3: Loss of job by a breadwinner

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Sense of disappointment	3.9	4.2	19.3	27.7	44.9	4.05 (1.078)	<.0005*

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
2. Feeling of hopelessness	2.9	6.5	18.8	26.1	45.7	4.05 (1.079)	<.0005*
3. Feeling stressed	2.3	4.7	11.2	22.8	59.0	4.31 (1.003)	<.0005*
4. Emotionally drained	2.9	4.7	15.4	26.9	50.1	4.17 (1.038)	<.0005*
5. Mentally affected	2.6	8.4	25.3	26.9	36.8	3.87 (15.686)	<.0005*

**These are all significant and the mean scores are all >3 indicating significant agreement for all.*

Table 4 shows the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic among the respondents. They were asked to rate their agreement, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), that they were affected emotionally using five different emotions. The table shows the psychological experiences of the pandemic on respondents. The psychological experiences included feelings of anxiety, fear, depressive symptoms, mood swings and change of sleeping habits.

Table 4: Psychological experiences of the pandemic on respondents

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Feeling of anxiety	1.6	4.4	12.0	31.6	50.4	4.25 (.940)	<.0005*
2. Feeling of fear	1.6	4.4	12.8	30.8	50.4	4.24 (.946)	<.0005*
3. Depressive	3.2	9.1	17.2	31.3	39.2	39.4 (1.101)	<.0005*
4. Extreme mood swing	4.7	11.7	26.4	24.5	32.7	3.69 (1.178)	<.0005*
5. Change of sleeping habits	4.2	7.3	16.4	21.4	50.7	4.07 (1.157)	<.0005*

**These are all significant and the mean scores are all >3 indicating significant agreement for all.*

Table 5 presents the effect of campus closures on respondents. They were asked to rate their agreement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) that they were affected by the campus closure. Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference in the psychological effect of closing campus across different race groups, p=.007. Results from paired analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment indicate that a majority of the respondents experienced anxiety about the future and some were not able to concentrate. Further, others had mental breakdowns, with a minority suggesting that they had no access to online teaching and learning.

Table 5: Campus closure

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Unable to concentrate	4.4	8.9	14.9	26.4	45.4	3.99 (.995)	<.0005*
2. No access to online teaching and learning	11.2	23.0	27.9	19.4	18.5	3.11 (.110)	<.0005*
3. Late submission	8.4	15.4	24.3	24.8	27.21	3.47 (.470)	<.0005*
4. Feeling anxious about the future	2.6	6.0	7.3	29.5	54.6	4.27 (1.274)	<.0005*
5. Mental breakdowns	7.6	12.8	20.9	27.9	30.8	3.62 (.616)	<.0005*

**These are all significant and the mean scores are all >3 indicating significant agreement for all.*

Table 6 presents students' feelings regarding the time they were asked to vacate university residences. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), that they were affected emotionally using five different emotions. There is a significant difference in the psychological effect of having to vacate their residence across different races, p<.0005. Results from paired analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment indicate that the effect was greater for Black students than for Indian students, p<.0005.

Table 6: Effect of vacating the residences

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Happy	23.8	19.3	43.1	5.7	8.1	2.55 (1.152)	<.0005*

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
2. Disappointed	7.3	6.6	34.7	21.9	29.5	3.60 (1.185)	<.0005*
3. Worried	5.5	3.1	30.3	26.6	34.5	3.81 (1.111)	<.0005*
4. Depressed	8.9	10.2	37.9	19.5	23.5	3.39 (1.203)	<.0005*
5. Angry	12.3	13.8	42.3	14.6	17.0	3.10 (1.203)	<.0005*

**These are all significant and the mean scores are all >3 indicating significant agreement for all.*

Section C: Challenges experienced

Table 7 describes the responses of participants regarding their ability to do their academic work during the pandemic. The results indicate that a majority of respondents were able to do their academic work, with a minority suggesting that they were not able to do their academic work during the pandemic.

Table 7: Ability to do academic work during the pandemic

Groups	***Binary Question***	***Percentage***
Group one	Yes	76
Group two	No	24

When asked if they could do their academic work during the pandemic, the results from a binomial test showed that a significant 76% were able to do their academic work, p<.0005.

Table 8 presents results about respondents' ability to socialize with other people during the pandemic. Students were asked to rate their agreement, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), that they were able to socialize or create relationships (Table 7). Results from paired analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment indicate that most of the respondents had social withdrawal symptoms.

Table 8: Socializing

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Social withdrawal	4.7	7.8	28.5	33.4	25.6	.674 (1.083)	<.0005*

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
2. Able to socialize	8.9	17.0	33.4	28.7	12.0	.180 (1.124)	<.0005*
3. Created lots of relationships	22.5	29.5	27.9	11.7	8.4	.460 (1.199)	<.0005*

**Significant agreement that they had social withdrawal; and that they were able to socialize. Significant disagreement that they created lots of relationships.*

Other challenges (qualitative)

Respondents were asked about other challenges that they experienced during the pandemic. The themes that emerged were grouped and analysed to describe the challenges. The themes that emerged from our analysis were as follows:

Theme 1: Connectivity issues

Some of the students indicated that they had connectivity issues and they struggled to access online teaching and learning activities.

Theme 2: Data

Students indicated that they had problems obtaining and purchasing data to keep themselves connected to online platforms. Thus, they were not able to do their assignments or access to their study materials.

Theme 3: Loss of confidence

Some students reported a loss in self-confidence and a lack of motivation to do their lessons, resulting in the untimely submission of their work.

Theme 4: Consultation with lecturers

Other students mentioned that they experienced challenges in reaching out to their lecturers especially when they needed clarity regarding topics or content they did not understand during the teaching and learning sessions.

Theme 5: Access to campus

Some students faced difficulty accessing laboratories on campus, which hampered the continuation and completion of their projects.

Theme 6: Environment factors

Students reported challenges with their living arrangements at home because the space was not conducive for them to do their academic work effectively.

Section D: Coping mechanisms

Table 9 shows participants' coping mechanisms during the pandemic. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), that they adopted coping mechanisms (Table 9). Results from paired analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment indicate that the majority were eating well and continued to connect with others. Whereas the minority maintained normal routines and read books as coping mechanisms.

Table 9: Coping mechanisms

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Eating well	6.8	13.1	30.7	35.8	13.6	.3.63 (1.084)	<.0005*
2. Maintain normal routine	9.4	22.7	34.5	23.5	9.9	.0.18 (1.113)	<.0005*
3. Continue to connect with others	6.3	20.4	32.4	29.2	11.7	.198 (1.086)	<.0005*
4. Reading books	7.0	14.6	30.0	26.2	22.2	.4.18 (1.186)	<.0005*

**These are all significant and the mean scores are all>3 indicating significant agreement for all.*

Table 10 shows the programmes that participants recommended for implementation by the university to assist them in dealing with psychological issues caused by the pandemic. They were asked to rate their agreement, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to recommend the implementation of these programmes by the university (Table 9). Results from paired analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment indicate that the majority of respondents needed programmes on improving social competencies and webinars on mental health. Whereas some agreed on having workshops on Covid-19 to assist them to deal with resultant psychological issues.

Table 10: Programmes to assist students to deal with psychological issues

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Workshops on Covid-19	2.1	6.0	19.8	35.8	36.3	3.98 (.996)	<.0005*

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Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
2. Webinar on mental health	.5	2.9	12.8	38.6	45.2	4.25 (.825)	<.0005*
3. Programmes on improvements on social competencies	.8	2.8	11.5	37.9	47.0	4.27 (.835)	<.0005*

** These are all significant and the mean scores are all>3 indicating significant agreement for all.*

Table 11 shows the types of support that participants felt should be offered by the university. They were asked to rate their agreement, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), if they needed psychosocial and academic support (Table 10). Results from paired analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment show that the majority of respondents indicated a need for webinars on mental health and workshops on Covid-19.

Table 11: Psychological and academic support

Item	Responses as Frequency (%)					Mean (SD)	*p*-value
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree		
1. Workshops on COVID-19	2.6	6.8	14.6	31.6	44.4	4.08 (1.045)	<.0005*
2. Webinar on mental health	1.8	3.4	11.2	29.2	54.4	4.31 (.929)	<.0005*

** These are all significant and the mean scores are all>3 indicating significant agreement for all.*

Discussion

This study investigated the psychological burden of Covid-19 among students at one university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The first objective of this study was to investigate the psychological impacts of Covid-19 on students at the selected university of technology. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a loss of employment opportunities, which impacted on livelihoods (Shang et al., 2021). The purpose of this objective was to investigate how household breadwinners' loss of employment psychologically affected students during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study confirms that the majority of breadwinners lost their jobs because of the pandemic, and this had a negative psychological impact on students.

The results also show that students had challenges with their mental health which included anxiety, feelings of fear, and depression. Visser & Law-van Wyk (2021) confirm that during the pandemic, students experienced emotional and mental health challenges. Moreover, this study also found that campus closure contributed to drops in academic performance by the students. This shows that some of the students struggled to cope with online-based methods of teaching and learning away from campus. The closure of campuses negatively impacted students' learning and well-being (Vlachos et al., 2021). The results suggest that vacating residences harmed students since they had insufficient resources to complete their academic work. Thus, it is suggested that the home environment affected students' learning and their well-being during Covid-19 (Agyekum, 2022).

The second objective was to investigate the challenges that students experienced related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The results show that most of the students were able to do their academic work, however, other students reported that they could not do their work as they experienced different challenges. Whitelaw et al. (2022) found that some students lacked data and learning devices which prevented them from completing their academic work. The study also found that Covid-19 had an impact on students' overall social relations as they experienced social withdrawal. Their face-to-face interactions were often limited and also lost during the Covid-19 pandemic (Long et al., 2021). Students were also asked about other challenges that they were experiencing. The results revealed that a minority of students had connectivity issues that prevented them from doing their academic work and having access to online classes. Further, these challenges contributed to some of the students losing confidence in themselves or their futures as they lost motivation to do their academic work. Thus, new techniques must be implemented to support students to do their academic work. The study also found that some of the students experienced challenges related to consulting with their lecturers. The pandemic contributed to reduced contact time and a lack of consultation when students faced challenges in learning or understanding (Sintema, 2020).

Another objective of the study was to identify mechanisms that students used to cope with Covid-19. A majority of the students agreed that there should be programmes implemented by the institution to assist them in coping with mental health problems, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic is ongoing. These programmes must be implemented to effectively address the psychological and other academic-related issues they faced with Covid-19. Therefore, based on the above discussion, an overarching finding is that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on students' psychological well-being which was embedded in economic, educational, and social factors.

Limitations

This study employed a mixed-method approach with limited close-ended questions which prevented researchers from further exploring the psychological effects of Covid-19 among students. A notable limitation was that there were no follow-up questions based on the responses that students provided. This limited the scope of our analysis, and the implications derived therefrom. Likewise, this study was conducted at a single university

of technology. Therefore, the results are not generalisable to other universities in South Africa.

Conclusion

This study has provided a snapshot of how Covid-19 psychologically affected students at a university of technology in South Africa. The suspension of in-contact classes by institutions to prevent the spread of the virus resulted in students being concerned about their academic performance and their psychological well-being. Further, the closure of campuses and residences had implications on students' academic progress as some of them had network connectivity issues and others had no data to access online classes which were likely to negatively impact their emotional and mental health wellness. Also, based on the results presented above, some of the students were able to cope and managed through these challenges using various coping mechanisms.

Although students indicated their coping methods, the results point to a need for ameliorative programmes aimed at assisting students to deal with the psychological impact of Covid-19. The university should, thus, strengthen its systems and processes by putting appropriate interventions to help students deal with such issues. Mental health is one of the important aspects that should be taken seriously in making sure that no student is suffering. Further, it is also vital to provide accurate resources that would enable students to perform their academic work without any disruption. Academic support is important if we want to assist students in striving for academic excellence. This also calls for the university to create an enabling environment where students are co-creators of programmes that will positively influence their development and growth in all spheres of life. Therefore, future research needs to look at universities' role in providing psychological support to students during public health emergencies.

Ethics statement

All ethics protocols were followed by the researchers.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Challenges confronting students during Covid-19: Insights from social workers at a university of technology

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ABSTRACT

University students were regarded as a vulnerable population as they not only had to endure significant levels of mental health problems and financial distress, but also academic challenges in the transition to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, the tumultuous nature of the pandemic and consequent sheltering as well as other disruptions placed an enormous burden on students. Using qualitative research methodologies, this study sought to explore the challenges faced by students through the lens of social work interns who were placed at a university of technology during the pandemic. Using purposive sampling to recruit the practitioners, the study explored what support measures were necessary to enhance the well-being of students during the pandemic. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The study found that students encountered an array of psychological problems, together with experiences of stigma and isolation whilst in quarantine, which led the sample to call for the reconstruction of the university space into a more supportive one.

KEYWORDS

Academic challenges, Covid-19, stigma, financial distress, higher education, mental health, student affairs, student experience

RÉSUMÉ

Les étudiants d'université étaient considérés comme une population vulnérable, car ils devaient non seulement faire face à des niveaux élevés de problèmes de santé mentale et de détresse financière, mais aussi relever des défis académiques lors de la transition vers l'apprentissage en ligne pendant la pandémie de Covid-19. Ainsi, la nature tumultueuse de la pandémie, les mesures de confinement et les perturbations qui en ont découlé ont imposé un fardeau énorme aux étudiants. Cette étude, qui s'appuie sur des méthodologies de recherche qualitative, visait à explorer les défis auxquels les étudiants ont été confrontés à travers le regard de stagiaires en travail social affectés à une université de technologie pendant la pandémie. L'étude a utilisé un échantillonnage raisonné pour recruter les praticiens, et a exploré les mesures de soutien nécessaires pour améliorer le bien-être des étudiants pendant la pandémie. Les données ont été collectées via des entretiens semi-structurés et une analyse thématique a été effectuée. L'étude a révélé que les étudiants ont rencontré un ensemble de problèmes psychologiques, ainsi que des expériences de stigmatisation et d'isolement pendant la quarantaine, ce qui a conduit les participants à demander la reconstruction de l'espace universitaire en un espace plus favorable au soutien.

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MOTS-CLÉS
Covid-19, défis académiques, expérience étudiante, détresse financière, enseignement supérieur, œuvres estudiantines, santé mentale, services étudiants, stigmatisation

Introduction

With the outbreak of Covid-19, university students worldwide endured the full wrath of the pandemic. Reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on university students globally, Zhai and Du (2020) report that they experienced depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other behavioural difficulties linked to poor sleeping and stress eating, which threatened their academic progress and mental health in a myriad of ways. The pandemic rapidly spurred new ways of life, including the quarantining of entire communities, closure of educational institutions, social isolation, and shelter in place orders which consequently disrupted the lives of many students at higher education institutions. Moreover, in South Africa the pandemic exacerbated human rights violations and coalesced into widespread job losses, unemployment, and starvation (Kunene, 2020; Breakfast, 2020), which disadvantaged students even further. The closure of universities also created additional uncertainties in education and compelled pedagogical innovations that involved technology and simulation based teaching, which included online lectures, video case vignettes, virtual simulators, webcasting, and online chat rooms (Sahi et al., 2020). Students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, who were more likely to encounter network connectivity issues, experienced greater disruption in their teaching and learning (Landa et al., 2021).

The pandemic birthed a multitude of studies related to how Covid-19 transformed the higher education landscape globally (Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022; Mohamed et al., 2022). Whilst some research has been done, to the researcher's knowledge, there is no study to date that has explored the experiences of social workers in a university context during the Covid-19 pandemic. Much of the current research has focused on the mental health consequences for students (Kaparounaki et al., 2020). Kaparounaki et al. (2020) also investigated the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students. An online survey revealed that 70.5%, 53.6 % and 47.8% of Egyptian students had experienced depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively. It further showed that being female; having a relative or acquaintance infected with Covid-19; having a pre-existing chronic disease; and lacking psychological support from family, community, and university increased the risk of depression, anxiety, and stress amongst Egyptian students. The researchers therefore suggested that the mental health of university students should be carefully monitored, and that universities should provide psychology-oriented services adapted to these circumstances to mitigate its emotional impact on the students (Ghazawy et al., 2021).

In another study in Bangladesh with 15,543 university students, 44.59% were found to present with severe anxiety, 48.41% with moderate anxiety, and 3.82% with mild anxiety (Dhar et al., 2020). Amongst the pandemic-related stressors, students were concerned about economic influences during and after Covid-19, as well as academic delays and the lack of social support during the pandemic, which were all positively

correlated with the level of anxiety. These researchers therefore argued for proper support and monitoring of students presenting with mental distress (Dhar et al., 2020).

Other studies examined the impact of Covid-19 on education. Kedraka et al. (2020) noted that the pandemic presented an opportunity for universities to improve the use of digital tools for an enhanced learning experience. They argued that this should be supported through investment in digital infrastructure for improving distance learning in higher education. Hands-on or practice-based learning constitutes the foundational objective of postgraduate teaching and training. Skilled and competent postgraduate medical students are critical to a country's health needs, particularly within the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst the pandemic has offered new learning modes like teleconsultation, videoconferencing, virtual simulations, and digital podcasts, the extent to which actual knowledge transfer and skill gain can be achieved through these mediums is unknown (Patil et al., 2021).

Theoretical framework

This study used Lee et al.'s (2009, p. 43) integrative body-mind-spirit model as its guiding theoretical framework. This model is premised on the notion that the physical, psychological, and spiritual facets of a person are interlinked. Hence, within each person, the "domains of behaviour, thought, feeling, sensation, value morality, meaning, intuition, spirituality, body and functioning are all interrelated in a connected web and are not regarded, as separate domains of the human experience". As such, each person is viewed as a complex, holistic, and multidimensional being, where the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of a person are indivisibly interrelated with each other. In addition to recognising the interdependence, mutuality, complementarity and interrelatedness of contrasting forces and phenomena, it "promotes a holistic perspective in understanding human experience and change" (Lee et al., 2009, p. 43).

One of the most important principles underpinning this model is that it "assumes that fundamental to health, mental health, and the well-being of individuals" is the dynamic balance of and interrelationship between mind, body, and spirit (Lee et al., 2009, p. 44). The proponents of this model describe the *physical body* as physical strength, body functioning, and as physiological responses, and they describe the *mind* as mood, emotional well-being, problem-solving ability, will power, etc. *Spirituality* is described as meaning making, values, and a relationship with a higher being and a connectedness with others.

All these aspects are important to students as they focus not only on their physical wellness during the pandemic but also how students cope emotionally with the various stressors brought about by the pandemic. Moreover, it focuses on their relationships with family and friends and how these affected their well-being and ability to cope during the pandemic. Spirituality within the context of this study focused on the students' ability to tap into their spiritual resources and strengths to cope. This model was therefore appropriate to study the bio-psycho-social issues confronting students during the pandemic. It also sensitised the researcher into awareness of the multidimensional issues confronting students during this time, over and above their academic difficulties.

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Methodology

Research design

This study utilised a qualitative exploratory research design, along with a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The study sought to obtain rich descriptive information from the social work interns with regards to how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted students' experiences.

Research setting

The study was conducted at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Sample and sampling

Participants were selected using non-probability, purposeful sampling methods. The participants were recruited from a pool of 15 social work interns specifically placed at the university of technology to provide support to students during the pandemic. Eleven participants took part in the study.

Data collection

A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to extract information about the experiences of social work interns participating in the study. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews, but only after permission from the Durban University of Technology's Institutional Research Ethics Committee was received. After receiving written informed consent from the participants, online interviews were conducted in October 2021 to adhere to Covid-19 restrictions. An interview guide consisting of a set of predetermined questions was used to facilitate the semi-structured interviews with the participants (Greeff, 2011).

Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun et al. (2020) was used to guide the analysis of the data. Following the transcription of the data, the participants' statements were inductively coded. Member checking was undertaken to safeguard accuracy. This consisted of short sentences and initial discursive themes, which ensured that the identified themes and patterns are strongly linked to the data itself. The themes were derived through a process of reading and rereading as well as reflecting on relevant literature on the topic. This process allowed the researcher to make sense of collective meanings and experiences and link the identified themes and patterns with the data itself (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Trustworthiness

To establish rigour and achieve trustworthiness, the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were utilised for data verification. Verbatim quotes were included to support the validity of the data. Member checking was conducted following the transcription of the data, giving the participants the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the results. An independent researcher verified the quality and completeness of the transcripts. Transferability was

enhanced by providing a detailed description of the study's procedures. Finally, an audit trail was kept to facilitate the data analysis process.

Results

Theme 1: Effects of the pandemic on students

A significant issue that emerged in the data was the academic difficulties experienced by the students. The participants reported that students had difficulty transitioning to online learning. This was confirmed as follows:

> *Students are coming to me because their grades dropped because now they are studying at home, they feel like studying at residence is better than studying at home. There is so much that they have to do at their homes, and they saw a drop in their grades because of the online system that was introduced at the university. (SW1)*

> *Especially with online studying, there was this one student who said her results were bad. (SW6)*

As evidenced in the data, students experienced challenges studying at home. This was mostly due to unconducive environments or the lack of connectivity, which affected the online learning process, and consequently, they saw a drop in their grades. The literature also mirrors the disruption created by the introduction of digital learning methodologies, where the transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning created a new and challenging experience for students and academics (Subedi et al., 2020). Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) also highlighted multiple issues that emerged, such as the weakness of online teaching infrastructure, information gaps, and unconducive home and learning environments. Consequently, as the current study found, students had to grapple with the stress of poor academic performance due to a new way of learning.

Another participant opined that the students from more disadvantaged communities struggled with the lack of resources at home, particularly access to laptops.

> *Some of them were complaining that they don't have laptops as they used the school['s] resources to get their work done. (SW8)*

Those who tested positive for Covid-19 while on campus endured other struggles related to having to isolate on campus. The social workers said:

> *Students were stressed that they can't continue with their academic work due to them being isolated, because they can't go out, they can't have visitors, they can't have access to anyone, they just don't have access to anything. (SW6)*

> *She was concerned with finishing the isolation process and then getting back to school and just continuing with her academic work. (SW8)*

Other universities have also reported that they had to become involved in strategies such as the control of Covid-19-related infection through effective contact tracing, quarantining and, where needed, hospitalization procedures (Lopman et al., 2021).

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Research undertaken by Patsali et al. (2020) with university students in Greece found a horizontal increase in scores, namely: 42.5 % for anxiety, 74.3 % for depression, and 63.3% for suicidal thoughts. They added that whilst the acute effects are clear, the long-term consequences are unknown and require attention. These authors concluded that such studies provide a strong message that vulnerable populations, which includes students, are in need of specific interventions targeting mental health issues.

In another study conducted by Konstantopoulou and Raikou (2020), university students reported increased symptoms of depression, with their mental health being affected more significantly in situations requiring quarantining. Concluding that it was critical, these authors asserted that the university therefore provide adequate psychological resources to help strengthen and support the students who are struggling. Furthermore, Chen and Lucock (2022) mentioned that of the 1,173 students surveyed in the north of England, more than 50% experienced clinical cut-off levels in terms of anxiety and depression. Based on their findings, they called for long-term monitoring and mental health support for university students.

Other students were found to be experiencing financial distress. In this regard, the social workers commented:

> *There are many disadvantaged students; their parents or guardians have been retrenched due to Covid. So it basically impacts on the finances of the students. (SW3)*
>
> *Some parents have been retrenched due to Covid; I saw retrenchment, and financial distress, and loss of family members. (SW7)*
>
> *In terms of how they and the university responded, the social workers said:*
>
> *We catered for those students that come from disadvantaged homes and provided food vouchers to those students. (SW2)*
>
> *The main problems she had was food; she had nothing, so I had to refer her to Pakimpilo for food vouchers. So the psychologist who provided help … and we did some follow up to see if she is okay. (SW4)*
>
> *They want to receive help as soon as possible. So I would think that the programme that would help them quickly is a programme that has like food solids … like food parcels, not necessarily vouchers, something they can go home with. (SW6)*

Research done by Lederer et al. (2021) also confirmed that university students faced increasing housing and financial insecurity and distress. Additional challenges included a lack of social connectedness and sense of belonging, along with uncertainties about their future which threatened their academic performance and well-being. They argued that Covid-19 exacerbated inequalities for disadvantaged students and therefore recommended that universities prioritise student support services to assist these students.

Galanza et al. (2021), in their study of Filipino university students, found that whilst the fear of Covid-19 had affected the students' mental health, their financial distress was

more strongly correlated with their negative mental health. As such, they recommended that mental health services address the financial difficulties experienced by students and their families. Jin (2020) supported this, saying that students with financial difficulties are prone to isolation and depression, and that low-income underrepresented students endure greater stressors at home due to scarcities in terms of basic needs such as food. She added that many have additional household responsibilities which include childcare and financial support. The plight of these students deeply reflects the South African scenario. Consequently, universities have begun collaborating with faith-based organisations (FBOs) to provide virtual group psycho-educational services (Jin, 2020).

Theme 2: Stigmatisation of students who were Covid-19 positive

Participants also indicated that many students who had tested positive for Covid-19 were being stigmatised. In this regard, they said:

> *There is a lot of stigma … there isn't anyone to help her and people are scared to go to her room. (SW6)*

> *So once the student tested positive for Covid-19, some of the other students became aware of this, and then they started ostracising her. (SW8)*

> *Students told me that they feel isolated; they were marginalized. Other students stayed away, and they feared their reactions. (SW9)*

One participant pointed out that even if a student became unwell for reasons unrelated to the coronavirus and required hospitalization, some students assumed that they had Covid-19:

> *The university would organise an ambulance, and they were fetched by the ambulance when sick; others just thought they have coronavirus ... it was exaggerated ... even if they weren't positive, they have to endure a lot of discrimination. (SW1)*

As reflected in the above excerpt, the students experienced discrimination even if they did not test positive. As shown below, another participant expressed that those who had no food were also stigmatised.

> *They were afraid of being stigmatised. I could see that students were afraid to even say that 'I am hungry'. There is this programme, this was helping students who were found to have no food, but they were afraid to say, 'I don't have anything', because [the] other students would laugh at you and call you poor. Can you imagine Covid-19 … They were afraid to disclose. (SW4)*

It was also evident that those who had loved ones who were infected by Covid-19 were also discriminated against. One participant said:

> *Students stay together in residences … maybe if they find out if the students were infected with Covid, and maybe a family member may have passed away from Covid … so I think maybe it happens … that they feel like the students might be positive, or maybe if a family*

member had passed away due to Covid, then they are also at risk of being infected from Covid due to interacting with the students or being around the students. (SW10)

Bhattacharya et al. (2020, p. 383) echoed the emergence of significant stigma, "othering", prejudice, and blame of those infected or those whose loved ones have been infected. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that stigma associated with Covid-19 is a major source of mental distress, such as stress, anxiety, and depression, with serious implications for well-being (Peprah & Gyasi, 2020; Bao et al., 2020). Peprah and Gyasi (2020, p. 1) affirmed that those discharged from quarantine and self-isolation experience stigmatisation and the associated drastic negative impacts on their mental health, whilst Gyasi (2020) described the occurrence of community rejection and self-isolation.

Individuals who were infected and have recovered are often socially avoided and discriminated against when they return home, leading to a decrease in support. In fact, as Poudel and Subedi (2020, p. 751) said, stigma can negatively affect clients searching for medical care at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

Theme 3: Reconstructing the university space

Sub-theme 3.1: Caring for those quarantined

In terms of sub-theme 3.1, the participants expressed the following:

I don't think a student should quarantine at the residence, and no one does a follow up to find out if the studen[t] is okay. (SW4)

The university can check up on them ... we are employed as social workers to check up on those people, but others should go see them. They felt lonely, like they were thrown away. You know, I don't know if I'm putting in the right words, but they felt like they were abandoned, like they were just put there, like nobody really cares. That's how they felt. (SW1)

Sub-theme 3.2: Controlling the spread of the virus

Other participants suggested ways to manage the spread of the virus, giving rise to sub-theme 3.2. They said:

I also don't think that it's a great idea if those infected are meeting other students; it's exposing other students to infection. If a student who is suspected to have Covid-19 is quarantined in a nearby space as others, you know students, they don't adhere to any rules. (SW11)

The blended learning should continue; students attending university should therefore also continue with online learning. (SW3)

Start by putting sanitisers where students are … sometimes there are no sanitisers in most places in other classrooms, like even residence there were no sanitisers. (SW4)

The participants also expressed concern regarding quarantine procedures, suggesting that not all students are compliant. One participant said it was important that quarantine facilities be at a distance from social or housing areas as students are often tempted to continue their social interactions. Another proposed that online learning should continue, as there is the possibility that there may be future waves. There was also the suggestion to use sanitisers to ensure hygiene control at all times. These strategies require behavioural change such as social distancing, hygiene, and the wearing of masks during periods where there are peaks in incidences of infection, all of which have proven to reduce the transmission of viral infections (Assab & Temime, 2016).

Furthermore, university librarians reported that the digital divide, lack of digital literacy skills, and slow internet speeds were the major barriers and reasons for the poor use of the library's online resources and web portals (Rafiq et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Support groups for students

The participants also suggested the importance of ongoing support groups to help students who had lost loved ones during the pandemic. This was particularly important due to the high death toll and the often rapid infection-to-death timeline for some of the infected in the early days of the pandemic, during which loved ones could not support their infected family members through or make peace with the deterioration of their health due to measures to prevent infection. In this regard, the participants responded:

> *The more you get to talk about your grief, the more it becomes easy, sharing your stories, realising that other people have experienced the same thing that you had experienced does make [it] more bearable, and I think having a group because most people lost their mothers, their fathers, their aunties, and having a group were discussing grief, discussing how Covid-19 has affected them, I think that it will be most helpful. (SW4)*

> *I would say just teach students on how to support other people who have lost a family member … I think psychosocial well-being of people is the most important thing. (SW8)*

> *I think a support group for those who want to talk, because I think they haven't healed, being infected with coronavirus and being a survivor of coronavirus, I think it's something huge. I think we can implement support groups of people who have lost a loved one(s) and those students who have survived. (SW1)*

> *Counselling, when dealing with such an illness or virus, having someone to talk to, could be beneficial, and having people around the person who knows about the situation of the person – of being infected –, understanding, and not judging or stigmatising them or ostracising them. It really could help. (SW4)*

Other participants mentioned the need for educational groups as follows:

> *Put similar cases together, of those students who are infected with Covid, and then for the social workers to do follow ups on the students who were infected, so students can get more support, or find out maybe if there were any issues that they faced and then social workers can attend to those issues or challenges, so they can better support students who were infected. (SW3)*

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> *I think there should be educational groups … we should tell them there shouldn't be any form of stigma towards those students. We should teach the other students how to treat infected students. (SW5)*

As indicated above, one important facet of these groups should be to reduce the stigmatisation of those infected and to provide them with greater support.

Theme 5: A university-wide programme to assist students

There were several suggestions that emerged from the data with regards to strategies that the university could implement to assist students. The first one related to webinars to deal with Covid-19-related anxiety and other student-related mental health difficulties.

> *We have seen a lot of webinars or programmes that talk about how can you get Covid-19, but it's not on, based on, your mental health at that time … you don't know what to do if you [are] having anxiety. (SW7)*

Another participant proposed that research be undertaken to ascertain what challenges students faced and what potential programmes the university could implement to assist them both at the university and at home.

> *Research where we go to different departments, find out what issues they have and what programmes can be developed based on what we found out from those departments …. Basically, how to deal with Covid, not only at the university but also at home, [at] residences, and maybe activities they can develop at residences to help them deal with Covid-19-related problems. (SW9)*

In addition to these suggestions, writers such as Pownall et al. (2022) proposed that universities assist students to reacclimate to academic work following a period of extended educational disruption, as well as support those who are still suffering the mental health effects of the pandemic, whilst remaining sensitive to the inequalities of educational provision that disadvantaged students have endured. These are important considerations in reconstructing the university space.

Another participant drew attention to the need for a toll-free line:

> *I think if we could have a toll-free line where people can call. Who are in need of social services like they did on gender-based violence. I think that could help. If people could have a number that is free that they can call to communicate with social work[ers] so that they can get the services. (SW4)*

Jin (2020) also supported the need for establishing psychological counselling and promoting good living habits to enhance the mental health of university students. Liu et al. (2020), on the other hand, argued for universities to have walk-in/drop-in virtual care options, as well as accessible virtual group therapy. These are important considerations as a way forward as the mental health burden of the pandemic may have lingering effects.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the plight of students at a university of technology during the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on some of the strategies that mental health professionals considered important in reconstructing the university space amidst the pandemic. Education, student support networks, the prevention of stigma and discrimination, and the provision of ongoing psychological support emerged as critical factors in ensuring that students coped with the educational and mental health challenges brought about by the pandemic. Given that several new variants of the virus have emerged, universities must be better prepared to deal with the myriad of challenges that may unfold.

Ethics statement

The study received full approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC 176/20) in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Durban University of Technology.

Potential conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can life satisfaction be measured fairly for different groups of South African first-year students? Testing the Satisfaction with Life Scale

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ABSTRACT

Student well-being has gradually become a topic of interest in higher education, and the accurate, valid, and reliable measure of well-being constructs is crucial in the South African context. This study examined item bias and configural, metric and scalar invariance of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) for South African first-year university students. A cross-sectional design was used. A sample of 780 first-year South African university students was included. Confirmatory factor analysis, differential item functioning measurement invariance, and internal consistency were tested. A one-factor structure was confirmed. Item 1 of the SWLS was particularly problematic concerning bias (uniform and non-uniform bias). Measurement invariance was established; however, Item 1 was again problematic, resulting in partial metric and scalar invariance. The scale was reliable (Cronbach's α was 0.83; McDonald's omega (ω) was 0.83). This study contributes to the limited research on the specific psychometric properties of the SWLS in a diverse higher education setting. The results could assist with valid and reliable measurements when developing interventions to enhance student well-being.

KEYWORDS

Satisfaction with Life Scale, item bias, differential item functioning, measurement invariance, first-year university students, student affairs

RÉSUMÉ

Le bien-être des étudiants est progressivement devenu un sujet d'intérêt dans l'enseignement supérieur, et la mesure précise, valide et fiable des constructions liées au bien-être est cruciale dans le contexte sud-africain. Cette étude a examiné le biais des items et l'invariance de la configuration, de la métrique et de l'échelle de l'échelle de satisfaction de vie (SWLS) pour les étudiants de première année d'université en Afrique du Sud. Une conception transversale a été utilisée. Un échantillon de 780 étudiants sud-africains de première année a été choisi. Une analyse factorielle confirmatoire, le fonctionnement différentiel des items, l'invariance de mesure et la cohérence interne ont été testées. Une structure à un facteur a été confirmée. L'item 1 de la SWLS était particulièrement problématique en termes de biais (biais uniforme et non uniforme). L'invariance de mesure a été établie ; cependant, l'item 1 était à nouveau problématique, entraînant une invariance métrique et scalaire partielle. L'échelle était fiable

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(l'α de Cronbach était de 0,83 ; l'oméga de McDonald était de 0,83). Cette étude contribue à la recherche limitée sur les propriétés psychométriques spécifiques de la SWLS dans un contexte diversifié d'enseignement supérieur. Les résultats pourraient aider à obtenir des mesures valides et fiables lors de l'élaboration d'interventions visant à améliorer le bien-être des étudiants.

MOTS-CLÉS
Biais des items, échelle de satisfaction de vie, étudiants de première année d'université, fonctionnement différentiel des items, invariance de mesure, œuvres estudiantines, services étudiants

Introduction

Life satisfaction is an essential indicator of individual and social well-being and includes the perception that one is moving towards accomplishing significant life goals (Esnaola et al., 2019; Jovanović, 2019). Life satisfaction is also crucial to first-year university students, as they face a period of uncertainty in which they idealise the values of their lives, prepare for the world of work, and actively explore their adult roles (Gökalp & Topal, 2019). Studies show significant relationships between high levels of life satisfaction, taking on more responsibility, experiencing less stress and emotional loneliness and more resilience in overcoming academic challenges (Gökalp & Topal, 2019; Rode et al., 2005). There is also a relationship between life satisfaction and satisfaction with educational experiences, healthy relationships, self-esteem (Chow, 2005), engagement, motivation and study satisfaction (Lewis et al., 2011; Wach et al., 2016). Conversely, there are also associations between low levels of life satisfaction, perceived stress, anxiety, and burnout (Alleyne et al., 2010; Serin et al., 2010), higher levels of impaired concentration and deteriorated academic performance (Rode et al., 2005).

One of the most widely used scales in assessing life satisfaction is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985). Periodic assessments are needed to accurately establish and measure well-being in the higher education sector, including measures of life satisfaction such as the SWLS (Băcilă et al., 2014). However, various factors challenge fair psychological testing in South Africa, such as the distribution of socio-economic resources, diversity in culture and language, and education and employment statuses (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2009). Psychological testing and other similar assessments are governed in South Africa by the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998, Section 8 (President of the Republic of South Africa, 1998), which states that assessments are prohibited unless they can scientifically be shown to be reliable and valid, can be applied fairly to all ethnic groups and cultures, and are not biased against any person or group.

In addition, psychological assessments in South Africa are controversial due to past unfair, undiscerning, and biased use (Laher & Cockcroft, 2014). Historically, assessment practices in South Africa have been known to use measurement instruments from Western countries, often without any adaptation to South Africa's multi-cultural and diverse context (Blokland, 2016). Consequently, the majority of South Africa's population was excluded from these assessment practices, as they tend to cater mainly for the

Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and developed population sectors (Laher & Cockcroft, 2013; Laher & Cockcroft, 2014). Therefore, questions related to test bias and equivalence are raised when applying adapted and imported measurement instruments in South Africa (Teresi & Fleishman, 2007; Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004).

It is essential to distinguish between the concepts of item bias and equivalence. Bias refers to the presence of annoyance factors (items invoking added abilities or traits) when making cross-group comparisons (Schaap, 2011; Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). In addition, another source of bias can be test items themselves – also referred to as **item bias** or **differential item functioning (DIF)** (Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). Item bias signifies that the meaning of one or more scale items is not being understood identically across groups, is not applicable to a specific group or that semantic differences are present in how items are conceptualised (Cleary & Hilton, 1968). When respondents have the same standing on the underlying construct and are from different cultures but have different mean scores on the item, this could reflect actual differences in the construct or that item bias is present (Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004).

A distinction should be made between uniform and non-uniform bias. **Uniform bias** refers to the likelihood of similar responses for one group being systematically higher or lower at specific endorsement levels (the underlying construct) compared to other groups (Swaminathan & Rogers, 1990; Teresi & Fleishman, 2007). **Non-uniform bias** refers to the difference in the likelihood of similar answers across groups varying across all levels of endorsement (Swaminathan & Rogers, 1990; Teresi & Fleishman, 2007). The most common sources of item bias include ambiguities in the original item, poor item translation, the influence of cultural specifics (connotations or nuisance factors) associated with the wording of the item, and low appropriateness and familiarity of the item content in some cultures (Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004).

Invariance (or equivalence) indicates whether a construct is interpreted and understood similarly across different groups, which is essential for cross-group comparisons (Mellenbergh, 1989; Milfont & Fischer, 2010; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016; Van De Schoot et al., 2012). **Configural invariance** indicates the extent to which the factor structure of a measure can be replicated across different groups, which is crucial for meaningful comparisons (He & Van De Vijver, 2012; Schaap, 2011; Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). **Metric invariance** involves equal factor loadings, across groups, for similar items (i.e. when individuals from different cultures who speak different languages complete the same questionnaire and conceptualise the construct the same way) (Milfont & Fisher, 2010; Morton et al., 2019). **Scalar invariance** establishes whether a test score has a similar meaning in its interpretation regardless of cultural background (He & Van De Vijver, 2012; Laher, 2008).

In essence, concerning the psychometric properties of assessment instruments, item bias and invariance testing will aid in establishing whether measures are fair to use for different sub-groups in the specific South African context (Schaap, 2011). Therefore, this study emphasizes the concepts of bias and invariance testing to ensure the validation of existing instruments in cross-cultural groups to ensure meaningful comparisons across sub-groups (Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004).

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While scholars recently investigated the psychometric properties of the SWLS among South African samples, including an adult population (Schutte et al., 2021) and primary and secondary school teachers (Pretorius & Padmanabhanunni, 2022), studies testing item bias and equivalence are limited. The present study explores the psychometric properties, specifically item bias and invariance (configural, metric and scalar), of the SWLS in a sample of first-year South African students.

Literature

Measurement and psychometric properties of the Satisfaction with Life Scale

The SWLS measures a single life satisfaction construct that could indicate levels of satisfaction with life throughout one's life span (Tomás et al., 2015). The scale displays favourable psychometric properties, has been validated in various countries and is translated into numerous languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and German (Diener et al., 1985; Gouveia et al., 2009).

Studies testing bias and invariance for the SWLS are scarce and report mixed results. Regarding the item bias of the SWLS, a study conducted on a Turkish university student sample concluded that the items of the SWLS are unbiased across gender groups (Avcu, 2021). However, Hultell and Gustavsson (2008) found that Item 4 and Item 5 are sensitive to age.

With regards to **configural invariance**, most researchers have found the SWLS to be invariant across gender, age (Glaesmer et al., 2011; Hinz et al., 2018; Lorenzo-Seva et al., 2019; Wu & Yao, 2006), and countries such as Spain and Portugal (Atienza González et al., 2016), Germany (Glaesmer et al., 2011), Columbia (Ruiz et al., 2019), the United States, and Brazil (Zanon et al., 2014). However, other studies report configural invariance for gender groups, albeit not for age groups (Shevlin et al., 1998; Wu et al., 2009).

In addition, studies report **metric invariance** for different age groups (Pons et al., 2000; Glaesmer et al., 2011), gender groups (Emerson et al., 2017; Hinz et al., 2018; Jovanović, 2019; Moksnes et al., 2014; Ruiz et al., 2019), and cultures (Atienza González et al., 2016; Emerson et al., 2017; Jovanović & Brdar, 2018). However, Zanon et al. (2014) presented evidence against metric invariance between undergraduates from the United States and Brazil, specifically for Items 4 and 5.

Studies on the SWLS support the notion that **scalar invariance** is supported across gender groups (Clench-Aas et al., 2011; Hultell & Gustavsson, 2008; Shevlin et al., 1998; Zanon et al., 2014), age groups (Durak et al., 2010; Gouveia et al., 2009; Tomás et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2009), and several European countries (e.g., Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia; Jovanović & Brdar, 2018). However, some studies reported insufficient evidence for scalar invariance across age groups (Clench-Aas et al., 2011; Hultell & Gustavsson, 2008) and countries (Atienza González et al., 2016; Whisman & Judd, 2016).

Method

Research procedure and participants

Before data collection commenced, permission was obtained from the relevant university to conduct research. An ethics application was submitted and approved, focusing specifically on anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation (ethics number: NWU-HS-2014-0165). A web-based survey link was sent via email and posted on the university's online platform for first-year modules. The study's goal, purpose, and value to the university were explained. The sample consisted of 780 first-year students aged 18 to 20. Of the 780 participants, 38.8% indicated that they spoke Afrikaans, 33.1% indicated that they spoke Setswana, and 6.2% indicated that they spoke Sesotho (three of the eleven official language groups in South Africa). The sample consisted of three campuses: Campus 1 (38.3%), Campus 2 (50.5%), and Campus 3 (9.7%). Concerning gender, 61.8% of the participants identified as women, and 38.2% identified as men.

Measuring instrument

The SWLS was developed by Diener and colleagues (1985) and aimed to measure a single life satisfaction construct that could indicate levels of satisfaction with life throughout one's life span (Tomás et al., 2015). Participants are asked five questions (e.g. "The conditions of my life are excellent"). A seven-point Likert-type scale is used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Pavot and Diener (1993) confirmed the scale's reliability, reporting Cronbach's coefficient alphas ranging from 0.79 to 0.89.

Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using Mplus 8.6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2021). Before bias and invariance were tested, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to confirm the one-factor structure of the SWLS. Maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) was used in the CFA due to the small samples in some groups to supplement the item bias analyses. The following fit indices and cut-off scores were used to estimate the measurement model's goodness-of-fit: the traditional chi-square (χ^2) statistic, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). Values of 0.90 and above indicate an acceptable fit for CFI and TLI (Byrne, 2001). Regarding the RMSEA scores, various researchers suggest using a cut-off score below 0.05 as the 'golden rule of thumb' to indicate model fit; however, values between 0.05 and 0.08 are considered to be an acceptable fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Chen et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Steiger, 1989). Concerning SRMR, a cut-off value of 0.05 was used (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Differential item functioning (DIF) was used to test for the presence of **item bias** by using the *lordif* package (Choi et al., 2011) in *RStudio* (https://www.rstudio.com/). The following formulas were used and compared to test for uniform and non-uniform bias, using ordinal logistic regression to generate three likelihood-ratio χ^2 statistics (Choi et al., 2011):

Model 0: logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k$

Model 1: logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k + \beta_1 *$ ability

Model 2: logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k + \beta_1 *$ ability $+ \beta_2 *$ group

Model 3: logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k + \beta_1 *$ ability $+ \beta_2 *$ group $+ \beta_2 *$ ability $*$ group

Based on the formulas mentioned above, uniform bias can be indicated with a significant difference at $p < 0.01$ when comparing logistic models 1 and 2 (x^2_{12}; $df = 1$), and non-uniform bias, when comparing models 2 and 3 (x^2_{23} $df = 1$) (Choi et al., 2011). Total DIF is indicated with a significant difference at $p < 0.01$ when comparing models 1 and 3 (x^2_{13}; $df = 2$) (Choi et al., 2011). The magnitude of DIF can be quantified using the pseudo-McFadden R^2 statistic, which can be classified as either negligible (< 0.13), moderate (between 0.13 and 0.26), or large (> 0.26) (Zumbo, 1999). However, DIF can be under-identified by only using the pseudo-McFadden R^2 statistic (Jodoin & Gierl, 2001; Kim et al., 2007). Therefore, to identify uniform DIF, the difference in the coefficient from Models 1 and 2 was used – with differences of 10% indicating a practically meaningful effect (Crane et al., 2004; Maldonado & Greenland, 1993). Lower than 5% and even 1% thresholds are also considered (Crane et al., 2007). In this study, a threshold of 5% was considered.

Measurement invariance was investigated for three different groupings: (1) language (Afrikaans, Sesotho, and Setswana, three indigenous South African language groups), (2) campus (three campuses were included), and (3) gender (men and women). A multi-group analysis framework was used to test for the configural invariance model (analogous factor structure), metric invariance model (similar factor loadings), and scalar invariance model (similar intercepts). CFI and RMSEA values were used to indicate measurement invariance. CFI is considered a good fit with values > 0.90 and better if the values are > 0.95. Regarding RMSEA, cut-off values of 0.05 and 0.08 are considered acceptable (Van De Schoot, 2012). Changes in CFI (ΔCFI) were used as they are less susceptible to the effects of changes in *df* (Shi et al., 2019). A ΔCFI value (> -0.01; that is a worsening of the model fit according to CFI) between two nested models indicates that the added group constraints have led to a poorer fit; in other words, invariance has not been achieved, and the more constrained model is rejected. Additionally, it is essential to note that there are many small variances among groups regarding factor loadings or intercepts; therefore, partial measurement invariance (whether metric or scalar) can be achieved by freeing the loading or intercepts of items (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Preti et al., 2013; Van De Schoot et al., 2015).

Finally, the **internal consistency** of the SWLS was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients (McCrae et al., 2011; Revicki, 2014). Values where $\alpha \geq 0.70$ were considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). In addition, McDonald's omega was calculated and reported for a more accurate estimation of internal consistency (Cortina et al., 2020). Reliability coefficients ≥ 0.80 indicate good internal consistency (Kline, 2015).

Results

Factorial validity

Before DIF and invariance testing, the factorial validity of the SWLS was tested with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to determine the model's goodness-of-fit. Even though it is best practice to test alternative measurement models (Marsh et al., 1998), given the limited items of the SWLS and based on the various studies supporting the five-item SWLS measuring one underlying factor, a one-factor measuring model was tested in this study. Also, with only five items, two factors would have one just-identified factor (3 items) and another under-identified factor (2 items).

The results indicate that the unidimensional structure of the SWLS is deemed to be a good fit for the data (χ^2 = 806.844; *df* = 10; CFI = 0.964; TLI = 0.928; RMSEA = 0.086; SRMR = 0.035). The CFI value was the preferred index of choice to determine goodness-of-fit (Shi et al., 2019). Table 1 indicates the results for the standardised loadings of the items for the latent variables of the SWLS.

Table 1: Standardised factor loadings for the latent variables of the SWLS

Item	Item text	Loading	S.E.	*p*
Item 1	In most ways my life is close to my ideal	0.543	0.037	0.001
Item 2	The conditions of my life are excellent	0.831	0.024	0.001
Item 3	I am satisfied with my life	0.879	0.016	0.001
Item 4	So far I have gotten the important things I want in life	0.684	0.031	0.001
Item 5	If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	0.533	0.035	0.001

Notes: S.E. = standard error; all p-values < 0.001

Factor loadings (λ) can either be classified as high (0.70), medium (0.50), or small (0.30) (Shevlin et al., 1998). The results show that the factor loadings for the SWLS ranged from medium to high.

Item bias

DIF was used to determine the item bias of the SWLS. Uniform and non-uniform bias were tested across different language, campus, and gender groups. Table 2 indicates the DIF of the SWLS.

Table 2 indicates that Item 1 was problematic for language and campus groups, and Item 3 for language groups. No DIF was detected across gender groups. Table 2 shows that Item 1 has uniform, non-uniform and total bias, based on the likelihood-ratio χ^2 difference testing across models 1, 2 and 3 ($p < 0.01$). Figure 1 illustrates the bias present in Item 1 across the different language groups.

Table 2: Summary of DIF for the SWLS

Group	Item	x_{12}^2	x_{13}^2	x_{23}^2	β_1	R_{12}^2	R_{13}^2	R_{23}^2
Language	Item 1	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.2085	0.0673	0.0893	0.0220
	Item 2	0.7623	0.7867	0.5545	0.0030	0.0003	0.0011	0.0007
	Item 3	0.0000	0.0000	0.1010	0.0483	0.0135	0.0160	0.0025
	Item 4	0.6712	0.1448	0.0488	0.0020	0.0004	0.0036	0.0032
	Item 5	0.5904	0.7034	0.5706	0.0063	0.0005	0.0010	0.0005
Campus	Item 1	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.1201	0.0459	0.0627	0.0167
	Item 2	0.6982	0.8404	0.7035	0.0001	0.0004	0.0008	0.0004
	Item 3	0.1220	0.2405	0.5263	0.0102	0.0031	0.0041	0.0010
	Item 4	0.4245	0.7227	0.8363	0.0013	0.0013	0.0016	0.0003
	Item 5	0.0446	0.1706	0.9105	0.0051	0.0037	0.0039	0.0001
Gender	Item 1	0.0823	0.0202	0.0287	0.0052	0.0015	0.0038	0.0023
	Item 2	0.6606	0.8625	0.7482	0.0000	0.0001	0.0001	0.0000
	Item 3	0.9325	0.4037	0.1789	0.0000	0.0000	0.0008	0.0008
	Item 4	0.9949	0.9358	0.7158	0.0000	0.0000	0.0001	0.0001
	Item 5	0.0239	0.0772	0.8894	0.0004	0.0021	0.0021	0.0000

Notes: = chi-square of model 1 compared to model 2; x_{13}^2 = chi-square of model 1 compared to model 3; x_{23}^2 = chi-square of model 2 compared to model 3; β_1 = change in beta coefficient; R_{12}^2 = pseudo-Mcfadden R^2 of model 1 compared to model 2; R_{13}^2 = pseudo-Mcfadden R^2 of model 1 compared to model 3; R_{23}^2 = pseudo-Mcfadden R^2 of model 2 compared to model 3

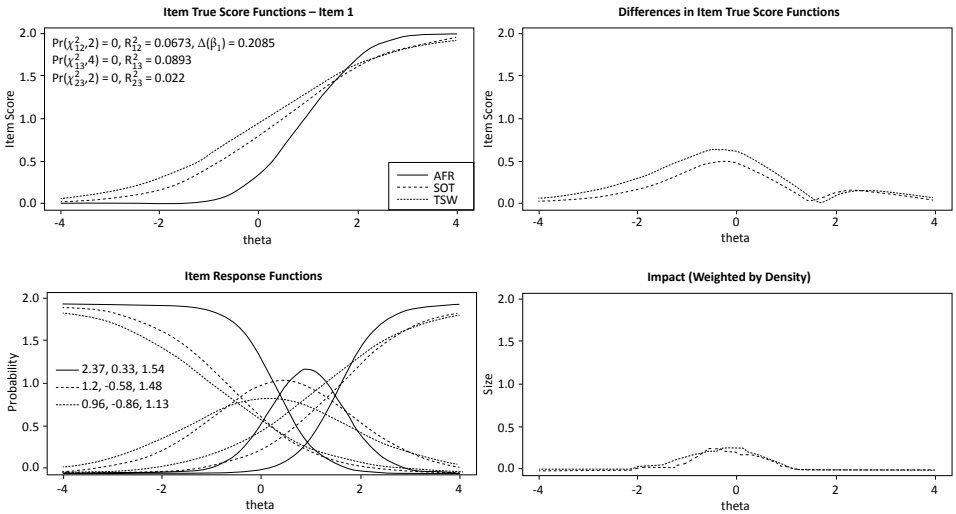

Figure 1: Graphical display of Item 1, which shows uniform and non-uniform DIF for language groups

The top left plot in Figure 1 indicates the item-true score functions based on group-specific item parameter estimates. The slope of the function for the Afrikaans group was significantly higher than that of the Sesotho and Setswana groups, indicating non-uniform DIF. The bottom left plot in Figure 1 compared the item response functions across the three language groups, which are noticeably different between the three language groups. The expected impact of DIF on scores is indicated by the top left plot in Figure 1 as the absolute difference between the item true-score functions (Kim et al., 2007). A difference can be seen at approximately = 0.50; however, the density-weighted impact (as indicated by the bottom right plot) can be interpreted as small. Even though the effect of bias can be regarded as small when taking the pseudo-McFadden R^2 statistics ($R^2 < 0.13$) into account, the change in beta coefficient is larger than 5% (= 20.85%), suggesting the effect is practically meaningful.

Item 1 was also problematic for campus groups. Based on the results in Table 2 and the plots in Figure 2, all likelihood-ratio χ^2 tests were statistically significant (< 0.01; < 0.01; < 0.01), which indicates the presence of both uniform and non-uniform DIF. Similar to the results for DIF between language groups, the results in Table 2 and the graphs in Figure 2 demonstrate that even though the impact of bias can be regarded as small (pseudo-McFadden R^2 statistics < 0.13), the change in the beta coefficient (= 12.01%) indicates that the impact of the bias has a practically meaningful effect.

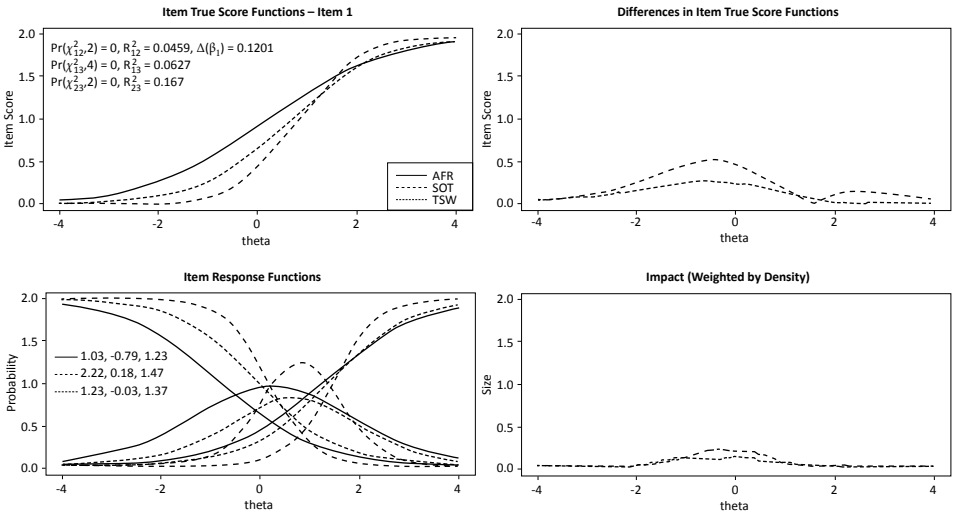

Figure 2: Graphical display of Item 1, which shows uniform and non-uniform DIF for campus groups

In addition, statistically significant bias was detected in Item 3 (Figure 3) across the different language groups, with significant likelihood ratio χ^2 tests when comparing Models 1 and 2 (< 0.01) and Models 1 and 3 (< 0.01), indicating mainly uniform bias. Noticeable differences between the language groups can be seen in the plots. However,

regarding the magnitude of these items, the density-weighted impact seen in the bottom right plot and pseudo-McFadden R^2 statistic values < 0.13 and Δβ1 coefficient smaller than 5% indicate that the significant practical effect is negligible.

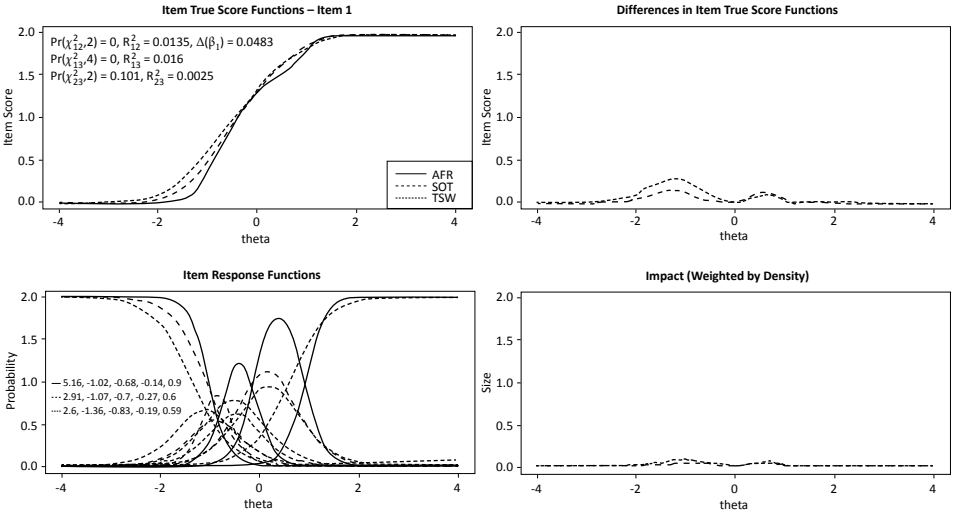

Figure 3: Graphical display of Item 3, which shows uniform DIF for language groups

Measurement invariance

Table 3 shows the measurement invariance across the language, campus, and gender groups included in this study.

Table 3: Summary of measurement invariance analysis for the SWLS

Group		*χ2*	*df*	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Language	Configural	52.85	20	0.962	—	0.102	—
	Metric	89.58	32	0.933	-0.029	0.106	0.004
	Scalar	178.36	44	0.843	-0.090	0.138	0.032
	Partial metric	60.67	31	0.965	0.003	0.078	-0.024
	Partial scalar	67.39	39	0.967	0.002	0.068	-0.010
Campus	Configural	37.29	15	0.975	—	0.076	—
	Metric	70.70	23	0.946	-0.029	0.090	0.014
	Scalar	154.54	31	0.861	-0.085	0.125	0.035
	Partial metric	47.84	22	0.971	-0.004	0.068	-0.008
	Partial scalar	50.28	25	0.972	0.001	0.063	-0.005
Gender	Configural	41.36	10	0.963	—	0.090	—

Group		*χ2*	*df*	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
	Metric	47.89	14	0.960	-0.003	0.079	-0.011
	Scalar	59.98	18	0.950	0.010	0.078	-0.001

Notes*: χ2* = chi-square; *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = Comparative fit index; ΔCFI = delta (change in) CFI; RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation; ΔRMSEA = delta (change in) RMSEA

First, configural invariance was tested. Table 3 indicates that the SWLS has configural invariance, with CFI scores ranging from 0.962 to 0.975, meaning that the scale consists of the same factor structure across all language, campus, and gender groups.

Concerning metric invariance, the results in Table 3 show that the SWLS has metric invariance across the gender groups (ΔCFI = -0.003) but not across the language (ΔCFI = -0.029) or campus groups (ΔCFI = -0.029). By releasing the intercept of Item 1 in the Afrikaans groups and Campus 2, partial metric invariance was achieved for the SWLS across the different language and campus groups.

Concerning scalar invariance, Table 3 indicates that the SWLS achieved scalar invariance across gender groups (ΔCFI = 0.010) but not across language (ΔCFI = -0.090) and campus groups (ΔCFI = -0.085). Therefore, to improve model fit, the intercepts of Item 1 and Item 3 were freed for the Afrikaans group to achieve partial scalar invariance. Similarly, partial scalar invariance was reached across different campus groups by releasing Items 1 and 5 intercepts for Campus 1 and Items 1 and 4 for Campuses 2 and 3.

Internal consistency

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated as a measure of internal consistency. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.83 was found for the SWLS, indicating an acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) (Nunnally, 1978). In addition, McDonald's omega (ω) was 0.83, showing good internal consistency (Kline, 2015).

Discussion

Essentially, any assessment used in a diverse and cross-cultural higher education institution must be tested and analysed to ensure the scale measures the same constructs across diverse groups to be considered fair and unbiased (Hill et al., 2013). Therefore, this study presented preliminary evidence on the psychometric properties of the Satisfaction with Life Scale for first-year university students at a specific South African university, with a particular focus on item bias and invariance (including configural invariance, metric invariance and scalar invariance) between specific language, campus and gender groups.

Before differential item functioning and invariance testing, confirmatory factor analysis was used to provide evidence for a one-factor structure. This indicates that satisfaction with life can be measured as one general factor (Diener et al., 1985).

Differential item functioning was used to test for uniform and non-uniform bias. Item bias was detected in both language and campus groups but not across gender groups. Item 1 ("In most ways my life is close to my ideal") was problematic for language

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and campus groups. Uniform bias was present between the Sesotho and Setswana groups, which indicates that the probability of a specific response from these two language groups was systematically higher or lower across all levels of endorsement (Swaminathan & Rogers, 1990; Teresi & Fleishman, 2007). However, non-uniform bias was present in the Afrikaans group, which indicates that at certain levels of endorsement, the relation between the Afrikaans group and the response to the item was dissimilar compared to the Sesotho and Setswana groups (Mellenbergh, 1989; Sireci & Rios, 2013). With regards to campus, the findings indicate that uniform bias is present between Campus 1 and 3, with non-uniform bias being present for Campus 2 – indicating that at specific levels of endorsement, the relation between Campus 2 and the response to the item was dissimilar compared to those for Campus 1 and 3 (Mellenbergh, 1989; Sireci & Rios, 2013).

In addition, uniform bias was observed in Item 3 ("I am satisfied with my life"). Even though this finding implies that the probability of a specific response to this item is found at all trait levels across the three language groups on a statistically significant level, based on the pseudo-McFadden R^2 statistic as well as the changes in beta coefficient, this impact was negligible and therefore not of practical significance (Crane et al., 2007; Teresi & Fleishman, 2007). No bias was detected for any of the SWLS items for gender groups.

Measurement invariance included testing for configural, metric, and scalar invariance across the different language, campus and gender groups included in this study (Preti et al., 2013). The results showed that the SWLS has *configural invariance* across the different language, campus, and gender groups, indicating that the same factor structure is present across the groups included in this study.

Regarding **metric invariance***,* the SWLS has metric invariance across gender groups but not across language and campus groups. When full invariance was not achieved, partial metric invariance was tested by assessing the factor structure of the SWLS based on changes in CFI (ΔCFI) (Clench-Aas et al., 2011). Partial metric invariance was achieved by freeing the loading of Item 1 in both the Afrikaans group and Campus 2. Although some parameters can vary across groups (rejected constraints), at least two intercepts and factor loadings should be equally constrained across groups to make valid inferences (Byrne et al., 1989; Laguna et al., 2017). Therefore, factor loadings can still be fairly compared across language and campus groups with partial metric invariance (Van De Schoot et al., 2012). Full metric invariance was achieved across the gender groups included in this study, which indicates that each item similarly contributes to the latent construct of the SWLS across gender groups (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016).

Evidence was found for **scalar invariance** across gender groups but not across language and campus groups; hence, partial scalar invariance was tested. Constraints were rejected in both language and campus groups. Concerning the language groups, the intercepts of both Item 1 and Item 3 were freed for the Afrikaans group to improve model fit. Regarding the campus groups, partial scalar invariance was achieved by releasing the intercepts of Item 1 and Item 5 for the Campus 1 group as well as Item 1 and Item 4 for Campuses 2 and 3. This implies that fair comparisons across language

and campus groups can still be made (Van De Schoot et al., 2012). Full scalar invariance was achieved across the gender groups, which indicates that the factor loadings and intercepts of the five items of the SWLS can be meaningfully compared across gender groups (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). These results are in line with other studies, where some items did not appear to be equivalent across cultures. More specifically, with regards to cross-cultural studies, variance was reported for Item 2, Item 3, Item 4 and Item 5 (Atienza González et al., 2016; Dimitrova & Domínguez, 2015; Whisman & Judd, 2016; Zanon et al., 2014).

Cronbach's alpha coefficients and McDonald's omega (ω) were used to test for the **internal consistency** (a measure of reliability) of the Satisfaction with Life Scale. The findings indicate a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.83 and McDonald's omega of 0.83, indicating that the Satisfaction with Life Scale is reliable.

Limitations and recommendations

The findings indicate that across the different language, campus, and gender groups included in the study, bias was detected in both Item 1 (language and campus groups) and Item 3 (language groups). In addition, evidence was provided for configural invariance across all groups but not metric and scalar invariance. As a result, partial, metric and scalar invariance was detected across language and campus groups (probably due to Item 1 being problematic). Although the SWLS has been validated across many countries, languages, and cultures, future researchers should validate the psychometric properties of the SWLS to ensure it is valid and reliable for use across different diverse groups and settings of university students. The present study serves as preliminary evidence of item bias and invariance of the SWLS. However, future research should focus on its differential prediction for different academic outcomes, such as test and academic performance, because the slope and intercept of relations still need to be determined (Berry 2015; Theron, 2006). Furthermore, future research could inform the nomological network of the SWLS by exploring its relationships to other variables related to student well-being, success, and goal commitment (Jonker et al., 2015; Van Lill et al., 2020).

Robust maximum likelihood (MLR) was used as the CFA measurement model's estimation technique and to test the SWLS's invariance based on the small sample sizes in this study. Even though MLR has been introduced into CFA models when the normality assumption of data distribution is moderately violated, as can be the case when using small sample sizes (Knief & Forstmeier, 2021), future studies with sufficient sample sizes could use a weighted least squares with mean- and variance adjusted (WLSMV) method of estimation when the data are of ordinal nature (see Li, 2016). Indeed, the results of the current partial measurement invariance might, with larger sample sizes in some groups, either reach the threshold of non-partial invariance or point out new nuanced differences in the interpretation of items between languages.

Practical implications

Globally, the multicultural nature of populations has become more salient (Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). For example, the increasing demographic diversity in the United

States has been well documented, specifically among the population that does not use English as their native or primary language (Nwosu et al., 2014; Pascarella, 2006). Liu et al. (2019) stipulate that literature regarding language diversity among college students in the United States is scarce and under-researched – the reason being that students with diverse language backgrounds are often combined in the discussion of low-income students, racial minorities, and other underrepresented student groups (Kanno & Cromley, 2013). In addition, non-native English speakers' cultural values and norms are not perfectly aligned with the English-only college environment (Liu et al., 2019).

Through the two mentioned examples, educators and researchers should be cautious when applying any instrument, in our case, the SWLS, to university settings without paying special attention to student diversity and testing for psychometric properties like item bias and invariance. Additionally, the current study only included Afrikaans, Sesotho, and Setswana language groups; therefore, future researchers should include English as a language group for cross-cultural comparisons.

On a practical level, psychologists and practitioners should take great care when applying concepts and instruments from Western countries without testing the applicability of those measures in a diverse setting. Without adequate testing, systematic measurement variability can cause several challenges, including flawed population forecasts, errors in hypothesis testing, planning and implementation of policies, and misguided research on discrepancies (Perkins et al., 2006). Instruments developed in other countries could either be culturally biased, produce inconsistent results when groups are compared, and might be unable to adequately measure a construct when the culture or language differs from the country of origin (Blokland, 2016; Moletsane, 2016; Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). Therefore, it is essential to ensure equivalent measurement before comparing groups or individuals to avoid ambiguous comparisons (Gregorich, 2006; Teresi & Fleishman, 2007).

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Ethics statement
The study was approved by the Ethics Committee, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS-REC) (Ethics no.: NWU-HS-2014-0165-A4).

Potential conflict of interest
The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Peer helpers at the forefront of mental health promotion at Nelson Mandela University: Insights gained during Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Student counselling centres are struggling to meet the demand for mental health services, which has intensified in recent years. This challenge calls for innovative ways to address the mental health needs of students. During the Covid-19 pandemic the peer helpers at Emthonjeni Student Wellness at Nelson Mandela University facilitated innovative psycho-educational workshops, virtually. In reflecting on our journey, we realise our peer helpers were at the forefront of mental health promotion initiatives at a time when many of our students were in dire need of support. The workshops sensitised students to the importance of their mental health. Furthermore, the content discussed in the workshops offered valuable insights and tips on how students could manage various challenges. These tips could be applied, by participating students, to improve their coping and overall well-being before their mental health deteriorated. These peer-led initiatives expanded our reach and capacity during a period of great stress brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, and they will continue to do so beyond the pandemic. This reflective article shares the details of our virtual workshops and the insights gained from the process.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19, online counselling, peer support, reflective practice, student affairs, student counselling, student mental health, well-being

RÉSUMÉ

Les centres de conseil aux étudiants éprouvent des difficultés à répondre à la demande croissante de services de santé mentale, qui s›est intensifiée ces dernières années. Ce défi exige des méthodes innovantes de répondre aux besoins des étudiants en matière de santé mentale. Pendant la pandémie de Covid-19, les assistants pairs du service Emthonjeni Student Wellness à l'université Nelson Mandela ont animé des ateliers psycho-éducatifs innovants, virtuellement. En réfléchissant à notre parcours, nous réalisons que nos assistants pairs étaient à l'avant-garde des initiatives de promotion de la santé mentale à un moment où de nombreux étudiants avaient un besoin urgent de soutien. Les ateliers ont sensibilisé les étudiants à l'importance de leur santé mentale. En outre, le contenu abordé dans ces ateliers a offert des connaissances précieuses et des conseils sur la façon dont les étudiants pouvaient gérer divers défis. Ces conseils pouvaient être appliqués par les étudiants participants afin d'améliorer leur capacité d'adaptation et leur bien-être général avant que leur santé mentale ne se détériore. Ces initiatives dirigées par des pairs ont élargi notre portée et notre capacité pendant une période de grande stress due à la pandémie de Covid-19, et elles continueront à le faire au-delà de la pandémie. Cet article réflexif présente les détails de nos ateliers virtuels et les enseignements tirés de ce processus.

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MOTS-CLÉS
Bien-être, conseil aux étudiants, conseil en ligne, Covid-19, œuvres estudiantines, santé mentale des étudiants, services étudiants, soutien entre pairs

Introduction

Student mental health has been of global concern in recent years (Macaskill, 2013). Student counselling centres have been battling to cope with the increased demand for mental health services (Lattie et al., 2019), and in some instances an increase in the complexity of mental illness (Williams et al., 2015). This challenge is observed in countries internationally (Brown, 2018; Oswalt et al., 2020; Lattie et al., 2019), of great concern given the importance of mental health in the overall well-being, quality of life and academic performance of students (Oswalt et al., 2020). It is, therefore, imperative that this challenge be addressed, to ensure that students in need of mental health services have access to support, to mitigate the impact mental health problems could have on their overall well-being and academic performance, as this may affect student success.

At many student counselling centres, the traditional mode of mental health support takes the form of individual counselling (Brown, 2018) offered by registered professionals (psychologists and counsellors). However, the individual counselling model does not seem sustainable, as it is unable to address the increased demand for services. Brown (2018) argues that if we are to reduce mental health problems, we need effective, scalable interventions that are attractive to students. In this article I argue that student peer helpers could play a valuable role in offering mental health promotion initiatives. I argue this based on the insights gained from peer-led interventions that the peer helpers at Emthonjeni Student Wellness, at Nelson Mandela University, implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic. This, in turn, could afford professional staff more time to attend to students in need of remedial intervention, and it could potentially reduce the number of students in need of individual counselling from professional staff.

Increased demand for mental health services at higher education institutions

Concerns for the mental health of students are on the rise (Brown, 2018; Macaskill, 2013), as the number of students presenting for mental health support at student counselling centres are increasing (Oswalt et al., 2020; Brown, 2018; Xiao, et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2015). There are numerous factors contributing to the increase in students presenting for mental health support. At a systemic level, broadened participation has increased enrolments of previously underrepresented groups, and consequently this may have increased mental health conditions amongst students to be similar to that of the general population (Macaskill, 2013). Students from previously underrepresented groups are often first-generation students (Tinto, 2012). As first-generation students, their adjustment difficulties are heightened by social factors such

as their educational backgrounds, family backgrounds, financial circumstances and even language barriers (Jehangir, 2010), which could make them more vulnerable to mental health problems (Macaskill, 2013).

Students' attitudes toward mental illness have also shifted. A study done by Eisenberg et al. (2012) found that stigma was not a barrier to students' help-seeking behaviour. This was supported by findings from a study done by Czyz et al. (2013), who found that only 12% of the students mentioned stigma as a barrier. The reduction in stigma has, therefore, seen a shift in help-seeking behaviours with more students being open to utilising counselling services (Oswalt et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015). From a developmental perspective, students are at an age where symptoms of mental health conditions often appear. Half of serious adult psychiatric illnesses, including depressive and anxiety disorders, start by age 14, with 75% presenting by age 25 years (Kessler et al., 2005). Some students, thus, enter the higher education environment with an existing diagnosis (Williams et al., 2015), or, as seen in our context at Emthonjeni Student Wellness, while symptoms may have been prevalent prior to enrolment, many students only present for treatment once they are enrolled as students due to the easy access they now have to counselling services compared to their hometowns/rural villages.

In spite of the increase in students presenting for mental health support, some students struggling with mental health conditions still do not seek professional support (Eisenberg et al., 2012; Oswalt et al., 2020) due to various barriers. Barriers to seeking treatment include a perception that their problems are not serious enough to warrant treatment (Brown, 2018; Czyz et al., 2013), a perceived lack of time (Czyz et al., 2013), a preference for self-management (Brown, 2018; Czyz et al., 2013) etc.. This suggests that the demand is probably underestimated as many students do not seek help (Brown, 2018). Even with some of these barriers prevalent, more students are reaching out for support.

Resources have not necessarily matched the increase in demand and consequently, student counselling centres are struggling to manage the increased demand for mental health services (Oswalt et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015). This challenge is exacerbated by the traditional one-on-one counselling primarily being offered at many student counselling centres. Generally, individual counselling is the most common form of support offered, but this format may not be able to reach the large numbers of students presenting for support. Alternative approaches and methods of delivery, therefore, need to be explored (Brown, 2018). One such alternative, I argue, is peer-led mental health support.

Peer-led mental health support initiatives

Peer-led support can expand the capacity for mental health support, and it can offer an alternative to interventions offered by professional staff (Byrom, 2018), which might be more attractive to students who are reluctant to speak to a professional. Some studies have found that young people prefer to talk to friends and family rather than professionals (Rickwood et al., 2005; Czyz et al., 2013). Friends are a major source of support to students (Williams et al., 2015), offering significant informal support to one

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another on a daily basis. Given the significant role friends and peers play in the lives of students, many higher education institutions offer formal peer-led support programmes.

Peer-led programmes, in the higher education context, generally take the form of peer mentoring and peer tutoring. Peer mentoring programmes are generally implemented as a means of improving retention (Collings et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2012), by assisting first-year students with their adjustment. Peer tutoring, on the other hand, aims to improve academic performance through support with course content (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). While these peer-led programmes tend to focus on first-year student adjustment and course content, other focus areas are also emerging. Formal peer-led mental health support is on the increase, either jointly developed with students, (Campbell et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2015), or completely student-led (Campbell et al., 2022), for example, being offered by student societies (Williams et al., 2015). This reflects the valuable role students themselves can play in mental health initiatives. Byrom (2018), for instance, evaluated a 6-part peer-led support group for depression, across multiple universities in England, and found that it improved the mental well-being of students who optimally participated in the group sessions offered. Peer-led mental health support initiatives could therefore be an effective alternative offered to students.

The Nelson Mandela University context

Nelson Mandela University (NMU) is a higher education institution in South Africa. The institution has seven campuses. Six of its campuses, including its main campus, are situated in Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape, with the seventh campus in George in the Western Cape. The institution, previously known as Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), opened on 1 January 2005, the result of a merger of three separate institutions, namely University of Port Elizabeth (UPE), PE Technikon, and the Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University (Vista PE) (NMU, 2022b). This merger was part of the transformation agenda of the higher education sector in a democratic South Africa (Jansen, 2004), which has also been met with significant transformation at the institution itself. The institution was officially renamed Nelson Mandela University on 20 July 2017 (NMU, 2022b). This name change has been significant to the university's identity, academic mission, and strategic priorities (NMU, 2022a).

Social justice is at the core of the institution's academic mission, as it strives to promote the public good in the service of society (NMU, 2022a). The institution is, therefore, very intentional in the role it needs to play in the development of South Africa through access to higher education, as guided by the national agenda. In line with this agenda, the institution has systemically increased access for first-generation students from quantile one to three schools, which was at 53% in 2020 (NMU Office for Institutional Strategy, 2021), most of these students being Black African students from low-income backgrounds. In 2022 a total of 32,472 students were enrolled at the university, 83% being Black African, 9% Coloured, 8% White, and 1% Indian (NMU Office for Institutional Strategy, 2022). The institution also appreciates that access needs to be accompanied by success and subsequently extensive support is offered to facilitate

the academic success of all students gaining access. A range of support strategies is prioritised including holistic psychosocial and mental health support.

Emthonjeni Student Wellness (Nelson Mandela University)

Emthonjeni Student Wellness, formerly known as the Student Counselling, Career and Development Centre, is part of the Learning and Teaching Collaborative for Success (LT Collab). We offer psychological services aimed at alleviating psychological distress, enhancing student wellness, improving academic performance, and optimising mental health. These services include assessments, individual counselling, group counselling, psycho-educational workshops, and projects in collaboration with our internal and external stakeholders. All registered students, from our seven campuses, have free access to our services. Additionally, we offer career counselling to both registered and prospective students (at a cost) (NMU Emthonjeni Student Wellness, 2020).

Our services focus on a broad range of interventions that include remedial, developmental, and preventative interventions. Figure 1 illustrates the spectrum of services we offer:

Remedial Preventative Developmental

Figure 1: The continuum of services offered at Emthonjeni Student Wellness

As seen in Figure 1, we offer remedial interventions on the one end of the continuum, to developmentally focused interventions at the other extreme, also including preventative interventions along the spectrum (NMU Emthonjeni Student Wellness, 2020). Our remedial services aim to alleviate psychological distress/symptoms of mental illness and to improve functioning. Our remedial services include individual counselling sessions and therapeutic group counselling sessions, all offered by our professional staff (i.e. registered psychologists and counsellors). It could also include referral for pharmacological intervention and/or hospitalization. For our preventative work we offer a range of psycho-educational initiatives such as psycho-educational workshops, e-pamphlets, radio talks etc. These initiatives aim to promote overall wellness through these psycho-educational platforms, giving it a mental health promotion focus. Our developmental initiatives focus on the development of the student to enhance graduate attributes and student success. Our peer help programme, for example, has a major developmental focus in terms of the development of graduate attributes of our peer helpers themselves, in preparation for the world of work.

While our services include the spectrum of interventions illustrated in Figure 1, we are, like many other student counselling centres globally, experiencing a greater demand for mental health support that requires remedial intervention. To meet this

demand, our primary model of support has been individual counselling offered by one of our registered psychologists/counsellors. Like many other student counselling centers we, too, are battling to meet this demand, which requires us to be innovative with our limited resources. To expand our reach and capacity, we also offer peer-led support through our Emthonjeni peer help programme, specifically in our preventative and development initiatives.

Peer-led psycho-educational initiatives at Emthonjeni Student Wellness during Covid-19

As mentioned, most of our students are first-generation students from low-income backgrounds. As first-generation students, they experience a range of challenges, which make them vulnerable to higher levels of stress/depression (Stebleton et al., 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic brought additional stressors to many of our students who were already experiencing a range of challenges. As coordinator of our Emthonjeni peer help programme I wanted to expand our reach through our peer helpers during the national lockdown brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, as our peer helpers shared in the student experience and they had greater access to students (via social media platforms), at the time.

Emthonjeni Student Wellness has a rich history of peer helping. However, the Covid-19 pandemic brought challenges to the role peer helpers played prior to the pandemic as well as our training practices. Prior to the lockdown, peer helpers were physically facilitating some of our psycho-educational workshops and they were involved in projects such as our Career Stall at the university's open day to prospective students, face-to-face. As activity on campus was suspended, we had to go back to the drawing board to rethink how our peer helpers could offer support to our student community in this new context. We also had to adjust our training material as we moved the training to a virtual platform (i.e. Microsoft (MS) Teams). The model we used to select our peer helpers guided my decision-making through this process.

As the coordinator of the programme, I adopted the model for intentional peer mentoring proposed by McConney and Fourie-Malherbe (2022) when I started this role. Their proposed model for intentional peer mentoring underscores selection practices aimed at recruiting peers that will be intentional in their role, peers who care about the students they support, who are genuinely interested in helping fellow students and who are open and empathetic (McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2022). This is what we did during our selection process. The intentionality highlighted by McConney and Fourie-Malherbe (2022) also guided me throughout the training and planning phases. We included the primary themes of our existing training, but the content had to be shortened and some group activities had to be replaced with activities suited to the virtual platform (e.g. personal reflective exercises). The following themes were included in our peer help core training: the role of the peer helper within the context of ubuntu; listening and responding with empathy; the decision-making process; ethics and referral practices; and facilitation skills.

During these trying times, it was imperative for us to offer support to students that would assist them in navigating the complex challenges they were confronting in our efforts to minimise the adverse effects these may have had on their mental health and academic performance. As coordinator, I had to venture into unchartered territory, and I appreciated that I needed support along this journey as I attempted to adjust our programme to be relevant and responsive to the Covid-19 context. I partnered with our newly recruited peer helpers as we attempted to support our students. We had to think out of the box to create a programme that would be suited to a context that was new and volatile, marked by great stress and pain, and one that challenged how our peer helpers previously offered support. Unfortunately, only half of our 50 newly recruited peer helpers could get on board, due to their own struggles with connectivity, remote learning, and other challenges.

Responding to the context, the peer helpers and I created a series of psycho-educational workshops that would provide participating students the opportunity to engage in topics that could affect their wellness and mental health; and to offer tips on how they could manage the stressors they were confronting. Figure 2 shows the list of workshops we offered:

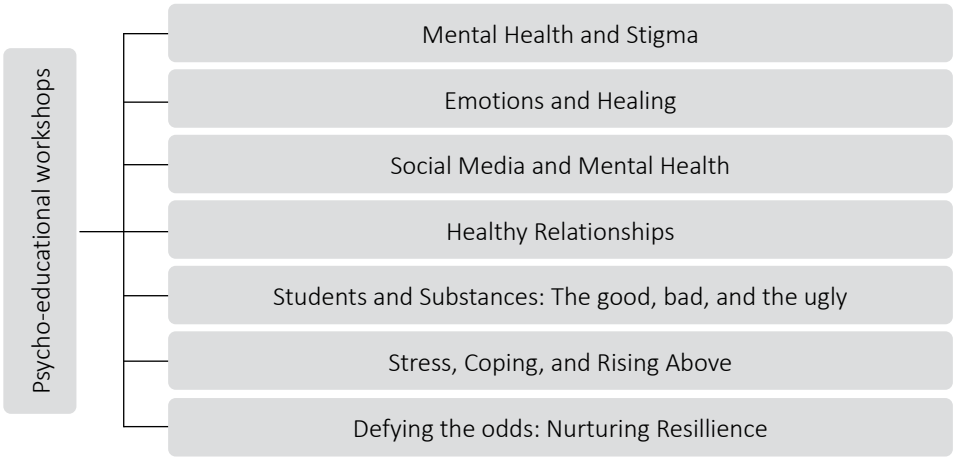

Figure 2: Psycho-educational workshops offered by the peer helpers

We offered a total of seven workshops. Each workshop focused on a specific theme. The workshops were offered via MS Teams on Mondays from 15:00 to 16:30. All the workshops were led by a group of four to five peer helpers, co-facilitated by the programme coordinator. The workshops were well attended: the number of participants ranged from 25 to 35 for each workshop. We offered each workshop twice, once per semester.

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Workshop 1: Mental health and stigma

While studies have shown a decline in mental health stigma amongst students, and we have also observed this trend at Emthonjeni Student Wellness, a level of stigma persists. Furthermore, while the students may not hold strong biases, stigma amongst their families and in their communities may affect their help-seeking behaviour. In our planning session, one of our peer helpers articulated the following: "We can have all the initiatives in the world, but if we do not address the stigma that is still attached to mental illness we may find that the students who are most in need of these services may not access it". This peer helper then took the initiative to develop workshop material on this topic. In collaboration with other peer helpers and supervision from me, we finalised material for a workshop on *Mental Health and Stigma*.

The goals of the workshop were to explore:

- the prevailing stigma around mental illness,
- the impact of stigma on students' willingness to access support,
- myths and facts on mental health and mental illness, and
- information and statistics on mental illness to sensitise students to the prevalence thereof.

Workshop 2: Emotions and healing

The conversation for our workshop *Emotions and Healing* was initiated by one of the peer helpers. She was particularly concerned about how, from her personal observations, males struggle with emotional expression and the impact this has on their relationships. Her observation has also been underscored by sociologists who have found gender differences in both the experience and expression of emotions (Simon, 2020). In our planning phase, we broadened the focus of the workshop. We expanded the focus to include the complexity associated with emotional regulation and expression, and how this interplays with mental health. However, we still included a section on the role gender plays in emotional expression.

The goals of the workshop were to explore:

- emotions and mental health,
- barriers to expressing emotions,
- gender differences in the expression of emotions,
- the relationship between emotions and healing from painful experiences,
- the importance of emotional expression, and
- healthy ways of expressing emotions.

Workshop 3: Social media and mental health

Social media has become an integral part of modern-day interaction and engagement. As young adults, students are generally very active on social media platforms, and these mediums have become significant influences on how they live their lives, without critically reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages thereof. In one of our planning sessions, one of our peer helpers stated the following: "I think our generation is the most depressed one of all time". This was a very powerful statement that we then explored.

In this discussion, it emerged that social media could be a primary factor influencing the perceived levels of depression that the peer helper was referring to.

Research findings, too, are highlighting the link between social media and mental health. Lin et al. (2016) found social media use to be significantly associated with increased depression amongst young adults. Similarly, Primack et al. (2017) found the use of multiple social media platforms was associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression amongst young adults, while the findings from Lattie et al. (2019) underscored the contribution of social media to the mental health challenges of students, in particular. These research findings suggest there may be some accuracy to the peer helper's observation. Through my discussions with the peer helpers and the literature on the topic, I became more appreciative of the impact of social media on student's mental health and thought it important to start this conversation with our broader student community. We had to tread with caution as we could not deny the value of these platforms. Lattie et al. (2019) propose that interventions aim at distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy use. This is what we set out to do.

The goals of the workshop were to explore:

- social media use amongst students,
- the impact of social media on students' mental health,
- social media as platforms for expression,
- distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy social media use, and
- tips on navigating social media platforms.

Workshop 4: Healthy relationships

Family-related concerns are a primary problem our students present with. Figure 3 on the next page shows a breakdown of the top ten presenting problems recorded from individual counselling sessions offered in 2021:

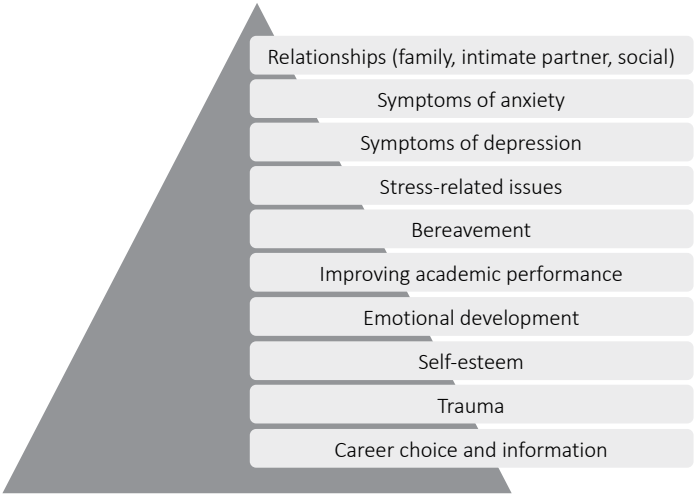

Figure 3: Emthonjeni Student Wellness: Top 10 presenting problems for 2021

Source: NMU Emthonjeni Student Wellness (2022)

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Our annual statistics from 2021 showed that relationship challenges were the primary presenting problem, followed by symptoms of anxiety and depression (NMU Emthonjeni Student Wellness, 2022). In many instances, the relationship challenges contribute to the symptoms of depression and anxiety. Family distress, more specifically, is a major source of distress for our students. However, this does not seem unique to our context. A study by Xiao et al. (2017) found that family distress is also increasing amongst students in the United States.

For many of the students being at a residential university, like ours, offers an opportunity to physically separate from stressful home circumstances and some space to better cope with family distress. However, during the Covid-19 lockdowns students were "stuck" at home, confronted with their challenging family realities daily. Some students struggled to cope with being back in their family environment for a prolonged period. The peer helpers and I thought it important to create a platform to discuss relationship challenges and to offer tips on how students could manage these. We were cognisant that relationship challenges amongst students are not limited to the family context and decided to introduce a broader workshop, namely *Healthy Relationships.*

The goals of the workshop were to explore:

- healthy vs unhealthy relationships,
- the interpersonal dynamics of relationships,
- challenges in relationships with intimate partners, friends and family, and
- tips on improving relationships and managing relationship difficulties.

Workshop 5: Students and substances

Substance use related problems are high in universities, but many students do not recognise the need for supportive interventions or seek support (Caldeira et al., 2009). While students may not recognise the need for support (Caldeiera et al., 2009), substance use amongst students is associated with numerous negative outcomes such as poorer academic performance and increased risk of committing and experiencing sexual assault (Welsh, Shentu & Sarvey, 2019). During the Covid-19 lockdown, I observed an increase in cannabis use amongst students, which made me concerned about the risks involved in excessive substance use as a coping mechanism under the stressful Covid-19 conditions and lockdown restrictions. After raising my concerns with the peer helpers, we agreed to initiate a workshop on *Students and Substances: The good, bad, and ugly.*

The goals of the workshop were to explore:

- students and their use of substances,
- substance use as a coping mechanism,
- substances and students' mental health, and
- ways of managing substance use/misuse.

Workshop 6: Stress, coping, and rising above

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the student experience in numerous ways. Academically, students had to rapidly adapt to the online learning experience. In the South African context, this posed massive challenges to many institutions as

large proportions of the student population lacked access to mobile devices, data connectivity, electricity, water, and conducive study spaces, which served as barriers to remote learning (NMU Office for Institutional Strategy, 2021). In the Nelson Mandela University context, this was very significant, given the high number of our students who come from low-income backgrounds. Some students had to navigate challenges with online learning amid the threat of infection with the virus, illness, and death of loved ones, and other personal, family, social, and/or financial challenges. Students had to cope with these challenges whilst being physically separated from their friends, who often serve as a primary source of support to them.

During these challenging times, the peer helpers and I thought it important to impart knowledge that would assist our students in coping with the challenges at hand. We introduced a workshop, *Stress, Coping and Rising Above*, which explored coping with stress in the Covid-19 context.

The goals of the workshop were to explore:

- what stress is,
- stressors confronting students amid the Covid-19 pandemic, and
- ways of managing stress.

Workshop 7: Defying the odds: Nurturing resilience

Given the magnitude of disruption, stress, and losses brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, we wanted to include a workshop that brought hope to our students. We wanted to tap into many of our students' resilience, which has carried them through previous adverse events. We wanted to encourage our students to not become despondent but to rather persevere against the odds. Thus, we included a workshop on resilience.

The goals of the workshop were to explore:

- what resilience is,
- what the characteristics of resilient individuals are,
- resilience in the Covid-19 context,
- tips on how students could nurture their resilience, and
- the power of resilience.

Students' reflections on our workshops

In reflecting on the psycho-educational workshops we offered during the Covid-19 pandemic, we realised that the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic offered an opportunity for innovation and creativity in our efforts to serve our students. The workshops we introduced helped us strengthen our peer help programme and our peer-led mental health promotion initiatives, in particular. Anecdotal feedback from students suggests that the content discussed assisted students in two ways: (1) they become more aware of the importance of promoting their own mental health and; (2) they gained insights and tips on how to manage life challenges that could have a negative impact on their mental health. The following quotations are reflections from participating students.

One workshop attendee reflected on the following benefit from attending the *Mental Health and Stigma* workshop:

> *The workshop was very informative more especially because mental illness is being ignored by many people and cultures. Joining the session helped me a lot because now I know that if someone next to me is having problems regarding mental health then we can recommend that she/he can see counsellor. I have learned that mental health is not just a disorder but it can cause harm to an individual if not treated or if judged. If I see any change in my life about my mental health I will have to take initiative to get help. I will be checking my sleeping patterns, eating patterns and my behaviours in general.*

The above quoted student had become sensitised to the importance of her mental health and that of others, and to address any mental health challenges timeously in the event of symptoms being observed. Another attendee also echoed that she gained a greater appreciation for her mental health and how she can nurture it. She stated:

> *I've learnt that my mental health is very important and I must prioritise it. I must not allow stigma from people to prevent me from seeking help or talking about what is bothering me.*

Students attending the *Emotions and Healing* workshop were sensitised to the role that emotions can play in their mental health. One student reflected the following:

> *I've learnt that emotional healing is important even though it is a long process, but its good so that you can be healthy mentally.*

Another student reflected:

> *For me it has been an eye opener on how emotions can affect one's mental health. I found it very interesting.*

Other students from the *Emotions and Healing* workshop reflected that they had gained insight on how to better manage their emotions. One student stated:

> *I was reminded of some really valuable points about emotional healing. Forgiveness is key, even though it takes time. Emotions are okay to accept, and this process is actually necessary. Going forward I will work on forgiveness.*

Another student reflected the following:

> *It was very informative. I've learnt a lot on how to deal with my emotions and I believe from now on I will deal with it in a better and more mature way.*

Students attending the *Healthy Relationships* workshop also reflected that they had gained insights on how to better manage their relationship challenges, as underscored by the following 2 reflections from students:

One student stated:

> *I felt I related much to it based on its content and it's really fitting especially to students because you find that in most cases the root of most problems or challenges come from relationships. The workshop triggered me in a good way because it would allow me to analyse where my weakest points were in relationships and how to tackle them in a good way.*

Another student said:

> *I took away that sometimes our parents/caregivers have no clue of what they are doing either, all they know and have grown accustomed to is how they were raised. So, we should approach family relationships with a little more grace. We should not try to change people in our families but rather accept them for who they are.*

From the insights quoted, the anecdotal reflections support our reflections as facilitators, that participating students were sensitised to the importance of nurturing their mental health and gained insights/tips on how to manage challenges that may negatively impact their mental health. These workshops underscored the importance of mental health promotion initiatives in our efforts to address the increasing demand for mental health support amongst students; and the role that student peers can play in this regard. If we empower our peer helpers to offer more mental health promotion initiatives, we could afford our professional staff more time to respond to the demand for remedial mental health support. Brown (2018) and Czyz et al. (2013) underscore the reluctance of some students to seek professional help due to a perception that their problems may not be serious enough to warrant treatment. Peer-led workshops, like the ones we offered, could be a more attractive alternative to these students and others who may be reluctant to speak to a professional. Furthermore, by including the student voice (that of the peer helpers) we created content that was student-friendly and relevant, and it was implemented by peers who could relate and share experiences. As the programme coordinator, I became more appreciative of the value of the student's voice, both in terms of content creation and implementation and the power of collaborating with students.

The way forward

We created the topics covered in the workshops in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. They will remain relevant post-Covid-19, as these themes reflect challenges that students generally grapple with. We will adjust the content as we go along (e.g. the *Stress, Coping, and Rising Above* and the *Defying the odds: Nurturing Resilience* workshops will speak to these topics more generally rather than drawing to the Covid-19 context). As we return to our university physically, we will initially take a blended approach to offering our workshops (i.e. offer it virtually and face-to-face). However, our initial experience, since returning to campus, indicates our students prefer to join our workshops virtually. This seems to be influenced by the distance between the various campuses and the busy schedules of students. Joining virtually affords students from all campuses to join without having to travel, and the convenience of joining from their

preferred locations. We are sharing our initiatives in the interest of other institutions who may benefit from similar initiatives. These initiatives should not be hard to replicate, provided the institution has a group of intentional peer leaders and a coordinator driving the programme.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 context brought new challenges to student counselling centres which were already struggling to address the mental health needs of students. We had to be innovative in responding to the mental health needs of students remotely, at a time when many students were vulnerable due to the changes, uncertainty, and stress brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. In navigating this challenge, the Emthonjeni Student Wellness peer helpers and I saw the opportunity for innovation to offer mental health promotion initiatives to our students. In partnering with our student peer helpers, we expanded our peer-led mental health promotion initiatives and in doing so we expanded our capacity to meet the demand for psychological services. Our journey has helped us strengthen our peer help programme and it underscored the power of collaborating with students. As coordinator of the programme, I hope that by sharing our journey and the insights gained from the process, we highlight the valuable role that student peers can play in supporting fellow students and how they can be at the forefront of mental health promotion initiatives.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the Emthonjeni Student Wellness peer helpers 2020/21 for their passion to serve fellow students, and the great contributions they made to the programme.

Ethics statement

In this article the author reflects on her process of creating and implementing mental health promotion workshops, in collaboration with student peer helpers. This is a personal reflection, and ethical clearance was not required. Some reflections from participating students have been included as anecdotal feedback on how participating students benefitted from participation. Identifying information from the student reflections has been kept confidential.

Potential conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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CAMPUS REPORT

IASAS turns 10! – Birthday celebrations in Rome in July 2023

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The International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) recently celebrated its momentous 10-year anniversary, marking a decade of impactful contributions to the field of student affairs and services worldwide. This milestone served as an opportunity to announce its 7th Global Summit in Korea in May 2024 and to reflect on the organisation's accomplishments, recognise the progress made, and set ambitious goals for the future. LUMSA, the Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta, situated at the Tiber in Rome, Italy, was a fitting site for this occasion. The event was generously supported by the European University College Association (EUCA). Professor Francesco Bonini, the Rector of LUMSA, hosted the 10-year anniversary celebrations and welcomed the guests.

Professor Rikke Toft Nørgård, professor of Educational Design and Technology in the School of Education at Aarhus University, Denmark, offered a most inspiring keynote address, challenging the attendees to project a plausible future and imagine a "preposterous one", using Baxter's futures cone to encourage the attendees to think further, deeper and "wilder". Nørgård was followed by Dr Brett Perozzi of the USA and Dr Birgit Schreiber of South Africa and Germany. Perozzi mapped the internationalization of the future university and Schreiber discussed issues around leadership in complexity. Complex contexts require agile and dynamic leadership that listens, learns, and deeply appreciates the context within which the university operates.

Prof. Olga Dietlin, USA and Ukraine, highlighted the role of Student Affairs in war-torn Ukraine and was followed by Prof. Maria Cinque of LUMSA, Italy, who shared the impact of service learning on global citizenship. The president of the Collegi Universitari de Merito, CCUM, Prof. Vincenzo Salvatore of Italy and Prof Paulo Ferraz of Portugal offered case studies of how students are supported in their contexts.

Professors Patrizia Lombardi and Giacomo Di Capua of Turin, Italy, discussed the role of universities as agents of change, and Gian Luca Giovannucci and Mariagrazia Melfi of EUCA in Italy, discussed their model of tutoring, mentoring and coaching at the halls of residence across Italy.

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Since its formal chartering in Belgium a decade ago, IASAS has been instrumental in fostering global collaboration and knowledge exchange among its 1,500 members in seven world regions and 95 countries across the world. IASAS has grown exponentially, expanding its membership base and strengthening its global presence. The association has become a vibrant and inclusive community, bringing together professionals from diverse backgrounds and cultures who share a common passion for supporting student success.

IASAS's 10-year anniversary celebration recognised a series of special events and initiatives. These included a flagship international biennial global summit, student leader global summits, virtual meetings and panel discussions, webinars and various research projects and publications. These activities provided a platform for members to reflect on the organisation's journey, exchange ideas, and envision the future of student affairs and services.

Over the past 10 years, the association has organised numerous conferences, workshops, and seminars, enabling professionals to connect, learn from each other, and share good practices. These opportunities have not only enriched the professional development of individuals but have also resulted in the implementation of innovative programmes and services in educational institutions around the world. Research and scholarship have been at the forefront of IASAS's activities during the past decade (www.iasas.global/research). The association has consistently encouraged its members to engage in rigorous research, evaluate programmes, and contribute to the body of knowledge in student affairs and services. Through its support for research, publication opportunities, and research-focused events, IASAS has facilitated the creation and dissemination of evidence-based practices, further solidifying the field's foundation.

The 10-year anniversary also allowed IASAS to reflect on its role as an advocate for the profession. Inclusivity, diversity, and social justice have been core values embraced by IASAS since its inception. The association has actively promoted the development of inclusive environments on campuses, encouraging professionals to foster a sense of belonging and celebrate diversity among students. By providing resources, training opportunities, and forums for discussion, IASAS has emboldened its members to address social justice issues and promote equitable educational experiences for all students.

Looking forward, IASAS has set ambitious goals for the next decade. The association aims to further expand its reach and impact by continuing to foster collaboration, supporting research and scholarship, advocating for the profession, and promoting diversity and inclusion. This IASAS 10-year birthday celebration received a lot of birthday wishes and the participants will meet again at the Global Summit in South Korea in May 2024 (www.iasas.global/globalsummit2024).

The birthday wishes can be viewed at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/153h2BSHwxxF4Shge9Z4pcpgvRTw_E0mt/view

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CAMPUS REPORT

IASAS Student Leaders Global Summit in Rome: Actioning the SDGs

Kathleen 'Kat' Callahan[1]

The 5th IASAS Student Leader Global Summit (SLGS) was held in Rome, Italy from July 13 to 15. Forty selected students from twenty countries attended and participated in educational sessions and working groups. Ailish Smith, a student from Ireland commented, "Being in Rome for the IASAS SLGS when Rome was experiencing record temperatures showed me that we are past the point of urgency to achieve sustainability, we are in an emergency." It is global issues that bring us together for one purpose.

Educational sessions at the SLGS ranged from universities as change agents, digital citizenship, and service learning. Students were put into small groups that selected one of UNESCOs Agenda 2030 sustainable development goals (SDG). They were tasked with creating a micro-campaign focusing on one SDG within a community of their choice in which at least one student has a personal connection. Connecting other elements within the system, they created a system map and an accompanying stakeholder map to ensure complete understanding of their selected issue and community. After establishing feedback loops and polarity of connections, they identified two to three leverage points that the group would be able to plan an intervention, but only an intervention in which the students would be able to access. Therefore, the eight micro-campaigns completed at the SLGS would be actionable and possibly replicable in communities around the world by university students.

The groups addressed SDGs 2 (zero hunger), 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 6 (clean water and sanitation), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate action), and 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). Students identified communities in South Africa, Ukraine, the United States, Norway, and Zimbabwe. Many of the campaigns directly involved institutions of higher education, student organisations, and surrounding communities to make sustainable change. Samuel Kaimenyi, secretary general from KCA university in Kenya discussed his experience working on SDG 5, gender equality. "I am now motivated to implement a project aimed at providing affordable recyclable sanitary products to women and girls from my informal settlements area back home. This issue is particularly close to my heart as I have seen firsthand the challenges that women in these marginalized communities face when it comes to accessing menstrual hygiene products."

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Overall, knowledge and content only get us so far in this world. It often is the relationships we build with one another that truly changes our mindsets and our ability to see past our own life experience. The students had an opportunity to build their own relationships. Alessandro Marsh, a student from South Africa stated, "Initially I thought the friendship at the summit was a welcome by-product of our project. Instead I realized that that it was its lifeblood." This is a testament to the quality of students blended with topics of the global summit to create this context for student growth and development in Rome.

Bhavika Vohra, a student from the United Arab Emirates reflected that "Through thought-provoking discussions, immersive workshops, and valuable connections with like-minded individuals, we were brought together to advocate for responsible practices aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. United by our shared vision and determination, we were inspired to build a future where responsible and sustainable practices become the norm, leaving a lasting impact on our planet and paving the way for a better world for generations to come." The student leader global summit will continue to challenge students in the future to confront current global concerns and address issues of society that impact us all. University students are both the leaders and active followers that future generations will depend on to change the world.

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Book review

Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions by P. Tabensky & S. Matthews (Eds.) (2015). Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Reviewed by Ronelle Carolissen[1]

The question of transformation and more, recently, decolonisation, of South African higher education institutions directly challenges untransformed institutional cultures in higher education institutions. Transformation-resistant institutions continue to strew disproportionate barriers for students marginalized by social identities such as race, gender, class and disability. Despite its 2015 production, Tabensky and Matthew's book, *Being at Home*, is as compelling today as it was then. It provides a thoughtful and critical philosophical and theoretical exploration of what institutional culture means and how it may contribute to an understanding of the purpose of higher education locally, and beyond.

The book is divided into three parts consisting of 13 chapters. The first part comprises three chapters in which conceptual concerns related to the overarching focus of the book are explored. While I will not detail the content of each chapter, Louise Vincent's first chapter makes a pertinent point central to the book. Her argument that changing institutional cultures depends on telling different stories about institutions is key. This, she argues, can interrupt the reproduction of social injustice, and make the taken for granted "strange" by producing alternate and multiple narratives about institutions. It assumes the telling of such stories from the experiences of marginalized social locations, who traverse higher education institutions. The concepts of collective memory, understandings of "home" and whiteness in relation to institutional culture are explored in this section in nuanced ways.

The second part consists of four chapters, all case studies drawn from one institution, Rhodes University. Authors explore core philosophical and theoretical tensions that arise from transformation imperatives in a seemingly untransformed institution (at the time). These chapters grapple with "unconditional hospitality", race and power concealed under a "veil of politeness", the challenges of heteronormativity for queer staff and students, and of attracting next generation academics. While all the chapters in this section are required reading, Thando Njovane's chapter remains captivating after numerous readings since I first read it in 2015. She unveils politeness as keeping institutional racism intact in the academy and provides a damning critique of

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the concept of "tolerance", so well-loved by many academics, as maintaining the status quo.

The third part consists of six chapters that consider the implications of this work for higher education locally and globally. In this section, a selection of emerging and well-established local and international authors reflects on a reimagined university that may be hospitable to all, and in which institutional cultures are unlearned and reimagined. As an example, Nigel Gibson, adopting a Fanonian lens, argues for a radical humanities which emphasizes the idea of the university as functioning for the public good with less emphasis on the university as a neoliberal factory for the job market. A radical humanities is one which focuses on creating spaces where marginalized voices that have systemically been erased from public view, are reinstated and knowledge is produced from the margins to develop new forms of critical consciousness.

This book still contributes significantly to understanding institutional cultures in universities. It was published just before the #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall protests that fundamentally brought into view the failures of hegemony in neoliberal higher education institutions. The book also serves as a model of how to include local and international, established, and emerging researchers. One potential shortcoming of Tabensky and Matthews' book is its focus on one historically white institution. It may be interesting to do similar explorations about institutional cultures at historically black institutions. This seems to be a core shortcoming in other books, such as Pattman & Carolissen (2018), who despite expanding the discussion on transformation to nine South African universities, likewise did not include historically black universities.

Tabensky and Matthews' book is a must read for all who are interested in debates on transformation and decolonisation in higher education since the themes it captures transcend the case study of Rhodes University in nuanced and thought-provoking ways.

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Book review

Crossing borders, bridging cultures: The narratives of global scholars by U. Gaulee, K. Bista, B. Zhang & B. Schreiber (Eds.) (2023). Baltimore, USA: STAR Scholars.

Reviewed by Patricia C. Timmons[1] & Rajendra Bista[2]

In an increasingly interconnected world, the importance of understanding and engaging with diverse cultures and perspectives cannot be overstated. As educators, researchers, and students strive to navigate the complexities of academic life in an ever-changing landscape, stories of resilience, adaptation, and growth are both inspiring and instructive. *Crossing Borders, Bridging Cultures: The Narratives of Global Scholars* provides a valuable and timely resource in this regard, offering a collection of firsthand accounts of international scholars as they traverse the boundaries of cultures, languages, and academic environments. The edited volume, comprising 20 chapters, is skillfully compiled by Uttam Gaulee, Krishna Bista, Bo Zhang, and Birgit Schreiber, all of whom have extensive experience in international education and research.

The book begins with a poignant reflection on the notion of 'un/mooring', exploring the dual sense of attachment and detachment that often accompanies individuals as they move between cultures and academic spaces. This theme resonates throughout the book, as the subsequent chapters delve into various aspects of the international scholars' experiences, such as workplace cultures, relationships with colleagues, and the challenges of studying or working in a foreign language. Notably, the book emphasizes the power of small gestures, such as hugs, in fostering a sense of belonging and community among scholars, regardless of their cultural background.

One of the strengths of this collection lies in the diversity of the authors' experiences and voices, as they hail from a wide array of countries and academic disciplines. This is evident in chapters such as 'A Lotus Flower from the East', which offers insights into the personal journey of a Chinese scholar in a Western academic environment, and 'Moscow Never Sleeps', which shares the unique perspective of a Russian scholar navigating the intricacies of a bustling metropolitan city. The book also addresses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on academic life, with chapters such as 'Pandemic Abroad' and 'Story of an Academic Advisor during COVID-19' highlighting the challenges and opportunities that have arisen during these unprecedented times.

One particularly powerful aspect of the book is its engagement with issues of race and social justice, as exemplified by the chapter 'Race Matters'. Here, the author shares

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their experience as a scholar of colour in a predominantly White academic environment, shedding light on the unique challenges they faced and the importance of representation and inclusivity within academia. This theme is further explored in the chapter 'No One Culture is Superior!', which underscores the value of embracing diversity and fostering mutual understanding among scholars from different backgrounds.

The book also includes several chapters written in German, such as ‚Wage den Schritt!', ‚Sonne, Stärke und tausendundein Liter Sand!', „Voll" er neuer Erfahrungen', and ‚So nah, doch so fern'. These chapters not only contribute to the linguistic diversity of the collection but also provide an opportunity for readers to engage with the narratives of scholars from German-speaking countries. The editors are to be commended for their inclusive approach in curating this collection, which serves to underscore the importance of multilingualism and transcultural communication within the global academic community.

Crossing Borders, Bridging Cultures is a thought-provoking and inspiring read that invites readers to reflect on their own experiences and assumptions, while fostering empathy and understanding for the diverse stories and perspectives of others. The editors have succeeded in creating a cohesive and engaging collection that illuminates the myriad challenges and triumphs faced by international scholars, and in doing so, emphasizes the importance of cultivating a supportive and inclusive environment.

The Global Essay Project seeks to illuminate the myriad ways in which studying or working outside one's country of birth can shape one's personal and professional journey. Essay submissions are encouraged to focus on moments, encounters, and experiences that capture the essence of being an international student, scholar, or faculty member. Topics may include friendship, service, freedom, discrimination, injustice, activism, belonging, family, courage, resilience, citizenship, academics, spirituality, parenthood, discovery, inclusion, self-discovery, growth, and more.

In conclusion, *Crossing Borders, Bridging Cultures: The Narratives of Global Scholars* is a significant contribution to the field of international education, offering powerful insights into the experiences and perspectives of scholars from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As a part of the broader Global Essay Project, this book exemplifies the power of storytelling in fostering understanding, empathy, and collaboration within the global academic community. Readers, be they students, researchers, or those simply interested in the human experience, will undoubtedly find inspiration and enlightenment in the pages of this compelling and thought-provoking collection.

Project link: https://starscholars.org/lanterns-across-the-sky/

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Author biographies

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Gian Luca Giovannucci is president of the European University and College Association, and treasurer of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS).

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Andile Samkele Masuku holds a bachelor's degree in Child and Youth Care and a master's degree in Health Sciences. He is registered for a PhD in Health Sciences in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Durban University of Technology. His research focuses on social issues affecting high school learners and students in higher education. Andile is currently employed as a student development officer in the Department of Student Governance and Development. In 2021, he was recognised as one of the top 18 impactful and influential visionaries by Enable Youth Organization.

Dr Angelique McConney is a registered clinical psychologist with 15 years of experience in the higher education sector. She is currently working as a senior clinical psychologist

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Achim Meyer auf der Heyde is a retired general secretary of the Deutschen Studentenwerks (DSW) who currently serves as president of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS).

Dr Vuyokazi Mntuyedwa is an academic literacy lecturer at CPUT. She holds a PhD from the University of the Western Cape master's degree from Stellenbosch University and was a visiting scholar at the Cali-State University Fullerton during her PhD studies. Mntuyedwa likes to develop herself and always looks for opportunities to grow her academic career. As a mentee, she benefits from her institution's mentoring programme, which is meant to develop young emerging researchers where they are guided for publication to boost her academic profile. She has developed a multilingual booklet to assist first-year students who are struggling with academic writing. The booklet can be accessed here: https://www.cput.ac.za/newsroom/news/article/4415/multilingual-smart-writing-guide-for-undergraduate-students. She is working on publications base on her doctoral thesis to boost her academic profile as an emerging scholar. Mntuyedwa is passionate about writing on the first-year experience, which was also the subject of her doctoral thesis.

Dr Disaapele Mogashana is currently a senior lecturer and in the Department of Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. She was formerly a lecturer and researcher at the Institute for Science and Technology Education (ISTE) at UNISA and a lecturer in the Academic Support Programme for Engineering in Cape Town (ASPECT) at UCT. She holds a PhD in Engineering Education, MPhil, and BSc (Chemical Engineering) from the UCT. Her research interests are in engineering education, student success and first-year experience.

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Prof. Karina Mostert is a professor in Industrial Psychology in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa. She conducted research on the subject of occupational health and well-being and focused on subjective well-being, burnout, engagement, work-home interference,

and strengths use. Her research focus shifted to the health and well-being of university students, with a specific focus on their experiences, engagement and psychological resources that can assist in optimal functioning and performance. She is leading the project StudyWell: Student Well-Being and Success at the North-West University. The project aims to develop a valid, reliable, culturally sensitive monitoring tool, informed by in-depth qualitative investigation, to assess and proactively monitor the study climate, individual traits, states and behaviours of students to inform targeted and cost-effective interventions.

Charmain Naidoo has been a journalist for 35 years, during most of which she worked for Africa's largest Sunday newspaper, *The Sunday Times*. During her time in newspapers she worked as a foreign correspondent in London and New York. She also edited both the *Weekend Post* and the *Herald* newspapers in Gqeberha. She currently works as an independent freelance specialist writer and is based in Johannesburg, South Africa. She lists her hobbies as travel and going to the theatre.

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Prof. Maureen Nokuthula Sibiya is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Engagement at Mangosuthu University of Technology, Umlazi, South Africa. She has previously served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at the Durban University of Technology and as head of the nursing department from 2011–2017. During the last year of her head of department tenure, the Nursing Education Association (NEA) awarded Prof. Sibiya an Excellence Award for Leadership in Nursing Education. Prof. Sibiya is a full professor and an NRF-rated researcher.

Patricia C. Timmons is a doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Morgan State University, Maryland, in the United States, where she focuses her research on diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, as well as college student experiences with student mobility, mental health, and student success and access. Currently, she is engaged in her dissertation project, investigating the experiences of African-American community college students with global student mobility and its impact on their personal growth, academic and professional careers. Patricia holds a Master of Education degree in School Guidance Counseling from Cambridge College and a Bachelor of Science from Coppin State University. Alongside her scholarly pursuits, she brings her expertise to the role of area administrator at the Harvard Kennedy School in Cambridge, MA. With a passion for fostering inclusive environments and supporting students' holistic development, Patricia is dedicated to advancing knowledge and practice in higher education.

Dr Nokuthula Tlalajoe-Mokhatla is an academic head and senior lecturer in the Division of Student Learning and Development in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Her research interests around student support, development and leadership focus on social learning, social integration and transitioning into higher education. Through credit-bearing modules, she also helps undergraduate Health Sciences students develop essential lifelong learning skills and graduate attributes.

Prof. Lynette J. van der Merwe is a medical practitioner specialized in health professions education and leads the Division Health Sciences Education at the University of the Free State in South Africa. She is involved in health professions education research, postgraduate training and supervision and faculty development. Her research interest is the holistic development of current and future healthcare professionals.

Clarisse van Rensburg is a registered industrial psychologist currently employed at JOBJACK – an online platform that offers a groundbreaking automated solution for entry-level recruitment. She completed her industrial psychology internship at SPAR, a large retail company in Johannesburg, South Africa. She completed her master's degree in industrial and organisational psychology at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus), South Africa. Her research interests are in life satisfaction, first-year students and psychometrics.

Dr Angelique Wildschut is chief research specialist in the Equitable Education and Economies research division of the Human Sciences Research Council and a research associate in Sociology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Her expertise is in the sociology of professional groups with a specific focus on the medical and nursing professions, artisans, and gender. She has studied different forms of social and structural exclusion and access as they translate in the transition from higher education into

the world of work, analysed by the variables of gender, race, sex, identity, skills and capabilities. Relatedly, her work has dealt with the role of occupational milieus and identities and the construction of symbolic boundaries by different occupational groups to establish and maintain privilege in society.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, Vol. 12(2), 2024

Advancing the scholarship of integration for impactful, sustainable and holistic student success

Sustainable and holistic student success arises from practice and scholarship of integration. Boyer (1990) coined scholarship of integration (SoI), describing it as "doing research at the boundaries where fields converge" (p. 7). This approach promotes "interdisciplinary, interpretive and integrative" work resulting in dramatically reshaping the boundaries of human knowledge. Scholarship of integration, according to Boyer (1990) promises to give deeper meaning to the work of the university through multi-disciplinary, integrated and evidence-based approaches. This kind of engaged and multi-disciplinary scholarship of integration holds the promise to align the disparate parts of traditional student affairs and student development theory, described by Torres et al. (2019) as a theoretically low-consensus field.

Madiba (2022) calls student affairs professionals closer into scholarship by virtue of being members of universities (or higher education). So too, Schreiber (2014) calls on researchers and scholars to embolden the co- and extra-curriculum agenda via multi-disciplinary and evidence-based approaches. Through research and scholarship university members within student affairs and services assert credibility, embolden the student affairs community of practice, develop the profession (Wildschut & Luescher, 2023) and participate in the core business of higher education institutions via knowledge production and capacity building.

By 2030, Africans are expected to comprise 42% of global youth. This implies that the global leadership potential sits in Africa. To meet global challenges of a complex, dynamic and highly stressful world, the education sector needs to rethink, among others, its methodologies. Embedding scholarship of integration into the overall higher education practices promises to take efforts around student success to higher impact and sustainability.

Reimagining African education harnesses the developmental potential of Africa (and beyond), for the future world and for global sustainability. Scholarship of integration (i.e. multi-disciplinary and engaged research) advances our knowledge, our leadership and student success. Holistic student development and student success calls for interconnected, multi-disciplinary and engaged approaches that challenge traditional research cultures and enable and accelerate transformation and decolonisation.

Therefore, this JSAA Call for Papers is aimed at advancing student affairs scholarship and research which underpins evidence-based decisions for holistic student success. Papers that address the following themes, are invited:

- professionalisation of student affairs;

- research and scholarship in student affairs;
- methodologies and theoretical approaches;
- graduate attributes, including approaches that view graduate attributes in their integrated sense (i.e. in and outside classroom) and blended activities that are integrated into the holistic experience of students;
- holistic success, including integrated notions of success;
- student leadership development, this may include work within student governance, student representative councils, activism, student leadership programs, etc.;
- student development, incorporating, but also extending
    - student health and wellness,
    - conducive living and learning environment,
    - underserved and marginalised students,
    - sports and recreation,
    - inclusive education policies and practices, and
    - sustainable development, beyond the university setting into the adult life of students, for creating proactive citizenship within the broader society;
- student success strategies;
- scholarship approaches and debates; and
- integrating the classroom and co-curriculum.

About JSAA

JSAA is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in African higher education. JSAA is published twice a year by the JSAA Editorial Executive in collaboration with the University of Pretoria and African Minds. The journal is full-text hosted on the website of the University of Pretoria at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa, as well as co-hosted by AJOL, DOAJ, and ERIC, and indexed in international indices. JSAA is accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as a subsidy-earning journal on the SA list of scholarly journals. Authors publish free of charge; there are no processing or page fees. Please register on the JSAA website and consult the JSAA Author Guidelines for information about formatting, referencing and submission requirements.

Submission process and important dates

Submission of abstract proposals (250-350 words)	30 September 2023
Response on abstracts to authors	31 October 2023
Full papers due for editorial vetting and peer review	28 February 2023
Responses from editors/peer review process	30 April 2024
Revisions from authors	31 May 2024
Galley proofs	30 June 2024
Publication of guest-edited issue	15 July 2024

Please direct any queries and submit abstracts by email to the guest editors:

Dr Neo Pule (lead): pulent@uj.ac.za
Prof. Matete Madiba: mmadiba@uwc.ac.za
Dr Irene Mohasoa: imohasoa@wsu.ac.za

References

Boyes, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered. Priorities of the professoriate*. The Carnegie Foundation For The Advancement Of Teaching. https://www.umces.edu/sites/default/files/al/pdfs/BoyerScholarshipReconsidered.pdf

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Submissions

Please register as an author and read the Author Guidelines at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa/user/register. Submissions must be made on the online system at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa/about/submissions. For information and help, please contact the Journal Manager, Ms Bronwin Sebonka at bronwin.sebonka@up.ac.za. Submissions in response to special calls for papers must also be made directly to the guest editors concerned (see Call for Papers).

The *JSAA* typically has themed issues. However, submissions that fall within the general scope and focus of the Journal can be made at any time and may be published irrespective of the overall theme of the Journal. Particularly encouraged are open-theme manuscripts that address the following:

- Case studies of innovative practices in student affairs in the context of African higher education (e.g. student lifecycle, orientation, residence management, student governance, student counselling).
- High-level ref lective practitioner accounts.
- Explorations of the nexus of student affairs theory, policy and practice in the African context and beyond.
- Conceptual discussions of student development, and key enablers and inhibitors of student development in Africa.
- Explorations of authoritative literature, theory and professional trends related to student affairs in Africa.

Please note that different requirements apply:

- **Research articles**: Contributors are encouraged to submit original research-based manuscripts of ca. 5000 words, including all references, notes, tables and figures. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150-200 words and about five keywords. They should be double-spaced and all pages consecutively numbered.
- **Reflective practice articles** (reflective practitioner accounts) on professional campus practice are peer reviewed. They are screened and reviewed according to the same criteria as research articles, albeit with a different emphasis. They do not need to include extensive consideration of recent literature and theory but focus on in-depth description and learnings. They must comply with standard academic convention and scholarly practice. Typical length: 2,500 - 5,000 words. Abstract: 150-200 words plus about five keywords.
- **Book reviews** should be between 800 - 1,000 words. Competent reviews of key student affairs books are published at the discretion of the Editorial Executive.
- **Letters to the editors, comments and critique** of no more than 2,500 words, are also welcome and published at the discretion of the editors.

- **Proposal for the journal's Interviews and Dialogue section and Calls and Notices** must be emailed directly to the journal manager. The publication of calls and notices (for conferences; vacancies etc.) may incur a nominal fee.

Upon acceptance, all abstracts are translated and published in a second African academic language. This is typically French in order to encourage greater engagement between the anglophone and francophone African Student Affairs scholars and practitioners. Authors who prefer translation into any other official African language (e.g. Afrikaans, Arabic, Kiswahili, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Portuguese, Sesotho, Setswana) must provide a translation upon acceptance of the article, with a confirmation from a language scholar that the translation is accurate.

Authors are required to check their submission's compliance with all of the following items, and submissions that do not adhere to these guidelines may be returned to authors.

1. The ethical requirements of social research have been considered and fully complied with.
2. The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the Editor).
3. The submission file is in MS Word, OpenOffice, or RTF document file format.
4. The text is double-spaced; uses a 12-point font; employs italics rather than underlining (except with URL addresses); and all illustrations, figures and tables are placed within the text at the appropriate points, rather than at the end.
5. The text adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements outlined on the Journal's website.
6. The Journal uses the APA7 author–date referencing system.
7. If submitting to a peer-reviewed section of the Journal, i.e. as a research article or reflective practioner account, the instructions in Ensuring a Blind Peer Review must have been followed.
8. If submitting a proposal for the Dialogue section, a Call/Notice, or a Comment/ Critique, this should be emailed directly to the Journal Manager.
9. The final text of the article has been professionally edited and proofread prior to submission.
10. The front page of the manuscript indicates the Section under which it is proposed that the article be published, i.e. Research article (peer-reviewed); Ref lective Practice (peer-reviewed); or Book reviews/Dialogues/other contributions.
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Section review policy and process

The JSAA publishes research articles (peer-reviewed); high-quality ref lective practitioner accounts (peer-reviewed); dialogues/interviews (non-reviewed); and book reviews (non-reviewed). The Journal is committed to assisting emerging scholars and professionals in developing promising manuscripts to the point of publication.

Editorial commentary

☐ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

Research articles and professional practitioner accounts

☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☑ Peer reviewed

Campus dialogue/interview section

☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

Book reviews

☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

The editorial and peer review policy of JSAA adheres to the *Code of Best Practice in Scholarly Journal Publishing, Editing and Peer Review* (Academy of Sciences of SA Council/ASSAf, 2018). All submitted manuscripts undergo an initial careful examination by the Editorial Executive to ensure that authors' submissions fall within the mission, scope and focus of the JSAA and conform to scholarly best practice. Qualifying scholarly research-based articles and high-quality, relevant ref lective practitioner accounts are blind-reviewed by at least two peer reviewers, who would typically be members of the International Editorial Advisory Board of the JSAA. Peer reviewers have proven scholarly and/or professional expertise in the subject matter of a manuscript. Reviewer reports are assessed by a member of the Editorial Executive and form the basis of any decision by the Editorial Executive on how to proceed with a manuscript. The suitability of a manuscript is evaluated in terms of originality, significance, scholarship and adherence to the requirements of ethical social research, scope and interest, and accessibility.

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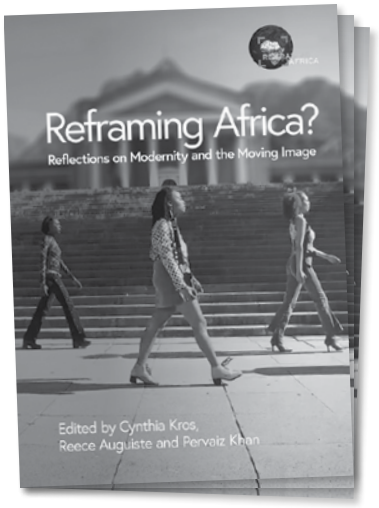

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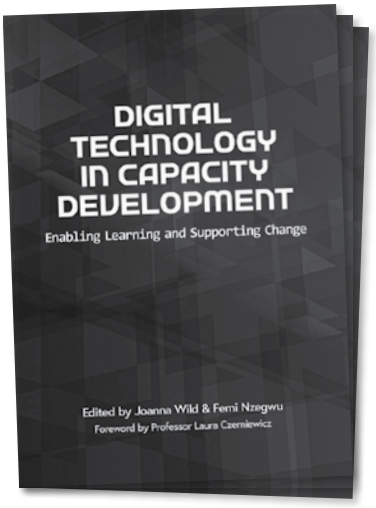

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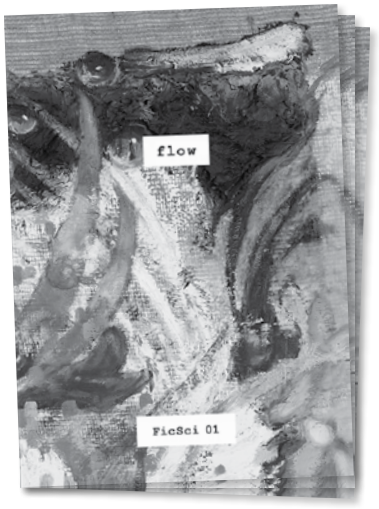

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Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

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