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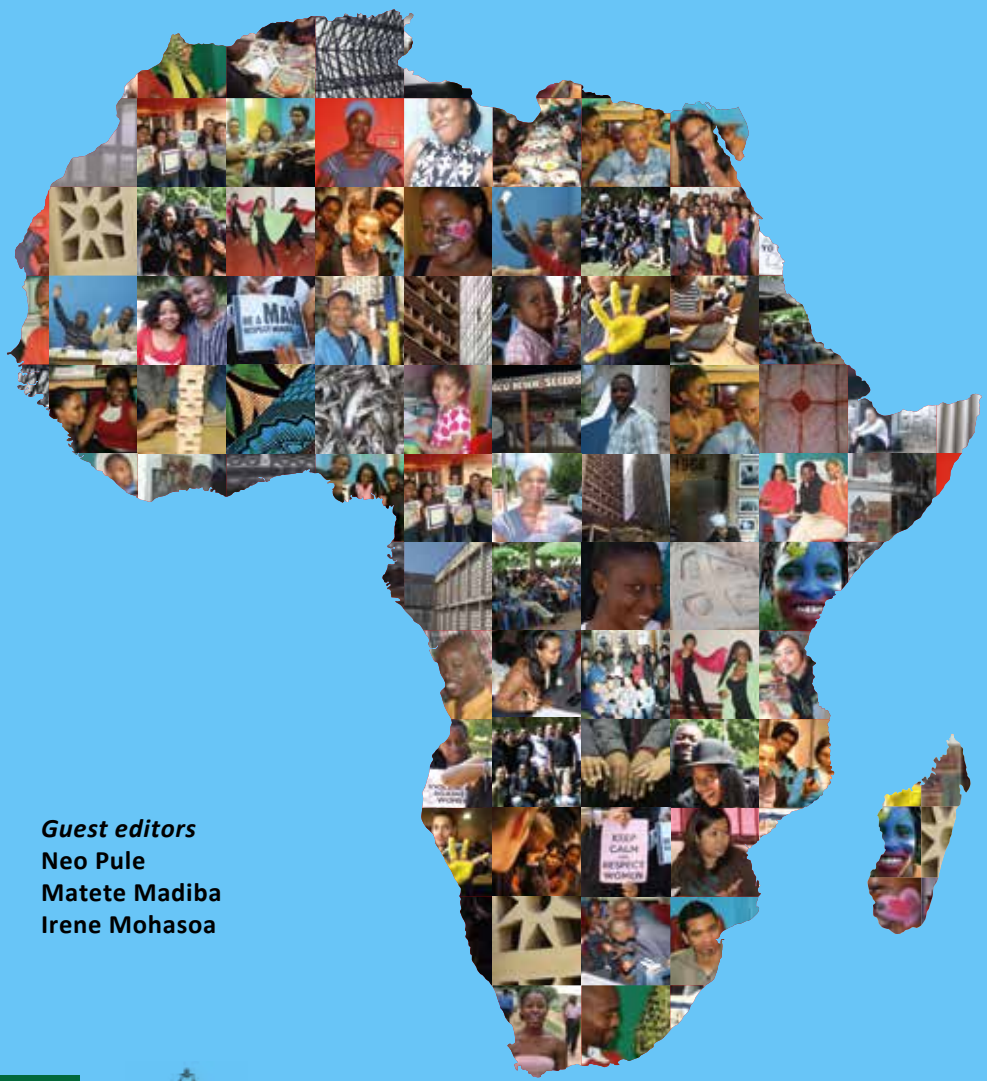
Advancing student success in higher education through the scholarship of integration



Guest editors
Neo Pule
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AFRICAN MINDS

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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 reflective 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 reflective 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 reflective 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, fluid and context-dependent.

The scope of the 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 reflective 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 team

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GUEST EDITORIAL

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

Neo Pule,[1] Matete Madiba[2] & Irene Mohasoa[3]

University professional and teaching staff are like two sides of the same coin. However, to a great extent, they work in silos – which leads to fragmentation and undermines efforts to achieve significant levels of impactful, sustainable and holistic student success. In this context, this special issue was proposed as a contribution towards closing the gap between the academic part of the university and the professional or support-services part; and as a means of encouraging the work required to forge integrated approaches in support of enhanced student success. The siloed approach, which is indicative of the politics and potential power dynamics that are embedded in university operations and structures, needs to be dismantled.

Historically, the formal teaching of students at universities is expected to take place within academic departments, which are also charged with the production of research outputs. However, over time, many universities have come to recognise that, in the pursuit of student success, equal importance should be attached to student development outside the formal classroom. In this regard, the task of improving the 'big rates' relating to student enrolment, retention, progression and completion is clearly a highly complex one. There are multiple factors at play. Madiba and Mathekga (2018, p. 162) cite an argument made by Crenshaw (1989) as they warn against a failure to embrace "the complexity of compoundedness". The authors argue that "it is important to recognise the complexity and the multiplicity of the factors that constitute the challenges faced by students throughout their studies" (Madiba & Mathekga, 2018, p. 150). Accordingly, there is a need to establish and foster linkages and partnerships across the different roles that academic, professional and support-services staff assume. To this end, professional and support-services staff should find their academic space by participating in the core university function of research and scholarship as they conceptualise, design and implement student success programmes (Huenemann, 2014). Equally, 'academics' should find their place by contributing towards the development of graduate attributes and critical skills among their students. In other words, there must be greater integration

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of efforts across the university if student success is to be improved. Meanwhile, working in silos will only undermine such efforts and render them less impactful.

The scholarship of integration (SOI) is becoming increasingly critical and relevant to the development of higher education institutions (Madiba, 2022). Boyer (1990, p. 7) coined the term 'scholarship of integration', describing it as "doing research at the boundaries where fields converge". The approach promotes "interdisciplinary, interpretive and integrative" work that can lead to a dramatic reshaping of the boundaries of human knowledge. The scholarship of integration, according to Boyer (1990), promises to enhance the meaning of the work undertaken at the university through multidisciplinary, integrated and evidence-based approaches. An engaged, multidisciplinary scholarship of integration holds the promise of aligning the disparate parts of traditional student affairs and student development theory and may also challenge traditional teaching to foster holistic student learning and development (Torres et al., 2019).

For this special issue, the aim was to pull together work from across the academic spectrum. In this respect, the editorial team for this issue is an ideal mix: it includes academic and 'professional services' staff from a number of universities. This partnership among academic and professional staff is meant to exemplify what may be achieved when linkages are forged and there is collaboration to integrate efforts. In this context, integration refers to academics and professional student-services staff working in partnership to advance scholarship and student success. Through the scholarship of integration, it is hoped that new, innovative methods and approaches will be discovered that will lead to the achievement of long-lasting and impactful change at South African universities. The prime time that students spend at the university should be a period of immense growth and development. It should prepare students to take on the many challenges that societies face. The scholarship of integration offers a new hope of breaking through the barriers that currently limit the impact of efforts towards student success and student development.

It is recognised that the challenges faced are not confined to silos and a lack of integration. Gilbert and Burden (2022) describe a range of barriers that stand in the way of student affairs practitioners and how these barriers make it difficult for practitioners to fully engage in scholarship. The barriers include: a lack of interest in and demand for scholarship produced by these practitioners; a lack of time and support; unreasonable work expectations; inadequate academic preparation; a lack of institutional and supervisor support; and a lack of motivation. In this context, Madiba (2022) issued a call to student affairs professionals to engage in scholarship so they can claim their place in the academic community. Schreiber (2014) made a similar call as she challenged researchers and scholars to strengthen the co-and extra-curriculum agenda through multidisciplinary and evidence-based approaches. Similarly, Wildschut and Luescher (2023) argue that it is through research and scholarship that student affairs practitioners, as members of the university, are able to assert their credibility, embolden their communities of practice, and develop their professions. In this way, they can fully participate in the core business of the university as knowledge producers. Accordingly,

student affairs practitioners should seek to overcome the barriers they face and claim their credibility as members of the academe. For the silos to be removed, student affairs practitioners should take their rightful place and, through engagement in scholarship, create opportunities and forge partnerships with teaching staff.

Impactful, sustainable and holistic student success, which is at the heart of youth development, should be seen as a priority given the projection that "by 2030, Africans are expected to comprise 42% of global youth, making this the world's largest workforce" (Population Reference Bureau, 2024). This estimate implies that the future potential for global leadership sits in Africa. Since student success relates to student engagement and positive outcomes regarding academic achievement; holistic personal development; and the cultivation of citizenship, the scholarship of integration is pertinent to the future of Africa (and the world), given that this depends on the development of the continent's youth.

The historical, political, social and economic trajectories of South Africa continue to shape the complex challenges higher education faces. Holistic development of students cannot be driven through monodisciplinary approaches. It requires multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. The scholarship of integration offers opportunities for these approaches to emerge, as different role players with diverse disciplinary backgrounds within the university create partnerships and break existing silos. It is in this way that the complex challenges that haunt student success can be tackled. As Uhl-Bien et al. (2007, cited in Madiba & Mathekga, 2018, p. 150) quip "it takes complexity to defeat complexity". A 'single-axis' framework (Crenshaw, 1991) will not bring the much-desired impact. As a way forward, Singh (2023) recommends the establishment of committees composed of academics and professional services staff to promote integration. This approach would encourage collaboration and the sharing of resources and facilitate training and knowledge-sharing to improve interdisciplinary skills. It has the potential to create an institutional culture that encourages multidisciplinary collaborations. Embedding scholarship of integration into higher education practice promises to improve the effectiveness of efforts to promote student success.

Student development theory cannot be left to remain stagnant when the ever-changing context within which it is implemented threatens student success. As with all other areas of knowledge, there is a need to develop integrated frameworks that will renew practice and ensure the field is a fertile site for research and scholarship. University staff, across all existing divides, should collaborate in creating intellectual vibrancy in this area. Theories and approaches from a range of disciplines must be adopted in order to produce a proper understanding of students' developmental needs and acknowledgement and affirmation of their agency. In addition, intellectual tools that can only be developed by integrating knowledges and disciplines are required to understand privilege in all its nuance and engage students from marginalised communities effectively.

In order to advance the scholarship of integration there is a need to challenge traditional research cultures and to enable accelerated transformation. Students will need to be equipped with critical skills from a variety of disciplines if they are to address

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the global challenges that they will face after graduation, such as climate change; the energy crisis; wars and conflict; corruption; and health related crises. Integrated approaches will need to be adopted to foster such skills, which include critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and problem-solving for positive societal impact. To this end, university staff, in partnership with their students, will need to collaborate across a variety of disciplines to prepare for the challenges ahead and equip students with the appropriate skills.

In this respect, efforts to integrate knowledge and methodologies from multiple disciplines can equip students with holistic learning experiences which will prepare them to navigate the complexities and challenges of the modern world from an advantageous position. Mishra (2024) and Ramamonjisoa (2024) note that students with interdisciplinary skillsets such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and an ability to collaborate and communicate are bound to be well-rounded individuals who are ready and able to navigate the complexities of the 21st century's interconnected and rapidly changing global landscape. In addition, efforts to integrate knowledge and methodologies will promote responsible citizenship and encourage students to become effective contributors to sustainable development in a global society.

Together, the contributions in this issue emphasise the critical role of integration in promoting student success within universities, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches that bridge academic and professional and support services. They explore various dimensions of such integration, including fostering resilience in challenging disciplines while examining students' perceptions of coping strategies and self-development. The evolution of counselling practices through the adoption of blended models is also underscored, emphasising the need for adaptive support mechanisms amid real-world challenges such as loadshedding. Meanwhile, it is noted that synthesising insights from student representation is vital for informing governance and driving transformation, particularly in aligning university policies to accommodate diverse student identities and experiences – so that, for example, rural identities may be more effectively navigated at urban universities. It is asserted that in response to diverse identities, there is a clear need for nuanced negotiation in order to establish and integrate effective support strategies. This issue of the journal also underscores the importance of engaging student leaders in co-creating knowledge and developmental strategies across personal, organizational and societal levels. Such an approach, it is argued, provides students with agency in shaping their success and ensures the establishment of governance and practices that extend beyond one-size-fits-all approaches.

The specific frameworks discussed in the articles presented in this issue include holistic support for mathematics learning, academic advising, mentorship programmes as foundational pathways to postgraduate success, and the integration of positive psychology into student affairs practice to facilitate students' self-development. Together, the evidence-based, iterative approaches presented here demonstrate how targeted, interdisciplinary strategies enhance student retention, resilience and holistic development. The papers and the studies they report on advocate for a scholarship of

integration that brings together diverse perspectives to meet the multifaceted needs of students in higher education. The implementation of multidisciplinary approaches will come at a price and push many out of their comfort zones. However, the benefits arising from these approaches are worth every effort.

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EDITORIAL

Advancing student success in higher education through scholarship

Birgit Schreiber,[1] Thierry M. Luescher[2] & Teboho Moja[3]

This is the second guest-edited issue in partnership with the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), led by guest editors Drs Neo Pule, Irene Mohasoa, and Prof. Matete Madiba. Heartfelt congratulations on this impressive JSAA 12(2) guest-edited issue!

The title of this issue, 'Advancing Student Success in Higher Education through the Scholarship of Integration' is used as basis for the title of our editorial which emphasises the importance of scholarship. *Period*.

For scholarship in Africa to be successful we require a conducive ecosystem that advances knowledge creation and facilitates the publishing process. Many factors within and beyond academe enable or hinder knowledge production.

The advancement of scholarship in Africa, particularly in the realm of student success, is deeply reliant on the collaborative efforts of reviewers, authors, and researchers. These individuals, most often voluntarily, with low incentives or rewards, contribute their expertise, time, and insights to ensure that research is rigorous, relevant, and impactful. By critically evaluating manuscripts, voluntary reviewers uphold the quality and credibility of academic publications, fostering a culture of critical scholarship. Authors and researchers push the boundaries of knowledge by addressing local challenges and proposing innovative, context-sensitive solutions. Their collective work not only enhances understanding but also informs policy and practice, ultimately driving improvements in student success across the continent.

Such voluntary efforts are especially critical in African contexts, where unique socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors require tailored approaches that are locally generated and have local relevance. The dedication of the voluntary reviewers, authors, researchers and contributors ensures that scholarship remains a powerful tool for transformation, equity, and the empowerment of the next generation of students.

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We are grateful for the many submissions we receive and are inundated with submissions that are relevant, of high quality and reflect an increasingly emboldened voice in African knowledge production. Moreover, we also hugely appreciate the academic peer reviewers who play a critical role in the knowledge creation process by ensuring the rigour, credibility, and validity of research, thereby upholding the standards that advance scholarly discourse and innovation.

Here a short reflection on this issue, which is made up of articles edited by our guest editors and in addition is comprised of additional articles from our open submissions, which are a compelling collection of studies that explore key themes of resilience, identity, mentorship, and well-being among students in diverse contexts. Each article highlights unique challenges and opportunities faced by students and professionals, offering evidence-based insights and practical implications for fostering growth and success.

By linking the principles of positive psychology to future-oriented thinking, Henry Mason's piece, 'Envisioning my best future self: Integrating positive psychology and prospection in student affairs practice,' highlights how student affairs practitioners can inspire resilience and optimism, equipping students with the tools to navigate uncertainty and aspire towards their goals.

Shifting focus to behavioural patterns, Andile Masuku and colleagues present findings from their exploratory study on alcohol consumption among students at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal. Their research sheds light on students' perceptions and practices surrounding alcohol use, providing crucial insights for developing targeted health promotion strategies.

Nokukhanya Thembane tackles the realities of 'Navigating the power outages: Impact and coping strategies of students in a South African university during loadshedding'. This timely contribution examines the intersection of infrastructural challenges and academic resilience, highlighting the adaptive strategies students employ to mitigate the disruptions caused by persistent power outages.

The importance of mentorship is spotlighted in Sindi Msimango's article, 'Mentorship in undergraduate studies – Building block for postgraduate success'. Msimango emphasises how structured mentorship programmes can bridge the gap between undergraduate and postgraduate success, fostering a culture of support and professional development in academic institutions.

Kolisa Siqoko and Saloshna Vandeyar bring an intersectional lens to the discussion with their piece, 'Constitution and negotiation of rural students' identities at an urban South African university'. Their work explores the identity negotiations of rural students transitioning to urban academic settings, offering a nuanced understanding of the cultural and social adjustments required in this context.

The final research article from the open submissions is by Janice Moodley-Marie, Bianca Parry and Itumeleng Masisi, who focus on 'Student experiences of attending the first online Southern African Student Psychology Conference at an open distance e-learning university in South Africa'.

Finally, this issue concludes with Xena Cupido's insightful review of the book *Reimagining South African Higher Education: Towards a Student-Centred Learning and Teaching Future.* This review underscores the importance of student-centred pedagogies and institutional reform in shaping equitable and transformative higher education systems.

This collection of articles would not have been possible without the largely invisible work done by the dedicated reviewers who give their time and expertise in advancing scholarship in Africa.

At this point we want to thank Dr Angelina Wilson-Fadiji who has been part of the Editorial Board for the past 3 years and will step down from her role in 2025. Her contributions have played a big role in the growth of the journal to becoming a highly respected platform for advancing the discourse and scholarship on student affairs across the continent and beyond. We wish her the very best and thank her for her energy, her time and her commitment to scholarship on student success in Africa.

We wish Bronwin Sebonka, our Journal Manager, the most heartfelt congratulations on completing her Master in Education at the University of Pretoria – well done and enjoy the well earnt accolades!

Ending this editorial on a high note: we received a grant by EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) with AJOL (African Journals Online) and WACREN (the West and Central African Research and Education Network), who offered this grant to support no-fee open access publishing in Africa and creating a Sustainable Diamond Open Access Future. JSAA is using this grant to build capacity and guidelines, create a financial sustainability plan, renew the editorial team, and operationalise the Community of Practice for the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa. We are very excited about and grateful for this opportunity and know that JSAA's sustainability is bolstered by this grant.

We hope this issue inspires further dialogue and innovation within the field of student affairs and reaffirms the collective commitment to advancing higher education and students as architects of our shared futures.

Enjoy the read!

Birgit, Thierry and Teboho

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Counsellors' experiences of integrating virtual interventions to provide mental health support for students

Amava kwiingcali zengqondo nabacebisi ngokuhlanganisa unyango lwemveli ukuhambisa inkxaso nonyango kwimpilo ngokwasengqondweni kubafundi

Gregory Mitchell,[1] Dalray Gradidge[2] & Nomalungelo Ntlokwana[3]

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the experiences of counsellors at Nelson Mandela University's Emthonjeni Student Wellness counselling unit regarding the implementation of a blended counselling model which integrated virtual interventions into the existing practice model. Grounded theory methodology was employed to generate an understanding of the evolving counselling practices and the growing acceptance of a blended model in a student counselling centre at a South African public university. The establishment of the new model entailed the integration of psychological knowledge and experience with other domains of knowledge, such as information technology; professional ethics; and student support. The data for this article were collected through semi-structured interviews with counsellors working at the university's counselling unit. The theoretical framework emerging from this study sheds light on the evolution of counselling practices within the university context and how students' mental health and wellness can be supported using virtual interventions. The study identified five main themes to be addressed in the establishment of a blended counselling model: the transition to integration; challenges and obstacles; benefits and advantages; diversity and uniqueness; and training issues for counsellors. It was found that key concepts that can form the basis of a blended counselling model and the training and development of counsellors required to establish such a model, include adaptation and flexibility, technological proficiency, cultural sensitivity and diversity, and boundary management. Each of these key concepts relates to areas for skill development in counsellors. In addition, it was found that an integrative, evidence- and scholarship-based approach to analysing these concepts would produce significant benefits for student counselling services at South African public universities.

KEYWORDS

Counselling, student mental health, virtual interventions

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ISISHWANKATHELO

Olu phando lujolise ekuphononongeni amava kwiingcali zengqondo nabacebisi abakwisebe lase Emthonjeni Student Wellness, elikwiziko lemfundo ephakamileyo eyiNelson Mandela, malunga nokusetyenziswa komgaqo woxilongo, ogxile ekuhlanganiseni unyango lwezixhobo zedijithali kucebiso noxilongo obelusetyenziswa. Kolu phando kusetyenziswe i-grounded theory ukuphuhlisa ulwazi oluphangaleleyo nasekwandiseni ukwamkeleka kweenguqu kucebiso nakuxilongo lwengqondo kwiziko lemfundo ephakamileyo yaseMzantsi Afrika. Oku kudinga ukuhlanganiswa kolwazi lwezenzululwazi yengqondo kunye namava kwiindawo ezahlukeneyo, ezifana nobuchwepheshe bolwazi, imithetho yobungcali, kunye neenkqubo zokuxhasa abafundi kumaziko emfundo ephakamileyo. Idatha yaqokelelwa ngodliwano-ndlebe olulungelelanisiweyo kwiingcali zoxilongo lwengqondo nabacebisi babafundi abasebenza kwicandelo lwengcebiso lwezempilo yengqondo kunye nempilo jikelele lemfundo ephakamileyo. Isakhelo sethiyori esavelayo sikhanyisele ukuvela kweendlela zoxilongo lwengqondo nezokucebisa abafundi. Ngaphezulu, indlela abafundi abafumana ngayo uncedo lwezempilo yengqondo kunye nempilo yonke ingaxhaswa njani kusetyenziswa uncedo lwezobuchwepheshe bokuxoxa kwi-intanethi. Imixholo ephambili echongiweyo kwizinto ezifunyanisiweyo ibandakanya: (i) inguqu eyimfuneko lalendibaniselwano, (ii) imicela mngeni nemiqobo, (iii) iinzuzo, (iv) iyantlukwano kunye nokugqama, (v) iindawo zokuqeqesha iingcali zeengqondo nabacebisi. Amagama angundoqo anokuthi enze isiseko somgaqo weengcali zengqondo nabacebisi abahlanganisiweyo kunye noqeqesho oluyimfuneko nophuhliso kubandakanya (i) ukuziqhelanisa nenguqu, (ii) ubuchule bobuchwepheshe, (iii) ukuqaphela inkcubeko kunye nokwahlukana kunye (iv) nolawulo lwemida. Ingcinga nganye kwezi zingundoqo onxulumene nemimandla yophuhliso lwezakhono kwiingcali zengqondo nakubacebisi, kwaye iya kuxhamla kwindlela edibeneyo esekelwe kubungqina kunye nembasa yezemfundo ukuze kuzuze iinkonzo zoxilongo lwengqondo nezokucetyiswa kwabafundi kumaziko emfundo ephakamilyo aseMzantsi Afrika.

IIMFUNDISO EZIPHAMBILI

Iingcali kwezengqondo nokucebisa, impilo yengqondo yabafundi, uncedo lwezobuchwepheshe bokuxoxa kwi-intanethi

Introduction

The topics of student access, retention and success have been the focus of significant scholarship in recent years (Millea et al., 2018; Kalkbrenner et al., 2021). The importance of student mental health in fostering student retention and success is increasingly acknowledged, which has led to greater emphasis being placed on the role of student counselling centres within the broader academic endeavour and as a means of student support (Bantjes et al., 2020; Kalkbrenner et al., 2021). In the context of growing understanding and awareness of mental health in society in general, there has been an observable increase in the demand for psychological services for students at higher education institutions; and the complexity of students' problems also appears to have mounted (Alonso et al., 2019; Al-Qaisy, 2011; Auerbach et al., 2016; Grøtan et al., 2019), including at South African public universities (Bantjes et al., 2019).

Auerbach et al. (2016) highlighted the prevalence of mental disorders among higher education students; and Bantjes et al. (2023) contextualised this phenomenon in the South African context, emphasising how early detection and effective treatment of mental disorders can play a pivotal role in reducing attrition rates and enhancing the overall educational and psychosocial functioning of students. Nonetheless, many students remain reluctant to access even free services that may help them to address their mental health challenges (Kalkbrenner et al., 2021). Hunt et al. (2023, p. 2) posited

that the reasons for students not receiving such help could include "stigma, a lack of awareness of their need for care, and low knowledge and/or acceptability of available resources". In this context, the discourse on student retention and success should address the twin issues of removing the obstacles that prevent students from accessing mental health support services, and increasing the accessibility of these services.

Although students at South African public universities enjoy greater access to psychological care than is generally available through the country's public health services, and although such provision is often free, there are still significant constraints on the provision of adequate, scalable and affordable in-person psychotherapeutic treatment for students, as well as significant differences in the provision available at public universities (Vanheusden et al., 2008; Bantjes et al., 2020). Accordingly, interest in the role that digital or virtual interventions may play in the provision of psychological services for students has mounted (Bantjes et al., 2022; Hunt et al., 2023).

iTelehealth, or virtual-healthcare, service providers saw a tremendous growth in the use of their products from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of virtual technology emerged as an important tool under COVID-19, with patients being encouraged to approach healthcare workers virtually if possible. Although the shift to deploying online tools was driven by necessity during the pandemic, previous research (e.g. Benson et al., 2018) and subsequent research (Akintunda at al., 2021; Bantjes, et al., 2020) also indicated the role that telehealth and its associated infrastructure may play in years to come.

Out of necessity, Emthonjeni Student Wellness (ESW) at the Nelson Mandela University (NMU) began to offer virtual counselling sessions to students from March 2020 and during the COVID-19 lockdowns. As the lockdowns eased and in-person ('mask-to-mask' or, later, 'face-to-face') counselling became possible, ESW transitioned to providing services in a blended way, synthesising in-person and virtual counselling and psychological interventions. The blended approach has become the new normal for the model of practice at ESW.

Although the provision of in-person services remains important and cannot in many ways be replaced by the provision of virtual services (Stein et al., 2022), the increasing role played by telemedicine can facilitate access to health services, including in relation to care for mental health. Institutions, such as universities, that choose to invest in online infrastructure can reduce the gap between patient demand and the provision of appropriate services in the field of mental health (Adepoju, 2020). At the same time, recent research has highlighted potential pitfalls in telehealth, particularly in relation to the provision of e-mental health (eMH) for diverse populations. In this regard, Narayan et al. (2022, p. 1) concluded that healthcare professionals should have a "greater and nuanced understanding of treatment needs in cultural groups".

In the context of the rapid transition to a blended practice model that was sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been insufficient reflection on the benefits and potential pitfalls of the blended approach to providing mental health services. In this regard, the experiences of counsellors who participated in this transition should be heard and considered as part of efforts to ensure that the needs of NMU's diverse

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student population are met in a responsive and effective manner. The aim should be to establish and develop a practice model that has a clear scholarly and evidentiary basis in reality. Such a basis may be fostered by seeking insights and input from the psychological professionals and other stakeholders involved in the provision of student support and related technical services.

The scholarship of integration, proposed by Boyer (1990), emphasises the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines; the application of theory to practice; and the need to foster connections between academia and real-world contexts. Within the realm of counselling, the scholarship of integration extends to the integration of diverse therapeutic modalities; the involvement of all stakeholders; the incorporation of technological innovations; and the need to adapt to evolving landscapes and the many factors that shape the context under consideration.

Problem statement and research question

Careful reflection on the benefits and potential pitfalls of blended mental health services is essential given the rapid but necessary transition to a blended practice model that took place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the present study interrogated the experiences of counsellors who participated in this transition. (Later research focused on client experiences and the input of other stakeholders in the wake of this transition.) Accordingly, the research question formulated for this study was: How does the experience of counsellors' transition to a blended practice model with diverse students inform a new blended practice model for a counselling unit at a South African public university?

Research aims

The overall aim of this study has been to develop a new evidence-based model for counselling practice that sufficiently describes the present reality and can recommend adaptations as required. In this context, the research objectives of this study were:

1. To explore and describe counsellors' experiences of transitioning from an in-person-only model of practice to a blended model of practice while addressing the needs of a diverse student population.
2. To generate a substantive theory that will inform a new model of practice for Emthonjeni Student Wellness that can integrate different domains of knowledge.

Research methodology

This study employed a research design based on the qualitative grounded theory method (GTM) in order to capture the real, grounded, professional experience of counsellors during their transition from a face-to-face to a blended (that is, face-to-face and virtual) model for counselling. By employing grounded theory methodology, the research aimed to generate an understanding of evolving counselling practices and the emerging acceptance of a blended counselling model in a student counselling centre at a public university in South Africa. The GMT approach was chosen so that the

research team could establish an applicable, coherent theoretical understanding of the participants' experiences of developing a blended counselling model before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The GTM design was also chosen so that a substantive theory free from prejudice could be developed (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Makri & Neely, 2021).

Participants and procedure

A non-probability, purposive sampling method was used to identify and recruit participants. The target population included counsellors working at Nelson Mandela University's student counselling unit, Emthonjeni Student Wellness. Inclusion criteria were that the counsellor must have been working at ESW prior to 2020 and was still employed there at the time of data collection. Exclusion criteria were counsellors not employed at ESW and those not employed prior to 2020. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Learning and Teaching Collaborative Research Ethics Committee at the NMU; the NMU's Research Ethics Committee – Human (RECH); and the NMU Deputy-Vice Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Internationalisation.

Once all permissions were received, a recruitment letter was circulated to all ESW staff members describing the study and inviting their participation. Interested counsellors were invited to email the researchers indicating their willingness to participate. Those volunteers who met the inclusion criteria were enrolled in the study and asked to read and sign consent forms.

Due to potential power imbalances existing between the researchers and participants, voluntariness was reinforced in the recruitment email and again with the completion of a consent form prior to each interview. No personally identifying information was collected beyond that used for the consent form, thereby ensuring compliance with privacy of personal information (POPI) legislation. Participants were furthermore informed that the findings would only be reported in summary, without identifying any single person. Individual participants cannot be reidentified from the collected data, as participants were not referred to by name during the interview, nor were recordings or transcripts stored by name. Participants were reassured that their consent forms would be kept confidential, and that the interviews would be conducted anonymously.

Data collection

Interview data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule with each of the participants after completion of the consent form. The interview schedule focused on: (i) the experience of the transition from an in-person-only counselling model to a virtual-only counselling model during COVID-19 lockdowns, and then to a blended counselling model; (ii) the counsellors' experiences of incorporating digital interventions in their practice model; and (iii) context-specific experiences of working with a blended counselling model at a South African public university with a diverse student population.

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Data analysis

Through constant comparative analysis, coding and theoretical sampling, the study identified themes and concepts that underpin the implementation of a blended counselling model. The emergent theoretical framework shed light on the evolution of counselling practices within the university context and how students' mental health and wellness can be supported using virtual interventions.

Trustworthiness

Efforts to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative data in this study, as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Lincoln and Guba (2013), were based on the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study utilised member-checking to confirm that the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences. After the interviews, participants were asked to review and validate the transcriptions and interpretations of their responses. The researchers provided thick descriptions of the context, participants and the phenomenon studied, allowing readers to determine if the findings were applicable to their own settings. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants representative of the diverse student counselling population at a South African public university, enhancing the potential for findings to be transferable to similar contexts. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a detailed record of all research activities, including data collection methods; decisions made during the research process; and reflections on the research. The use of a voice recorder allowed for verbatim accounts of the interviews, and participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of their statements. To promote confirmability, the researchers demonstrated that the findings emerged from the data and not from their own biases or predispositions.

Results

The study identified five main themes to be addressed in the establishment of a blended counselling model: the transition to integration; challenges and obstacles; benefits and advantages; diversity and uniqueness; and training issues for counsellors.

Counsellors' experiences transitioning to a blended counselling model

Counsellors said that their therapeutic approaches changed quickly in response to the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Counselling transitioned from traditional face-to-face engagement to a blended model that incorporated online methods. Online counselling platforms, such as emails, WhatsApp video calls, and Zoom served as vital tools to maintain connections with clients, especially those categorised as high- to medium-risk.

As the counselling community navigated this unforeseen landscape, the use of more advanced and integrated platforms, including Microsoft Teams, emerged. There was an evolving process of adapting to new tools and technologies. However, this transition was not without its challenges, with initial resistance stemming from counsellors' concerns about potential deficits in rapport and interaction under a virtual-only model.

The university's institution-wide adoption of Microsoft Teams as a preferred, supported platform alleviated some of the anxiety experienced by counsellors, who had previously been presented with a bewildering choice of platforms as they sought to navigate the diverse technologies on offer on their own.

The shift from an in-person to a blended counselling model presented significant challenges for counsellors who were accustomed to the nuances of face-to-face interactions. The counsellors noted that during face-to-face interactions they had become accustomed to interpreting what the client was saying through the use of non-verbal cues, such as body language and eye contact. In this regard, initial scepticism towards the blended approach was rooted in a perceived loss of ability to read clients effectively in familiar ways.

As counsellors returned to physical office spaces and more structured work schedules were reintroduced, face-to-face sessions were held once again as students began to return to campus. During this transition, a number of shifts in student behaviour online were noted, such as an increased willingness among students to turn on the camera after a few sessions, indicating the development of trust between counsellor and client. Over time, counsellors became increasingly open to conducting even initial counselling sessions online, marking a notable adaptation to, and acceptance of, the blended counselling model.

Challenges and obstacles

Counsellors discussed challenges and obstacles they experienced in navigating the virtual counselling space, including in relation to (i) rapport building; (ii) unpredictable client behaviour; (iii) technical challenges; (iv) professional ethics; (v) privacy and confidentiality; and (vi) time management.

Rapport building

Foremost among the concerns expressed by the counsellors was an apprehension about building rapport in an online environment. Adjusting to the dynamics of virtual appointments, the counsellors described a number of obstacles to their attempts to maintain a significant therapeutic connection. In particular, they cited how students hesitated to reveal their faces during initial online sessions. It was also noted that the impersonal nature of online interactions, coupled with potential distractions, further complicated the counselling process. Counsellors grappled with the loss of qualitative aspects inherent in face-to-face counselling, such as the capacity to decipher body language and unspoken cues. It was felt that the full depth of client experiences and emotions could not be captured online, which had the effect of amplifying the complexity of the therapeutic engagement.

Unpredictable client behaviour

Client unpredictability emerged as an additional challenge, with clients frequently switching between in-person and virtual sessions without prior notice. Counsellors consequently found themselves having to adjust rapidly, which could lead to them

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feeling disoriented and unprepared. In addition, the asynchronous nature of email counselling introduced challenges in relation to timing and continuity, as responses from clients could be hours apart, disrupting the natural flow of counselling.

Technical challenges

Technical challenges included unfamiliarity with the technology and connectivity issues such as disruptions due to poor internet connections or platform glitches. Other concerns included ensuring equal access to the tools required for blended counselling, preventing platform hacking, and adapting to the new technological tools on offer. Counsellors also found it difficult to manage and store client files virtually over an extended period in the absence of a central online practice-management tool.

Professional ethics

Counsellors reported challenges in maintaining their professionalism and boundaries under the blended model, which had given them significant pause for thought on how best to navigate the new working environment in which they found themselves. Reported challenges included clients apparently being less intentional or committed during online sessions; clients sending messages outside designated hours; and clients increasingly changing their preference for face-to-face or virtual sessions – all of which required counsellors to be adept in their communication and prepared to set boundaries in new ways. In addition, a number of new ethical considerations emerged in relation to ensuring clients were alone during online sessions; silencing email notifications; and ensuring that the office space was free of off-camera distractions such as visible cell phone screens.

Privacy and confidentiality

Privacy concerns loomed large among counsellors who noted that they had been worried about clients capturing messages or recording sessions without consent. The virtual space itself also introduced new dynamics between counsellors and clients in relation to notions of privacy, which demanded a nuanced understanding on the part of the counsellor. For example, counsellors were often unable to see clients during online sessions, which could be attributed to clients failing to switch on their webcams out of concern about data usage and bandwidth or because of shyness or a desire for privacy, or simply because their devices lacked webcam functionality.

Time management

There was great uncertainty about how to undertake counselling at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak; and once online therapy started to be organized, time management was viewed as a formidable challenge, particularly in relation to the difficulty of establishing a set duration for sessions when using emails for counselling. Subsequently, in their transition to a blended counselling model, counsellors came to acknowledge the importance of adaptability; technological proficiency; and the preservation of therapeutic relationships in the face of adversity.

Benefits and advantages

Counsellors acknowledged the benefits and advantages of the virtual counselling space, including in relation to (i) flexibility; (ii) accessibility; (iii) time management; (iv) the use of other technologies; and (v) the efficacy of the blended model.

Flexibility

The blended model was seen as affording unprecedented flexibility and convenience, allowing sessions to be conducted in diverse settings and across geographical divides. The incorporation of in-person and online sessions was said to have addressed the diverse needs and preferences of students, providing a more dynamic approach to counselling. In this context, counsellors who were flexible and adaptable were able to respond to the changing needs of students during the pandemic and were able to deploy the new skills they had acquired during this period as part of their counselling practice even after the lockdowns came to an end.

Accessibility

It was noted that blended counselling facilitated a broader reach and greater inclusivity, catering to a wider audience, including individuals who may be hesitant about attending in-person sessions due to factors such as shyness, introversion, or the stigma associated with seeking mental health support. It was noted that counsellors became more accessible due to the introduction of online services during the pandemic, and that the adoption of the blended model had enabled access to counselling services even for students who could not be physically present on campus. In this regard, it was noted that a number of obstacles that had previously prevented students from accessing counselling services had, to an extent, been removed.

Time management

It was noted that the introduction of virtual platforms had positively impacted time management through the introduction of a digital calendar that enabled structured scheduling.

Other technologies

The adoption of virtual tools spurred the establishment of a virtual filing system for client data; and streamlined administrative processes, enhancing organizational efficiency, such as through the use of online booking systems and digital counsellor diaries. The adoption of online technologies for counselling also appears to have fostered greater acceptance of new technologies being adopted in support of the management of counselling services.

Efficacy of the blended model

The adaptability of counsellors and students became apparent as they embraced new tools and platforms in response to client circumstances and preferences. In particular, the importance of the capacity to build rapport online through consistent validation

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and understanding, was identified as a valuable skill, including among students who demonstrated increased confidence in adapting to the online model over time. In this context, the blended model was seen as offering a more tailored approach to therapy, allowing counsellors to adapt their strategies to meet the unique needs of each client. Despite acknowledged limitations, such as the absence of non-verbal cues in virtual appointments, it was noted that virtual sessions could be effective when approached with the same seriousness accorded to in-person sessions. This finding underscores the potential efficacy of the blended counselling model, affirming its role as a flexible and adaptable framework that can enhance accessibility, inclusivity and the provision of individualised therapeutic experiences.

The effect of diversity on the use of a blended model

The deployment of blended counselling gave rise to a number of cultural issues, including in relation to (i) comfort with technology; (ii) counsellor openness; and (iii) geographical diversity.

Comfort with technology

Participants did not observe distinct cultural differences in the uptake of the blended model, but did highlight that individuals who opted for online sessions were generally already comfortable with the format. The importance of recognising individual differences in terms of their comfort and familiarity with technology was noted. In this context, it was noted that differing ethnic or cultural backgrounds were not seen as being predictive of whether a client was more or less willing to engage in virtual counselling.

Counsellor openness

The efficacy of virtual and other forms of counselling was seen as dependent on counsellors' openness to new counselling environments and the uniqueness of individual clients – indicating the importance of being receptive to the diverse contexts that clients bring to the therapeutic space. In this regard, the effectiveness of the blended model was seen as being dependent on the therapist's adaptability and understanding rather than on the client's background. In addition, the concept of diversity within diversity, which emphasises the wide range of experiences and contexts within each cultural or ethnic group, was acknowledged.

Geographical diversity

It was noted that students in places without reliable or free Wi-Fi, including in rural settings where internet connectivity was limited or in places where they had to spend their own money on data, tended to be more reluctant to make use of the video call option for counselling. In response, a range of tools and platforms were adopted to cater to a diverse range of clients with differing levels of tech-savviness and accessibility. Institutional support, including through the provision of Wi-Fi or data allowances was key in removing obstacles that many students experienced.

In this regard, it was noted that the blended counselling model was at its most effective in accommodating a wide range of clients and their unique needs when approached with sensitivity not only to cultural differences but also to logistical and geographical challenges.

Recommendations for other counsellors

A number of guiding principles for counsellors navigating the new blended counselling model were identified by the study, including in relation to (i) the need for boundary setting; (ii) the management of expectations; (iii) the need for ongoing training; (iv) camera use during virtual sessions; and (v) the need for patience and understanding.

Boundary setting

The importance of establishing boundaries was highlighted by the respondents. While providing students with a choice between online and face-to-face sessions was seen as beneficial, it was emphasised that having some structure around these options was essential. Accordingly, it was advised that counsellors should utilise tools such as 'out of office' autoreply messages to clearly communicate their availability to clients.

Managing expectations

Counsellors were encouraged to be clear in managing client expectations and to avoid last-minute changes to appointment schedules unless necessary, fostering a sense of predictability and reliability. Effective communication with clients emerged as a key component of boundary-setting. Counsellors were encouraged to communicate openly with clients about any uncertainty in relation to cultural or personal contexts and to approach these conversations as opportunities for mutual learning.

Ongoing training

The importance of ongoing training and adaptability was emphasised. Counsellors were advised to stay updated on new tools and platforms, recognising that continuous learning can enhance their ability to meet the changing needs of clients. It was suggested that regular team meetings within group practices be convened to ensure consistency and alignment and to ensure that counsellors were kept updated on best practices.

Camera use

In trying to maintain professionalism and personal contact in the virtual counselling space, it was recommended that counsellors keep their own camera on during virtual sessions, regardless of whether the client chooses to or not. Counsellors said that this helped them to maintain a professional disposition during the session and encouraged trust and fostered rapport with the client who may slowly warm to the idea of showing their face.

Patience and understanding

Patience and understanding were highlighted as important qualities when working with students who may initially be hesitant to engage fully online. The importance of

recognising and valuing small cues and behaviours that indicate the establishment of rapport and trust in the online environment was emphasised. In addition, counsellors were advised to treat virtual appointments with the same level of importance and seriousness as in-person sessions, fostering a consistent and reliable therapeutic experience.

The importance of acknowledging and appreciating the diversity of clients, whether cultural, generational, or otherwise, and to adapt counselling techniques accordingly, was emphasised.

Discussion

Grounded theory allows researchers to consider new paths and concepts as ideas emerge from the data gathered (Makri & Neely, 2021). Accordingly, based on an analysis of the results presented above which flow from the real-life experiences of psychological professionals, the authors of this study were able to consider the impacts of the rise of virtual, hybrid, and blended counselling and how counsellors in higher education settings may approach these modalities most effectively.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, psychological professionals have, necessarily, undergone a shift in their therapeutic approaches. Growing familiarity with online platforms has led to the greater deployment of virtual spaces, including as a place for counselling, as has been observed by Hunt et al. (2023) and Stein et al. (2022). The emergence of online or digital interventions by psychological professionals as dominant or expected forms of counselling has forced counsellors to reflect on their own engagement with such interventions. In particular, psychological professionals are now expected to build their competence and expertise in this relatively new field as the potential of virtual and blended services as a means of fostering greater access to counselling, including in the field of higher education, has become apparent. Meanwhile, Stein et al. (2022) note that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, professionals cannot assume that virtual and in-person interventions are interchangeable modalities. Rather an evidence base for counselling practice needs to be established so that counsellors can effectively navigate the complexities of blended modalities with which they may not be familiar and in which they may not have been trained.

Counsellors are required to stretch the boundaries of their knowledge and practice if they are to integrate the available technologies so that psychological assistance is made more widely accessible and the counselling experience for both practitioners and clients, particularly within the higher education environment, is enhanced. The challenges of providing appropriate mental health interventions in South African higher education environments have been well explored by Bantjes et al. (2019; 2020; 2022; 2023).

At the same time, counsellors working in this difficult context may be reassured by the knowledge that the skills that they are required to develop in support of blended practices might lie outside the core competencies that they are expected to possess. In this context, they should know that a willingness to work in a collaborative manner and integrate expertise from different fields can foster opportunity rather than exposing them to threat.

Key capacities required to establish an effective blended counselling model which should be promoted as part of efforts to train and foster the development of counsellors include: adaptation and flexibility; technological proficiency; cultural sensitivity and diversity; and boundary management:

1. Counsellors working in blended counselling environments need to remain adaptable and flexible, given that they may be required to transition rapidly between in-person and online modalities, incorporating modern technologies into their practice while adjusting their therapeutic approaches to meet the needs of their clients. They may be required to draw on the expertise of others, including information technology (IT) specialists and peer supervisors, in order to be able to integrate the various new tools and platforms while maintaining professionalism and ensuring the quality of their interventions.
2. Recognising that psychological professionals are not necessarily trained in advanced IT skills; it is important to inculcate proficiency in the use of technological tools and platforms in order to implement an effective blended counselling practice model. Counsellors should update their skills continuously and be able to navigate technical challenges and leverage ever-evolving digital resources.
3. Counsellors should recognise and respect the diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and preferences of clients. The capacity to understand cultural differences as experienced in the virtual space may be fostered through study and reflection; an openness to new information; the integration of cultural knowledge; and sensitivity to different types of diversity, such as generational and geographical diversity.
4. Counsellors should navigate the intricacies of virtual communication while maintaining professionalism and upholding ethical standards. New frontiers for the ethical management of boundaries may emerge in the virtual space, requiring reflection and the integration of expertise from the realm of professional ethics.

As with any developing environment, there is a necessity for professionals to broaden their skills to remain relevant and effective if they are to manage the blended provision of counselling effectively. Counsellors should be aware that limited resources and growing demand will necessitate the exploration of innovative ways of making services accessible. In this regard, some of the logistical challenges that inhibit the provision of digital services, such as data limits and access to smart devices, have been unpacked by Van Olmen et al. (2020). At the same time, counsellors may need to draw on domains beyond their core competence given the familiarity of the general population, especially younger people, with digital technologies, and their expectation that services should be provided virtually, as indicated by this research.

The demand for accessible counselling has also grown because of the increased focus on student retention and success as a holistic enterprise in which mental health professionals play a crucial role, as has been noted by Alonso et al. (2019), Al-Qaisy

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(2011) and Grøtan et al. (2019). In this context and as part of efforts to navigate the complexities of blended counselling in a comprehensive way and promote student wellness holistically, counsellors are increasingly required to deploy and synthesise concepts and competencies derived from the study of psychology, technology, cultural studies, professional ethics, higher education, and student support. In addition, counsellors can continue to adapt, innovate and collaborate to meet the evolving needs of students at South African public universities by embracing the principles of the scholarship of integration proposed by Boyer (1990).

Meanwhile, from a national and institutional perspective, policymakers and stakeholders in the higher education sector should be aware of: (i) the importance of the provision of mental health support services at higher education institutions; (ii) the demands placed on psychological professionals to provide services to students who increasingly present with complex mental health problems that may affect their academic success; (iii) the reality that this demand necessitates expanding access to counselling services and removing obstacles that prevent students from accessing them; (iv) the need for appropriate staff and infrastructure (physical and digital) to provide flexible and adaptable services; and (v) the inputs, support, and integration among professionals, including information technology specialists, that are required to ensure the provision of effective blended counselling.

Limitations, recommendations and conclusions

The limitations of this study include that it focuses on a small sample working in a specific context, which means that the findings cannot be generalised to all counsellors working in a diversity of settings. The study also chose to focus only on experiences of counsellors and not of clients. Recommendations for future studies include considering multiple settings that make use of a blended counselling model, and interrogating client experiences of virtual counselling and the kinds of recommendations that may flow from these experiences.

The transition to a blended counselling model during the COVID-19 pandemic required significant adaptation from counsellors, who faced various challenges relating to technological proficiency, privacy and professional boundaries. Despite initial scepticism, the blended model offered increased flexibility; accessibility; and inclusivity, demonstrating its potential to cater to the needs of a diverse student population. Key to the success of this model were counsellors' adaptability and capacity for continuous learning, and the integration of new digital tools. Moving forward, ongoing training; clear boundary setting; and institutional support are crucial for optimising the efficacy of blended counselling in higher education.

From a student affairs perspective, the delivery of effective, equitable services depends on the maintenance of professionalism and adherence to ethical standards. Student affairs services benefit from being data-driven and scholarship-based so that they may be as accessible as possible and may continuously improve in effective ways to meet diverse student needs.

Ethics statement

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University's Research and Ethics Committee (Human) with reference number 2023-RECH-0120-244.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"They all offered different support": Integrated support systems for academic resilience among engineering students

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ABSTRACT
A critical area of debate in an era of evolving university support systems is how best to offer support to students in challenging disciplines. This study examines the effectiveness of current frameworks in addressing the needs of engineering students. This research employs a mixed-methods approach to identify the experiences of final-year students undertaking bachelor studies in engineering technology at Nelson Mandela University, as well as those of their lecturers and relevant support staff. The study finds a direct relationship between students' stress levels and their resilience, highlighting the importance of well-structured support systems, including orientation programmes and subject-specific tutoring. This article introduces a novel perspective on fostering academic resilience in engineering education, advocating for a comprehensive approach that integrates personal, academic and socio-ecological forms of support. Challenging conventional views of interventions for student success, it proposes a new, holistic framework for the provision of support in higher education institutions. This approach could contribute to enhancing student resilience and success and provide a fresh lens to address student dropout in higher education in South Africa and beyond.

KEYWORDS
Academic resilience, engineering students, holistic student success, interventions, South Africa

Introduction

In the quest to redefine the landscape of student success, numerous evidence-based interventions have emerged, challenging traditional educational paradigms and provoking an important question: Are these approaches actually resonating with the students they aim to serve? The recent significant evolution in student support, while laudable for its innovative spirit, confronts a key hurdle – how to ensure that the new interventions being produced meaningfully connect with the diverse experiences and needs of students.

In other words, there is a need to examine the effectiveness of the new evidence-based strategies that are being implemented. In this regard, it has been found that, while the intentions behind these strategies are often noble, the reality of their implementation frequently reveals a mismatch between what is anticipated by educators, support staff and university managers, and how the students experience these interventions. This discrepancy highlights the intricate balance that must be achieved between meeting

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institutional objectives and addressing actual student needs. Scholars such as Dollinger and D'Angelo (2020) and Scott (2018) delve into this complexity, advocating for the alignment of educational strategies with the authentic experiences and aspirations of students. Their work underscores the need to adapt interventions so that they cater to the evolving landscape of student demographics and expectations; and so that the well-intentioned efforts may be transformed into truly impactful and meaningful educational experiences for students.

Engineering education presents challenges that require intervention. Historically, engineering has been quite male-dominated and characterised by a lack of representation among women who face a range of hurdles in this field (Patrick et al., 2021). Engineering programmes are also known for their demanding course work; heavy workloads; and competitive environments – all of which can contribute to increased stress and relatively high rates of student attrition (Khajeha, 2017; Mapaling, 2023).

Research indicates that the provision of effective support services, such as tutoring, mentoring, coaching and academic advising, plays a crucial role in enhancing student outcomes, including in terms of retention rates, academic performance and overall satisfaction (Campbell & Mogashana, 2024; de Klerk, 2021; Strydom & Loots, 2020; Versfeld & Mapaling, 2024). Student support services should not only assist students in navigating the challenges they face but can also cultivate a sense of community and belonging which helps to promote student success (Stellenbosch University, 2022; University of Cape Town, 2022). However, the academic support services offered by institutions can differ significantly; and some students may lack access to the resources that they need to achieve academic success.

In the recent discourse on student services, well-being has increasingly been defined as a prerequisite for student success (Davey, 2023; Mapaling, 2023). This contemporary view challenges traditional notions that equate student success solely with academic achievement (Alyahyan & Düştegör, 2020) and acknowledges the multifaceted nature of student experiences.

Meanwhile, the concept of student success itself has been a matter of ongoing debate and has evolved in significant ways. Historically, it was closely tied to relatively simple measures of retention and academic performance (Mayet, 2016; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Over time, however, a consensus has emerged that student success should be viewed as a matter of collective responsibility (Bainter, 1998; Bowers, 2015; Wilson et al., 2011). The complexity of the term and its various interpretations are evident in efforts by organizations such as Universities South Africa (USAf) to define and contribute to student success (Greenleaf Walker, 2023).

In the South African context, Van der Merwe and Maharaj (2018) identify four major factors that influence the prospects of academic success for engineering students: challenges within the school system, high dropout rates, the cost of engineering programmes, and stringent professional accreditation requirements. These factors resonate globally, as is evidenced by Wang et al.'s (2022) study across 14 undergraduate engineering programmes in the United States (US). This study aimed to fill the gap in research on holistic support systems and academic resilience among engineering

students, highlighting the need for comprehensive support for diverse student populations, including those from low-income, first-generation and international backgrounds; and also addressed gender disparities within the field.

Against this background, the present study employed a mixed-methods approach in an effort to provide a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of academic resilience among engineering students. Through a combination of quantitative data and qualitative insights garnered from interactions with students, lecturers and support staff, the research underscores the critical nature of, and need for, holistic support systems. The hope is that the approach adopted facilitates a deeper understanding of the factors influencing academic success and highlights the vital role of comprehensive support in bolstering the resilience of students navigating the complex landscape of higher education. The multifaceted nature of academic resilience and the interconnectedness of various support mechanisms indicate a need for integrated, student-centric strategies in fostering sustainable and holistic student success.

Perspectives on risk, resilience, and wellness: Theoretical foundations for holistic student success in engineering education

Educational interventions have traditionally targeted 'at-risk' students, that is, those facing potential academic failure or dropout. This risk-averse approach aims to prevent negative outcomes but often overlooks the broader concept of resilience. In this regard, it is important to note that academic resilience comprises more than an absence of risk; it requires overcoming adversity and is a key component of a holistic approach to promoting student success (Cassidy, 2016; Mapaling, 2023; Morales, 2008).

A holistic approach that covers not only academic achievement but also well-being and personal development is vital to promoting effective education in engineering, which is a particularly academically rigorous discipline. Academic resilience for those studying engineering encompasses academic accomplishment and mental and emotional well-being so that students can foster meaningful relationships and prepare themselves properly to address the challenges they will face after university. In this context, concepts of risk and resilience should be integrated into the understanding of student success so that a comprehensive view of student experiences and needs may be reached, and more effective and empathetic educational practices and policies may be implemented.

Against this background, the present literature review begins with an examination of how environmental factors and individual differences contribute to resilience. For example, Rutter's (1979, 2006) work highlights the significant role that environment plays in shaping resilience and the way in which multiple exposures to risk can affect the likelihood of psychiatric disorders.

Building on the foundations laid by Rutter (1979), Werner and Smith's Kauai study (1982) illustrates how resilience can persist despite severe stressors. The Kauai study emphasises the dynamic balance between risk and protective factors during individual developmental trajectories (Werner & Smith, 1982). The study further sets the stage for understanding resilience as a process that evolves across different life phases. Building

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on this idea, Garmezy's (1991) 'functional adequacy' concept explores protective and risk factors in stress-resistant children, highlighting resilience as a trait that is shaped by both individual and environmental factors. Garmezy's work paved the way for a more nuanced view of resilience as a phenomenon shaped by a confluence of internal and external elements.

Luthar et al.'s (2000) work on the multidimensional nature of resilience complements and extends the ideas previously developed, emphasising the complexity of the concept of resilience and exploring risk and protective factors as distinct yet interconnected influences. Luthar's approach underlines the idea that resilience cannot be viewed in isolation but should rather be seen as part of the broader, multifaceted spectrum of human experience (Luthar et al., 2000).

Masten and Reed (2002), building on Garmezy's (1991) foundational work, view resilience as the capacity to adapt and change in response to risk. They place a significant emphasis on the importance of assets and protective factors in fostering a supportive environment for resilience (Masten & Reed, 2002). Masten and Reed's perspective thus advances the conversation by focusing on how individuals and environments interact dynamically, suggesting that resilience is not merely about enduring adversity but rather about evolving in response to it (Masten & Reed, 2002).

These theoretical perspectives highlight the fluid nature of resilience and how it can be shaped by an intricate web of personal traits; familial dynamics; educational settings; societal resources; and cultural influences. In a similar vein, it is important to acknowledge the wide array of factors shaping student life if one is to develop educational strategies that not only foster academic prowess but also nurture the comprehensive growth and well-being of students.

The focus on student and staff wellness takes on heightened significance in an era of global health crises and student protests. The importance of fostering student well-being, including in terms of emotional and academic support; personal empowerment and self-care; interpersonal interactions; and future-oriented goals, becomes more pronounced during challenging times (Eloff et al., 2022) when the need for robust support systems that can address both mental health and academic achievement becomes quite achievement.

Meanwhile, there has also been an increasing focus in the literature on the importance of tailoring wellness initiatives to individual needs in higher education institutions (Henrico, 2022). This notion of customising wellness interventions aligns with the view of well-being as a core component of academic success, challenging traditional academia-centric views (Alyahyan & Düştegör, 2020; Davey, 2023; Mapaling, 2023). In addition, the call for comprehensive, personalised wellness programmes (Henrico, 2022) mirrors the rise of a broader educational narrative that emphasises the importance of integrated, student-focused strategies. Under this view, such strategies are considered vital for nurturing the multidimensional resilience upon which academic and personal success depends (Van der Merwe & Maharaj, 2018; Wang et al., 2022).

Hossain et al. (2022) argue that it is essential to expand the understanding of student well-being to include a broad spectrum of academic and life experiences. This broader

view of student success, which frames it as a shared responsibility to be undertaken by a range of educational stakeholders (Bainter, 1998; Bowers, 2015; Wilson et al., 2011), is critical to the effective establishment of interventions that holistically address student needs.

Conceptual frameworks guiding the study

This study was primarily informed by two conceptual frameworks that were deemed particularly relevant to engineering education in South Africa. First, it drew from Ungar's (2008, 2011) socio-ecological approach to resilience, which emphasises that resilience processes operate across the micro-meso-macro continuum and are not solely rooted within the individual. This perspective allowed for a more holistic examination of the factors enabling and constraining academic resilience among engineering students. The second conceptual position that guided this study was Ebersöhn's flocking theory (2019), which is grounded in an indigenous psychology of resilience in the Southern African context. This framework is particularly relevant as it illustrates how collective support mechanisms that are deeply embedded in cultural practices can foster resilience, particularly in resource-limited settings such as South Africa (Ebersöhn, 2019).

By incorporating these two conceptual lenses, the present study was able to capture the multifaceted and contextually situated nature of academic resilience among the engineering student population. The integration of Ungar's socio-ecological approach and Ebersöhn's flocking theory provided a robust foundation for exploring the complex interplay of individual, relational, and contextual factors influencing the academic resilience of engineering students in South Africa.

Research methodology

Research design and approach

This study utilised an exploratory case study design (Yin, 2018) and mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The exploratory case study design has been considered suitable for an in-depth investigation of academic resilience in a new context (Rule & John, 2011; Yin, 2018), enabling the exploration of novel themes and perspectives. The mixed-methods approach, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative data, enabled a comprehensive understanding of academic resilience through data triangulation and validation, enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

Participants and sampling

The present research focused on final-year students pursuing a three-year Bachelor of Engineering Technology degree at Nelson Mandela University and their lecturers and support staff. The engineering technology degree spans multiple engineering disciplines including industrial, civil, electrical, marine and mechanical engineering. For the quantitative aspect of the study, 47 out of a possible 66 students (74.6%) were recruited from these disciplines. They participated by completing various measuring instruments. The sample size of 47 students is considered representative, as it exceeds

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the recommended minimum sample size of 40, calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula for a population of 66 with a 90% confidence level and a 10% margin of error. Simple random sampling was employed to select the students for this study, ensuring a representative cross-section of the cohort.

Individual interviews with a diverse group of participants, including 13 engineering students, six lecturers and six support staff, were conducted for the qualitative component of the study. This sample size was determined based on the concept of data saturation, under which interviews continued until no new themes or insights emerged from the data (Saunders et al., 2018). The interviews aimed to delve into the respondents' perceptions and experiences of academic resilience. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who could provide rich, relevant and varied perspectives on the topic.

The criteria for participation in the study were that the students needed to be in their final year of the Bachelor of Engineering Technology programme; aged 18 or above; and enrolled in civil, electrical, industrial, marine or mechanical engineering. The lecturers needed to have a minimum three years of teaching experience in these disciplines from 2018 to 2020. The support staff needed to have undertaken academic and counselling activities for the specified student groups.

Phase 1: Quantitative data collection

During phase 1, quantitative data were collected, analysed and tested for reliability and validity.

Data collection

Five instruments for data collection were employed: a self-designed demographic questionnaire; the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition*, 'self-rated Level 1 cross-cutting symptom measure-adult' (DSM-5 CCSM-A) (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5 Task Force, 2013); a 10-item Kessler psychological distress scale (K10) (Kessler et al., 2002); the adult resilience measure (ARM-28) (Resilience Research Centre, 2018); and the academic resilience scale (ARS-30) (Cassidy, 2016). These tools measured demographic variables; individual and contextual risks; and resilience factors.

Data analysis

The statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) Version 29 was utilised for data analysis, ensuring only complete responses were analysed. The quantitative data were analysed through two kinds of statistical analyses: descriptive statistics (Fisher & Marshall, 2009) and inferential statistics (Allua & Thompson, 2009). Descriptive statistics were generated from each of the instruments that were administered. The frequency of admission and academic support information was also presented using descriptive statistics. Inferential statistical methods, such as the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test, were used to assess whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the categorical variables in this study, including academic resilience; personal resilience; and psychological distress.

Reliability and validity

The DSM-5 CCSM-A, a 23-item self-report scale covering 13 mental health domains, has demonstrated internal, convergent and criterion-related validity for assessing psychopathology among university students in a non-clinical setting (Bravo, 2018). The K10, a 10-item scale for psychological distress, has shown strong correlations with clinical diagnoses of anxiety and affective disorders (Andrews & Slade, 2001) and satisfactory internal reliability in studies with foreign students (Chiara et al., 2021) and medical students (Qamar et al., 2014). The ARM-28 assesses protective resources across individual, relational, and contextual domains. However, notwithstanding its use to explore resilience in diverse cultural contexts (Clark et al., 2022), its factor structure may need further validation to capture context-specific nuances. The ARS-30, which was designed specifically for academic settings, has shown acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90) and accounts for significant variance in academic resilience scores (Cassidy, 2016). However, its generalisability to diverse student populations, particularly males, requires further investigation.

Phase 2: Qualitative data gathering

During phase 2, qualitative data were gathered, analysed by theme and assessed for trustworthiness.

Data gathering

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews using Zoom, in response to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Separate interview schedules for students, lecturers and support staff were developed to enable them to focus on their experiences and perceptions of academic resilience.

Thematic analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) six-phase thematic analysis in an effort to ensure a reflective and inductive approach. The data were initially subjected to careful reading, transcribing, and memoing so that a nuanced understanding of academic resilience and the effectiveness of support strategies could be acquired. Key patterns relating to student support strategies and their real-world impact were identified and coded; and these formed preliminary themes around the challenges faced in engineering education and the nature of the available support systems. In the subsequent phases, these themes were critically reviewed and validated against the original data, with the aim of ensuring they accurately reflected the intricate relationship between institutional objectives and student experiences. This process involved refining the themes to capture the multidimensional nature of academic resilience and support mechanisms. Finally, the refined themes were synthesised into a cohesive narrative, portraying the current landscape of academic resilience in engineering education. This narrative addressed the core research question and sought to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on student success and well-being in the dynamic field of higher education.

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Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed as part of the thematic analysis process to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). These strategies included prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation, an audit trail, thick descriptions, member-checking, and reflexivity. There was prolonged engagement with the data to develop a deep understanding of the context and participant perspectives. Triangulation was achieved through the deployment of a number of data generation modes, involving an independent co-coder; and data were triangulated using various research methods. An audit trail of code generation was maintained; and thick descriptions of context were developed through memoing (reflexive journaling). This detailed documentation of the research process allowed for transparency and reproducibility. Member-checking was undertaken by providing each participant with a password-protected transcript of their interview via email for review and approval. Participants had the opportunity to omit sensitive information or indicate if they would rather not be quoted on specific matters. All participants approved the use of their interviews as transcribed. The author practised reflexivity throughout the study using memoing, which also served as a means of maintaining a clear audit trail.

Ethical considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent electronically before the interviews commenced. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms during data analysis. The potential risks and benefits of participation were clearly communicated to the participants. Counselling support was offered to participants in case they required this. Informed consent also covered the use of data for educational and research publication purposes and covered the recording and transcription of interviews. Confidentiality agreements were signed by the research team, and data were stored securely in both physical and electronic formats.

Research findings and discussion

This research generated extensive data, parts of which have been disseminated in publications (Mapaling, 2023; Mapaling, 2024; Mapaling et al., 2021; Mapaling et al., 2022; Mapaling et al., 2024a; Mapaling et al., 2024b; Mapaling & Wint, 2024).

Resilience amid risk

This study considered the experiences of 47 final-year students studying for a bachelor's in engineering technology at Nelson Mandela University. This group, who were 23.3 years-old on average and predominantly hailed from South Africa (92%), were ethnically diverse – comprising black (61%), white (24%) and coloured (15%) students – and communicated primarily in Xhosa (43%), Afrikaans and English. Their academic pursuits varied, with mechanical engineering (35%) and civil engineering (32%) being the most common specialisations.

The success of these individuals, half of whom were first-generation university students, was supported in various ways. Financial aid was a key component, with 41% benefitting from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS); and 17% benefitting from family funding or bursaries. Only 11% were self-funded. Notably, 21% of the students relied on the Meal-A-Day project as a resource for daily sustenance.

The analysis uncovered significant relationships within the data. Table 1 indicates a clear correlation between stress levels and resilience: 86% of students reporting low stress exhibited higher personal resilience, while only 61% of those experiencing moderate to severe stress exhibited relatively high personal resilience.

Table 1: Contingency table – Kessler distress category and personal resilience

	Personal resilience					
Kessler distress category	**<=60**		**>60**		**Total**	
Well/mild	5	14%	30	86%	35	100%
Moderate/severe	7	39%	11	61%	18	100%
Total	12	23%	41	77%	53	100%
Chi² (d.f. = 1, n = 53) = 4.11; p = .043; V = 0.28 Small						

Table 2 highlights the impact of orientation programmes on resilience. A total of 97% of students who attended the How2@Mandela programme demonstrated increased adult resilience, significantly higher than the 61% resilience rate among non-attendees.

Table 2: Contingency table – Attended How2@Mandela orientation programme and adult resilience

	Adult resilience					
Attended How2@Mandela orientation programme	**<=60**		**>60**		**Total**	
Yes	1	3%	34	97%	35	100%
No	7	39%	11	61%	18	100%
Total	8	15%	45	85%	53	100%
Chi² (d.f. = 1, n = 53) = 12.04; p = .001; V = 0.48 Medium						

These data points highlight the complexity of academic resilience and student success, particularly in the context of risk exposure, with demographic factors, financial support and participation in university-led support programmes all having an influence.

Unveiling perceptions and experiences

The perceptions and experiences of students, lecturers and support staff are categorised under three themes: well-being; support from relationships and the socio-ecological environment; and the role of support and resources. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned and coded for each sample group during data analysis. Engineering

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students' pseudonyms began with their discipline's initial (e.g. "C" for Civil – Chris); lecturers were coded with "Prof" followed by an initial (e.g. "Prof A" for Adams); and support staff were identified by an acronym indicating their role (e.g. "AS Aaron" for academic support – Aaron). Representative quotes from each group under each theme are included to offer perspectives and deepen the understanding of academic resilience and student success in engineering education.

Table 3: Well-being

Sample group	Pseudonym	Quote
Engineering students	Isaac	*I would say what was available was student counselling, especially for the mental health side of things.*
	Chido	*… hope is very powerful because … knowing that eventually like you're gonna … make it through anything.*
Engineering lecturers	Prof I	*A lot more is expected with online learning, and I think that causes a lot of stress.*
	Prof E	*… there are other important factors in rounding off a person completely, not just academic studies. How is COVID going to affect the next four to five years of students studying now?*
Support staff	AS Rosie	*… stressors in them that can trigger many times and open up many things that they need extra support through Emthonjeni [student counselling]*
	CS Ruby	*I would sell them [lecturers] a psychological approach and so it was new to them initially and what I found was that we couldn't even talk to them about things like well-being because they wanted to talk about student success, about academics.*

Table 3 indicates a shift in the engineering education community towards acknowledging the importance of well-being. While the initial focus was predominantly on academic achievement (Alyahyan & Düştegör, 2020), a growing recognition of the importance of well-being among students and staff is evident. Students value counselling and psychological support, a perspective that aligns with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) emphasis on character strengths such as hope and persistence. This alignment is particularly evident in the way student participants express hope, viewing it as central to overcoming challenges and persevering through adversity. Support staff's advocacy for personalised support mechanisms reflects the socio-ecological model developed by Ungar (2008, 2011), under which the interaction between individual and environmental factors in stress management is highlighted. Meanwhile, an evolving understanding among lecturers about the impact of various stressors, including online learning, resonates with Ebersöhn's (2019) perspective on the role of external support systems in fostering resilience.

Table 4: Support from relationships and the socio-ecological environment

Sample group	Pseudonym	Quote
Engineering students	Cliff	*There was a tutor in my first year that was helping out with Excel.*
	Eleanor	*I would say the study centre was also helpful. Even the library was helpful.*
Engineering lecturers	Prof M	*I've been busy this whole week answering WhatsApp from the students and emails and assisting them and sending them videos, additional videos to explain.*
	Prof I	*The IT [information technology] helpdesk is probably the biggest referring factor that I as lecturer do.*
Support staff	AS Yanga	*We offer academic advice … because when I meet you for the first time, I need to understand what your goals are and where you see yourself, in the next three, four years.*
	MS Lee	*I basically deal with a lot of the students and help them with any queries that they have regarding the bursary funds.*

Table 4 showcases a range of support strategies within the socio-ecological environment of engineering education. Engineering students emphasise the benefit of varied academic assistance, reflecting a need for personalised and systemic support that caters to their specific educational challenges. The students' appreciation for varied forms of support illustrates the relational dimension of resilience-building, directly resonating with Ebersöhn's (2019) emphasis on the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering resilience. At the same time, the focus on individualised strategies as a way of meeting unique student needs reflects Ungar's (2008) perspective, which underscores the necessity of customising assistance to enhance student well-being and success. Lecturers described how they contribute through proactive communication and the provision of resources, which aligns with Liebenberg and Moore's (2018) findings on the importance of adaptable and responsive support systems. The role identified by the support staff, who tend to focus on broader aspects of student needs from academic advice to financial guidance, illustrates the comprehensive nature of the support required. The varied approaches to support, as indicated by these groups, align with Masten's (2015) perspective on resilience as the capacity for dynamic adaptation and change in the face of risk.

Table 5: Role of support and resources

Sample group	Pseudonym	Quote
Engineering students	Mike	*I did attend the uhm I think it was called the How2 Buddy [first-year orientation] programme … I had a really good time.*
	Esona	*I went for mentoring. It did help me a lot. I went for tutoring. It helped me a lot.*

Sample group	Pseudonym	Quote
Engineering lecturers	Prof C	*We would actually buy groceries for them.*
	Prof E	*Sometimes if it's a potentially serious medical problem, then I will pay for them to go to my private doctor.*
Support staff	AS Uyanda	*Students coming from rural areas, who, as I said, do not know how a laptop works, do not have internet access, do not have the right resources – and what I did I was act as a middleman.*
	AS Mary	*We developed online material … time management, goal setting, motivation, uhm, study skills, stress management.*

Table 5 reveals the diverse, multifaceted nature of the support and resource strategies deployed in engineering education. It highlights students' appreciation for peer-led initiatives (Versfeld & Vinson, 2024), reflecting the effectiveness of such strategies in enhancing their success. This appreciation for peer-led initiatives aligns with Ebersöhn's (2019) flocking theory. Meanwhile, the lecturers' support efforts appear to extend beyond conventional academic boundaries to include various forms of care and assistance, resonating with Sarafino and Smith's (2014) definition of support. Support staff describe how they contribute by addressing students' immediate and long-term needs, exemplifying Rutter's (2006) concept that resilience is bolstered through appropriate resource provision.

Synthesis: Unifying quantitative and qualitative insights

The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data sheds light on the complexity of the support systems in engineering education. Quantitative correlations show a link between stress levels and personal resilience, as well as the positive impact of developmental programmes. Qualitative insights complement this finding, with students, lecturers and support staff expressing appreciation for a range of different forms of support, from peer-led initiatives to more comprehensive care. Overall, the analysis indicates that resilience and student success are products of a dynamic interplay among systemic support, individual needs and socio-ecological elements. This finding underscores the importance of a holistic student-support approach that integrates emotional, mental, academic and practical aspects to enhance overall well-being and student success.

Conclusion

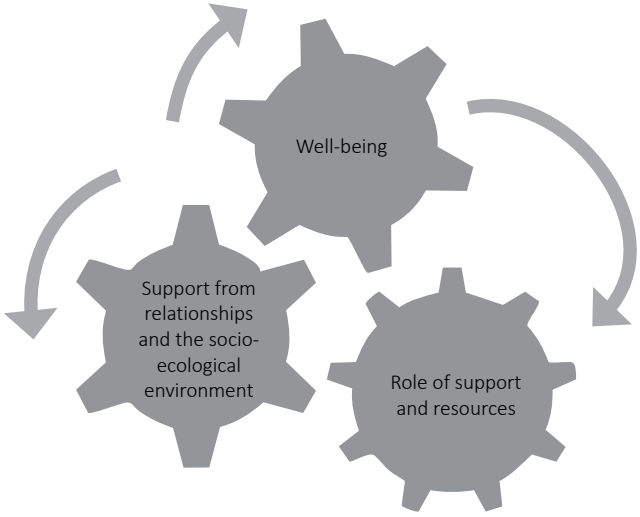
This study explored diverse support mechanisms essential for student success, as captured by the participants' words in the title of this article: "*They all offered different support*". This diversity challenges the traditional concept of 'interventions', which is a term that can be laden with stigmatic connotations. In place of this term, it is proposed that a more inclusive phrase – 'gears of connectivity' – be promoted. This phrase better reflects the dynamic, adaptable nature of the provision of support in higher education.

Traditionally, student support in higher education has been viewed on a linear continuum, from remedial to developmental strategies (McConney, 2023) (as seen in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Linear continuum of interventions

However, the findings of this study indicate that a more interconnected approach should be adopted – as embodied by the three interconnected gears of connectivity: well-being; support from relationships and the socio-ecological environment; and the role of support and resources (see Figure 2 below). These gears, which are essential to fostering academic resilience and success, highlight the need for support mechanisms that are adaptable and responsive to the diverse needs of university students.

Figure 2: Interconnected gears of connectivity



The 'gears of connectivity' framework emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to student support. It recognises that effective support in higher education must shift and adapt, just as mechanical gears move and interlock, to meet the evolving academic, social, and personal needs of students. The approach goes beyond merely addressing deficiencies and seeks instead to nurture students in a comprehensive fashion.

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Incorporating Ungar's (2008, 2011) socio-ecological approach to resilience, which emphasises how resilience processes operate across the micro-meso-macro continuum, the 'gears of connectivity' framework serves to underscore the multifaceted nature of support mechanisms. This alignment with Ungar's (2008, 2011) perspective also highlights the importance of considering individual, relational and contextual factors when designing support systems for students.

Furthermore, the interconnectedness of the 'gears of connectivity' framework resonates with the collective support mechanisms promoted under Ebersöhn's (2019) flocking theory. This study's findings reinforce the significance of culturally embedded support systems, particularly in the context of resource-constrained South African higher education institutions, as suggested by Ebersöhn's (2019) work.

This study contributes to a growing body of research that recognises the importance of collective support mechanisms in fostering resilience and success among university students, as suggested by Ebersöhn's (2019) flocking theory. In this context, future research should aim to extend the insights presented here by undertaking comparative studies across different universities and countries, exploring the impact of cultural and economic differences, as well as differences among education systems, on student success, resilience and well-being.

In addition, this study's findings offer important insights for university support staff and practitioners, particularly in relation to the need to forge and implement culturally sensitive, context-specific support strategies; and incorporate a broad spectrum of student experiences into these strategies so that effective resilience and well-being programmes are developed.

While this study provides valuable insights into the academic resilience of engineering students, it is important to note several limitations. The findings are specific to the context of Nelson Mandela University and may not be generalisable to other institutions or countries. Additionally, the sample size and composition may have limited the breadth of perspectives captured.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for this study was secured from the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee: Human (approval reference number: H20-EDU-ERE-026). Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study and ethical standards were observed throughout the study thereby safeguarding the integrity of the research process.

Potential conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Using action research and grounded theory techniques to design an evidence-based academic advising programme

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ABSTRACT

Academic advising, if done effectively, can play a significant role in supporting student retention. However, as a relatively new field in South Africa, there is limited locally contextualised research into advising interventions and their effectiveness. So, there is a need for evidence-based approaches that will lead to more intentionally structured, and shareable practices that meet the needs of the South African context. Accordingly, this article outlines a methodology for designing an evidence-based advising programme that is both effective and academically rigorous. The article shows how the principles of action research, supported by grounded theory analytical techniques, were used to develop a programme for students facing exclusion at a South African university, the University of Cape Town (UCT). During the implementation of the programme, feedback was collected in cycles, with the student 'voice' from one cycle (n=352) informing the design of the next cycle. Programme evaluation data (n=122) from a third cycle was then used to assess the effectiveness of the approach. The results indicated a positive association between the new capabilities developed in students and the designed learning activity, which suggests that this approach to developing an advising programme was effective. The method described to design this programme has application across a wide variety of student development initiatives and could be used to support effective, intentionally designed initiatives and the sharing of effective, evidence-based practices.

KEYWORDS

Academic advising, action research, grounded theory analysis, evidence-based intervention design

Introduction

South African universities face a distinct imperative to forge new pathways for student success that are inclusive, and transformative; as well as responsive, and relevant (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). To this end, new holistic ways of thinking about student support must be embraced (Bangeni et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2019; Schreiber, 2014; Sithaldeen & Van Pletzen, 2022; Wildschut & Luescher, 2023) and there must be acknowledgement that student success is shaped both in the classroom and beyond it. Students come to university with many needs that can impact on their prospects of achieving successful academic outcomes (Kuh et al., 2006; Maslow, 1978; Strayhorn, 2018; Tinto, 1997). Meeting these needs has traditionally been the mandate of student affairs staff, who offer a range of co-curricular services including academic advising (AA) (Schreiber, 2014). Co-curricular initiatives provide safe spaces for students to connect with others, share

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experiences, and build support networks (Bowman & Rosser, 2019); and the informal nature of such programming means it can be adapted quickly to meet emerging student needs (Schreiber, 2014). However, the perceived informality of such provision can also promote a less than academically rigorous mindset and undermine efforts to produce scholarship on the practices adopted. The problem here is that, in the absence of proper scholarship, it becomes difficult to share sound practices and furnish empirical evidence of how and why impacts are achieved which is required to promote institutional investment in effective strategies.

In this context, scholars have called for student affairs professionals to prioritise producing credible, evidence-based scholarship so that the efforts undertaken can be more effective and the profession can move forward (Luescher et al., 2023; Madiba, 2022; Schreiber, 2014; Wildschut & Luescher, 2023). This call has particular relevance for the practice of academic advising which has begun to take root in Africa (Ogude et al., 2012; Strydom et al., 2016; Fussy, 2018), since this is a relatively new field in South Africa, and there has been only limited research into academic advising initiatives and their effectiveness (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). While there is an understanding that academic advising is a useful practice (Nayager & de Klerk et al., 2024), there remains a need for evidence-based approaches that will lead to intentional, structured and coherent set of policies and actions that are sustainable over time (de Klerk & Dison, 2022 and references therein) in relation to this practice. Credible research entails meeting standards of academic rigour (Kreber, 2003) so that the knowledge that is produced can withstand scrutiny and may form the basis for the work of others in the field (Brew, 2001).

> *Rigor refers to the meticulousness, consistency, and transparency of the research process, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the phenomenon being studied. This includes meeting the standards of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings. (Kalpokas, 2024)*

To achieve rigour, researchers must apply systematic and disciplined methods, such as careful coding of data and consistent documentation of themes. Transparency in qualitative research entails clear, detailed, and explicit documentation of all stages of the research process. It further entails researchers making their work available to be scrutinised, critiqued, and improved upon, thereby contributing to the ongoing development of knowledge in their field (Kalpokas, 2024).

Against this background, this article describes the design of an academic advising intervention that draws on the principles of action research (Lewin, 1948; Stewart, 2024) and grounded theory analysis (Chun Tie et al., 2019) to produce a programme that enables students to develop or enhance capabilities that empower them to meet challenges faced in their academic lives. The present study proposes that the intentional and structured approach of this programme comes close to meeting the standards of academic rigour, producing results that are actually representative of the participants' experiences; featuring clear, logical, dependable documentation of the design process;

and allowing for evidence-based confirmation of the findings. The approach adopted also allows for transparency (Kalpokas, 2024).

What is academic advising?

> *Academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes. (NACADA, 2024)*

Academic advising (AA) initiatives offer a form of accessible, holistic support that can address the academic, mental-health and social needs of students (Nayager & de Klerk, 2024; Chiteng Kot, 2014; Swecker et al., 2013; Young-Jones et al., 2013) and can help students to curate an individual support experience. As such, AA can play a significant role in promoting student retention (Shelton & Yao, 2019; Bean & Eaton, 2002; Kuh et al., 2006) and offers opportunities outside the formal curriculum for promoting student success – for example by enabling students to draw on African values, such as *ubuntu*, as a means of improving their prospects of success. (Le Grange, 2007; Sithaldeen et al., 2022).

In South Africa, it has been stated that the goal of academic advising is "to empower students in their learning development process to explore and align their personal, academic and career goals" (Siyaphumelela, 2017, p. 4). In this context, the function of academic advising is to improve student engagement and conceptual understanding (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2018; Strydom et al., 2017; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). As a system, academic advising should "contain support mechanisms, structures and practices that complement the university's Teaching and Learning ecosystem" (Academic advising framework, University of Cape Town, unpublished). However, in order to promote AA as core university business and part of the academic agenda, practitioners must be able to point to how research on AA has indicated its effectiveness (de Klerk et al., 2021; Van Pletzen et al., 2021; NACADA, 2024).

Action research as a principle for designing an academic advising intervention

Action research (AR) has been widely adopted in the classroom (Cain, 2011; Mertler, 2021) due to its emphasis on collaboration; practical outcomes; and evidence-based continuous improvement (Mertler, 2021). The methodology is cyclical and includes a series of steps (Stewart, 2024; George, 2024):

- The first step is to identify the problem or issue that one is trying to solve. This requires understanding both the context in which the problem exists, as well as its impact on students.
- The next step is to develop a plan to solve the problem. At this point, one should also set objectives for the work and describe how achievement of these

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objectives may be measured. Then an intervention to address the problem is designed.
- Then the planned intervention or actions are implemented while simultaneously collecting data.
- Then the collected data is analysed, and consideration is given to what worked, what did not, and why. The plan is then revised and improved for the next cycle.
- This process is undertaken iteratively to promote continuous improvement.

The AR approach is often used to solve actual problems in real situations and should be used when some action, change or improvement on an issue is needed (O'Brien 1998; Pain et al., 2019). It therefore represents an ideal approach for designing new academic-advising interventions that speak to the critical challenges students face.

Deploying grounded theory (GT) analytical techniques in the design process

GT is an inductive methodology that provides systematic guidelines for gathering, synthesising, analysing and conceptualising qualitative data for the purpose of theory construction (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The aim is to develop theories or insights that are grounded in empirical data. The obvious benefit of this is that the insights produced are specific to the context, students or challenges under study. In addition, Canlas and Karpudewan (2020) propose that GT, by virtue of its strong analytical approach, can bolster the validity of a process, furnishing it with academic rigour that may otherwise be considered lacking.

Fundamental to GT is the process of analysing the data, or coding. Chun Tie et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive, practical framework for novice researchers so that they can conduct grounded theory research. The framework is designed to guide researchers through the essential stages of GT analysis and emphasises its iterative and non-linear nature. Taken from Chun Tie et al. (2019), the analytics elements of the framework that were utilised in the present study in order to develop insights from student feedback were:

- Purposive sampling: identifying the sample that will help one to answer one's questions.
- Data collection: generating or gathering the data from the sample in whatever form is appropriate.
- Initial coding: breaking down the data into initial codes, identifying key concepts that assign meaning to the data.
- Intermediate coding: developing core categories and subcategories, relating them to each other. Where initial coding breaks up the data, intermediate coding starts to bring it together so that the data may generate meaning.
- Advanced coding: integrating categories to form cohesive insights /theory.
- In addition, there are the iterative elements of:
    - Theoretical sensitivity: being sensitive to what is really important to the work going forward; and

- memoing: which is how ideas and reflections are stored throughout the process.

The present case study deployed action research, supported by GT analytic techniques, to design and evaluate an advising curriculum for academic recovery. In this regard, a key aim was to assess whether this methodology for tailoring a 'fit-for-purpose' intervention would result in an effective activity that built new student capability. Another aim was to ascertain whether, through this approach, important standards of academic rigour could be met.

The case study

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted tertiary education, particularly impacting students in transition from high school (Ojo & Onwuegbuzie, 2020). Unlike previous cohorts, these students faced an 'unusual year' without access to the traditional learning communities that foster academic growth and academic capital (Sithaldeen et al., 2022). Internal data from students at the UCT under study confirmed that their learning processes and journey had been disrupted due to a lack of online infrastructure; social isolation; and a loss of support networks, all of which had negatively impacted their academic performance and mental well-being, leaving them feeling disadvantaged and stigmatised (UCT, 2020, p. 85). Although academic exclusions take place every year, there was a dramatic increase in the number of students facing exclusion in 2021 – the year after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in South Africa – prompting the UCT to temporarily suspend exclusions and establish interventions to help students get back on track. At this time, no specific, structured programmes existed to help students reengage with their studies, or at least not at the scale required. Therefore, the challenge was to develop suitable support interventions that would address the impacts of the 'unusual year' and enable academic recovery and retention.

One such intervention was the Phambili programme which was developed by the Academic Advising Initiative (AAI) at UCT with the aim of offering advising in support of academic recovery to students from all faculties and across all levels of study. Under the Phambili programme, a team of professional AAI advisors would train peer advisors on how to facilitate group sessions among students and guide them to submit a task at the end of each cycle (for more details on this programme, see Sithaldeen et al., 2022). However, the programme had to be developed and implemented quickly; and given that action research allows for implementation of a solution while investigating the problem further and making improvements along the way (George, 2024), this was considered an appropriate approach for the design of this programme.

Planning and objective setting

The overarching aim of the Phambili initiative was to motivate students to reconnect with their studies thereby enabling student retention. The Phambili development team comprised an academic development practitioner, a clinical social worker, a learning experience designer, and a research assistant (all with professional advising

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qualifications). Once there was clarity about the context of the initiative and its objective, the process of planning the intervention began.

First, there was a drive to source relevant literature and secondary data that would help those establishing the programme develop a better understanding of the UCT and its students. To this end, secondary student data on the student experiences under COVID-19 was sourced from UCT (2020) which provided an overview of the broad range of challenges that students had faced during the pandemic. In addition, the programme drew on an earlier study of academic advising at UCT (Sithaldeen et al, 2022) that had recommended that a strengths-based (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015) academic advising curriculum drawing on elements of capability theory (Sen, 1999; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2015) would improve students' outcomes at the UCT. Strengths-based advising is an approach in academic advising that focuses on identifying and leveraging students' inherent strengths, talents and positive attributes to help them achieve their academic and personal goals. Capability theory considers what people are able to do and be, highlighting the importance of enhancing individual capabilities to ensure a successful life (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015; Sen, 1999; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Acting and analysing

In the acting stage of the action research approach, the first programme cycle was implemented and the students were asked the following questions:

- What would you say were the three biggest challenges that you faced in achieving academic success in 2021?
- What support do you think you would need to enable you to activate your strengths?

Applying the principle of purposive sampling (Chun Tie et al., 2019), submissions (n=352) were collected from the students in the programme. These were treated confidentially and anonymously. The aim was to gain insights that would shape the design of the next programme cycle.

A structured deductive approach was adopted in the analysis of the 352 student responses with the intention of ascertaining:

- What specific obstacles were the students facing on their journey to success?
- What capacities would students need to develop to overcome these obstacles?

The student submissions were analysed using the methodology from Chun Tie et al. (2019). Referencing the above questions relating to obstacles, open coding was used to find initial codes in the student responses, and a number of key obstacles were identified including 'lack of confidence' and 'struggles with focus'. Intermediate coding was then deployed to develop core sub-categories and categories to find meaning in the data. This was achieved using NVIVO software. Finally, advanced coding was deployed to integrate categories to form cohesive insights. Meanwhile, any analytical thoughts and insights

that arose during the process were documented. The findings from the intermediate and advanced coding stages are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Findings from analysis of student responses

Question: What obstacles did students face on their journey to success?
Academic challenges: The academic challenges that students reported were complex and varied. They included a lack of confidence in their abilities; inability to prioritise academic responsibilities; misunderstanding the expectations of university-level education; and maintaining focus on academic tasks.
Personal challenges: Students also faced a multitude of personal challenges, including dwelling on failure; reluctance to seek assistance; lack of personal accountability; imbalances between their work and personal lives; discipline deficiencies; motivational shortcomings; feelings of not belonging; insufficient social support; negative external life influences; and neglect of overall wellness.
Question: What capacities would students need to develop to overcome these obstacles?
Planning and goal setting: A major theme that emerged was that students wanted to improve their ability to adhere to a plan; effectively manage their time; set long-term goals; and make the most of the opportunities available to them.
Balance and well-being: Students also noted that their conception of success included maintaining a healthy balance between academic activities and other important aspects of life. In this regard, they wanted to be able to maintain a conducive working environment and prioritise their academic pursuits while also taking care of their mental and physical well-being.

Planning and acting again

Cycle 2 was planned based on the insights that emerged from Cycle 1 (see Table 1). It was decided that the focus should be on addressing students' self-reported inability to prioritise academic responsibilities, particularly given that any activity that addressed this challenge would also promote understanding of the expectations of university-level education and how to maintain focus on academic tasks. Accordingly, the students were guided to design an academic action plan so that they would be better able to prioritise academic responsibilities. Given that an academic action plan must include a study plan; set specific, achievable academic goals; and address the issue of effective management of time and task prioritisation (Shelton & Yao, 2019), the students were asked to:

- Visualise and articulate plans for the remainder of the academic year.
- Outline steps and actions to achieve the academic goal that they set.
- Define a timeline for achieving the academic goal and identify specific milestones and deadlines within the academic year.
- Identify observable signs indicating progress towards the established goal.
- Develop a system for tracking and recognising positive developments.
- Assess and articulate the support necessary to execute the academic game plan effectively.

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Evaluating the effectiveness of action research as a means of designing interventions

In addition, self-evaluation activities were incorporated into the programme with students being asked to score themselves on how effectively they had used their academic plan. They self-reported on how well they believed they had 'stuck to their game plan', giving themselves a score from 1 to 5 (with a score of 1 indicating low adherence to the plan and a score of 5 indicating a more disciplined approach). They were also asked to provide an explanation for this score.

A total of n=122 responses on this were received from the students, who were then divided into focus groups based on their self-scores. The reflections that emerged from each of these groups were analysed separately, using the grounded theory coding process (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Results

Of the 122 responses received, 2% (n=3) students reported a very low score of 1, while 9% (n=11) students gave themselves a score of 2. A further 3% (n=4) reported a score of 3. The majority of students 66% (n=81) gave themselves a score of 4; and 19% (n= 23) students gave themselves a score of 5.

Students with a very low score of 1 (n=3) attributed this to a combination of impractical study strategies; insufficient personal engagement; missed classes; and challenges related to internet connectivity. Students with a score of 2 (n=11) showed awareness of their challenges and a willingness to seek help to overcome them. Students with a score of 3 (n=4) acknowledged that they had not really used the planning tool despite less-than-ideal first-semester results. In this group, some students reported that personal challenges had led to academic setbacks that were still prevalent, while others noted some progress in finding discipline and focus.

The majority of students gave themselves a score of 4 (n=81). In this group, students indicated greater proactivity and a positive attitude towards their academic studies. They also exhibited significant goal-driven behaviours, including in relation to time management and personal accountability. Their academic progress was also quite evident in relation to the achievement of goals; improved grades; and consistent management of coursework. Students with a score of 5 (n=23) described a positive academic journey characterised by consistent accountability and a keen sense of responsibility. Many reported being proactive in seeking help; and some said their mindsets had changed as a result of participation in the Phambili programme.

Discussion

Many student affairs practitioners are unable to show a direct correlation between their work and measurable student outcomes such as throughput and pass rates. One reason is that student development work may not lend itself to traditional, empirical research methods. However, several scholars have called on student affairs and services staff at universities to assert the credibility of their community of practice; develop and build the capacity of their profession; and contribute to the knowledge-production function of higher education institutions (Wildschut & Luescher, 2023). Responding to

this call, practitioners in this field may need to challenge traditional research cultures; redefine the nature of scholarship and promote alternative indicators of impact, including qualitative ones measuring sense of belonging and increased capacities among students (e.g. Sithaldeen et al., 2022). Such endeavour may also entail practitioners rethinking their design practices when developing their interventions, including by using academically rigorous, evidence-based approaches that can be readily evaluated and shared. The deployment of such approaches can both enhance the effectiveness of student support interventions and contribute to the credibility and development of the profession.

In the present case, the challenge was to develop an academic-advising solution at speed for students who urgently needed to reengage meaningfully with their studies. Action-based research aims to address specific problems or challenges within a particular context and often involves collaboration between researchers and practitioners to understand, diagnose and solve practical problems, while simultaneously generating new knowledge (George, 2024). Although this method is primarily intended to produce research (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020), it has a long history of use in educational design (Mertler, 2021) because it focuses on finding relevant solutions to specific problems through engagement with participants who are best placed to articulate their own needs (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020).

The methodology for this study deployed analytical techniques provided by grounded theory to anchor the intervention in the actual environment and realities of the students. In this regard, student views on their educational development must be addressed in order to improve pedagogy and promote a better understanding of its impacts on student learning (Seale, 2016). The incorporation of such student views also ensures that the design is relevant, inclusive, valid and more likely to be impactful. As Strydom and Loots (2020, p. 31) point out: “If our high-impact practices are continuously informed by students, we can improve the quality of outcomes”. Accordingly, the methodology deployed for the programme under study used grounded theory analytical techniques in an effort to embed student voices in the programme design in a systematic, methodical way that was both credible and transparent.

Deploying action research and grounded theory, a customised intervention was designed which was tailored to the specific needs of the UCT students in question – an intervention which was found to have positively impacted their academic confidence and ability to engage with their academic responsibilities. Of the 122 students who responded, approximately 85% indicated a score of 4 or 5, reflecting strong adherence to the programme. These students also expressed a proactive, positive attitude towards their academic goals. They noted that they were clear about the nature of their goals and were committed to achieving them. In this regard, a significant number of students said that positive benefits accrued from setting deadlines, and demonstrated an ability to adapt their plans as needed, leading to better stress management. Within the sample, several students attributed improved grades and consistent course work management to their newfound discipline; capacity for effective time management; and sense of

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personal accountability. Some directly linked the acquisition of a new, positive mindset to their participation in the Phambili programme.

In order to produce credible, shareable scholarship, student services practitioners should employ detailed methodologies in the design of their practices, collecting and presenting data transparently, and being open about the potential limits of their work. Establishing an intentional, structured approach that deployed analytical techniques derived from grounded theory to capture student voices, the designers of the Phambili programme were able to posit a credible connection between their results and the experiences of the programme participants. In addition, they were able to document the design process (e.g. in the form of this manuscript) clearly and logically, confirming the links between the findings and the data. Through such academic rigour, the designers of the programme were able to be explicit about what they did; why and how they did it; and what was achieved. Looking to the future, the acquisition of the capacity to design (and justify) programmes in this way is likely to be increasingly important for academic-advising practitioners, as well as student affairs professionals, as they strive to provide effective, relevant support to a growing student population in an increasingly resource-constrained environment.

Limitations of the study

Although 122 students responded as part of evaluation undertaken in implementing the Phambili programme, this sample size is likely not large enough to capture the full diversity of student experiences and outcomes, especially as Cycle 1 of the programme initially engaged 352 respondents. Additionally, the sample may not be representative of all students on academic probation or in need of academic recovery. Accordingly, in order to take this work going forward, there should be recruitment to include a sample from outside the study group and to ensure representative sampling from faculties and across years of study.

In addition, the study primarily captures short-term outcomes and immediate impacts on students' academic confidence and engagement; and long-term effects on academic success and retention rates might not be fully addressed or measured. In this regard, it would be worth conducting a longitudinal study to track students' progress and outcomes over a longer period, providing insights into long-term impacts.

Furthermore, the inclusion of a more diverse and larger sample size from different institutions and academic settings would improve the generalisability and transferability of the findings, which is another important criterion for academic rigour (Kalkopas, 2024).

In terms of academic rigour this work would also have been strengthened by more reflexivity as part of the process; and planning for triangulation to cross-check and validate findings – for example, by engaging lecturers or tracking student-performance data.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance (CHED2022_6_Author) for this work was provided by one of UCT's faculty research ethics committees. Student submissions were treated confidentially and analysed anonymously.

Potential conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bridging gaps: Enhancing holistic support in mathematics during the transition from secondary school to university

Ukunqotshwa kwezinkinga: Ukuqinisa ukusekelwa okuphelele ngokufundiswa ngesifundo sezibalo kusukela emazingeni aphansi kuya emazingeni emfundo ephakeme inyuvesi

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ABSTRACT

The provision of multidimensional holistic support in mathematics for students transitioning from secondary school to university is identified as a challenge facing global education systems, including in South Africa. Ongoing attempts to select effective mathematics learning support reflect the enduring nature of a problem caused by a range of factors. Despite a wealth of literature on the topic there has been little effort to consolidate the diverse knowledge on this issue into a comprehensive, useful understanding. This study aims to close this gap by synthesising and integrating the disparate elements with the aim of producing a unified framework to address the problem. The research employs a comprehensive rapid literature review following PRISMA (preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses) guidelines. The review concentrates on papers that investigate the impact of specific types of mathematical support; on those conducting analyses of the efficacy of distinct mathematical support approaches; and on those proposing solutions towards improving first-year South African university students' mathematical performance. To mitigate bias, the Rayyan AI-assisted literature review platform is utilised with the aim of promoting a rigorous, unbiased selection process. This rapid literature review reveals the absence of a unified framework for providing holistic mathematics learning support, which is a major obstacle to the provision of such support. The authors note that this deficiency can detrimentally impact students, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach. The findings suggest that mathematics support can be enhanced by integrating the core elements of a holistic approach and acknowledging the interconnectedness and mutual influence of the various elements.

KEYWORDS

Holistic approach, mathematics support, first-year engineering students, transition from secondary school to university, engineering education

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ISIFINYEZO

Ukuhlinzekwa ngosizo olunobubanzi obuhlangene noluhlanganisa zonke izinsiza kufunda ekufundeni isifundo sezibalo kubafundi abaphumelele umatikuletsheni kuya ezingeni laseyunivesithi kuwumqansa ohlangabezwa izinhlelo zemfundo emhlabeni jikelele, kuhlanganisa naseNingizimu Afrika. Imizamo eqhubekayo yokukhetha izindlela eziphumelelayo zokwesekwa ekufundeni izibalo ibonisa isimo esinzima esibangelwa izinkinga eziningi ezihlangene. Naphezu kobuningi bemibhalo yesayensi, kuye kwaba nomzamo omncane wokuhlanganisa le mithombo ehlukene ukuze kutholakale ukuqonda okuhle nokuwusizo. Lolu cwaningo luqonde ukuvala leli gebe ngokuhlanganisa amasu ahlukene abe uhlaka oluhlangene. Ucwaningo lusebenzisa ukubuyekezwa kwemibhalo okujulile futhi okusheshayo, kuhanjiswa ngokuqapha iznkombandlela ze-PRISMA. Lolu cwaningo lugxile emaphepheni ahlola umthelela wezinhlobo ezithile ezilandelwayo ekufindeni izibalo, kulabo abenza izibuyekezo zokusebenza kahle kwezindlela ezihlukile zosizo lwezibalo, kanye namaphepha aphakamisa izixazululo zokuthuthukisa ukusebenza kwabafundi baseNingizimu Afrika abenza unyaka wokuqala ezifundweni zezibalo. Ukuze kugwenywe ukuchema, kusetshenziswe ipulatifomu ye-Rayyan esekelwa yi-AI yokubuyekezwa kwemibhalo, ukuqinisekisa inqubo eqinile nengachemile yokukhetha. Lolu cwaningo lwembula isithiyo esijwayelekile sokwesekwa ekufundeni izibalo ngokubanzi, ngendlela yokungabi khona kohlaka oluhlangene. Sibonisa ukuthi lokhu kushoda kungaba nomthelela ongemuhle kubafundi, kuphinde kugcizelele isidingo sokusebenzisa indlela ebanzi. Imiphumela iphakamisa ukuthi ukwesekwa kwezibalo kungathuthukiswa ngokuhlanganisa izici eziyinhloko zendlela ehlangene, kanye nokwamukela ukuxhumana kanye nomthelela omkhulu wezinto ezahlukene ezihlangene.

AMAGAMA ANGUKHIYE

Indlela ehlangene, ukwesekwa kwezibalo, abafundi be-injiniyeringi bonyaka wokuqala, ukudlulela eyunivesithi usuka emfundweni yesiseko

Introduction

Transitioning from high school to university presents significant challenges for South African students, especially around mathematics (Selesho, 2012; Kizito et al., 2016) and particularly for those students from previously 'disadvantaged', under-resourced schools. The shift, particularly in subjects like calculus, represents a critical hurdle for many students and can affect their retention in technical programmes (Yoon et al., 2018). Early strong mathematics performance is crucial for academic success in STEM subjects (Sithole et al., 2017). Despite efforts to remedy the situation, student performance in mathematics has remained relatively unchanged over time, highlighting persistent challenges (Faulkner et al., 2010; Kizito et al., 2016). The problem of performance stems from such factors as students' negative attitudes towards mathematics; their levels of competence; and the socio-economic context (Rach & Heinze, 2017). Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach, one that includes academic, psychosocial and foundational dimensions (Ward et al., 2014).

A holistic approach in this context refers to a comprehensive perspective on student mathematical development, one that recognises the interrelated elements of curriculum design; instructional practices; assessment strategies; and socio-emotional factors. Such an approach would integrate these components to create a cohesive system that promotes understanding and success among students.

Disconnected and fragmentary programmes have not been found to improve retention, success or graduation rates in mathematics (Palmer, 2016; Tierney & Sablan, 2014), indicating the importance of designing more integrated support initiatives

to obviate the confusion arising from uncoordinated interventions (Palmer, 2016). A significant research gap exists in exploring holistic perspectives to enhance first-year mathematics students' understanding and motivation (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Accordingly, the authors of this article argue for addressing this gap by establishing a unified framework to improve conceptual understanding and graduation rates.

This review seeks to provide insights into the current landscape of mathematical support for first-year university students in South Africa (SA) and proposes specific strategies to enhance their learning experiences. It explores the development of a framework to improve fragmented support and argues for the potential benefits of a holistic perspective in enhancing mathematical proficiency. It further references the importance of developing mathematical skills for the success of students in STEM degree programmes (Deeken et al., 2020).

The review poses three research questions:

1. What are the prevalent challenges and gaps in mathematics support encountered by students transitioning from secondary schools to universities?
2. What existing strategies, interventions and programmes have been proposed or implemented to address fragmented mathematics support during the transition period, and what evidence exists regarding their effectiveness?
3. How can a comprehensive synthesis of literature on mathematics support assist in developing a unified framework that effectively addresses the diverse needs and education backgrounds of students engaging in mathematics as they transition from secondary school to university?

The study is organized as follows: first, it examines the current body of knowledge on mathematics support programmes for first-year university students; then it discusses the research methodology used in the review. The findings section introduces a holistic approach to mathematics support and presents a visual framework for students to help them develop and apply certain concepts/connections and enhance their understanding. The article concludes with a discussion of the possibilities for new research in this area.

Literature review

This literature review seeks to explore critical aspects surrounding mathematical support for first-year university students, examining key issues, prevalent challenges and emerging initiatives. It addresses the issue of first-year university students' failure rates in mathematics. It explores the factors contributing to this, and the implications for educational practice. It examines evidence of the fragmentary nature of the mathematical support on offer to first-year students, identifying gaps and inefficiencies. It also considers the various integrated and holistic mathematics support initiatives on offer, synthesising research perspectives to understand and assess the potential benefits and challenges of adopting a holistic approach.

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First-year university students' failure rates in mathematics

Adamuti-Trache et al. (2013) explored factors influencing successful transitions from high school to university in mathematics at the University of British Columbia. They examined performance gaps and school effectiveness, emphasising the crucial role of high-school programmes in shaping student preparedness. They concluded that a student's first-year university mathematics performance is closely tied to the high school they attended.

Another study investigated prerequisites for individual mathematical learning among 182 first-term university students majoring in mathematics (Rach & Heinze, 2017). The authors found that, while school-related mathematical resources had a minor impact, students' prior knowledge and the effectiveness of their learning strategies during the transition had a relatively great influence on their prospects of success.

Park et al. (2018) analysed the impact of optional developmental education on underprepared first-time university students in Florida in the United States (US). Their study revealed that many students chose not to enrol for optional courses, leading to lower success rates in mathematics at the post-secondary level. However, they found that underprepared students performed better in modified developmental courses compared with courses with developmental support.

Berry et al. (2015) conducted a study at Maynooth University in Ireland on student engagement with a mathematics support-centre website. They identified a lack of institutional information and training in relation to using technology, as well as a lack of suitable online resources to support student performance. Their recommendations included the establishment of a modern website design, and comprehensive training and support for students and lecturers. Kizito et al. (2016) also emphasise the importance of integrating technology into mathematics education to bridge resource gaps. Their study on mobile learning interventions in Uganda showed that tutorials and assessments significantly improved student engagement and performance in mathematics, offering a scalable solution to inadequate preparation among high-school graduates.

Holistic mathematics support in the African context

The educational landscape in Africa presents unique challenges and opportunities for holistic mathematics support. Selesho (2012) notes that the transition from high school to university in SA tends to be characterised by significant disparities in mathematical preparedness due to socio-economic factors and the varying quality of secondary education across the country. In this context, a holistic approach that addresses academic needs and considers the socio-emotional and foundational aspects of student development is required.

Mutodi and Ngirande (2014) explored the role of psychosocial support in enhancing mathematics performance among university students in SA. They found that students who received regular counselling and mentorship demonstrated marked improvements in mathematical understanding and overall academic performance. Highlighting the need for a support system that includes not only academic tutoring, but also psychological support and mentorship.

In a similar vein, Mayet (2021) examined the effectiveness of foundation programmes offered by South African universities to underprepared students transitioning to higher education. These programmes can include intensive mathematics courses; study skills workshops; and personal development sessions. The study concluded that such comprehensive support structures are crucial for improving retention and success rates in STEM disciplines.

Evidence of fragmented mathematical support

Koskinen and Pitkäniemi (2022) conducted a systematic study to address fragmentation in research on teaching and learning mathematics. Their goal was to create a comprehensive synthesis of the literature from diverse sources focusing on meaningful learning, or the lack thereof, in the education provided at schools. They examined correlations between various teaching approaches; interactions during the teaching–learning process; and learning outcomes. The study found that achieving high-quality learning outcomes in mathematics requires active guidance and immediate feedback during student activities. Additionally, an emotionally supportive classroom environment and the presence of teachers who consider students' unique needs and learning styles are required for a meaningful learning experience.

Research undertaken on technology-assisted mathematical support shows the potential of digital tools to enhance education. Bray and Tangney (2017) examined 139 recent studies on technological interventions in mathematics and developed a classification system to categorise digital tools; activity goals; pedagogical foundations; and levels of technological integration. Their analysis revealed a discrepancy between the focus of published research and the approaches to using technology that were most effective in enhancing mathematics teaching and learning.

Effectiveness of holistic framework components

Research has shown the effectiveness of including several components within a holistic mathematics support framework. De Jesus (2012) highlighted the importance of such tailored instructional practices as differentiated instruction and personalised learning plans. Those students who received customised learning experiences demonstrated significant improvements in their mathematical skills and overall academic performance.

Psychosocial support is another crucial component of a holistic framework. Arif and Mirza (2017) found that students who participated in programmes which included counselling, mentorship, and stress management workshops exhibited higher levels of academic resilience and motivation than those who did not. From such studies one can conclude that a supportive learning environment may be fostered by addressing students' emotional and psychological needs.

Studies conducted by Kizito et al. (2016) and Bray and Tagney (2017) show the importance of the role of technology in providing effective mathematics support. Shi et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of online learning studies, concluding that students in technology-enhanced learning environments performed better than those in

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traditional settings. Such studies show the value of incorporating adequate digital tools and resources into mathematics support programmes to enhance learning outcomes.

Several studies have found collaborative learning to be effective within a holistic framework. Almajed et al. (2016) found that collaborative learning strategies, such as group problem-solving and peer tutoring, improved students' mathematical understanding and promoted positive interdependence and accountability among peers. Thus, effective social interactions can be seen as crucial for developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

In addition, assessment and feedback have been found to be vital in the learning and transitional process. Irons and Elkington (2021) emphasise the importance of formative assessment in providing ongoing developmental feedback, and in helping students identify strengths and areas for improvement. Their research showed that formative assessments, when integrated into the learning process, significantly enhance student achievement and motivation.

Theoretical framework

The holistic approach informing this study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, which emphasises the complex interplay between individuals and their environmental contexts. The theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how different layers of the educational environment, from immediate settings (such as classrooms) to broader influences (such as educational policies), affect student learning and development. The study advocates for a shift towards holistic educational practices that prioritise both academic achievement and overall well-being, preparing students for the complex global challenges ahead.

Methods

To investigate the ongoing poor performance of first-year university mathematics students transitioning from secondary school, with an emphasis on the South African experience, a rapid literature review was undertaken. This approach allowed for a focused examination of recent empirical studies (2010-2022) on the topic. It entailed five steps: (1) identifying review questions; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) selecting studies from the many potentially relevant studies; (4) charting data; and (5) summarising results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Guided by the PRISMA framework (Moher et al., 2009) to enhance transparency and replicability, the methodology sought to adopt a rigorous and structured approach, contributing to the credibility and reliability of the findings.

The application of the PRISMA methodology promoted the establishment of a transparent and replicable research process. This methodology provided a clear framework for each phase of the review, from the initial identification of studies to the final synthesis of findings. The use of PRISMA also supported the review's aim to be comprehensive, capturing a wide range of relevant studies and minimising the risk of bias (Moher et al., 2009).

The PRISMA-guided review has highlighted the interconnectedness of various elements within a holistic approach to mathematics learning support. By systematically identifying and synthesising relevant studies, the review has provided robust evidence to support the implementation of holistic educational practices. The findings have emphasised the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning so that student outcomes may be improved.

Identification phase

The initial phase of the PRISMA process – identification – involved a comprehensive search to capture a broad range of relevant literature, the aim being to avoid selection bias (Moher et al., 2016). Researchers have noted that an effective search approach should balance specificity and sensitivity, thus ensuring the inclusion of relevant studies while minimising the inclusion of unrelated research (Brunton et al., 2017). Relevance is seen as crucial for validity, safeguarding against selection and publication bias (Booth et al., 2016).

The search for this review spanned databases including Engineering Village, ERIC via EBSCOhost, and Scopus. The Rayyan AI-assisted platform was deployed to further fortify validity and avoid publication bias (Bartoš et al., 2023). Search strings were developed with a university librarian, using Boolean operators 'OR' and 'AND', and proximity and truncation operators to balance sensitivity and specificity (see Table 1). The search strategy varied based on each database's characteristics.

Table 1: Database search field strings

Database search field	Search string
Global search	(support AND (mathematics OR math OR maths) AND (("first year" OR freshman) AND (university OR college OR "higher education")) AND transition)
Specific search for South Africa	(support AND (mathematics OR math OR maths) AND (("first year" OR freshman) AND (university OR "higher education")) AND transition) AND "South Africa"

Source: Fictitious data, for illustration purposes only

The study selection process complied with the four PRISMA steps recommended by Moher et al. (2009), encompassing identification; screening; eligibility; and inclusion. Screening involved the independent assessment of abstracts and titles (n = 162), and articles in full text (n = 162). Ultimately, 30 studies met the inclusion criteria, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Screening phase

During the screening phase, the identified records were selected according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were established to ensure that the studies selected were relevant to the research questions, specifically focusing on

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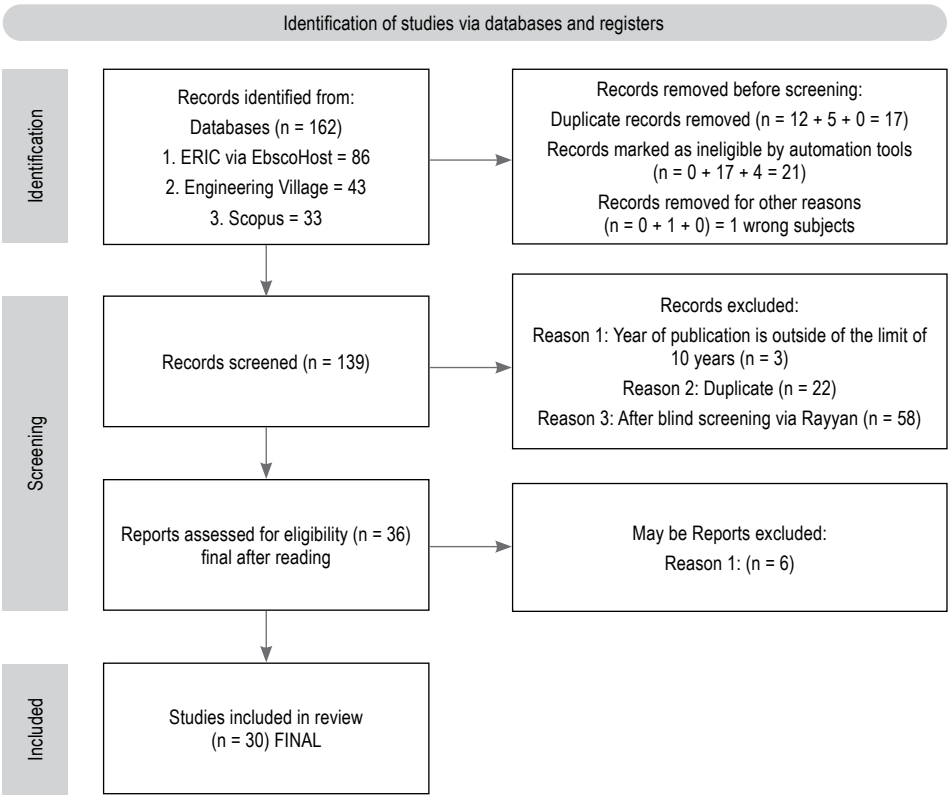
Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009)



holistic support in mathematics for first-year university students in SA. Exclusion criteria helped to eliminate studies that did not meet the relevance, quality or focus required for this review. This phase involved removing duplicates; reviewing titles and abstracts; and conducting a preliminary assessment of the full texts (Page et al., 2021).

Eligibility and inclusion phases

The eligibility phase involved a detailed examination of the full-text articles to confirm their suitability for inclusion in the review. Studies were assessed for their methodological quality; relevance to the research questions; and adherence to the defined inclusion criteria. This rigorous assessment ensured that only high-quality studies with significant contributions to the topic were included in the final review. To ensure the inclusion of recent research, only texts produced from 2010 to 2020 were considered, with language restrictions based on the reviewers' proficiency in English.

Data extraction and synthesis

The final set of included studies underwent a comprehensive data-extraction process. Key information, such as study objectives, methods, sample characteristics, findings, and implications, were systematically extracted and tabulated. The PRISMA framework facilitated the synthesis of these data, allowing for the identification of common themes, patterns, and gaps in the existing literature. This structured approach supported the production of a comprehensive, coherent synthesis and the provision of a clear understanding of the current state of research on holistic support in mathematics education (Page et al., 2021).

Ethical considerations

All extracted articles and resources were treated with respect for intellectual property rights. Citations were carefully recorded, and original authors were credited for their contributions.

Results

Research question 1

Examining the literature, several themes and findings were identified in response to the first research question posed by this study: What are the prevalent challenges and gaps in mathematics support encountered by students transitioning from secondary schools to universities?

Change in learning environment

There is a significant difference between the structured, teacher-led environment of secondary school to the more self-directed and independent learning style adopted at university; and this shift can have a significant impact on first-year students' understanding of mathematics at the university level. In the absence of the structure and guidance of a teacher-led environment, students can struggle to manage their time effectively; set meaningful study goals; engage deeply with the material; seek help when needed; receive feedback on their progress; and, ultimately, develop a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Smith and Thomas (2020) note that students face considerable difficulty in adjusting to the less structured, more autonomous nature of university learning environments.

Lack of prerequisite knowledge

A growing body of literature has investigated the lack of prerequisite knowledge on the part of first-year students as they transition from school-level to university-level mathematics (Hochmuth et al., 2021). Research has indicated that some first-year university students commence their academic journeys without a comprehensive grasp of essential mathematical concepts that should have been taught in secondary school, thus creating gaps in their understanding. This limitation impacts their comprehension of advanced mathematical topics and impedes their ability to follow lectures, execute assignments, and achieve satisfactory outcomes in examinations. Additionally, the

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absence of a robust foundation in mathematical fundamentals exacerbates their struggles to navigate the university mathematics curriculum. Consequently, students might find themselves requiring remedial courses or additional support to bridge such knowledge gaps and synchronise with their peers. Jones et al. (2021) attest to the fact that many first-year students lack a strong foundation in essential mathematical concepts, hindering their prospects of success at university level.

Technology and software

Studies underscore how a lack of technological skills can impact first-year university students' understanding of mathematics (Er, 2018). University-level mathematics often necessitates the use of specialised software and technology which may be unfamiliar to students accustomed to traditional learning methods devoid of technological integration. Students who have previously been educated in this way may be less engaged and motivated at university, struggling to maintain enthusiasm for their learning in the absence of interactive and visual learning tools. Additionally, those who were not previously exposed to the new information technologies in their education may be unfamiliar with communications tools and digital collaboration which are crucial for success in academic and professional environments. Brown and Wilson (2019) found that the integration of the new technologies into mathematics education underpins student engagement and comprehension.

Cultural and institutional differences

First-year mathematics students encounter myriad challenges associated with cultural and institutional differences in transitioning to university (Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2021). Varying approaches to teaching mathematics across different countries and educational systems contribute to a considerable discrepancy in learning methods. For instance, some educational systems may prioritise rote memorisation and examination-based assessments, whereas others emphasise problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2021). This diversity of teaching styles can result in students from different backgrounds facing difficulties in adapting to a new educational environment, which can affect their academic performance. Additionally, cultural differences in learning styles and attitudes towards education can create misunderstandings and conflicts when undertaking group work and/or collaborative learning. Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge and address such disparities to promote equitable academic success.

Research question 2

Examining the literature, several themes and findings were identified in response to the second research question posed by this study: What existing strategies, interventions and programmes have been proposed or implemented to address fragmented mathematics support during the transition period, and what evidence exists regarding their effectiveness?

Addressing challenges with a holistic approach

The present literature review identified several core elements underpinning a holistic approach to mathematics learning, including conceptual understanding; problem-solving skills; active learning; contextualised learning; assessment for learning; cultivating mathematics mindsets; and professional learning communities. Under a holistic approach, it is acknowledged that the entirety of these components surpasses the sum of the individual parts given their intricate interconnectedness and how they affect each other in a systemic way (Toh et al., 2019).

Conceptual understanding

A cornerstone for enhancing mathematical proficiency is conceptual understanding. In order to promote this, students are encouraged to delve into the depths of mathematical concepts (rather than learning through memorisation), a process which fosters in them a robust comprehension that transcends procedural knowledge (Tutak et al., 2011). Students are then able to grasp the fundamental principles and connections inherent in mathematics, thereby facilitating problem-solving and active learning. By employing concrete examples, visual representations, and real-world applications lecturers can illuminate abstract concepts, making them more accessible and tangible. Through this approach, students not only gain a deeper understanding but also develop the ability to transfer their knowledge in diverse contexts.

Problem-solving skills

Mathematics education at the first-year university level may be improved through a process of enhancing students' problem-solving skills (Csapó & Molnár, 2017). By immersing students in a diverse array of challenging and engaging problems, lecturers can cultivate in their students a mindset geared towards critical thinking and analytical competency (Abrami et al., 2015). Encouraging students to explore problems from multiple angles and to develop diverse strategies for creating solutions improves their mathematical skills and fosters their resilience in the face of complex challenges. Teaching explicit problem-solving techniques and fostering reflection on problem-solving processes enables students to navigate the mathematical terrain with confidence and originality. The acquisition of such skills also empowers students to apply mathematical concepts in real-world contexts and to tackle novel problems effectively and creatively.

Active learning

The deployment of active-learning techniques can improve pedagogy and foster students' understanding by fostering their engagement in, and ownership of, the learning process (Ahn & Choi, 2015). By integrating hands-on activities; group discussions; and interactive exercises, educators create dynamic learning environments that encourage students to participate and explore mathematical concepts, rather than simply memorising them. Through active learning, students engage with and apply their knowledge (instead of passively receiving information), leading to deeper conceptual

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understanding and increased knowledge retention. Active learning also cultivates a positive mathematical mindset by making the subject relevant and approachable.

Contextualised learning

Contextualised learning plays an essential role in strengthening the teaching and learning of mathematics at first-year university level by bridging the gap between abstract mathematical concepts and real-world applications (Madrazo & Dio, 2020). This has been found to foster a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, the subject.

Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning improves university mathematics education by facilitating continuous monitoring of student progress and understanding (Doño & Mangila, 2021). Undertaking formative assessments, lecturers can dynamically, and in constructive and developmental ways, gauge student comprehension and skills development throughout the learning process. Timely and developmental feedback, which highlights both strengths and areas for improvement, empowers students to reflect on their own learning and make necessary adjustments to enhance their understanding. By engaging in self-reflection and receiving constructive feedback from both peers and lecturers, students develop a better awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, fostering a sense of agency and ownership of their learning.

Cultivating mathematical mindsets

Lecturers' cultivation of positive mathematical mindsets in their students fosters confidence, resilience, and a growth-oriented attitude towards mathematics at the first-year university level (Chisaka, 2019). Promoting a culture of collaboration reinforces positive mathematics mindsets, providing students with opportunities to share ideas, ask questions, and learn from one another.

Professional learning communities

Professional learning communities (PLCs) can play a pivotal role in improving both the teaching and learning of mathematics at first-year university level and comprise a crucial aspect of a holistic approach (Olsson, 2019). By bringing together lecturers, administrators, and stakeholders with a shared commitment to enhancing student outcomes in mathematics education, PLCs create a collaborative environment for the professional growth and development of all participants Through collaborative dialogue and a focus on continuous improvement, PLCs provide educators with opportunities to share best practices, exchange ideas, and engage in reflective discussions about instructional strategies. By leveraging the collective expertise of the community, lecturers can identify and address individual and collective challenges, tailoring teaching methods to meet diverse learning needs.

Research question 3

Examining the literature, several themes and findings were identified in response to the third research question posed by this study: How can a comprehensive synthesis

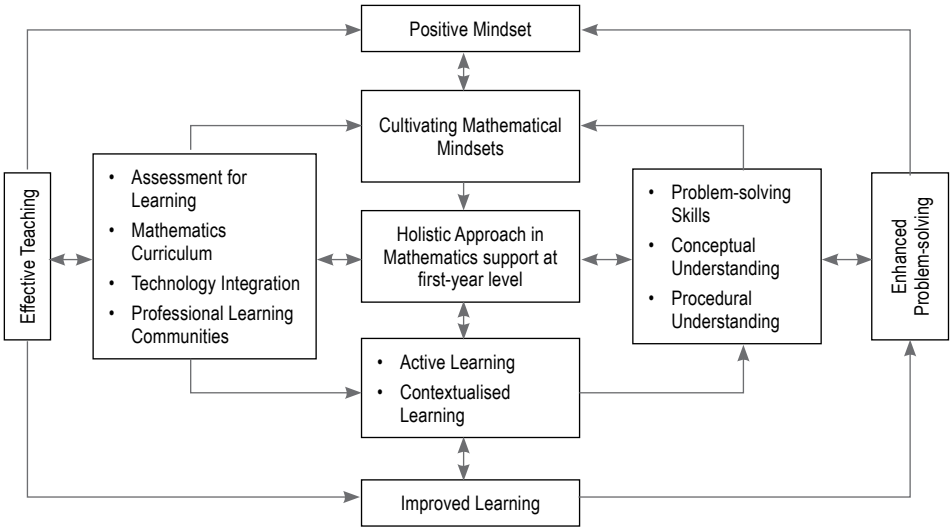
of literature on mathematics support assist in developing a unified framework that effectively addresses the diverse needs and education backgrounds of students engaging in mathematics as they transition from secondary school to university?

This research question was designed with the aim of exploring the possibility of creating a unified holistic approach framework that may enhance first-year university students' performance in mathematics. In this regard, the authors argue that embracing a blend of the core elements of a holistic approach in teaching and learning lays the foundation for a transformative learning experience for students in their first year of mathematics education.

Creating a framework for a unified holistic approach

Figure 2 visually presents the intricate interconnections among the various elements of the proposed holistic approach. Central to this approach is the emphasis on recognising that these elements do not exist in isolation but rather are intricately linked, each influencing and reinforcing the other.

Figure 2: Holistic approach framework in mathematics support



Detailed descriptions and discussions of the components of this holistic approach and their interconnectedness are provided below.

Improved learning

Improved learning outcomes stem from the synergy between active and contextualised learning, which are two interrelated elements of holistic mathematics support for first-year university students. Active learning methods, which have several advantages (Freeman et al., 2014), encourage students to explore mathematical concepts and

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apply them in various contexts, enhancing understanding and retention (Alkilany, 2017). Meanwhile, contextualised learning embeds mathematical concepts within relevant and meaningful real-world scenarios (Simms, 2016). Combining active and contextualised learning creates a dynamic learning environment which fosters deeper understanding, critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students.

Enhanced problem-solving

Enhanced problem-solving skills result from the interplay between enhanced problem-solving abilities, conceptual understanding, and procedural knowledge as aspects of holistic first-year university mathematics support. Problem-solving skills enable students to tackle complex mathematical challenges using various strategies (Bradshaw & Hazell, 2017). Through practice and exposure to diverse problems, students develop resilience, creativity and critical thinking (Hanfy et al., 2022). Conceptual and procedural understanding enable students to grasp underlying principles and connections between and among mathematical ideas (Juandi & Tamur, 2021), fostering students' confidence in their problem-solving abilities (Al-Mutawah et al., 2019).

Positive mindset

The acquisition of a positive mathematical mindset represents an important goal in the provision of holistic mathematics support at the first-year university level (Simms, 2016). The reciprocal relationship between a mathematical mindset and a positive attitude can underpin student success. As students gain confidence and adopt a growth-oriented attitude, they become more resilient to challenges and setbacks (Hanfy et al., 2022). This positive mindset empowers them to take charge of their education and persevere (Simms, 2016). The interplay between a can-do outlook and belief in one's mathematical ability is reinforced through positive experiences and successes, and supports the establishment of a thriving, inclusive learning environment.

Effective teaching

Effective first-year mathematics support results from the interplay between assessment for learning, the mathematics curriculum, the appropriate integration of technology, and PLCs. Assessment for learning guides educators in tailoring their teaching to student needs by providing timely feedback and highlighting areas for improvement. This feedback informs the development and adaptation of the curriculum so that instructional materials are aligned with learning goals and standards (Al-Mutawah et al., 2019). Meanwhile, PLCs provide support for effective teaching by fostering teamwork and providing a space in which best practices are shared, and ongoing professional development is encouraged (Olsen et al., 2020). This interconnected approach creates a dynamic environment in which educators can deliver high-quality, responsive instruction, and measurably promote student success in mathematics.

Discussion

The findings from this survey of the literature highlight the need for a holistic approach in educational institutions to ensure students are prepared for personal fulfilment and professional success, which aligns with the twin goals of promoting student well-being and academic achievement. The review indicates that the challenge of comprehensive mathematics support can only be effectively addressed through recognition of the multifaceted nature of student learning; and that, accordingly, institutions should adopt a holistic approach to support their students' cognitive, emotional, and social development; and, in the process, create a solid foundation for student success.

Against this background, it may be argued that collaborative inquiry initiatives that bridge secondary schools and universities and interrogate the interconnectedness of the factors influencing mathematical proficiency and well-being can play a key role in fostering growth within mathematics education (Jackson & Burch, 2019). By engaging in a process of learning with pupils/students – for example, through a series of reflective dialogues – researchers. academics and university administrators can produce an exchange of ideas; an understanding of best practices; and an evidentiary basis for decision-making and the allocation of resources, so that the mathematics education on offer and the prospects of professional growth among the students are improved.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical need for the adoption by tertiary institutions of a holistic approach to address the multifaceted challenges faced by first-year university mathematics students. The findings indicate that integrating conceptual understanding, problem-solving skills, active learning, contextualised learning, formative assessment of learning, positive mathematical mindsets, and PLCs can lead to the creation of a solid supportive educational environment. Understanding and leveraging the interconnectedness of these elements has been found to significantly enhance students' cognitive, emotional and social development, offering a richer learning experience than that offered by traditional teaching methods.

The study advocates for a shift towards holistic educational practices that prioritise both academic achievement and overall student well-being and prepare students for the complex global challenges that they may face. In addition, collaborative inquiry initiatives that connect secondary schools with universities can play an important role in promoting continuous improvement and innovation in mathematics education. Such initiatives can facilitate the sharing of best practices, resources, and strategies that can help pupils/students in their transition to higher education.

A holistic approach has been found to build students' confidence, creativity and resilience, which are among the characteristics required for academic and personal success – particularly in South Africa, where stark educational and socio-economic disparities persist. By fostering environments that value holistic well-being and academic success, South African universities can better support students in overcoming obstacles and achieving success in mathematics, ultimately empowering students and contributing to their broader success.

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Ethics statement
Strict ethical guidelines were followed in this investigation to guarantee both the study's integrity and the rights of its participants. The study did not directly include actual participants; instead, it analysed the body of current literature. Nonetheless, the following moral guidelines were followed: observance of intellectual property; neutrality and objectivity; openness and replicability; dedication to beneficence and avoidance of harm.

Potential conflict of interest
Potential conflicts of interest in the context of this study were unlikely, as the research primarily involved a review of existing literature rather than direct interaction with stakeholders or financial dependencies.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring student representative councils' experiences at historically white universities: A meta-narrative review

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ABSTRACT
Student representation has been conceptualised and studied in different ways and by different researchers for more than 10 years. However, there are too few meta-narrative reviews indicating the main developments that have taken place in student representative councils (SRCs). Against this background, this article offers a summary of the events and actions that affected student representatives at historically white universities (HWUs) from 2011 to 2022. The data underpinning this summary, which is presented as a meta-narrative review, derive from a search of the literature conceptualising and studying student representation experiences including electronic sources, journal articles and book chapters. Synthesis and analysis of the data revealed a number of themes, including experiences of diversity; experiences of disruption; the use of protests; and the development of policies promoting transformation at HWUs. The review concludes by highlighting the significance of understanding the experiences of student representatives through the pursuit of a scholarship of integration that identifies and consolidates the university governance efforts that have a major impact on the prospects of holistic student success.

KEYWORDS
Student representative councils, historically white universities, disruption, diversity, meta-narrative review

Introduction

Studies on student representation in South African universities include the works of Klemenčič et al. (2015); Luescher et al. (2020); and Speckman (2015). These studies show how student representation has evolved over the years. For instance, Klemenčič et al. (2015, p. 2) state that student representation is "the formal structures and processes of appointed student representatives acting on behalf of the collective student body in higher education governance within a higher education institution". Speckman (2015) conceptualises student representation as student organization of leadership that has been formally recognised by universities. This article conceptualises student representation as the trust and confidence granted by students and demonstrated through electing other students to represent their voices in institutions. Student representation thus plays a significant role in promoting inclusivity and changing previously exclusive higher education policies and processes.

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This article further frames student representation as referring to student representative councils (SRCs) as the umbrella structure for student governance. These councils are composed of university students who are elected democratically by other university students to ensure the presence of student voices and considerations in university decision-making. SRCs occupy different positions and roles that can complement each other in the representative councils' engagement with university management (Kouba, 2017).

Student representation has been studied for more than 10 years and represents a growing topic for study across different areas of research (Kamsteeg, 2016; Moja et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the literature that has been produced offers only a relatively disjointed account of how the research into student representative councils has developed (Khan, 2011). In this context, the present research sought to produce a meta-narrative review to consolidate research on student representation. It undertook this by surveying the different theories and approaches used to study student representation and finding commonalities and differences among them with the aim of forming networks of understanding about student representation (Wong et al., 2013).

The current scholarly review aims to summarise events that affected historically white universities (HWUs) from 2011 to 2022 and serve as a guide for HWUs to envision and promote a scholarship of integration in pursuit of impactful and holistic student success.

Diversity and disruption at historically white universities

The term 'historically white universities' refers to universities that, historically, mostly accommodated only white students and excluded students of other races (Collins & Milliard, 2013). Following the introduction of the white paper on education and the Higher Education Act in 1997, historically white universities were required to implement transformation policies (Department of Education, 1997; Republic of South Africa, 1997). These policies led to HWUs improving their educational systems and improving their diversity and inclusivity. However, the transformation was also accompanied by disruptions at HWUs (Pattman, 2007; Walker, 2005). For example, Kamsteeg (2016) refers to a video of racist behaviour at the University of the Free State (UFS) that was distributed in 2008, which resulted in protests and sparked disruption. The video depicted four white UFS students at the university's traditionally white, male Reitz residence "initiating" five black university cleaners by getting them to drink urine (Cloete & Sapa, 2008).

The Reitz incident and its aftermath indicate the existence of disruption and diversity prior to 2011. However, this article's focus is on the prevalent instances of disruption and increased level of protests demanding transformation at HWUs which occurred at these universities from 2011 to 2022. Several issues were raised during this period of disruption, including those related to a need for free education (Griffiths, 2019); the language of instruction (Beukes, 2010); curriculum transformation (Griffiths, 2019); student access and student disadvantage (Cross & Carpentier, 2009; Gore, 2020); diversity and inclusivity of historically white universities in the wake of transformation

(Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017); and how lectures were delivered under the COVID-19 pandemic (Champagne & Granja, 2021; Kele & Mzileni, 2021). Broadly, the disruptions gave voice to a number of institutional and structural factors affecting SRCs (Gore, 2020; Rupande & Bukaliya, 2012; Seabi et al., 2014).

In this context, it should be noted that in relation to the transformation goals established by the 1997 white paper and the Higher Education Act, actions were taken by HWUs, prior to #FeesMustFall, to implement efforts to address a lack of diversity and transformation at their respective institutions (Macupe, 2022; South Africa History Online, 2020).

SRC responses to disruption and diversity

SRCs commonly organized protests as a means of navigating disruption and diversity from 2011 to 2022 (Luescher et al., 2020). Protests are actions directed at solving issues in a social situation that may be seen as representing a collective systematic effort to bring about change notwithstanding their potentially violent and disruptive character (Mavunga, 2019). Protests also facilitate the representation of students' voices in formal decision-making at universities. The student protests during this period may be characterised as a recurring and, in some places, violent response to actions taken at HWUs (Luescher et al., 2020). For example, the *#FeesMustFall* movement which spread nationwide began as a response to a proposed rise in student fees (Griffiths, 2019; Mutekwe, 2018) but widened to address larger issues of transformation at higher education institutions that were flagged by students and student representative councils (Keet et al., 2021). The protests involved considerable violence and destruction: university infrastructure was burned, and police used stun grenades against protesting students including SRC members. In addition, protesting SRC members and students were arrested (Mavunga, 2019).

The protests may be seen as has having produced a number of positive outcomes, including reductions in tuition-fee hikes; the provision of additional tuition assistance; and the provision of support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, new language policies were been established to promote multilingualism and integration in transforming HWUs (Amato, 2021; Griffiths, 2019); and universities removed structures associated with colonialism and changed the names of buildings (Kekana, 2015; Marais, 2016) in an effort to promote inclusivity and correct the institutional culture that had underpinned HWUs before the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 (van Marle, 2022).

Methodology and methods

Planning phase

The planning phase entailed the researcher determining the applicability of a meta-narrative approach to the present study in terms of four questions:

- Has the topic been studied by different scholars?
- Has the topic been studied in different academic disciplines?

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- What different methods were used to study the topic?
- How has the understanding of the topic changed over time?

Under this phase, literature about student leadership and HWUs from 2011 to 2022 that was accessed from different disciplines and sources was examined to establish a foundation for the review.

Searching and mapping phases

Under the searching phase, the review moved from being a general systematic one to being grounded as a meta-narrative review through the deployment of appropriate research.

Student representation has been conceptualised and studied in different ways and the literature on the topic highlights the contrasts and similarities between the ways in which the subject has been studied. In this context, the literature chosen for the review generally incorporated studies that were applicable to historically white universities in South Africa.

In addition, a number of keywords were used to search for sources. The abbreviation 'SRC' and the keyword 'student leadership' were used in database searches. Additional key phrases that informed the search were 'SRCs in historically white universities'; 'student leadership in historically white universities'; 'diversity and disruption in South African universities from 2011 to 2022'; and 'SRC protests from 2011 to 2022 in South African universities'.

Inclusive search criteria were created based on the deployment of the keywords for the period 2011 to 2022; although, some searches were made for the years before 2011 to produce evidence of the presence of protests and examples of diversity and disruption before 2011. The searches generated 205 relevant sources, which were then refined to 30 sources. A total of 70% of the sources were chosen on the basis on their titles and abstracts; 10% were picked based on their keywords and their relevance in terms of the study background; and 80% were chosen on the basis of their reporting of incidents and actions at HWUs from 2011 to 2022.

The deployment of the keywords mainly generated results from online news channels, including EWN, News24, the Mail & Guardian, and eNCA, as well as the South African History Online (SAHO) website. The online news channels and SAHO were used because of the large scale of their reporting about university protests and incidents involving student leadership. The South African web-based news sources were considered trustworthy because they offer information produced by reporters who are bound to the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa's (ICASA's) code of ethics (ICASA, n.d.).

In addition, six databases were used for journal articles, including those of *Transformation in Higher Education, Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, Studies in Higher Education, International Journal of Educational Research, Government Gazette*, and *Cogent Education*. These databases were used because of the frequency with which they produced literature on South African student affairs. In addition, a number of books were used as sources, including

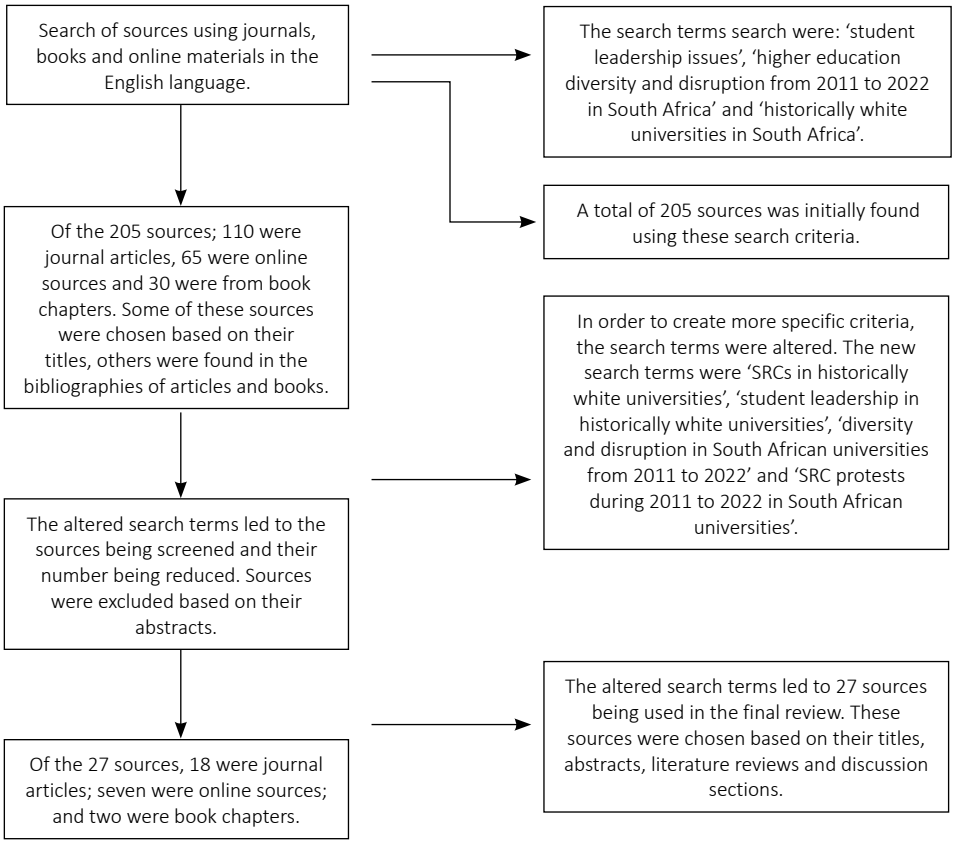
#Hashtag: An Analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities, University on the Border: Crisis of Authority and Precarity, and *Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017*.

The mapping phase of the meta-narrative review was guided by a number of questions:

- What is the reach of the studies on student leadership? For instance, how has student leadership been studied in the past and at present?
- What methods have mostly been used to study student leadership?
- What results have been yielded about student leadership, and how have these results contributed to the development of student leadership?
- How has studying student leadership led to the growth of the concept; and how has this growth been documented and used to influence the direction of student leadership?

Figure 1 below show the process that was used to decide which sources should be included and excluded from the meta-narrative review.

Figure 1: Determining the inclusion and exclusion search criteria



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Appraisal phase

In the appraisal phase, the researcher develops codes and themes (Wong et al., 2013). At this point in the process, sources that mentioned South African universities but did not include historically white universities as a central issue were excluded. Also, sources that focused entirely on COVID-19 were excluded on the basis that this study sought to explain incidents and actions affecting historically white universities specifically, and how they had affected the development of their student representative councils.

Synthesis phase

During the synthesis phase, the researcher is required to compare and contrast how different paradigms conceptualise and theorise the topic in question, and the methods they use to study it (Wong et al., 2013). When synthesising the literature, it was found that the different sources were mostly qualitative in nature and that student representative councils had been conceptualised and studied differently by different researchers. The identified differences and similarities guided decisions about which sources should be used, with the similarities indicating consistency in the literature and the differences indicating areas for further research.

The synthesis stage also entailed adhering to six principles that should guide how a researcher undertakes their work, as recommended under RAMSES publication standards (Wong et al., 2013).

Table 1: Meta-narrative review principles and applications

Principle	Definition	Application in this review
Pragmatism	The reviewer needs to conduct the review by using what is more useful to the review and considering the readership for whom the review is intended.	The sources identified for the review were used on the basis of their applicability to the topic and how they had conceptualised and studied student representative councils at historically white universities.
Pluralism	The topic of the review should be studied from more than one perspective and not one preferred perspective. The perspectives should be quality-assessed according to the criteria applicable to each one.	The present topic was studied from more than one perspective, as is elaborated in the introduction to the review.
Historicity	Research traditions and how they have evolved over time should be highlighted, with information included on the researchers and discoveries that shaped the tradition.	The research traditions for this topic, including information on key researchers and discoveries that were made, are considered in the introduction section to the review.
Contestation	Data from different research traditions should be examined, and the contradictory ideas in the traditions should be examined to create higher-order insights.	The data mentioned in the literature review show similar and different ideas about student representative councils that are discussed in the review.

Principle	Definition	Application in this review
Reflexivity	Reviewers should reflect on the findings that surface constantly, as a group or individually.	During the process of researching and compiling the review, the researcher reflected on the findings that surfaced and inserted reflections that applied to the review.
Peer review	Findings should be presented to an external audience, and the feedback received should be used as a guide for analysis and reflection.	Based on the scholarly nature of the review, the researcher consulted an external audience which had to provide ethical clearance for the study; the researcher also consulted with their designated supervisor and enlisted the assistance of peer reviewers in order to receive feedback and guidance on the process of conducting and compiling a meta-narrative review.

Recommendations phase

The literature used for the review comprised 27 sources. Table 2 below describes which sources contributed to which theme.

Table 2: Themes and sources contributing to the themes

Themes	Sources included under the criteria used to create themes
1. Experiences of diversity	Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017; Beukes, 2010; Cloete & Sapa, 2008; Champagne & Granja, 2021; Collins & Milliard, 2013; Cross & Carpentier, 2009; Gore, 2020; Griffiths, 2019; Kamsteeg, 2016; Kele & Mzileni, 2021; Macupe, 2022; Moja et al., 2014; Rupande & Bukaliya, 2012; Pattman, 2007; SAHO, 2020; Seabi et al., 2014; and Walker, 2005.
2. Experiences of disruption	
3. Use of protests	Amato, 2021; Griffiths, 2019; Keet et al., 2021; Kekana, 2015; Luescher et al., 2020; Marais, 2016; Mavunga, 2019; Mutekwe, 2018; and van Marle, 2022.
4. Development of policy promoting transformation at HWUs	Amato, 2021; Department of Education, 1997; Griffiths, 2019; and Republic of South Africa, 1997.

Discussion of findings

Since the first democratic elections in 1994, there has been an influx of non-white students into HWUs which introduced new 'experiences of diversity' at these institutions. At the same time and notwithstanding a national drive for transformation, HWUs were slow to change, which, in hindsight, led to 'experiences of disruption' at these places.

Such disruption has been characterised as a form of disapproval on the part of students and their elected leaders (Mavunga, 2019) who felt that their complaints

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about how historically white universities functioned had not led to the introduction of methods or procedures that improved their university experiences. In this regard, it should be noted that the struggle for equality and fair treatment at HWUs had waged for many years, both before and after democracy in South Africa.

From 2011 to 2022, the conflict within HWUs was made manifest in a number of ways, with SRCs taking a leading role by banding together to tackle issues, including through the 'use of protests' (which is a prominent theme in the literature).

Despite peaceful intentions, the 'use of protests' led to significant disruption at universities. Infrastructure with colonial associations was burned and police used stun grenades on protesting students and SRC members. In addition, SRC members and students were arrested while protesting against student exclusions on the basis of outstanding fees (Mavunga, 2019).

SRCs also voiced their concerns over a lack of discussion with management; budgetary restrictions; academic workloads; conflicts at university councils; and their lack of pastoral capacity to address students' issues as expected of them (Moepya, 2021). SRC representatives said that the challenges they faced were a product of institutional governance structures in which they had no say in decision- and policymaking.

In this context, SRC leaders justified protest violence as a means of forcing the government and university authorities to listen to their demands in defiance of a dominant neoliberal ideology in higher education that opposed giving anything to anyone for free (Malabela, 2016). At the same time, there has been acknowledgement that the justification of violence in the 'use of protests' and as a response to dissatisfaction can be problematic due to the trail of destruction to university property and the disruption to university processes wrought by such violence, which can prevent students from learning and hinder opportunities for conflict resolution.

At the same time and notwithstanding the violence associated with protests, there has been 'development of policy promoting transformation in historically white universities' (which is one of the themes that emerged from the present review). Such development has been attributed to the 'fight' led by SRCs and the students against a university system which they felt was excluding them and in which they did not feel incorporated. It was also understood that the system did not encourage the protesting students to excel or to resolve past injustices which were viewed as underpinning and continuing to promote persistent disadvantage at HWUs (Luescher, 2005; Akomolafe & Ibijola, 2011).

By contrast with this quite pessimistic approach to the 'fight', the 'use of protests' had historically been viewed as a form of problem-solving by protesting students during apartheid and the early year of democracy's implementation (Nyundu et al., 2015). In this context, the more recent use of protests by student representatives may even be seen as counter-productive and anti-transformational.

In an effort to address this situation, programmes should be established that can equip SRCs with effective problem-solving skills so that they can pursue transformation within their own structures and across the university. The implementation of such programmes can foster leadership characteristics and styles that may be deployed by

SRCs to forge effective ways of addressing diversity and disruption (Moreku, 2014). Such an approach would undermine some of the dynamics shaping the 'experiences of disruption' theme – such as the inability to learn new, improved ways of responding to a situation which can lead to adverse results that actually reproduce the difficulties being faced. Instead, the aim should be to promote collaboration and a scholarship of integration through which student representative councils may learn to employ different, less violent methods of problem-solving.

In this respect, Luescher-Mamashela (2013) noted that students lack the experience necessary to participate formally in universities. This paucity of experience has been, in part, attributed to students' lack of understanding of governance, inferring that important practical and academic information, skills, and capabilities are not being imparted to students engaged in governance. In this regard, Mafa (2016) asserts that the problem is not a lack of understanding but rather a lack of information being imparted to student representatives, which is symptomatic of a larger failure to promote a holistic view of student success. In this context and given the diffuse structural character of university administration (Planas et al., 2013), SRCs lack the capacity to realise the extent to which they should be involved in governance and the benefits that may accrue from increased involvement in university governance.

In response, Luescher-Mamashela (2013) suggests that universities should establish strategies to promote the involvement of students in institutional decision-making. Scholars have also concluded that universities should revise their policies on student involvement to ensure that all students – not just those interested in governance – should receive information about university structures and their stance on student involvement in decision-making. This is another principle underpinning the scholarship of integration that is highlighted in the findings from this review.

At the same time, notwithstanding the positive outcomes produced by new policies and programmes promoting student development, there remains a significant shortfall in leadership capacity among students at the institutional, university level (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Tshauambea, 2023), which may, to an extent, be traced back to the ways in which student representative councils navigated their way through events and actions at historically white universities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present review it is recommended that:

- Student representative councils should find and implement different strategies to navigate disruption and diversity through a scholarship of integration that focuses on the holistic treatment of student success.
- Student representative councils should adopt an integrated approach and increase their collaboration with university students and management so that issues at HWUs may be addressed in more harmonious ways.
- The strategies implemented by universities should be more applicable in the context of disruption and diversity so that the integration of university

processes may be improved, and holistic student success is promoted more effectively.
- Student representatives should participate in individual and group-oriented programmes, promoting group work and sharing decision-making power for an enhanced scholarship of integration.

Limitations

The research for this review was mainly undertaken by one student which limited the range of sources deployed. The credibility and trustworthiness of the data presented would be enhanced through the use of a larger number of sources. In this regard, consideration may be given to recruiting external agencies to help conduct, analyse and document such research.

Conclusion

The literature documented in this study indicate that HWUs in South Africa faced similar transformation challenges prior to their efforts to implement transformational programmes, and that SRC responses to the lack of transformation at these institutions took the form of protests. In addition, the literature indicates that, notwithstanding a number of adverse effects produced by the protests, HWUs responded by increasingly implementing transformational programmes at the institutional level and for their SRCs. These programmes have played a significant role in promoting a scholarship of integration in support of holistic student success.

This meta-narrative review has shown the importance of documenting the experiences of SRCs at HWUs and other tertiary institutions and how such documentation can help SRCs to develop or adjust the approach that they have adopted over the past more than ten years in pursuit of student success. In addition, the review has indicated the need to apply the scholarship of integration to student governance so that universities can be more proactive in developing student leadership as a way of promoting holistic student success.

Ethical considerations

Not relevant to this article.

Potential conflict of interest

The review was completed as part of a degree being undertaken at the University of the Free State, and, as such, the views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those held by the University of the Free State.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Knowledge creation by student leaders to promote their own leadership development: A multi-university social dream-drawing project

Baeteledipele ba baithuti ba ba nang le seabe go bopa kitso go ya kwa go tlhageng ga tlhabololo ya boeteledipele jwa bone: Porojeke ya go taka toro ya loago ya diyunibesiti tse dintsi

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ABSTRACT

Engaging student leaders in knowledge creation in support of their own leadership development is an important strategy in the scholarship of integration which seeks to promote research-based, student-engaged professional practices. This article describes a strategy for engaging student leaders in support of such development, drawing on the insights they gained from their own leadership experiences. South African student leaders participated in a multi-university, social dream-drawing study which was designed using a socio-analytical framework. Through this project, leadership experiences were made manifest at unconscious and conscious levels. Group sharing and reflection helped the participants recognise and process their leadership experiences, and to uncover and explore areas that needed development. Engaging in knowledge creation about their own development, the participating students co-produced an evidence-based understanding of the importance of integrated approaches about the development of student leadership. In addition, their participation in a process of compassionate engagement positioned them as co-developers of problem-solving insights in support of their own development and, more broadly, universities' social and cultural capabilities. Pule and Gibney (2023) also demonstrated this. The social dream-drawing findings furthermore indicated how such interventions could go beyond an examination of the perspectives of individual leaders to consideration of the nature of student leadership as a group, organizational or even societal function – considering intra- and inter-group dynamics; different organizational levels and their leadership sub-systems; and the role of student leadership in society at large. In addition, the research conducted through social dream-drawing may be seen as strengthening the argument for the broader adoption of the scholarship of integration in pursuit of strategic goals.

KEYWORDS

Co-productive research, leadership, student-engaged practices, student development, scholarship of integration, social dreaming

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MADIŠANA

Go akaretsa baeteledipele ba baithuti mo tlhamong ya kitso go tlhagisa tlhabololo ya boeteledipele jwa bona ke leano le le botlhokwa mo thutong ya go kopanya. Ka jalo, setlhogo seno se gatelela leano la go dira gore baeteledipele ba baithuti ba nne le seabe, ba nne botlhokwa mo tlhabololong e e ntseng jalo le ba ba tla solegelwang molemo ke yone, ba dirisa kitso ya bone e ba e boneng mo maitemogelong a bone a boeteledipele. Borutegi jwa go tsenyeletsa bo golaganya tiro ya dipatlisiso tsa borutegi le tiragatso ya seporofešenale, go tlhabolola tiragatso ya tlhabololo ya boeteledipele e e tsenyeleditsweng e e ikaegileng ka borutegi, e e tsenyeletsang baithuti. Baeteledipele ba baithuti ba Aforika Borwa ba ne ba tsaya karolo mo thutong ya go dira toro ya loago, ya diyunibesiti tse di farologaneng ba dirisa thulaganyo ya thuto ya tshekatsheko ya loago. Ka seno, maitemogelo a boeteledipele a ne a tlhagelela mo maemong a a sa lemotshegeng le a a lemotshegang a go itshupa. Go abelana ka ditlhopha le go tlhatlhanya go ba thusitse go lemoga le go sekaseka maitemogelo a bone a boeteledipele, le go senola le go sekaseka mafelo a a tlhokang go tlhabologa. Moeteledipele wa moithuti go nna le seabe mo maitemogelong a bona a boeteledipele jwa moithuti go bonala a tlhageletse mo tlhamong ya kitso ya bone ka ga tlhabololo ya bone. Maano a a neng a tlhagelela a ne a akaretsa go dirisana mmogo le go dira mmogo mo tlhabololong ya baeteledipele ba baithuti ka go dirisa leano le le kopaneng le go dirisa maatla a go nna le seabe ka bopelotlhomogi go rotloetsa tlhabololo ya baeteledipele ba baithuti. Ponelopele e, e akaretsa tirisanommogo magareng ga ditlhopha, seabe mo setlhopheng le mo maemong a mokgatlho, go dira le ditsamaiso tse di farologaneng tsa boeteledipele le kamogelo ya boeteledipele jwa baithuti mo maemong a setšhaba, ka jalo go rotloetsa maitsholo a go tsenyeletsa ka go dirisa mekgwa ya borutegi. Dipatlisiso ka go dirisa toro ya loago e nonotsha dikopo tsa go amogela diporojeke tse di kopaneng tsa borutegi tse di tsamaelanang le maikaelelo a leano la yunibesiti e e maleba.

MAFOKO A BOTHLOKWA

Patlisiso e e kopantsweng ya ntshokuno, boeteledipele, mekgwa e e tsentsweng tirisong ke baithuti, tlhabololo ya baithuti, borutegi jwa tsalano, go lora ka loago

Introduction

Student leader development traditionally involves strategies for organizing, managing and administering leadership structures and activities, with a focus on leadership development through pedagogy (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Xaba, 2021). Theories in this field primarily come from Western psychological and sociological frameworks (Moja et al., 2014). In African contexts, including South Africa (SA), practitioners and researchers have tested these models for local relevance or created their own African-based knowledge (Luescher et al., 2018). However, South African student leadership development is still an emerging academic field, with little scholarly guidance (Xaba, 2021). Much of the research on student leadership has focused on activism and protest, leaving leadership development as an understudied area in need of further attention.

South African universities are expected to contribute to societal progress by preparing future leaders. This need, which has been recognised by the World Economic Forum (2015), is heightened by global demands for adaptability, reskilling and complex problem-solving among youth leaders. Universities must develop students' technical and soft skills in an integrated manner (Griesel & Parker, 2009). Soft skills, which can be cultivated through co-curricular activities, include a strong work ethic, as well as effective communication and interpersonal skills (Xaba, 2021). Meanwhile, South African universities define their approach to student leadership development in a range of ways, which has resulted in a lack of standardisation and coordination across institutions

(Luescher, 2018). This fragmented approach has undermined the sustainability of efforts to promote student leadership and has made it more difficult for universities to fulfil their role in fostering holistic development (Kuh, 2008).

Boyer (1990) introduced the idea of a scholarship of integration (SOI), which emphasises the interconnectedness of knowledge and practice across disciplines. The development of a scholarship of integration is considered key to efforts to ensure that higher education can have a significant impact in the 21st century (Madiba, 2022). Such scholarship is seen as underpinning efforts to transform education by integrating specialists into a broader context, including in pursuit of student-leadership development.

Student leaders in South Africa are elected through the Higher Education Act (Republic of South Africa, 1997) or fostered through the South African Washington International Program (SAWIP); the University of the Free State (UFS) Leadership for Change initiative; and the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute at the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Pule, 2017). Non-positional leaders, including those who emerged from hashtag student movements, also form part of the student leadership cohort (Pule & May, 2021).

This research utilised a social dream-drawing methodology, integrating psychoanalytic perspectives and social-systems thinking to explore student leadership dynamics at three South African universities. Through the use of dream drawings in group sessions, researchers and participants collectively examined unconscious and conscious experiences of leadership. This co-productive process aligns with the SOI framework and represents a contribution to the creation of a South African student-leadership competency framework. In particular, the project sought to advance leadership development by helping student leaders navigate identity; relational dynamics; and historical, social, and cultural perspectives, addressing the leadership challenges of the 21st century. This article aims to show how social dream-drawing can inform the evolution of integrated scholarship and enhance student leadership development through the production of knowledge by student leaders themselves.

Theoretical framework: Socio-analysis

Socio-analysis blends psychoanalysis with systems thinking. It suggests that people's psychology and behaviour are best understood within their social contexts (Long, 2017). The social context comprises a repository of thoughts, feelings, actions and processes produced and enacted over time in a social environment through relationships (Long, 2017). The contents of this repository, which may be consciously expressed and unconsciously enacted, can be studied through the associative unconscious (Mersky & Sievers, 2019), which is a network of symbolic linkages representing the web of thoughts, feelings and meanings that are generated in groups (Long & Harney, 2013). Reverie, the conscious perception of the unconscious, facilitates the verbalisation of data from the associative unconscious (Ogden, 2019). As deployed by this study, reverie allows for a deeper cognitive and emotional engagement, inviting shifts in group thinking towards a

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broader understanding of the capacity for leadership among the group's members (Ferro & Nicoli, 2017).

Socio-analysis focuses on the group-as-a-whole as the unit of analysis (Long, 2017). In this context, student leadership at universities or at the national level, as well as across the broader societal system of higher education, can be viewed as a group as a whole. Dynamics emerge within individuals and groups, and between and among groups, affecting the group at organizational and societal levels (Long, 2016). The associative unconscious assumes that individual leadership experiences cannot be separated from their societal context (Long & Harney, 2013). Thus, exploration of individual leaders' experiences in a group setting can reveal insights that are applicable at both individual and group levels, as well as system wide.

Consequently, the broad definition of student leadership, as adopted in this research, transcends the individual and extends to group, organizational and societal levels (Long, 2017). In an effort to deepen understanding of student-leadership development, socio-analysis is deployed as an integrated theoretical framework, utilising insights from social dreamdrawing research (Mersky & Sievers, 2019).

Social dreaming, which is a methodology developed by Lawrence (1998), allows access to the associative unconscious through the construction of associations and amplifications around dreams that have been shared in a group. Social dream-drawing builds on this process, providing a verbal and visual tool for exploring social and psychological issues within groups (Mersky, 2008). The deployment of this creative, playful methodology can uncover deep insights about student leadership roles, according to Mersky (2013). Mersky (2008) expanded on Lawrence's work by using social dream-drawing to explore hidden elements in organizational and social systems (Long, 2016). The current research employed social dream-drawing as both a methodology and design approach (Creswell, 2014), integrating the social dreaming methodology developed by Lawrence (1998) and Bion's (1961) theory of dreaming and object relations. In the approach adopted by this study, dreaming is viewed as a form of thinking that can be accessed through the associative unconscious (Mersky, 2008). The process entails researchers and student leaders collaboratively deriving meaning about student leadership, while the researchers also seek to interconnect the findings derived from different sessions.

Methodology

Research design

Data were collected over two years for this multi-university study. The findings reported in this article pertain to data collected at three universities in the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. Four groups of students participated – by chance, one of the universities recruited two groups for the study. The research is qualitative (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2014), employing abductive reasoning to explore possibilities creatively by making observations in the search for possible explanations of lived experiences, or by forming explanatory hypotheses (Long & Harney, 2013).

Research participants and sampling methods

Research participants were drawn from those who were elected to leadership at South African universities in line with either the Higher Education Act (Republic of South Africa, 1997) or the National Student Governance Framework.2 Sampling was conducted in a purposive, voluntary way within the pool using inclusion criteria (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). In addition, the study was open to students participating in SAWIP; the UFS Leadership for Change initiative; the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute at UNISA; and the Future Health Leaders Programme at the University of Cape Town (UCT), as well as student activists. An invitation document was sent to the respective student affairs offices so that all categories of student leaders could be included in the study. In most cases, the final lists of participants presented comprised only students elected to leadership under national statutory instruments.

Each group of students comprised 5-7 members who were homogenously drawn from the same university. A total of 21 dream drawings were collected from the participants. Table 1 below describes the participating groups.

Table 1: Summary of the sampling process

University	Number of participants in the group*	Gender distribution	Type of student leadership
University 1 (sample A)	6 (1 abstained due to an unexpected academic test)	2 females (1 abstained) 4 males	SRC and residence committee
University 1 (sample B)	7 (2 abstained due to positive COVID-19 results)	2 females 5 males (2 abstained)	SRC of historically merged campus, and committee of male residence at the historical main campus
University 2	6	1 female 5 males	SRC
University 3	5	1 female 4 males	SRC – and all participants belonged to the same political structure

**Total dream drawings collected: 21*

Data collection methods

Student leaders were asked to bring a drawing of a (nighttime/sleep) dream relating to their student leadership experience (Mersky, 2008). Each of the leaders took a turn to describe and explained their dream and the accompanying drawing. Then the members of the group talked about the dreams that were presented, freely associating by describing what came to mind in thinking about the various dreams. In this way, the dreams became social (Long, 2016), as social meaning was attributed to the dream material (Mersky, 2013) and the group-as-a-whole produced an understanding of

2 For more on which, see: https://saassap.com/national-student-governance-framework

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the various dreams and their dynamics (Mersky & Sievers, 2019). A meaning-making dialogue was then undertaken to link the free-association insights that had been offered with social issues experienced by the group (Mersky, 2013).

Mersky (2008) advises that researchers (or facilitators of the social dream-drawing methodology) have an important role to play during data collection and the process of considering the dreams and the drawings, helping group participants link the dreams to one another and presenting hypotheses about the group's dynamics and experiences of related social issues. Once this work has been undertaken, the participants should collaborate with the researchers to explore the various hypotheses that have been presented in order to obtain insights regarding their own experiences of leadership.

Data recording

Verbal descriptions of the dreams and the dream-drawings were recorded. The voice recordings were later transcribed to help with data analysis (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Researchers also kept notes of their observations during the data collection. Photographs of the dream drawings were captured and kept as records (Mersky, 2012).

Data analysis

The data analysis used a triangulation method (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014) to substantiate the role of student leaders as co-producers of the knowledge created through the process of social dream-drawing. In this regard, the student leaders worked with the researchers to make sense of their dreams (including by drawing them); link them to each other; contribute free-associated thoughts and impressions; and explore what these might mean for student leadership. After the data were collected from the focus groups, the researchers read the transcriptions of the group sessions, paying particular attention to the emergence of themes (Mersky, 2013), including across the sessions. Researchers then undertook member-checking by asking the student leaders to confirm that the emerging themes that had been identified had been understood correctly. In this way, the themes described in this report may be seen as accurately representing the experiences of student leaders as explored and identified during the social dream-drawing process; while the data analysis represents insights that emerged during a process of reflection after the data had been collected.

Ensuring data quality and integrity

At least two facilitators are required to collect data effectively under the social dream-drawing methodology – paying attention to detail, capturing nuance and ensuring the credibility of the process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014; Mersky, 2008). During the present study, these facilitators were required to check in with the participants about their understanding of the task at hand; ensure that the dream drawings that were presented were produced according to the instructions provided prior to each session; and apply a consistent approach to how the dreams and drawings were presented and discussed at the sessions.

Consistent with Lawrence's (2008) conception of social dreaming, the dreams and drawings shared concentrate less on the dreamers or research participants and more on

the shared material. The phenomenon 'depersonalises' the shared material, therefore minimising the risks linked to issues of confidentiality in this study. Due to the nature of the research design, where dreams, corresponding drawing and associations are shared, subjectivity and intersubjectivity are central to the study. Member checks were used to verify the quality of the findings and conclusions made which addresses the traditional practices that relate to potential biases in voluntary sharing.

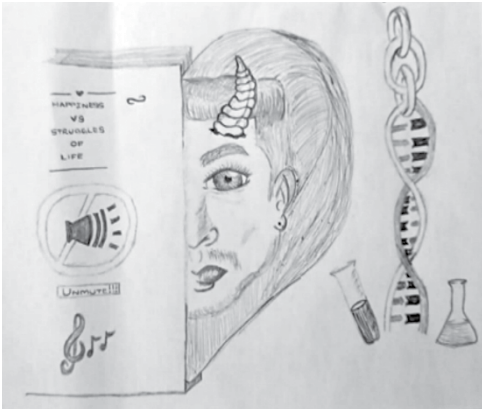
Although the generalisability of the findings reported here can be questioned, the study's deployment of a socio-analytical methodology means that the dynamics observed at the individual/group and organizational levels may be viewed as representing those taking place in society at large (Long, 2016). In other words, the themes emerging through the associative dialogues that took place may legitimately be analysed for their broader societal significance (Long, 2017).

In terms of ethical integrity, clearance for this research was obtained from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) at the relevant university. Furthermore, each university where data were collected provided institutional permission for data to be collected there.

Findings

The data from the research are presented here in the form of photographs of two of the dream drawings, which have been chosen as best demonstrating some of the key themes that emerged during the sessions. Each image, which is accompanied by a caption describing the dominant idea of the dream, is followed by a synopsis of the dream, and then a description of the associations and meaning-making that emerged during the discussion about the dream and the related drawing.

Figure 1: Sourced from Dream 3. University 1, sample A: Dynamics of identity in student leadership and student leaders' mental health



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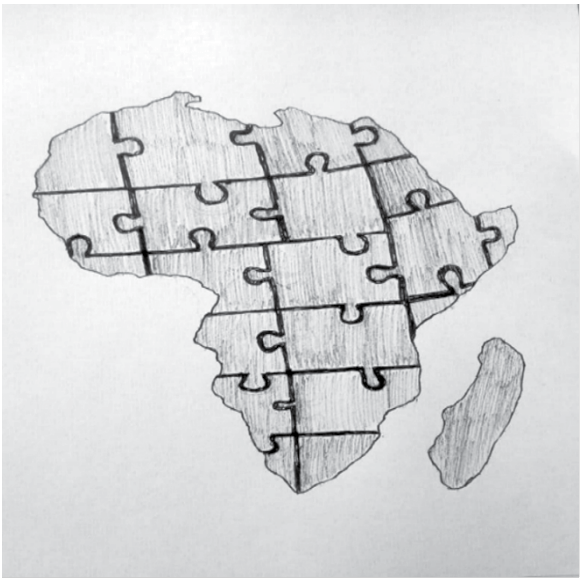
> *The dreamer described this dream as one he had dreamt after becoming a student leader. In the dream, he said, he was bitten by a snake; and the tail of the snake stuck out like a horn on the forehead of the student leader, who developed a half-face. This horn-like snake tail remains on the forehead of the student leader throughout their term in office. The snake bite changes the DNA of the student leader (as is depicted by the DNA helix on the right of the drawing). The test tube and glass jar next to the helix show the DNA of the student leader before and after he took on a student leadership role. Once the DNA has changed, the student leader is placed on mute – unable to voice the vision which brought them into a leadership position in the first place.*

This dream led to a conversation about leadership identity and crisis in leadership identity; the discourse around being silenced; mental health issues linked to losing one's sense of self or identity in a leadership role and the depression that can accompany such loss; and the frustration of not being able to speak out. The conversation about this dream indicated student leaders' need for integrated support given that the burden of student leadership can be greater than anticipated. Student leaders also spoke about the difficulties of feeling and having to act in two different ways – as if they had been split into a student in the classroom and a leader outside. One student leader said: "*It is very difficult. I have to wear one face when I am in class and show the other face outside*". This sentiment is echoed by the split face in the image of the dream drawing.

Figure 2: Sourced from Dream 4. University 2: African unity and the burden of student leadership



> *The dreamer described a dream in which they sat at a table listening to music and building a puzzle. The completed puzzle would be of a united Africa, with clear demarcations among the respective puzzle pieces depicted the diversities of an Africa that could be united based on a pan-African identity. In the dream, the dreamer saw a map of the world in blue and green, once the puzzle was completed. The dreamer also said he had seen himself sitting under a light in a dark room while building the puzzle. He could only see his face and, more profoundly, his hands moving in the act of completing the puzzle.*

During free association, the group was preoccupied with the description of the lighting in the dream. "*I associate the light with an illusion*," said one participant. The idea of illusion inspired discussion around what comprises illusion versus what comprises the real within student leadership. The building of the puzzle was associated with unity or things coming together. The group wondered whether unity could be realised or whether it was an illusion. In this regard, it was noted that student leaders struggled with the idea of the different parts of the university working together to pursue a united Africa and investing in them as future leaders. As one participant said: "*Lecturers and management seek different things*."

At the same time, there was an association with the lyrics "We are the world, we are the children, we are the ones to make a better day" of the song written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie (USA for Africa, 1985). In this context, the group saw themselves as the youth who should unite Africa and, with the right developmental support, achieve success for Africa.

One group member exclaimed: "*Putting the pieces together is challenging*", perhaps referring to the complexity of integration. Another replied: "*I actually have no memory in actually completing a puzzle ever before*." In some ways, the student leaders saw themselves as lacking the capacity to complete the puzzle. In this regard, the group talked of finding it hard to make the links required for integration; and the pressure that they faced as student leaders who may lack the confidence to fulfill their leadership roles. In this context, the design of the map in the drawing became associated with a question mark. In summary, the participants saw cause for hope but also wondered whether they would succeed as leaders given the present extent of their leadership development and the obstacles to integrating different initiatives in support of a more holistic development approach.

Discussion

Through a process of making sense of their dreams and their drawings of these dreams, student leaders at different universities produced several insights concerning their own leadership development. Given that the associative unconscious, which gave rise to these insights, assumes that individual leadership experiences cannot be separated from their societal context (Long & Harney, 2013), the issues revealed may be taken as representative of those facing student leaders at individual, group, organizational (campus), and systemic (national and global) levels. Accordingly, this discussion speaks to strategies and insights for student leader development that could have a significant impact at a range of levels.

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Co-producing student leader development through an integrated strategy

Issues that student leaders face are complex and concern not only their immediate, diverse student constituencies but also their institutions, the higher education sector and society at large. Student leadership requires a range of intellectual, emotional, psychological, and other capacities to navigate the historical, economic, and social aspects of being South African and global citizens (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Xaba, 2021). In particular, they are required to play a key role in transformation efforts at a range of levels (Pule & May, 2021). Figure 2 in this research references the importance of responding in integrated, holistic ways to the challenges faced – with specific reference to the idea of African unity. Pan-Africanism is a loaded concept with significant implications in terms of history, culture, social organization, gender roles, and justice. Nonetheless, the research found that student leaders saw themselves being responsible for enacting transformation, including in terms of promoting integration and holistic success. In this regard, the student leaders became sceptical about whether they were united and following an integrated approach in their leadership – which raised the issue of whether their development in and outside the classroom was being integrated (Jones et al., 2017). When united (or integrated), student leaders can marry their intellectual capacity to make decisions, be logical and pursue their academic studies with their emotional capacity to care for and nurture others in a holistic way.

Accordingly, the findings indicate the importance attached to an integrated mode of leadership development, under which student leaders' engagement in both academic and cocurricular activities may be reflected in the adoption of a more integrated approach at the institutional and systemic levels, so that collaborative problem-solving and strategising are promoted to achieve transformation (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Mino, 2020). In this way, student leaders may be strategically positioned at the core of an integrated transformation strategy enacted at a number of levels (Nkonoane, 2015; Xaba 2021). The dreams that were shared and the analysis of these indicate that student leaders are preoccupied with playing a unifying role and challenging the institutional cultures that maintain siloed practices. Meanwhile, university departments that collaborate to promote integrated student development may come to experience the benefits of an integrated approach in support of other institutional goals (Mutero & Chimbari, 2021).

Advancing student leadership through compassionate engagement

The social dream-drawing research also identified the idea of the silenced student leader who feels unable to undertake their role effectively, and can become frustrated and unhappy with the restrictions on their ability to speak out even as they appear to have been granted a position to do so – a frustration that can, in time, give rise to mental health concerns. Compassionate engagement fostered through the social dream-drawing process allowed student leaders to verbalise their need to talk to a mental health professional in response to experiences of feeling depressed; being silenced; and being subjected to other power dynamics, as was previously noted by Pule and Gibney (2023).

The ways in which the student leaders were able to express some of their mental health concerns during the dream-drawing discussions also indicate how this process can strengthen student leaders' capacities to identify and address the individual, group, organizational and individual challenges they may face. The student leaders' susceptibility to mental health issues, as reported during the dream-drawing process, was based on perceptions derived from 'reverie' (Ogden, 2019). In a clinical setting reverie consists of the analyst building an impression of a client by allowing unconscious elements to intrude on awareness (conscious functioning) so that the unconscious is no longer hidden (Ferro & Nicoli, 2017). In relation to the social dream-drawing process, the members of the group effectively acted as analysts, perceiving a range of unconscious manifestations due to their compassionate engagement with each other. In this way, through reverie, the participants were able connect with the data being presented in ways that enabled them to make sense of their subjective experiences, at individual, group and/or organizational levels. In general, student leaders' participation in their own development through a compassionate integrated approach positions them as co-developers of insights who can have significant impact not only in relation to their own development but also in terms of enhancing universities' social and cultural capabilities (Mino, 2020).

The data-dreaming discussions also indicated that interventions to promote student leadership development should be both proactive for long-term impact on leadership development, and reactive, focused on the volatile, rapidly changing requirements of an environment in crisis. Meanwhile, with reference to the promotion of co-governance (Sebola, 2019), the deployment of the social dream-drawing methodology placed the student leaders at the heart of efforts to promote their own development, positioning them as beneficiaries who were being actively consulted as part of an interdisciplinary university initiative.

The social dream-drawing findings further indicated the ways in which interventions to promote student leadership can go beyond an examination of the perspectives of individual leaders to consideration of the nature of student leadership as a group, organizational or even societal function – considering intra- and inter-group dynamics; different organizational levels and their leadership sub-systems; and the role of student leadership in society at large (Long, 2016).

Conclusion

This study aimed to practicalise its research findings, applying and implementing them in the environment in which they originated. In other words, student leaders were engaged to produce knowledge about their own student leadership experiences with the aim of fostering their development as leaders. The study used social dream-drawing as a methodology so that the perspectives of the researchers could be integrated with those of the student leaders, with a meta-understanding being produced by interconnecting the findings from the sessions.

A scholarship of integration approach was employed as an effective way of engaging student leaders as partners, co-developers and active participants. The strategy fostered

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the production of student leaders' voices and sought to attend to these voices in the quest for sustainable co-curricular, collaborative student-leadership-development approaches. The choice of approach was important given that a key outcome of such research may be that student leaders (who are central to university business and management) are positioned as core participants in, as well as beneficiaries of, integrated student-leadership-development efforts.

This research concludes that the scholarship of integration could be a powerful tool for addressing the gap between theory and practice regarding student leadership development. In this context, social dream-drawing research as a scholarship of integration approach revealed the potential of integrated approaches for student leadership development – thus reinforcing calls to promote sustainable, impactful and holistic student leader development to achieve institutional strategic goals at universities.

Summarily, suggested interventions for higher education institutions that are rooted in the scholarship of integration that emerged in student leaders' knowledge creation regarding their own leadership development could include:

- Collaborative leadership workshops that bridge academic and co-curricular activities.
- Interdisciplinary projects that encourage collaboration across different university departments.
- Support systems for mental health and leaderships resilience, such as peer counselling programmes or access to psychologists.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of the Free State General and Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC), Ethical Clearance number: UFS-HSD2020/1528/191/21. Additionally, institutional permission to conduct research at the various institutions was obtained through the respective institutions' ethics committees.

Potential conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is known to the author to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theoretical perspective

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Goal of the study

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

Research method

Research design, context and ethics

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

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Data collection and sample

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

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

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

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

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

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

Data analysis

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

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

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

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

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

Qualitative findings and discussion

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

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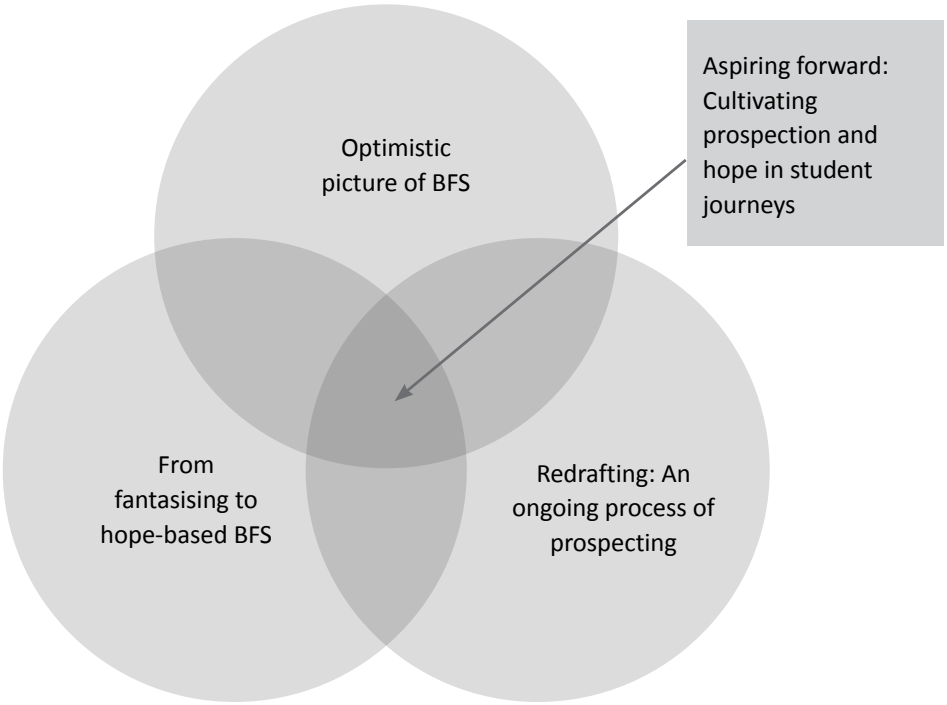
aspirations. Furthermore, the overarching theme encompasses three subthemes: (1) an optimistic picture of BFS, (2) redrafting, an ongoing process of prospecting, and (3) from fantasising to hope-based BFS. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the qualitative interpretation and indicates the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

Figure 1: Integrated representation of the qualitative themes



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

Optimistic picture of BFS

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

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

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

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

Redrafting: An ongoing process of prospecting

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

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

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

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

From fantasising to hope-based BFS

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

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

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

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

Aspiring forward: Cultivating prospection and hope in student journeys

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

Ethics statement

The study was approved by Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee (REC/2019/11/003). The study was conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Potential conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

An explorative study on students' perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology

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ABSTRACT
Alcohol consumption is a well-known public health problem, particularly among university students. Students experience many challenges in life that may lead them to consume alcohol. The aim of this study was to explore student's perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study utilised a qualitative and exploratory design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 selected students using convenience sampling. The findings of this study revealed that reckless alcohol consumption among students is challenging and that there are many contributing factors leading to alcohol consumption. The recommendations sourced from participants indicate that the issue of reckless alcohol consumption must be addressed by the university through awareness campaigns, initiating support groups for students struggling with reckless alcohol consumption, and strengthening policies related to substance abuse.

KEYWORDS
Alcohol consumption, qualitative research, university students

Introduction

Alcohol consumption is a public health concern and a leading cause of global suffering, including health issues and social effects (Davoren et al., 2016). Alcohol contributes to many diseases and injuries associated with various health conditions (Mekonen et al., 2017). Chekole (2020) argued that despite the adverse health and social issues related to alcohol use, it is one of the most common risky behaviours among university students. Zadarko-Domaradzka et al. (2018) revealed that extreme alcohol consumption is typical among university students worldwide. It is well established that university students are at an age at which they can make personal choices that influence their behaviours (Chu et al., 2016). However, Aboagye et al. (2021) and Olashore et al. (2018) argue that university students may use alcohol as a coping strategy in dealing with stressful events.

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Several factors contribute to increased alcohol consumption (Sudhinaraset et al., 2015). Davoren et al. (2016) indicate that, in most cases, alcohol consumption by students is influenced by changes in lifestyle, lack of parental support and stress. Mitchell et al. (2022) argue that parents have a range of mechanisms to reduce alcohol consumption risk and to balance the harms of alcohol use among young people. Biramo and Philipos (2016) echo these sentiments and indicate that peers can influence each other in forming certain behaviours, among which is alcohol consumption. Peer pressure has been reported to be a significant contributing factor to alcohol use by university students (Calhoun et al., 2018; Teffera, 2018).

Various researchers have indicated that psychological stress is associated with alcohol consumption and abuse among young people, including university students (Balogun, 2014; Risi et al., 2019; Sallie et al. 2020). However, Becker (2012) noted a complex relationship between alcohol consumption and stress. He further stated that alcohol reduces anxiety and relieves stress (Becker, 2012). Castaño-Perez and Calderon-Vallejo (2014) echo these sentiments and argue that alcohol abuse could exacerbate existing social and emotional stressors and damage individuals, contribute to accidents and physical altercations, and negatively impact academic retention. Of particular concern in this study was the reckless alcohol consumption among university students. The concept, reckless alcohol consumption, refers to a pattern of drinking that ignores the potential negative impact on a person's physical, mental, social and emotional health and disregards the legal consequences associated with intoxication or subsequent behaviours.

Alcohol consumption among university students

Alcohol consumption among students has received considerable attention because of its negative impact on students and the university community (Makongho 2018). Onyebuchkwu et al. (2015) suggested that there is a significant relationship between alcohol consumption and academic performance. Alcohol consumption can lead to poor academic performance (Htet et al. 2020). Govender et al. (2017) also reiterated that alcohol affects students' academic progress. To address alcohol consumption among students, El Ansari et al. (2020) stressed that universities should assess alcohol consumption among students and emphasise a preventative focus. Against this backdrop, there has also been a call for collective efforts, including interventions and strategies to address alcohol consumption among students (Cabalatungan, 2015).

The following sentiments and arguments motivated the study being reported on:

- Reckless alcohol consumption among students is a matter of concern as it leads to health and social effects.
- Students are exposed to different challenges that they deal with in their daily lives, hence these challenges can intice students to consume alcohol recklessly.
- There are several factors and causes that contribute to students' alcohol consumption.
- The impact of alcohol consumption on students can be far-reaching, including but not limited to poor academic performance and other social pathologies.

- Universities should develop interventions and strategies to address alcohol consumption among students.

Consequently, this study explored students' perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology in South Africa. The significance of this article lies not only in exploring students' understandings and perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption but also in identifying factors that contribute to alcohol consumption among students. Additionally, the study sought to investigate the impact of alcohol consumption on students' academic and social lives, and health. Most importantly, this study highlights possible prevention and intervention strategies for addressing reckless alcohol consumption among students. Universities need to put in place appropriate measures to ensure that students who are recklessly abusing alcohol get the necessary support by all available means.

Theoretical framework: Understanding alcohol consumption through the ecological systems theory of development

The present study drew on aspects of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory of development. This theory illuminates how human development is influenced by various environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The study focused on four ecological systems: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems.

To understand students' alcohol consumption, it is crucial to consider the life cycle of a student and their surroundings. A *microsystem* is a setting in which people interact directly with each other. This includes family, friends, classmates, and other individuals who directly interact with a particular person's microsystem (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). Students involved in alcohol consumption may be influenced by people with whom they interact on a daily basis. Moreover, positive influence may come from this setting as well, encouraging students to overcome alcohol consumption and alcoholism.

Krishan (2010) indicates that the *mesosystem* is the second immediate layer that contains the microsystem. This layer focuses on two or more systems that are different from microsystems, that is, school, home, and playmate settings. Such environments presuppose students developing friendships, relationships, identities, and new behaviours. In these situations, there are often issues of peer pressure. Home and university play a significant role in students' lives (Luescher et al., 2023). There should be effective interaction between the student's home and the university, as these settings are part of the student's life. Therefore, the university should play a role in assisting these students and provide them support to ensure that they have a bright future ahead of them.

Exosystems refer to settings external to the student but which may influence students' behaviours. Such environments include media, social media, neighbourhoods, parents' friends, and other external factors. For example, students spend a lot of time on social media, where alcohol is often portrayed as 'cool'. This narrative is also portrayed in alcohol advertisements. In addition, many universities are built around cities where

there is access to places of fun, nightclubs, and others which inevitably expose students to alcohol. Policies and legal structures play an important role in alcohol consumption. In South Africa, the drinking age is 18 years (Inaç et al., 2021); however, students start drinking before they reach the age of 18.

The macrosystem layer may not be a specific framework, but is comprised of cultural values, customs, and laws (Berk, 2000). This layer examines the factors affecting student development. Such factors include ethnicity, background, and socio-economic status (Inaç et al., 2021). Moreover, the majority of students in South African universities tend to be from poor backgrounds and end up using alcohol as a form of coping with the challenges posed by university life.

Goal of the study

The main aim of this qualitative study was to explore students' perceptions of alcohol consumption at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal South Africa. The researchers sought to identify the factors that contribute to reckless alcohol consumption and the subsequent negative effects on students. Furthermore, the researchers explored the views of participants on strategies to assist students with alcohol consumption issues and alcoholism. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the perceptions of students at a university of technology in South Africa towards alcohol consumption, the contributing factors to reckless consumption and alcoholism, the negative effects thereof on students, and participant views on strategies to assist students dealing with issues of alcohol consumption and alcoholism?

Research methodology

Research design

A qualitative methodology was adopted to conduct this study. Qualitative research includes the contextualised study of people, communities, systems, and concepts through interviews, observations, and artefacts (Eyisi, 2016). Consequently, a qualitative methodology was deemed as most suited to developing an in-depth and rich understanding of students' experiences associated with alcohol consumption.

Sample

This study employed a convenient sampling technique and 13 students were recruited to participate in the study. The demographic characetristics of participants are presented in Table 1. All of the participants in this study were black and aged between 19 and 25 years. Furthermore, the demographic representation shows that seven participants were males and six were females. Therefore, there is a slight difference in gender balance. Three participants were in their third year, five participants were in their second year, two participants were in their fourth year, and one participant was in the first-year level of study.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants

Participant no.	Gender	Race	Age	Level of study
P1	Male	Black	23	Third Year
P2	Male	Black	22	Second Year
P3	Male	Black	21	Second Year
P4	Male	Black	19	Second Year
P5	Female	Black	23	Fourth Year
P6	Female	Black	23	Third Year
P7	Female	Black	19	First Year
P8	Female	Black	21	Second Year
P9	Male	Black	20	First Year
P10	Male	Black	23	Third Year
P11	Male	Black	25	Fourth Year
P12	Female	Black	21	Second Year
P13	Female	Black	24	Third Year

Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews facilitated via an online platform. Specifically, interviews were conducted via video call. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used. The guide consisted of the following questions:

- What is students' understanding of alcohol consumption?
- What are the factors that lead to alcohol consumption?
- What impact does alcohol consumption have on students' health, academic and social lives?
- What prevention and intervention strategies can be developed to address the issue of alcohol consumption amongst students?

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants. Permission to record interviews was requested from participants. Interviews lasted between 20-25 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded, and notes were taken for later analysis. Due to the study taking place online, participants were assured of the confidentiality.

Data analysis and ethics

The data were analysed using thematics analysis, which included the following steps (Henning et al., 2011). First, the lead author immersed themselves in the data by listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcriptions. Next, the transcribed interviews were coded and themes were identified. The analysis concluded by presenting the emergent interpretation.

The university of technology granted permission to conduct the research study after the researchers received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee (IREC 049/20).

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All data were anonymised to protect participants' identities, and were stored on a computer secured with password access.

Findings

Four themes emerged following the thematic analysis, namely: (1) understanding of alcohol consumption (2) factors contributing to reckless alcohol consumption (3) impact of reckless alcohol consumption on academic, social life and health and (4) possible prevention and intervention strategies to address reckless alcohol consumption. The emerging themes are presented in the sections that follow. Then, the themes are integrated and discussed.

Understanding of alcohol consumption

Participants revealed that reckless alcohol consumption is problematic among students. To this end, other participants indicated that alcohol has the potential to affect students' academic performance in negative ways. The following quote substantiates this interpretation:

> *Yes, alcohol consumption comes with many challenges, and which leads students not to focus on their academic work and they become addicted to a point where they misuse their NSFAS money.* (P11)

NSFAS is an important organization that provides financial support to students in higher education who are from marginalised communities. It's crucial to use the funding responsibly as misusing it could have negative consequences on both academic performance and meeting personal needs that are essential for survival.

The participants highlighted that reckless alcohol consumption could potentially lead to alcohol addiction. The following verbatim quotes indicate students' opinions that they have limited to no control regarding alcohol consumption, which could spur addictive behaviours:

> *Yes, alcohol consumption is a problem with students. Some of the students they drink every night and day and they end-up being alcoholics.* (P10)

> *… it is a problem. It is a common issue to university students as some are into a partying life and end up in addiction because of alcohol.* (P3)

Issues related to decision making were also raised. Some participants argued that due to alcohol consumption, some students struggled to make sound and informed decisions. This can potentially affect academic performance. Furthermore, the students raised concerns about poor budgeting and careless spending due to alcohol use and abuse. Moreover, participants indicated that, under the influence of alcohol, there was also the potential of being involved in risky and life-threatening situations.

> *… it is a problem because tend to make drastic decisions based on the alcohol like waste money. They involve themselves with more dangerous situations and put their lives in danger.* (P4)

In light of the above, it is clear that students foresaw the various challenges associated with alcohol consumption. The factors contributing to reckless alcohol consumption are discussed in the next section.

Factors contributing to reckless alcohol consumption

The participants revealed that many factors contribute to reckless alcohol consumption. These factors include academic-related challenges, financial precarity, and other diverse challenges. The following quotes offer insight into participants' perspectives:

> *There are many things which include academic stress, family issues, depression and financial stress.* (P8)

> *The contributing factor to alcohol consumption and alcoholism is stress, exams and the academic stress including their background as they think about their past. Also, peer pressure because they have friends who are influential.* (P6)

> *Students drink alcohol because they want to deal with challenges that they face in life and drinking alcohol is the solution to cope with these challenges. They also doing it because of the peer pressure they have so that is why they drink alcohol.* (P1)

In addition, the participants claimed that the transition from high school to university was a key factor associated with alcohol consumption. The transition from high school to university is a well-documented stressor among student populations and a critical stressor that, if not managed well, could lead to the student not being fully integrated into university life and ultimately leading to dropout (Luescher et al., 2023). Participant 11 reported that

> *Some of the students face challenges which force them to alcohol consumption and alcoholism. The change of environment and academic and financial stress and peer pressure are the contributing factors.*

Besides the factors stated above, student background, including family history, was reported to be a risk factor for alcohol abuse. Participant 2 explained that family history plays a role in drinking alcohol because some of them learn this behaviour from their homes. Participant 2 also indicated that

> *Mental health is a contributing factor for students to drink alcohol as they face challenges. I believe that the environment contributes and including the peer pressure as they hang with people who are drinking alcohol. They also have trauma of academic as they lack the ability to cope with the pressure of academics.*

Consequently, students may utilise alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with challenges in the context of higher education. While such coping strategies may provide temporary relief, they are bound to create further problems for students as they encounter more stressors in the university milieu (Mason, 2016).

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Impact of reckless alcohol consumption on health, academic and social life

When asked about the impact of alcohol consumption, there were differing views. Participants believed that the effects of alcohol consumption on academic life, social life, and health were major issues resulting in negative consequences for students. The students expressed that poor academic progress was linked to reckless alcohol consumption. The following quotes highlight this interpretation:

> *They lose focus for their academic work and their academic performance drops. In terms of their social life, it destroys their relationships and when it comes to health it affects their thinking capacity and the body.* (P1)

> *There is a slight chance of academic excellence if some of the students consume alcohol – this is because some of them spend their time away from their books instead of studying.* (P5)

Other participants felt that alcohol consumption could lead to unhealthy relationships with friends and family members. Students under the influence of alcohol come into contact with issues of unprotected sexual encounters, which could potentially cause sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV transmission. Besides the risk of contracting STDs, other participants felt that alcohol could also lead to other health-related issues, including mental health issues.

> *… Also, the use of alcohol influences bad behaviour which most of the time affects the relationship that they have with others because they end up fighting. Another thing, when students are drunk, they also engage in unsafe sexual intercourse which exposes them to different diseases.* (P12)

> *Some students tend to lose control over the use of alcohol and in that case their academic studies suffer because they cannot balance things. They tend to make friends with wrong people and who are fake friends. Alcohol contributes for students to get severe diseases, and some do suffer from mental health because of alcohol.* (P4)

Some participants highlighted that alcohol could lead to abusive behaviour. Violence in intimate relationships has also been reported. Participant explained that

> *Alcohol impacts the academic progress of students as it contributes to poor academic performance, and they sometime submit their assignments late. Some students when they are under the influence of alcohol they become abusive of which it may contribute for them to be in abusive relationships. Alcohol contribute for students not being fit because they are controlled by alcohol.* (P3)

Possible prevention and intervention strategies to address reckless alcohol consumption

The participants made recommendations on strategies to assist students who struggle with reckless alcohol consumption. Some participants felt that the university community should proactively ensure that students do not consume alcohol. According to Participant

7, the university should provide education on the risks of alcohol consumption through programmes:

> *Everyone within the institution should play a role in ensuring that students should not involve themselves with alcohol as it is not good for them. We need to have awareness programmes that will give lessons to students about the danger of alcohol.* (P7)

Participants noted that because stress was one of the factors that lead to alcohol consumption, emotional support through support groups should be created to eradicate problems associated with reckless alcohol consumption. Specific quotes associated with this interpretation include the following.

> *We must have support groups as there are students who can talk and share their experiences of alcohol. Also do programmes that will focus on addressing alcohol consumption.* (P5)

> *There should be supports groups for students and facilities where they will get help from and have programmes that will bring awareness to students.* (P8)

Participant 13 added that the issue of student alcohol consumption should be addressed at a policy level, whereby the university provides ways to tackle the problem. According to the specific participant, "*The university should have policies that would speak specifically about substance abuse and this policy must have guidelines that will help to reduce the use of alcohol by students*" (P13).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore student perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology. The findings of this study showed that the participants understood alcohol consumption. Whilst students shared their perspectives on alcohol consumption, they also emphasised the deleterious effects associated with abuse. In this regard, Mekonen et al. (2017) indicate that alcohol consumption is problematic among students because it has the potential of unpleasantly impacting students' academic performance (Ntombela, 2022). According to Barr and McClellan (2018), university life is highly stressful, and students can regard alcohol consumption as a way of coping. However, as the findings reported herein indicate, alcohol consumption can result in various negative sequelae. Ham et al. (2021) suggest that alcohol consumption can lead individuals to become aggressive and lose control of their emotions. Alcohol consumption and violence are linked to major public health issues (Gebara et al., 2015). Sontate et al. (2021) suggested that alcohol as a contributing factor to aggression should be scientifically explained to educate the public, and people should practice moderate drinking to avoid violence.

The second objective of this study was to identify factors that contribute to reducing alcohol consumption among students. Students face many challenges at university. Such challenges include academics, financial scarcity, and many other university-related challenges. Peer pressure is regarded as one of the leading factors in alcohol

consumption. The findings of this study confirm what Shange (2018) indicated, that students experience various difficulties when transitioning from their backgrounds into a challenging and diverse multicultural education institution environment, and that these challenges adversely impact their academic performance. Consequently, the reckless use of alcohol as a coping mechanism for academic stress by students appeared to be a significant factor, as most participants emphasised that most students used alcohol as a form of escapism from their academic challenges. The study conducted by Metzger et al. (2017) found that students used alcohol to cope with academic stress. Peer pressure has been shown to play a significant role in the misuse of alcohol (Studer et al., 2014). The participants emphasised that peer pressure among students is a unique issue that influences them to make decisions that are not good for themselves. Hence, they are negatively influenced by their peers who use alcohol. Morris et al. (2020) stressed the need to have a better understanding of supporting initiatives that would reduce the effects of peer pressure and develop strategies that would deal with factors influencing peer pressure.

The third objective of this study was to understand the impact of alcohol consumption on students' academics, social life, and health. This study found that reckless alcohol consumption negatively impacted students. Binge drinking has serious negative consequences (Salanţă et al., 2018). This study found that alcohol affects the academic performance of students as they lose focus on their studies because they are always drunk. Students who misuse alcohol have poor academic performance, resulting in an inability to achieve their academic goals (Patte et al., 2017). Furthermore, participants also reported that students had poor relationships with others because when they were under the influence of alcohol, conflict was prevalent. Morris et al. (2020) suggest that alcohol can impact an individual's life as well as their relationships. Participants indicated that alcohol does affect their health, which may cause their body to not function correctly and become addicted to alcohol. Alcohol misuse can lead to acute and/or chronic health problems (Rehm et al., 2010).

The fourth objective of this study was to identify possible prevention and intervention strategies to address alcohol consumption among students. Among these participants recommended that awareness and education campaigns be conducted on the negative consequences of alcohol consumption. Thus, universities play a role in ensuring that their campuses are alcohol free (Dlamini et al., 2012). Furthermore, participants recommended that there should be support groups for students who are struggling with alcohol consumption (Cunningham et al., 2011). Moreover, universities need to create social and academic environments that support health-promoting norms to assist students struggling with alcohol consumption (Higher Education Center, 2011).

Finally, this study indicates a relationship between research findings and the ecological systems theory of development. Looking at the microsystem, the environment in which the learner lives, the findings confirm that the environment is one of the elements influencing students' alcohol consumption. This includes family and friends who encourage such behaviour. The challenges that some students face in the microsystem are also contributing factors, as they become reliant on alcohol. The

mesosystem is classified as a second layer containing the microsystem. This also includes the university setting. From the findings of this study, it is noted that many pressures emanating from academic pressure and not having the ability to cope in a new environment influence students' consumption of alcohol. In the exosystem, external settings influence student behaviour. The findings confirm that peer pressure is one of the issues that makes students consume alcohol, as they fail to make decisions on their own. Finally, as the macrosystem comprises cultural values, customs, and laws, this study found that financially strapped students misuse alcohol as an escape mechanism from the reality of their situations. Moreover, the findings emphasised the need to strengthen university rules and implement policies that address the issue of alcohol consumption among students.

Recommendations

In light of the findings reported in this qualitative study, it is recommended that the university allocate additional resources to assist those who are struggling with alcohol consumption. Furthermore, there is a need for the development, provision and evaluation of student support programmes aimed at addressing reckless alcohol consumption. It is recommended that a policy relating to substance abuse be designed and implemented to address the issue of alcohol consumption among students. Lastly, findings draw attention to the importance of counselling services to address student mental health issues as an integral component of reckless alcohol consumption.

Limitations

This study was limited in, amongst others, two ways. First, a relatively small and purposively selected sample was utilised, which was not representative of the entire university population. However, these findings offer valuable insights into student thoughts and perspectives on alcohol consumption. A second limitation is that all study participants were black. Hence, the qualitative interpretation should be interpreted with the stated limitations in mind. Further research should consider alcohol use and abuse in a more diverse sample of university students, as white, Indian, and coloured students were not represented. Moreover, the findings of this study cannot be generalised, as the research only focused on this particular university of technology in South Africa.

Conclusion

The results of this study confirm that reckless alcohol consumption is a significant issue among students. Students' perceptions of this subject reiterate the need for the university to think critically about how to address this issue and how students can be assisted in overcoming this problem. Everyone plays a role, including the staff members and students.

Ethics statement

The study was conducted after researchers received ethical clearance from IREC. Respondents were not coerced into participating in the study.

Potential conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating the power outages: Impact and coping strategies of students in a South African university during loadshedding

Ukuphila ngaphansi kwezikhawu zokucishwa kukagesi: Umthelela kanye nezindlela zokuphila zabafundi basenyuvesi yaseNingizimu Afrika ngesikhathi sohlelo lokucishakonga

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ABSTRACT

Loadshedding, the scheduled power outage implemented in South Africa, has significantly affected various sectors, including higher education institutions. This article explores the impact of loadshedding on students in a South African university, focusing on the difficulties they face, and the coping strategies employed. The study adopts a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data from a structured survey and qualitative insights from discussion interviews. The findings highlight the disruptions caused by loadshedding, including missed lectures, limited access to resources, and challenges in submitting assignments. Power outages also negatively affect students' mental health, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. The study emphasises the need for support measures to address the mental health needs of students during loadshedding. Various coping strategies are identified, such as time management, alternative power sources, offline study materials, group study sessions, and self-care practices. Understanding and analysing these coping strategies is essential in mitigating the impact of loadshedding on students' academic progress and well-being. The study contributes to the understanding of loadshedding's multifaceted impact on students, providing insights for developing support measures and creating a conducive learning environment. These findings can inform discussions in institutions, among policymakers and stakeholders to support students and address the challenges posed by loadshedding.

KEYWORDS

Loadshedding, academic performance, students, mental health, coping strategies

ISIFINYEZO

Ukucishakonga, okuwuhlelo lokucishwa kukagesi izikhawu okwethulwe eNingizimu Afrika, sekube nomthelela omkhulu ezimbonini ezihlukene okubandakanya nezikhungo zemfundo ephakeme. Lolucwaningo luzohlola umthelela odalwe ukucishakonga kubafundi kwenye yamanyuvesi aseNingizimu Afrika, lugxile kakhulu ezinkingeni ababhekane nazo kanye nezindlela abazisebenzisile ukulwisana nalenkinga. Lolucwaningo lusebenzisa izindlela ezixubene zokucwaninga, ezibandakanya idatha eyikhwantithethivu evela kusaveyi kanye neyikhwalithethivu evela ezingxoxweni ezibe khona ezibanjiwe. Ulwazi olutholakele luveza ukuthi kukhona ukuphazamiseka okuqhamuka nokucishakonga, okubandakanya amakilasi okungafikekanga kuwo, izinga elincane lezinsizakusebenza, kanye nezingqinamba zokuthumela imisebenzi eyenziwe. Ukuhamba kukagesi kunomthelela ongemuhle esimweni sengqondo sabafundi, lokho okuholela ekutheni baphazamiseke

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emqondweni, ukucindezeleka, ukukhathazeka kanye nemizwa yokuzwa ngathi babodwana. Ucwaningo lugcizelela isizathu sezindlela zokulekelela okumele zenziwe ukulwisana nezidingo zomqondo zabafundi ngesikhathi sohlelo lokucishakonga. Zikhona izindlela zokuphila kulesisimo ezitholakele, lezi zibandakanya ukulawulwa ngendlela kwesikhathi, ezinye izindlela zokuthola ugesi, izinsizakufunda ezingadingi ukuxhuma kwi-inthanethi, izikhathi ezihleliwe zokufunda ngamaqoqo kanye nezindlela zokuzinakekela. Ukuqonda kanye nokuhlaziya lezizindlela zokuphila kulesisimo kubalulekile emizamweni yokuqhamuka nezindlela zokulekelela kumthelela onezigaba eziningi odalwa ukucishakonga kubafundi, ngokuthi kuqhanyukwe nemibono engasetshenziswa ukuthuthukisa izindlela ezingalandelwa kanye nokwenza indawo yokufunda okuphileka kalula kuyo. Lolulwazi olutholakele lugqugquzela izinkulumo okumele zibe khona maphakathi nezikhungo, abaqambi bamapholisi, kanye nezinye izinhlaka ezikhona ukulekelela abafundi kanye nokulwisana nezinkinga ezidalwe uhlelo lokucishakonga.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA
Ukucishakonga, ukuphumelela kwezemfundo, abafundi, isimo sokuphila komqondo, izindlela zokulwisana nezimo

Impact of loadshedding on higher education

Loadshedding, stemming from insufficient generation capacity, maintenance issues, and other factors, has led to unpredictable power outages across the country (Laher et al., 2019). However, this challenge is not unique to South Africa; governments of countries like Nigeria (Faleye, 2021), Pakistan (Kazmi et al., 2019), Nepal (Shrestha, 2010), Ghana (Ibrahim et al., 2016), and Bangladesh (Meah, 2010) also face a similar electricity crisis. In fact, Agba (2015) asserted that the current supply of electricity can best be described as epileptic, impacting the work performance of academic staff in Nigerian public universities. Additionally, in Japan, energy poverty is common among college students living independently (Nazarahari et al., 2015). Matsheta and Sefoka (2023) study the impact of loadshedding on education in South Africa, focusing on the 'Section 29 Inquiry'. They highlight how power outages threaten students' access to education, disrupting learning opportunities guaranteed by South Africa's Constitution. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Education at a Glance 2019* report showed that only 7% of adults aged 25 to 34 in South Africa had completed university level education, with a projected increase to 15% by 2020 (OECD, 2019). Loadshedding exacerbates educational challenges, potentially discouraging enrolment and harming academic performance.

Challenges faced by students

For students in higher education, these outages disrupt their academic routines, impede their access to resources, and create added stress and anxiety (Malik et al., 2022). Findings from a study in Honduras concluded that unreliable access to electricity reduces educational attainment (Squires, 2015). When electrical supply is interrupted, it leads to students missing lectures, limited study time, difficulties in accessing online learning platforms and research databases, and challenges in submitting assignments (Malik et al., 2022). Such disruptions not only affect student academic progress but also contribute to heightened pressure and a sense of uncertainty.

Curriculum delivery impacts

Loadshedding in South Africa significantly affects students and universities in several ways (Mhandu et al., 2021). It disrupts classes and lectures, leading to missed content and curriculum difficulties. Limited access to online resources hampers studying, research, and assignment completion (Ginsburg, 2010). To illustrate, the incessant electric power interruption destroys and causes malfunction of ICT instructional materials and equipment (Ogbu, 2013). Power outages also interrupt research activities, causing delays and compromising outcomes (Tollefson, 2019). Difficulties arise in submitting assignments on time, and students face limited study time and productivity due to power disruptions (Phiri et al., 2021). Examination schedules are often disrupted, causing additional stress. Power outages, as noted by Jianjun et al. (2018), notably also affect students, particularly during exam preparation. While some invest in alternative power sources, unequal access is an issue. Loadshedding disrupts activities and causes students to lose their work (Khan et al., 2022).Top of Form Loadshedding negatively impacts student's mental health due to uncertainty, stress, and pressure to meet deadlines (Altaf et al., 2013; Phiri et al., 2021).

Additional impacts on curriculum delivery

Loadshedding poses various additional impacts on curriculum delivery in higher education (Mapudzi et al., 2021). Apart from the aforementioned challenges, it can disrupt practical sessions that require specific equipment or laboratory facilities, impeding students' first-hand learning experiences (Bukar, 2016). Furthermore, the limited access to digital learning resources during power outages hampers students' engagement with e-books, online libraries, and multimedia materials, hindering self-study and research (Malik et al., 2022). Power outages pose various additional impacts on curriculum delivery in higher education and hamper the move to educational technologies and media embedding into education systems (Williamson, 2019). University students find online collaborative work tools useful (Oliveira & Terra., 2021). Collaborative work among students may also suffer due to loadshedding, as group projects and virtual meetings heavily reliant on digital communication tools are affected by loadshedding, leading to delays and inefficiencies (Faleye, 2021). Moreover, inconsistent assessment and grading may occur as online examinations or assignments requiring uninterrupted power supply may need to be rescheduled, impacting timely evaluation and feedback (Cahapay, 2021).

Mental health implications

The consequences of loadshedding extend beyond academic implications, impacting the mental health and well-being of students (Malik et al., 2022). The constant worries about power outages, missed deadlines, and the need to catch up on missed course work can result in increased stress and anxiety levels (Ibrahim et al., 2016). A study conducted in Zambia reported that students experienced anxiety due to loadshedding (Kombe & Mtonga, 2021). The disruption of study routines and limited access to resources may further exacerbate these issues, leading to reduced motivation,

productivity, and feelings of isolation among students (Malik et al., 2022). In contrast, a cross-sectional study among university students in Ghana reported that erratic power supply does not suggest any clinical confirmation of the student's anxiety disorders (Ibrahim et al., 2016). There is limited information on the impact of loadshedding and coping strategies of students during loadshedding. However, loadshedding in South Africa has negative effects on both the economy and mental well-being. A survey on the general population by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) found that people experience anxiety, stress, and depression during power outages. The lack of power leads to isolation, reduced family time, and difficulty staying connected. Loadshedding has increased calls for mental health support and worsened existing conditions. Disrupted schedules and sleep patterns further impact wellness (South African Depression and Anxiety Group, 2023).

Coping strategies and mental health support

The impact of loadshedding on the mental health of students in South African higher education institutions is still not well documented, and it is unclear whether students have implemented different coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges it presents. According to Ibrahim et al. (2016), the frequency of power outages increased anxiety levels among university students in Ghana. It remains unknown whether the uncertainty and unpredictability of power outages increase stress and anxiety levels of South African university students as they worry about the impact on their studies. Disruption of study routines, limited access to resources, and academic pressure contribute to heightened stress. Reduced motivation and productivity result from studying under suboptimal conditions. Loadshedding, as reported by SADAG (2023), also leads to social isolation, disturbed sleep patterns, and limitations on coping mechanisms, further impacting students' mental health. Recognising these effects is crucial in implementing support measures to address the mental health needs of students during loadshedding. The coping strategies provided in the literature include time management and planning, utilising alternative power sources, relying on offline study materials, engaging in group study sessions, utilising public spaces with electricity, prioritising essential tasks, practising self-care, and adapting to the changing circumstances (Malik et al., 2022). An earlier study indicated that the high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms among university students is alarming (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Understanding and analysing these coping strategies is crucial to uncovering effective approaches that can mitigate the impact of loadshedding on students' academic progress and mental well-being. Therefore, the objective of the study reported on in the current article was to investigate the impact of loadshedding on the academic performance, mental well-being and coping strategies of university students in South Africa. Specifically, the study aimed to explore how power outages affected students' access to education, including disruptions to lectures, research activities and online learning, as well as the associated stress and anxiety. Additionally, the study sought to identify and analyse the coping strategies employed by students to manage these challenges and assess the need for mental health support in response to the impacts of loadshedding.

Research design

The study adopted a mixed methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, supplying a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This included a structured survey and discussion interviews that did not exceed ninety minutes. The data were obtained from a focus group interview and questionnaire of fifteen students.

Sampling

A table has been included below to provide a clear overview of the data sources, their purposes, target populations, and samples:

Table 1: Sampling overview

Data source	Purpose	Target population	Sample
Focus group interview	Gather qualitative insight	Registered students	15 students
Survey questionnaire	Gather quantitative data	Registered students	15 students

Additionally, further background on the profile of the respondents has been provided to give context to the participants' experiences and how they mitigate loadshedding. The focus group comprised students from different academic levels, and living arrangements, ensuring a diverse representation to capture a variety of experiences. All registered students were eligible to participate, promoting gender inclusivity, with an age range of 18 to 30 years to include individuals at various stages of young adulthood. This comprehensive approach helps to paint a clearer picture of the participants' demographics and their relevance to the study's objectives.

Data collection methods

A semi-structured questionnaire was employed to assess the specific difficulties faced by students during loadshedding, their coping strategies, and the impact on their academic progress and mental well-being. The questionnaire incorporated standardised scales for measuring stress and anxiety, including the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2 (GAD-2), a self-report questionnaire that evaluates the severity of generalised anxiety disorder symptoms. However, as noted in the relevant literature, establishing a causal link between loadshedding and mental health outcomes can be methodologically challenging (Bantjes & Swartz, 2023). The lack of empirical data to support such a link, and the tendency to conflate psychological distress with psychopathology, require caution in interpreting the results (Bantjes & Swartz, 2023). This study aimed to address these concerns by carefully exploring how the effects of loadshedding manifest in students' mental well-being, while considering the potential biases and limitations inherent in the research design.

Theoretical framework

The study utilised the theory of Stress and Coping Framework to examine how students respond to power outages (loadshedding) stress and their coping methods. This framework assesses the impact of these coping strategies on mental health and

academic performance. Both the Stress and Coping Framework and GAD-2 were utilised to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences.

The GAD-2 is a screening tool that quantifies anxiety symptoms, while the Stress and Coping Framework explores individual's responses to stressors and their coping mechanisms. This framework allows for the study to build on existing similar work by Malik et al (2021). Combining these approaches allowed for a nuanced analysis, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights into how students experience and manage anxiety in the face of stressors such as power outages. Additionally, open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire to allow participants to provide additional comments and insights, enriching the qualitative data collected. The data collected through the questionnaire were coded and analysed using Microsoft Excel, facilitating the organization and interpretation of the findings.

Results and discussion

Examining the spectrum of unwellness: Physical, emotional and mental impact of loadshedding

Part A: Exploring the range of effects

In this regard, according to the survey findings, participants reported various types of illnesses associated with loadshedding. Among respondents, 6.7% noted experiencing physical illness during power outages, suggesting they may encounter physical discomfort or health issues due to loadshedding. In terms of emotional well-being, 13.3% reported feeling emotionally unwell during loadshedding, indicating that power outages can affect their emotional state, potentially leading to distress, anxiety, or other negative emotions.

Part B: Self-administered questionnaire

The second part of the study was a self-administered questionnaire of the symptoms and coping strategies of students during loadshedding. The computed p-value is < .00001. The result is significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2: Self-administered questionnaire on loadshedding impacts on students

Characteristic	Yes	No
Irritation and perspiration during classes	86.66	13.34
Punctuality	93.33	6.67
Problems concentrating during lectures	93.33	6.67
Marks and general results	100	0
Disruption of study routines	100	0
Preparating for assessment and exams	100	0
Inadequate preparation for assignments and projects	93.33	6.67
Sleep disturbances	33.33	66.67

Mental and emotional stress (anxiety and frustration)	100	0

Loadshedding has a range of adverse effects on individuals, as evident from the responses of the participants. The majority experienced irritation and perspiration during classes, problems in concentration, and disruptions to their study routine. These findings echo those of Chiner et al. (2021), who also identified significant academic and emotional challenges faced by students due to external disruptions, such as loadshedding and transition to online learning, highlighting the need for improved infrastructure and support systems in higher education. Additionally, these results are comparable to those reported in Zambia, where it was determined that power outages had a significant impact on students' daily schedules and educational pursuits. This included a reduction in study time, particularly during the evening, leading to an adverse effect on their academic performance (Phiri et al., 2021). These findings were further corroborated by those reported by Pillay et al. (2023) stating that loadshedding had previously revealed significant negative impact on the students' academic performance in higher education.

Loadshedding also had a notable impact on punctuality, with participants frequently arriving late to classes. Additionally, it affected their preparation for assessments and exams, resulting in inadequate preparation for assignments and projects. Sleep disturbances were reported by a third of the participants. Most significantly, loadshedding induced mental and emotional distress, including anxiety and frustration. These findings emphasise the widespread negative consequences of loadshedding on various aspects of students' academic experiences and well-being.

Table 3: GAD-2 (Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2-item)

Participant	Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	Not being able to stop or control worrying	Total
1	1-Several days	3-Nearly every day	4
2	3-Nearly every day	2-More than half the days	5
3	0-Not at all	0-Not at all	0
4	3-Nearly every day	2-More than half the days	5
5	3-Nearly every day	2-More than half the days	5
6	1-Several days	1-Several days	2
7	1-Several days	2-More than half the days	3
8	1-Several days	1-Several days	2
9	1-Several days	1-Several days	2
10	1-Several days	0-Not at all	1
11	3-Nearly every day	1-Several days	4
12	3-Nearly every day	3-Nearly every day	6

13	3-Nearly every day	3-Nearly every day	6

The study assessed the participants' (n=13) loadshedding induced anxiety levels. The interpretation of the given information is that a score of 3 points on the GAD-2 (Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2-item) questionnaire is considered the preferred cut-off for identifying possible cases of generalised anxiety disorder. If an individual scores 3 or above, further diagnostic evaluation for generalised anxiety disorder is recommended. Furthermore, using a cut-off of 3 on the GAD-2, the questionnaire demonstrates a sensitivity of 86% and specificity of 83% for diagnosing generalised anxiety disorder. This indicates that the GAD-2 has a relatively high accuracy in correctly identifying individuals who may have generalised anxiety disorder (with 86% sensitivity) and accurately ruling out individuals who do not have the disorder (with 83% specificity).

Scores on the GAD-2 range from 0 to 6, with higher scores indicating a greater likelihood of experiencing symptoms related to generalised anxiety disorder. Based on this interpretation, individuals with scores of 4 or above may have an increased likelihood of exhibiting symptoms associated with generalized anxiety disorder, while scores below 4 suggest a lower likelihood. It is important to note that a formal diagnosis of generalised anxiety disorder should be made by a qualified healthcare professional using comprehensive diagnostic criteria and additional assessment tools.

Table 4: Coping strategies

Coping strategy	Yes (%)	No (%)
Physical activity	46.66	53.34
Sleeping	66.67	33.33
Walking outside	40	60
Listening to music	86.67	13.33
Interaction with others around me	86.67	13.33
Interaction with others on social media to relieve boredom	80	20
Expressed anger	60	40
Develop offline study strategies	66.67	33.33
Take breaks and practice self-care	73.33	26.66
Collaborative study groups with friends who live in locations without loadshedding	53.33	46.66
Utilise battery-powered devices	44.44	66.66

The study examined various coping strategies employed by participants to manage the challenges of loadshedding. The most commonly reported coping strategies included sleeping, listening to music, interacting with others (both in person and through social media), taking breaks and practising self-care, and developing offline study strategies. Physical activity, walking outside, expressing anger, collaborative study groups, and

utilising battery-powered devices were also reported as coping strategies, although to a lesser extent. These findings suggest that individuals are employing a combination of approaches, focusing on both physical and psychological coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges posed by loadshedding. It is worth noting that further research and investigation may be needed to better understand the effectiveness and long-term impact of these coping strategies in managing loadshedding-related stresses. The present findings shed light on the diverse approaches' individuals adopt to navigate the challenges posed by loadshedding and provide insights into the coping mechanisms prevalent within the study population. Loadshedding remains a pervasive national issue, affecting not only higher education but also the broader economy and daily life. Memane et al. (2019) highlight that loadshedding, while a temporary measure to prevent total blackouts, requires optimised implementation to minimise its economic impact, particularly as the country faces growing energy demand.

Conclusion

Three main conclusions emerge from this study. First, loadshedding significantly disrupts university students' academic performance and mental well-being. Power outages affect study routines, exam preparation and concentration, while also contributing to increased stress and anxiety, as shown by elevated GAD-2 scores. Second, students employ various coping strategies, including physical activity, social interaction, and offline study methods. While these approaches offer some relief, they are insufficient to fully mitigate the challenges, highlighting the need for institutional support and mental health interventions. Third, addressing the impact of loadshedding requires comprehensive institutional strategies, including enhanced mental health support, access to alternative power sources, and measures to minimise academic disruptions. By attending to these challenges, universities can better support students' academic success and well-being. The foregoing study is not without limitations. These include its small sample size and focus on a single institution, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should aim to include a larger, more diverse sample from multiple institutions and explore the long-term effects of loadshedding on students' academic performance and mental health.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance (RDI/08/2022) was obtained prior to the study. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent provided, and data were anonymised. The researcher maintained objectivity, using theory to analyse and interpret the findings.

Potential conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mentorship in undergraduate studies – Building block for postgraduate success

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ABSTRACT
Postgraduate output is important in any country's knowledge development and their knowledge economy. The development of postgraduate output especially at master's and PhD levels in South Africa is at risk due to its slow pace. An argument that can be made is that undergraduate experiences lend to postgraduate access and success. This article explores the experiences that students had during undergraduate study that assisted them to access postgraduate studies. A qualitative methodology was used to collect the data. Data were collected from a sample comprising of postgraduate students from different faculties except health sciences, at a research-intensive university and a comprehensive university in Gauteng, South Africa. Results indicated that there are many experiences, and socialisation processes the undergraduate students had that shaped their professional identity and facilitated access into postgraduate studies and success. This article hones in on mentorship. There were also different forms of mentorship that postgraduates had experienced during their undergraduate study. The results help in supporting the notion that mentorship during undergrad is one of the building blocks to postgraduate success in the South African context.

KEYWORDS
Mentorship, undergraduate, postgraduate, socialisation, experiences, universities, success

Introduction

South African undergraduate education consists of an average time span of about four to five years. However, this is not free of obstacles: the attrition and dropout rates are high (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2023). When students choose to enrol in a programme, they spend a further two to six years doing a postgraduate degree. Very few students go on to pursue postgraduate studies in South Africa (ASSAf, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015; Essop, 2020).). Many spend time working and trying to make a living and do not enrol in further education courses or postgraduate degrees. This is cause for concern as there are a fair number of graduates which should ideally translate to higher numbers of students registering for postgraduate studies.

A number of newspaper articles have been written and studies have been conducted to examine this shortage of postgraduate output in South Africa. What is not prevalent in the literature is how undergraduate experiences support and contribute to building professional identity and postgraduate success, especially at the doctoral

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level. The study reported on in this article examines a few student experiences and the forms of mentorship to which they were exposed in undergrad that had an influence on professional identity and may have assisted with progression and access to postgraduate studies and creation of postgraduate knowledge output. The main research question guiding this study was: What were the experiences in undergraduate that shaped your professional identity and helped you to progress to postgraduate studies?

Problem statement

Despite annual growth increases, which is viewed positively, the undergraduate graduate cohort still surpasses postgraduates extensively. These graduate numbers are not translating to similar or at least close enough proportions in postgraduate enrolments and graduations. There is a total average of 80.4% of undergraduates and only 17.6% of postgraduates in post school education and training (HEMIS, 2017). According to the literature and statistics published by DHET (2023) during the 2021 academic year, more than two-thirds of students (38% or n=88,874 students) enrolled for bachelor's degrees (360 credits); these were followed by diploma enrolments (360 credits), which made up 21% of the total enrolment (or n=48,756 students, and higher certificate enrolments (17.3% of the total enrolment or n=40,324 students) (DHET, 2023). Combined, these account for 76.40% of students who have enrolled in higher education programmes. Postgraduate degree enrolments made up roughly 11.2% of the total number of students in the sector, or n=25,373.

The disparities in postgraduate numbers in comparison to undergraduate numbers is high. The number of undergraduates the country produces are simply not converting to the desired postgraduate numbers. The doctoral statistics are very small in comparison to the number of undergraduates that hold degrees or diplomas (Mouton et al., 2019; Mouton et al., 2022). These statistics demonstrate that there is a problem with postgraduate development, progression, access and success in South Africa. Integral to understanding postgraduate success and professional identity development are the experiences during undergraduateship to which students were exposed. In this article, the role of mentorship will be foregrounded. The next section delves into the literature on mentorship.

Literature review

The role of mentorship

Higher education has seen a rise in the use of mentoring as a strategy to (a) graduate and retain students; and (b) produce and maintain highly successful professors (Castle et al., 2021; Diggs et al., 2023; Padayachee et al., 2024). The section will begin with definitions used in this article, followed by the positive impacts and negative aspects of mentorship, all supported by studies on mentorship. Several definitions of mentorship can be found in the existing literature.

Where two or more individuals have a positive and beneficial relationship, this is usually considered mentorship as stated by Fuentes et al. (2014). The mentee and the

mentor are both responsible for ensuring that the mentorship relationship is successful (Fuentes et al., 2014; Rinfret et al., 2023). The mentorship relationship creates conditions that allow for the transfer and sharing of beneficial information and resources for the mentee and mentor (Fuentes et al., 2014). Mentorship is a developmental process in which individuals with greater experience and skillsets act as role models for those with less experience or skillsets, offering guidance, support, encouragement, and friendship. Diggs et al. (2023) state that mentors assist mentees in navigating higher social networks and provide insight into the unwritten rules of academia.

Mentorship also involves the development of activities that also contribute to the growth and development of the mentee that are usually initiated and driven by the mentor (Azevedo et al., 2023; Brizuela et al., 2023; Keiter Humbert et al., 2011). A mentorship relationship is advantageous for both the mentor and mentee but is not always easy to maintain (Azevedo et al., 2023; Keiter Humbert et al., 2011). Mentors are especially concerned with the professional and personal growth of their mentees, helping them integrate into the academic discipline, culture, and career (Diggs et al., 2023). In agreement with this, Alshayhan et al. (2023); Hummel and Hersey (2023); and Rinfret et al. (2023) state that with enduring consequences on their careers, mentorship provides graduate students with crucial emotional support during the most trying times of their academic careers

Informal contact with students by staff and lecturers at universities can also be considered a form of mentorship outside the lecture room. Informal mentorship occurs without institutionalised organized effort (Todoran, 2023). These informal interactions between staff and students also make staff what Pascerella (1980) called “informal agents of socialization” (cited in Fuentes et al., 2014, p. 288). Although this is not a deliberate attempt to mentor the students, their interactions and their influence on students can be classified as mentorship (Todoran, 2023; Wofford, 2024). It has also been found that sometimes informal mentoring relationships have better positive consequences for students than those that are formally arranged (Fuentes et al., 2014). Mentorship goes beyond just advising students about their career paths, it is personal and pastoral in nature, providing a guide for students to experience campus life and also to pursue and develop their careers (Hummel & Hersey, 2023; Wofford, 2024; Lindén et al., 2013). Mentorship is also going beyond the bare minimum of what a lecturer or supervisor traditionally does in the execution of their duties and responsibilities towards students.

Mentorship is also a developmental relationship, where academic staff and postgraduate students assist with the development of undergraduate and postgraduate students (Azevedo et al., 2023; Lunsford et al., 2013). Staff give the students career coaching and that lends to a developmental relationship or mentorship. According to Godfrey and Benson (2023), Todoran (2023) and Wekullo et al. (2024), postgraduate students also form camaraderie with undergraduate students and support them during their studies, this lends to informal mentorship.

Undergraduate students can also observe the behaviour of university staff and postgraduate students. This observation could be a form of mentorship. University

staff and students could also just model the common features and mannerisms of their profession for undergraduate students (Castle et al., 2021). Mentorship will not always be formal nor does it have to be. Findings from a study conducted by Adams and Hemingway (2014) indicate that the mentors themselves managed to support the students' identities by modelling behaviour that is associated with that knowledge domain and also how things work in that discipline. Access to academic, intellectual and social experiences during studies is essential to student success (Bates III et al., 2024; Xulu-Gama et al., 2018). This is very important since professional identity develops in social interactions and mentorship is one such social interaction.

In addition to career benefits like enhancing teaching, developing leadership qualities, applying for competitive grants, raising research productivity and service opportunities, and empowering faculty, mentoring also addresses psychosocial needs like adjusting to academic culture and fostering positive relationships with coworkers and other students (Azevedo et al., 2023; Bradley & Mead, 2022). Mentorship enhances professional and personal development (Rinfret et al., 2023) and fuels student success.

There are many studies on how mentees and mentors approach the mentoring relationship. Mentorship depends on the mentor's characteristics and personality. These characteristics can range from gender, cultural background, and all the way to the position of the mentor in their career and domain (Adams & Hemingway, 2014; Diggs et al., 2023; Ngongalah et al., 2021)). Mentorship also depends on how involved and interested the mentor and mentee are in the mentoring relationship, if both are uninterested and not making an effort, then the mentorship relationship will also suffer. If both are committed then it might succeed (Corbett, 2016).

Mentorship must be supportive. The mentor's role is to guide students through what is expected of a graduate in their domain or discipline (Wekullo et al., 2024). This could also be dependent on the professional identity with which the student identifies. Whether this is an academic identity or corporate practitioner identity or even both. Ultimately, there are no perfect mentors or mentees but ''it is essential that graduate students receive prudent, accurate advising, and consistent, supportive mentoring'' (Corbett, 2016, p.). A strong mentoring relationship gives the mentees access to knowledge and skills and this also helps to empower them against challenges and further pursue their goals (Corbett, 2016; Diggs et al., 2023). As reported by Lindén et al. (2013), a supportive mentor will invest time and make an effort for their mentee's development and be encouraging in their academic and personal endeavours.

Mentors that work in a university as academics or are postgraduates might have gone through what the student that they are mentoring is experiencing. This enables them to empathise with the student (Dudley et al., 2022; Padayachee et al., 2024; Van Vliet et al., 2013). Some studies have found that mentoring also has benefits for the mentor, not just the mentee. Being a reciprocal relationship, mentorship can benefit both the mentor and mentee (Kumar & Blake-Beard, 2012). In order to assist the mentee, the mentor can also put their prior experiences and knowledge into practice (Khamis & Chapman, 2017). In addition, Kumar and Blake-Beard (2012) and Pavlovic

and Jeno (2024) agree that the mentor can receive recognition for their efforts, and this helps with building their reputation in academia.

A study by Strebel and Shefer was conducted in South Africa on doctoral candidates that were already registered for a doctoral course in South Africa. At postdoctoral and student levels, mentorship was identified as an important support mechanism for success and completion (Strebel & Shefer, 2016). It was found that the students that had been part of the mentorship programme were grateful and appreciated the support that they were given which assisted them in completing their doctoral studies (Strebel & Shefer, 2016). The mentorship relationship that doctoral students and postdoctoral research fellows have with lecturers and supervisors promotes and supports professional advancement as was found in another South African study on mentorship (Thackwell et al., 2018). The researchers found that structured and well-planned mentorship programmes were the best approach.

South African and international academics and supervisors are overloaded with work and there is pressure for academics to attend to administration, supervision, lecturing and research demands (Strebel & Shefer, 2016). Because of this existing burden, supervisors frequently find themselves unable to satisfy the demands of the responsibilities that come with mentoring and supervision (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). As argued by Thackwell et al. (2018), this often leads to poor outcomes for mentorship. Mentorship requires effort from academics and an awareness of the obstacles often faced by students and postgraduates (Thackwell et al., 2018). A solution to this could be engaging senior or retired academics in this regard, who may not have the added pressures of lecturing, publishing and dealing with administrative duties (Pavlovic & Jeno, 2024; Strebel & Shefer, 2016).

While mentorship is generally positive, there have also been studies on its negative aspects. These types of study are few and far between. Negative mentoring relationships tend to damage the mentee (Eby & McManus, 2004; Eby et al., 2004) and mentor (Eby & McManus, 2004; Horton, 2023; Lunsford et al., 2013). No one benefits from such a destructive type of relationship. If negative interactions such as these took place, could it even still be considered mentorship?

Both the mentor and the mentee may suffer grave consequences from unfavourable mentoring situations. Unhealthy competition and obsession emerge when a mentee makes an unhealthy attempt to emulate their mentor as found in studies by Bechard and Gragg (2020), and Lunsford et al. (2013). These negative experiences with mentorship could also lead to truancy from university lectures and abnormal stress levels (Horton, 2023; Kumar & Blake-Beard, 2012). Additional research on what defines bad mentoring reveals that unfulfilled needs persist for both the mentor and the mentee. (Lunsford et al., 2013). Both the mentee and mentor end up emotionally and mentally burned out as a result of their continued dysfunctional relationship (Bechard & Gragg, 2020; Eby et al., 2000). Lastly, there can also be financial implications, especially in terms of taking the time to meet with each other, which if it requires travel, has costs attached to it.

According to the literature, the positive attributes of mentorship outweigh the negatives. Mentoring is an important relationship that students need to develop during

their undergraduate studies. Specifically, with a mentor they have chosen and seek out and also feel comfortable with and trust. Such a mentor does not only have to be a member of academic staff, but it can also be with older students, postgraduates or other support staff (McCorkle et al., 2024). The benefits of mentoring are said to accrue over the years especially when it is cultivated from undergraduate level (Elsen et al., 2009; Wayment & Dickson, 2008). It has also been found in another study on mentorship, that more students are likely to become critical thinkers, secure funding easier and report an interest in becoming professors in their field one day as a direct result of the mentorship that they receive (Lunsford et al., 2013). The mentorship relationship has also been compared to an apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As it is also a process in which not only skills are gained, but attitudes and values for a particular domain as well (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Van Vliet et al., 2013). Students that succeed in their studies tend to be students with a sense of belonging (Hayman et al., 2022; Tinto, 2017). This sense of belonging can be facilitated through mentorship and could be where professional identity intersects with student success. The studies mentioned thus far have shown that mentorship can also be challenging. The final section of this literature review briefly delves into the concept of professional identity.

Conceptualisation of professional identity in higher education

The concept of professional identity is broad. It is defined as the understanding that a profession's values, attitudes, beliefs, and duties foster dedication to a career (Dickerson & Trodd, 2022; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Supporting this is another definition by Tan et al. (2017) where they state that individuals build a sense of professional competence and legitimacy in their field, which can continue to evolve throughout their careers in relation to the self. Fitzgerald et al. (2024) posit that professional identity is shaped by social and cultural factors, including one's behaviour in specific cultures.

Communities of practice, such as professional societies, can enhance acculturation into a profession by fostering shared aims, beliefs, values, and behaviours (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Professional identity is part of a narrative arc that explores a person's projected future self and how it relates to their professional identity at work (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). In addition, Foo and Green (2023) and Kristoffersen (2021) state that professional identity is thought to develop over time as the individual obtains insight into professional methods and experiences.

There are a couple of factors that affect the formation of professional identity. These can be gender and gender stereotypes (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021; Volpe et al., 2019), motivation to complete their studies (Cruess et al., 2019; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Undergraduate professional identity formation relies on both explicit knowledge given by teachers and supervisors and tacit knowledge conveyed through social interactions (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Student satisfaction with their programme appears to be a major element in professional identity. Research indicates that student satisfaction at universities correlates with teaching quality and accessible resources (Green et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Lastly Ewe and Ng (2022) state that the student's resilience and grit also play a role in their professional identity formation.

The above literature review demonstrates that there is a paucity in the South African literature on mentorship and experiences in undergrad and their role in professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021) formation and advancement to postgraduate studies. What has not yet been clarified is how this relationship, between mentor and mentee, assists the student in developing a professional identity, advancing to and achieving success as postgraduates in the South African context.

Theoretical framework

Reference will be made to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in order to frame an understanding of how mentorship plays a role in professional identity development and postgraduate success. This theoretical framing is useful in this study because the theory positions the individual in different social settings and interactions. As stated by Fearnley (2020), social interactions play an important role in professional identity formation and academic success. Mentorship cannot take place without social interactions. Identity cannot develop without social interactions either. A brief introduction into the ecological systems theory is presented in the following paragraphs. Bronfenbrenner was a proponent of the idea that an individual's environment and experiences influence their growth, which in turn leads to further development (Woodland et al., 2024). The scholarly work of Bronfenbrenner uses an ecological, systems-based methodology to study social phenomena and human development (DiSanti & Erickson, 2021). According to Woodland et al. (2024), Bronfenbrenner's approach also requires the passage of time. Time is relevant to the current study as it involves undergraduate level experiences, which is usually four years to five years, and then master's and PhD.

At the centre of the system is the student or individual. The student or individual in this study are the participants who were interviewed. Due to their existence, interactions, and capacity to alter their surroundings, individuals constitute an essential part of all ecosystems (DiSanti & Erickson, 2021). Then surrounding the individual is what is called the microsystem which consists of the individual and their immediate environment, for example family and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Woodland et al., 2024). A robust description of the microsystem was provided later and Bronfenbrenner defined the microsystem as the activities, personalities and beliefs that the developing individual came into contact with (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A simpler description is the face-to-face social interactions of the individual (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

The mesosystem consists of the connections between the people in the individual's immediate environment and the wider community such as school and religion (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Woodland et al., 2024). The next layer is the exosystem and this is the connection between the mesosystem and another system, for example politics, social media, wherein the developing individual does not have direct interaction but is impacted by the processes that take place in these settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Woodland et al., 2024). This system indirectly impacts the behaviour and development of the individual (McLinden, 2017). Then comes the macrosystem, which is a combination of microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem and is influenced by the social interactions

that are contained within, such as ideologies and cultural attitudes or beliefs (McLinden, 2017; Woodland et al., 2024). The final level or system is the chronosystem which refers to time and is made up of all the experiences that the individual has in their life (McLinden, 2017). The participants in the study have existed and interacted with all these different systems throughout their four- or five-year undergraduate degrees.

Generally, these experiences take place in spaces where identity is nurtured and wherein interactions with others develops similarly to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). The ecological systems take into account the individual's entire development and experiences throughout their life (McLinden, 2017) and this can be connected to how identity and professional identity change over the course of an individual's life. Every individual has unique situational and dispositional characteristics that impact how they engage with the systems in their environment (DiSanti & Erickson, 2021). In addition to this, Fearnley (2020) asserts that each person develops through a multitude of experiences, including their relationships within their immediate and wider social environments.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory supports the progression of students from undergraduate through to postgraduate and examines the experiences that got them there. It also examines how these experiences shaped their professional identities that also assisted them to access postgraduate studies. The Bronfenbrenner theory also takes time into account and so does professional identity formation. This is important as undergraduate degrees in South Africa take about four or five years and this is a considerable amount of time for these experiences and social interactions to take place.

Within these interactions, Bronfenbrenner's theory also encourages that attention be paid to the unique characteristics of each individual and how they experience things differently compared to the next individual (McLinden, 2017). Individuals inside each system are always changing, and their growth depends critically on how various systems interact (Fearnley, 2020). The link between the individual's characteristics and the environment they are interacting in is very important (Darling, 2007). It can be said that it is these interrelationships that shape the individual's professional identity and also determine progression to postgraduate access and success.

From this theory outline the main research questions are:

- Describe mentoring experiences that contributed to your professional identity?
- What mentorship experiences from undergraduate assisted you to get to postgraduate?
- How did you develop these mentorship relationships?

Methodology

A qualitative design was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview protocol is exploratory and allows for the examination of the different ways that mentorship played a role in the development of professional identity and postgraduate achievement. All interviews were submitted to NVIVO. The outputs from NVIVO were nodes or themes that are relevant to the study. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained for the study.

Postgraduate students from two universities in South Africa, one research-intensive and the other comprehensive, were involved in the study. Sampling for the study was purposive because students that had completed their undergraduate studies at the same institution were selected for the study to ensure consistency and to enable demonstration of the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate in a similar environment. The participants were from different faculties; commerce, humanities, science and engineering. The health sciences were not included as further ethical clearance would have had to be sought as the postgraduate students were mainly hospital-based and not on campus. The researcher was advised that this would be a possible bottleneck and hinder progress and upon consideration had to exclude health sciences. After data collection there were n=27 interviews collected from both institutions.

The researcher selected two institutions in South Africa because the country has different higher education structures. There are research-intensive universities, comprehensive and universities of technology in the country. This was also within the financial limits and timeframe that the researcher had been given. The interviews used a semi-structured approach wherein the researcher was able to ask probing questions where necessary rather than following a strict interview schedule. The methodology used allowed for the exploration of postgraduate student's past experiences of mentorship in undergrad with regards to how this played a role in their professional identity formation and enabled progression to postgraduate level. The questions were used to explore the forms of mentorship that students encountered during their undergraduate studies.

Findings

A major theme or primary forms of mentorship was at the faculty level (outside the lecture room). Then secondary forms of mentorship were identified including engagement with the community, friends and family. Additionally, mentorship sub-themes were formed during data analysis. The sub-themes are (i) mentorship within the faculty/department/ university, (ii) mentorship from the community, and (iii) well-known public figures as role models. Famous people were mentioned as role models by some respondents. Role modelling is also considered a characteristic of mentorship (Thevenin et al., 2016). This is not considered mentorship in the current study as they did not have a relationship with these famous people, however, such accounts are relevant to mentorship and thus were included in the study.

Different forms of mentorship

All respondents reported positive mentorship experiences. There were no reports of negative forms of mentorship that they encountered but this is not to conclude that they do not exist. The respondents mentioned that their mentors had shared valuable knowledge, skills and discipline-specific values and attitudes through their interactions with them. Below is a breakdown of the sub-themes that came out of the study.

Mentorship within the university

These experiences took place outside of their formal lecture environments and sometimes off campus too. The respondents reported that they had developed mentoring relationships with their lecturers and some postgraduate students that were tutors. One respondent had the following to report:

> *One of my lecturers mentored me and some of my classmates from our second year of university.* (Respondent 1, Author, 2020)

The very same respondent mentioned that the lecturer had quite a few of her students under her mentorship and would take them out for lunch once a month. It was at these informal and friendly get-togethers that they managed to ask her some private questions about her life. This allowed for some transfer of valuable life lessons to the mentees.

> *She only mentored young women. We were comfortable enough to ask her personal questions about how she became successful and any challenges that she faced.* (Respondent 1, Author, 2020)

Mentorship from family and community

One of the respondents had a family member who was already working at their university. This particular respondent spent a great deal of their free time in the relative's office space on campus, assisting with some of their admin. At some point, the relative encouraged the respondent to go to an academic conference and the respondent had this to say:

> *The academics I saw were having so much fun during after-hours when conference sessions had ended. Which was completely opposite to how I thought they were like.* (Respondent 2, Author, 2020)

Another respondent also reported being mentored by a family member and older friends, who were studying at the same university that they were doing their undergraduate studies in:

> *My cousin lived with us and was doing his postgraduate studies. He would allow me to tag along to the postgraduate bar on campus with his friends. They were all scientists and this made me want to pursue my postgraduate studies.* (Respondent 3, Author, 2020)

A respondent also gave an anecdote about a neighbour who used to visit and who also gave advice from time to time:

> *Our neighbour had studied something in the science field and she came to speak to me. I now have postgraduate qualifications in a science field too.* (Respondent 4, Author, 2020)

A few of the respondents also came from religious backgrounds. They were exposed to different people that worked in different fields in their various places of worship. This

represented an opportunity for them to interact with people they had something in common with (their religion). A respondent had the following to say:

> *The church that I attend was able to set up programmes for the matric students in our congregation. Usually the programmes were led by people that already had degrees. I knew that I could trust these people and they were very open to giving us advice.* (Respondent 5, Author, 2020)

The respondent mentioned a very important characteristic of mentorship and that is trust. This is also a very important component for a mentor–mentee relationship to flourish. Without trust, a mentorship relationship is impossible or unsustainable. The individuals at their places of worship were also easily accessible because they were found in a place that the respondent frequented.

Famous role models

Although this is not necessarily a mentoring relationship, as they did not have a direct relationship with these famous personalities, these are still role models that they wanted to emulate. Some of the respondents mentioned that they looked up to famous people that worked in their domain. A respondent in international relations had this to say:

> *The people that had a great influence in my life and professional identity were my high school friends, Kofi Anan and Banki Moon.* (Respondent 6, Author, 2020)

A respondent from engineering had the following to say:

> *Elon Musk is one of the tech giants and I want to be like him one day.* (Respondent 7, Author, 2020)

The examples of role models that they gave are people that work in their fields of study. These are famous personalities that are known all over the world. Only accessible through social media and other modes of media. The respondents also felt that they have something in common with their role model although they had never met them.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the mentoring experiences to which the respondents were exposed during their undergraduate that contributed to the development of their professional identity and also assisted them to be successful in their postgraduate studies. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory assisted with contextualising the fact that mentorship experiences occur in different 'ecosystems' or situations and social interactions and therefore also support the various forms of mentorship that result.

Data analysis was conducted, and it was found that mentorship experiences took place in varied forms. This demonstrates that informal mentorship comes in different forms, some of which are not defined in the existing body of knowledge. Consistent with previous literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Woodland et al., 2024), this study found

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that instances of mentorship in the faculty, family and community were mentioned by respondents. The primary form of mentorship was that which took place in faculty spaces and mainly with lecturers and tutors. Further analyses revealed that secondary forms of mentorship took place in the external community, inside the university community and in family structures.

Professional identity formation involves combining personal and professional identities. This requires them to be conscious of their own situated, relative, and relational positions in terms of their postgraduate studies. Professional identity is socially determined and also dependent on the individuals themselves. In relation to mentorship, this means that the social nature of mentorship and the social nature of professional identity formation support each other. That the participants reference their experiences with lecturers, friends, neighbours and people from their religious affiliations also shows that mentorship, and therefore the development of professional identity, is dynamic. It changes over time.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory also supports the context in which mentorship and professional identity forms in different spaces and over time. Time is a common factor between the theory, mentorship and professional identity and this is consistent with the literature (McLinden, 2017; Woodland et al., 2024). This also examines how students' experiences with higher education, mentorship and the development of professional identity and how this may impact their professional identities and knowledge contributions, drawing on the diverse extant literature. Reflecting on who they interacted with, what role they played and even the environment and the resources that they had at their disposal is another important part of the process.

The experiences that the respondents reported can be viewed as positive. Good mentorship entails a relationship that is supportive, encouraging and collegial. Respondents in the study reported that they had experienced good mentoring relationships. These findings support previous literature and studies (e.g. Diggs et al., 2023; Hayman, 2022; Wekullo, et al., 2024). None of the respondents reported negative mentoring experiences.

Respondents indicated that their role models assisted them in shaping their professional identities and also helped them to thrive during their postgraduate studies. It is important to highlight that, despite the fact that role models are not a type of mentoring as the respondents have never met the renowned individuals they consider as their role models, role modelling is a characteristic of mentorship (Hammond et al., 2024; Van Vliet et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2023). Hammond et al. (2024) observe that, considering how easily accessible renowned people are in today's world, it appears likely that some historical, religious, and popular media leaders can positively impact youth by modelling their behaviours.

The respondents also had something in common with the people that they considered mentors. One that particularly stood out was a student who was an African female whose mentor was also an African female. In her engagement with her mentor she mentioned that the group of mentees she was part of used to ask their mentor

how she had become successful with reference to her race and gender. The participants responses suggested that mentors with a similar cultural background or gender identity might be best for students that want to progress to postgraduate studies. This is supported by Corbett (2016) as they confirm that if the mentor and mentee can see themselves in each other, it facilitates positive growth of the mentoring relationship. Further research by Azevedo et al. (2023) supports this. They found that women in certain programmes have distinct mentorship needs compared to men.

The work of Corbett (2016) and Azevedo et al. (2023) demonstrates that mentorship is also beneficial for the mentor. The mentor gets the opportunity to discuss their own past experiences that shaped who they are. In turn, the mentees get opportunities to learn from those past experiences. As mentioned earlier, mentoring is beneficial for both the mentee and mentor (Kumar & Blake-Beard, 2012) and is demonstrated in the respondents' accounts.

This article had to rely on literature related to mentorship and professional identity but did not necessarily have a direct link between mentorship and postgraduate success. The paucity in studies related to this issue in South Africa highlights the need for more studies on the role of mentorship in professional identity and postgraduate success in South Africa. It is important to highlight that informal mentoring experiences are reported in this study. Formal mentorship programmes were not reported by the respondents. Universities can also encourage staff and postgraduate students to mentor future postgraduate researchers.

A limitation of the study is that the participants were registered or had completed postgraduate studies only. An area that needs to be examined are the mentorship experiences of postgraduate students that dropped out of their programmes and graduates that hold only an undergraduate degree and never registered for postgraduate studies. What also needs to be explored is the possibility of negative mentoring experiences during university students' undergraduate studies. Due to the known difficulties in obtaining ethical clearance – the majority of master's and PhD medical students are based in hospitals rather than on campus – the study did not include the health sciences faculties. Ethical clearance would have required permission from the Department of Health and from the hospitals' management in addition to the ethical clearance that had to be sought from the two higher education institutions from which data were collected. Future research with greater resources and time should incorporate them. Additionally, the study purposefully excluded full-time and part-time academics. To fully comprehend their distinct mentoring approaches, more research is required. Future research might more closely monitor student access and directly invite faculty. These are cohorts of graduates and academics that can be considered for further studies.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance was obtained for this study.

Potential conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constitution and negotiation of rural students' identities at an urban South African university

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ABSTRACT

Utilising a social constructivist lens, this study explores how students from rural areas constitute and negotiate their identities in the context of an urban South African university. Much of the research on rurality in South Africa has focused on rural areas as places, and not on the people occupying them. This qualitative study employed a narrative inquiry, using the life course theory of development as its theoretical framework. Data collection comprised a mix of semi-structured questionnaires and focus group interviews. Data were analysed by means of content analysis. The findings were threefold: first, in constituting their identities, rural students remained grounded in their rural identities. Contrary to the literature, which found rural students trying to fit into the dominant hegemonic culture of an urban university. Second, in negotiating their identities, rural students assumed hyphenated identities – the rural-urban binary – to blend into the urban environment, assuming a 'chameleon' identity, but did not abandon their socio-cultural upbringing, philosophy, values, and attributes when they joined an urban institution. They aligned with philosophies and values that resonated with their upbringing rather than seeking to be assimilated. Third, when they joined an urban university, they began to perceive their role as having shifted from being recipients of their background to becoming contributors to its development.

KEYWORDS

Rural students, constitution of identity, negotiation of identity, urban university, rural areas

Introduction and background

To fully understand the context of South African higher education, it is important to note that the twenty-six public universities in South Africa are differentiated according to the spatial and historical legacies of apartheid (Govinder et al., 2013). Some universities are semi-urban or rural, but most are located in metropolitan areas across the country, in the centres of economic activity. The study that was undertaken was of students in South Africa's university system who came from rural environments (Wongo, 2016).

In rural high schools in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, students' backgrounds are community-focused (Zhang et al., 2017). Socio-cultural issues that the students are born into are homogenous cultures, races and languages. The contrast between rural and urban environments in South Africa is particularly evident in South Africa's secondary schooling system. Secondary schools are stratified along economic

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lines, and this leads to huge disparities between rural and urban students (Van Breda, 2001; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018). For example, geographical stratification ensures that high schools are differentiated by access to transport, and information and communication technology. Funding for high schools is officially divided in terms of the national criteria for schools: they are classified as quintiles 1-5, with quintile 1 schools being the poorest of the schools in South Africa. The majority of rural schools are classified as quintile 1 (Department of Basic Education, 2004).

This economic stratification in South Africa's secondary schooling system inevitably spills over into universities (Govinder et al., 2013). When students join a university in South Africa, the disparities on the basis of affluence of background and geographical location are evident. Students who are plagued by these disparities have to battle with identification at the new institution at different levels: personally, institutionally and academically (Ramrathan & Pillay, 2015; Spaull, 2013).

The constitution of personal identity

There are multiple interpretations of how identity is constituted, therefore there are various descriptions of it. Some regard it as a set of traits learned at different intervals in a person's life which manifest in the ways they perceive themselves and others (Vandeyar et al., 2014). Identity is sometimes viewed as something people do, embedded in their social activities, or as part of their orientation towards their local and regional cultures. The main consensus, however, is that it is an individual's sense of belonging (Syed et al., 2011; Vandeyar et al., 2014).

For this study, the definition by Auerbach et al. (1999) (quoted in Parameswaran, 1999, p. 52), appropriately points out that "[i]dentity relates to desire – the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety". This definition was preferred by the researchers because of its relevance to this particular study, in which a student's constitution of identity is viewed as an evolving process of representations of attitudes, expectations, social actions and behaviour, influenced by the student's socialisation process (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Chee et al., 2019).

The negotiation of identity

The literature reveals an interplay of layers in how students negotiate their identities. The discussion has been foregrounded under three important aspects: dislocation and integration, situational identity, and the role of identity brokers. These concepts are borrowed from various studies addressing the development of students' identities at universities. Vincent and Hlatshwayo (2018, p. 122) state, "Students in our study cited that unfamiliarity with the institutional culture and demands of the university makes integration into and acceptance of the university far more challenging. When it comes to integration and belonging "students often discuss rather similar struggles of not fitting in" Lehman (2000, p. 99).

Situational factors such as experiences of contact or distance learning, race, language, socio-cultural factors and gender often require that students shift their identity representation based on the environment (Harry et al., 2008). They are viewed

as key in the cyclical process of students' identity negotiation. Some aspects are more dominant than others, depending on the individual and the environment in which they are situated (Chetty & Vigar-Ellis, 2017). Thus, it is evident that identities are negotiated through habitus, or situations.

Identities are also negotiated by employing supportive agents or brokers of identity development (Modipane, 2011). In an academic institution, this can range from institutions offering bursaries and sponsorships, to the influence of lecturers, mentors and peers. For example, some institutions insist on language standardisation as a qualifier or for gaining university entry and for being considered for a scholarship. In such cases, organizations advocate for identity linked to a particular language (Diab et al., 2015; Chee et al., 2019). The literature, therefore, identifies that rural students negotiate identity through:

Socio-economic barriers to learning

When rural students reach an urban university, their situation changes as they are disconnected from their former way of learning, because, how learning is conducted at university differs vastly from the rural experience (Harrison, 2006). Students experience an inclination to dislocate from the former way of life and assimilate into the new university culture. This causes an internal conflict.

Race as a factor

The issue of race and the equitable way in which rural students gain access to university is, in general, a primary axis for identity in South Africa (Bhana, 2014; Heleta, 2016). Racism is a pervasive feature in the South African context of urban universities and is therefore an important factor in identity. Bazana and Mogotsi (2017, p. 3) state:

> *Colonialism is a feature in South African universities; it helped shape specific cultural identities. The economic upper hand that came through conquest positioned the culture of the colonisers as superior, therefore rendering them Eurocentric.*

Linked to race is language and culture, family background, affluence and self-confidence and the role of supportive agents in the negotiation of identity. These are all important aspects in adjusting to university life (Yull, 2014).

Proficiency in English

English language acquisition, where there is strong parental involvement and parental affluence, affects students differently. It is a contributing factor in predicting how rural students integrate into an urban university. According to Paxton (2009, p. 2), "In South Africa, English is viewed as a language of power and status and basic interpersonal and communication skills. It is used to determine the level of academic literacy a student has".

Family background, affluence and self-efficacy

Successful completion of a degree is often associated with earlier influences, rather than with those experienced at the university (Oduaran, 2015). In terms of demographics, there are more students with higher-earning parents in urban universities, compared to those in rural areas. A study by McCracken and Barcinas, (1991, p. 30) found that adolescents from large, urban communities thought more highly of themselves than adolescents from rural communities and therefore succeeded because of increased self-efficacy, derived from parental affluence rather than parental involvement (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017, p. 3). Lack of self-efficacy on the other hand led to learning challenges (Swenson et al., 2008; Modipane 2011; Uleanya & Gamede, 2018).

Supportive agents

Identities are also negotiated by employing supportive agents or brokers of identity development (Modipane, 2011). In an academic institution, this can range from institutions offering bursaries and sponsorships, to lecturers and their teaching styles (Diab et al., 2015). A university's academic culture plays a significant role in helping rural students identify with the institution. Transformation of the entire university climate in terms of the culture of teaching and learning, curriculum, finance, and social and linguistic problems is important (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018). A study conducted in the USA concluded that rural students struggled to fit in at an urban university, particularly, African American students who attended predominantly white institutions in the USA. They are reported to have experienced alienation. Rural students try to acculturate by finding smaller and more intimate spaces similar to their homes. In doing so, they negate being part of the bigger institution and lose out on the opportunities and power that comes with links to larger associations (Christiaens, 2015; Swenson et al., 2008; Modipane, 2011; Uleanya & Gamede, 2018).

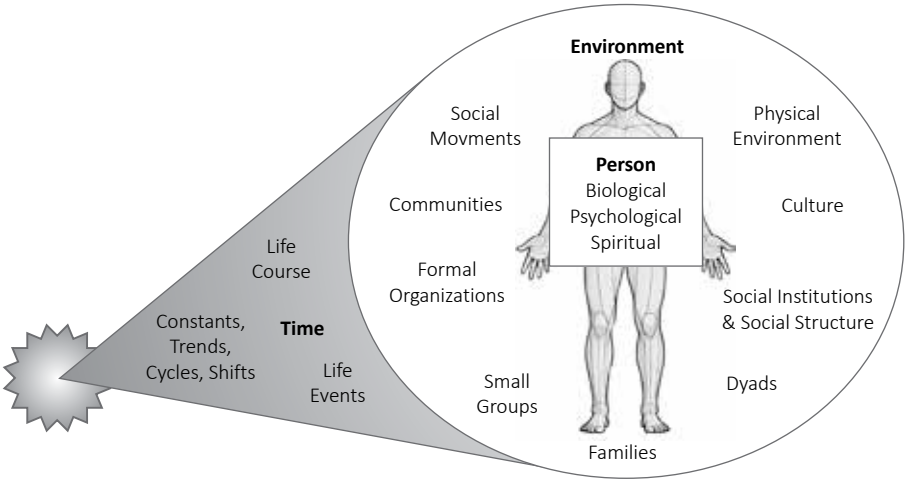
Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the life course theory of development, which provides a multifaceted approach to define the transition of students holistically, focusing on changes in ones' social life over time. Such transitions and trajectories are characterised by multiple, simultaneous roles that are played by an individual. These are described as social pathways. The changing interpersonal relationships experienced during transitions are known as social convoys (Ahier & Moore, 2002).

Life course theory is an important lens through which to view and understand the transition of rural students from a rural setting to an urban setting. As students make the transition, there is an intersection between social pathways and social convoys. Social pathways are institutionalised paths or the historical forces that are entrenched in the rules, regulations, norms and standards that society follows. They are shaped and structured by social institutions (Benner, 2011). As the students transition to a new environment, they are confronted with new rules and regulations which act as shocks of change that govern how they interact in the new spaces. They therefore need to adapt their social convoys (interpersonal relationships) in order to ensure harmony with

the new spaces. The disassociation from communal ties and the attachment to new relationships formed at university or in learning to adapt to living between different social environments results in a shifting of students' social convoys (Benner, 2011; Ahier & Moore, 2002; Dannefer, 2003).

Figure 1: Life course theory of development



Source: Hunt (2010)

Research strategy

The study was conducted using a meta-theoretical paradigm known as social constructivism; this is based on several assumptions. The first is that knowledge is generated through social interaction, interpretation and understanding, and cannot be separated from the social environment in which it occurs (Bruce et al., 2016). The second assumption of social constructivism is that the socialisation of individuals has a strong influence on how they perceive their world, therefore knowledge is a construction of individuals (Larochelle & Bednarz, 1998). This means that, for individuals, meaningful knowledge and reality is construed through interactions with others. The methodological paradigm of the study was the qualitative approach. This research relied on the participants' views of the phenomena and a pattern of a theory of meanings generated from the participants' views. The study is descriptive in nature and data were inductively collected. (Bentley et al., 2015).

Sampling and sample size

A purposive sample was used for the study. Third- and fourth-year students within a Faculty of Education at an urban university were purposively sampled because of assumed lived experiences and were viewed as capable of providing sufficient rich data for the study. Respondents were selected on the basis of their home addresses as reflected in the faculty registration database. Their home address was used as an

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indicator of whether or not the students came from the deep rural parts of South Africa. Those residing in the deep rural parts of South Africa had a general dealer address and did not have street names and numbers as their home address. This led to 12 respondents in their early twenties, of whom the eldest was 30 years of age. There was no need to extend the sources of data beyond the group that had experienced the urban university (Petrova et al., 2016).

Data collection strategies

Semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and participants reflections were used to elicit data about the phenomenon. (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Focus group interviews were useful because respondents can agree or disagree and build up on each other's arguments. Participant reflections comprised of summaries of how respondents constructed and negotiated their identity within the institution. This was done to elicit more in-depth, personal accounts of respondents' identity formation processes while at university (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019).

Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations that were followed for this study range from securing access to the research site, following procedures regarding informed consent and confidentiality, and protecting participants from harm. As researchers with histories working in historically disadvantaged institutions, it was important to avoid the potential exploitation of staff and students because of the researchers' positions. To protect the vulnerability of the students, the lead researcher chose a site based on authorities' commitment to providing access and a rigorous ethical clearance application process from the site institution. The participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and the risks involved in participating in it and were reassured that those risks would be minimised. Respondents were informed they were free to withdraw their participation at any time during the process. Informed consent and confidentiality forms were signed by the respondents.

Limitations of the study

Although the study is an in-depth investigation of students' experiences, it must be viewed with the context that the research site is located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Specifically, in a metropolitan area which is under-developed compared to other areas of South Africa, such as the Gauteng and Western Cape Provinces.

Discussion

The research was conducted in 2022, which marked twenty-eight years since South Africa held its first democratic election. The respondents belonged to the generation commonly known as 'born-frees', and this was evident in the way they neither focused on nor emphasised the apartheid-era practice of categorising identity along racial lines. They described their identity in terms of processes, memories, knowledge and experiences of their background environments. The discussion below indicated that individuals have multiple, shifting, and simultaneous identities, with a single identity

dominating at any given time, usually influenced by a strong affiliation to someone or something (Vandeyar et al., 2014).

Given the South African context, one might expect race to be a dominant feature in the respondents' identity discussion; however, it was notably not a defining factor of their self-identity. This might indicate that they viewed it as intrinsic to them, and as therefore not worth mentioning. They focused on self-identification by place, background, values, principles, poverty, possessions and community. Only three of the twelve respondents mentioned race as a defining factor. One message was consistent throughout their narration: that the respondents received foundational values from home which subsequently informed their self-identity. When they reached university, the self-identities influenced by home adjusted slightly, without loss of their foundational identities. New identities were constituted in the new environment, influenced by ideals, values and lessons from the new community.

Most of the respondents came from the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, both of which are dominated by the traditional home languages of isiXhosa and isiZulu, respectively, and the rural communities of which are populated predominantly by black Africans. The respondents therefore self-identified as Xhosa or Zulu. Their identities were constituted as a common feeling of not wanting to lose who they already were in the new environment. They described their identity as originating in their communities. Hlumi, a 22-year-old man from Gqeberha Farms in Eastern Cape, stated, "*My community back home lacks hope, therefore, whatever I do, I always think about it – I want to restore or be the hope*." This indicated that, even at university, the respondents carried their background experiences with them, never losing sight of how they had shaped their self-identity.

The respondents also narrated that they negotiated their identity by continuing to think independently, while remaining part of the collectives that they came from. They maintained this independence by accepting differences and respecting other people's boundaries while, at the same time, embracing their immediate community. Limile, a 21-year-old woman from Sepetu Administration Area in the Eastern Cape, expressed it in this way:

> *At residence I had to learn and adapt to house rules and residence rules, not fighting, not inviting strangers into the shared spaces. Respect for others was key.*

Data from respondents presented mixed values, beliefs, imaginings, views and experiences. The new world of the university needed to be negotiated differently if they were to fit in. They recounted their journey of learning and re-learning their identities, and of trying to find their own spaces in the new environment. After having done so, they had to adjust their understandings of identity and learn to embrace differences in attitudes to gender for example. According to Pam, a 20-year-old student:

> *I struggled. The change of environment took a toll on me. I had to adjust to new social rules that I had never believed in. For example, homosexuality was taboo where I grew up. Now, I was surrounded by people who perceived it as normal.*

There was a need to negotiate their work ethic, gained through socialisation and influenced by teachers and personal goals. From the respondents' accounts, some of their backgrounds and foundational values transcended home and community boundaries and were re-affirmed in the new environment. Some values were important for continued success at university, as well for acceptance in the academic environment. Lisa, a fourth-year female student from Flagstaff in the Eastern Cape, expressed this as follows:

> *Although there are few educated people in my background, I had successfully identified with those, I resolved to continue my studies and to be like them. As a result, every year of my four years, I am registered and continuing with my studies. Commitment to my studies and working hard pushed me and motivated me.*

In dealing with their fear of the unknown, and of failure and inadequacy stemming from being in an unfamiliar environment, and in overcoming cultural dissonance, the respondents realised that they had to negotiate their way through these fears and move towards acceptance. One such fear was of the new environment in general. An example was the fear of the buildings and the size of the lecture halls. Zama, a 22-year-old woman from Mangquzu Location in Eastern Cape, commented, "*Where I come from there is no development, so seeing the big buildings and robots were a little bit scary for me*."

Financial support was one of the most important factors that caused students to identify with an urban university. Without financial support, the respondents claimed they would have suffered an identity crisis, since they already perceived the institution as catering for the rich. Pinky, a 24-year-old woman from Bensonville Village in the Eastern Cape, stated,

> *The University is supportive because I found a place to stay (student accommodation) and they helped me with NSFAS.[3] Now I see myself as part of the University, I no longer see myself differently from other students.*

In analysing data from this research, the aim was to present a nuanced account of respondent's answers to each question, outlining their perspectives on the meanings they brought to their institution and the meanings they ascribed to acceptance and belonging (Gibau, 2015). The themes in the table below emerged from the data.

Table 1: Emerging themes

Themes	
Foundational identities	
Theme 1	Self-Identification
Theme 2	Remaining grounded in who we are
Theme 3	A deepened sense of responsibility for our communities

3 The National Student Financial Aid Scheme, a government entity providing financial aid to South African students.

Themes	
Negotiated identities	
Theme 4	Overcoming misconceptions about an urban university
Institutional culture	
Theme 5	Learning to straddle between the two worlds
Identity brokering structures	
Theme 6	The influence of university communal structures

Results

Rural students self-identified by navigating new interpersonal relationships at the urban university. They sought the familiarity of communal ties, and it did not matter the race or background of those they formed communities with, but what mattered was how they experienced a sense of identity and belonging, some in the personal struggles they experienced with their newly found communities daily or in the processes of learning to adjust to the unfamiliar infrastructure and buildings. This they had to do to adjust in the new urban environment while remaining grounded in the values and beliefs inherent to their community background.

Socio-cultural circumstances

Rural students constituted their identities by retaining a deep sense of responsibility for their communities. This stemmed from their foundational identity of being black, poor and disadvantaged. This identity is also influenced by socio-cultural circumstances of emanating from homogenic cultural communities.

Financial security

Identity was also constituted through financial security. The new environment (university) required a different level of financial security. To identify, students needed to be free of the financial burdens of their rural environment and be able to afford being at an urban university.

Cultural dissonance

The students also identified by learning to handle cultural shocks such as the modernity of the campus, the styles of teaching and the way in which students engaged with one another which was different from their upbringing, whilst at the same time remaining grounded in the values embedded through their up-bringing. Cultural dissonance emerged as a result of learning to straddle the two worlds.

Relationships

Identities were also constituted in the way the respondents' felt affinities with certain socio-cultural aspects of the urban university, for example, the relationships they chose to pursue. They identified with what they had seen, observed and been taught, which was manifest in the attitudes they adopted towards the people with whom they associated. A large part of the association was influenced by university brokering

structures and communal societies, thus rural students negotiated their identities through adopting new social convoys.

Changing roles

Respondents also constituted their identities within the urban university by shifting their roles and obligations, as they previously conceived them, and assuming new roles within their background communities. Their self-perceptions evolved from being students to being contributors and role-models in their communities. Latterly, they perceived their roles as having shifted from being recipients of their home cultures and community values and practices to being shapers and contributors to the development of their communities.

Learning and re-learning

The respondents negotiated their identities by overcoming misconceptions about urban universities and learning to straddle the two worlds. For example, their change in perceptions of how they anticipated university freedom as opposed to how they experienced it. Freedom at an urban university is freedom with limits. Learning to adapt their previously attained values, philosophies and beliefs in order to be part of this bigger world, yet not lose the values and philosophies of their up-bringing, caused them to adopt 'hyphenated identities'. Contrary to the literature which reported rural students as trying to fit into the dominant hegemonic cultures of urban universities, the current study found that students remained grounded in their rural identities. They took on 'chameleon-like' roles, adapting their identities according to the requirements and adjusting to binary rural-urban approaches.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article explored the constitution and negotiation of rural students' identities in an urban university setting. Future research could focus on how the identities of rural students are affirmed in the curriculum, and how the way rural students negotiate their identities informs and influences institutional culture and practice at an urban university, particularly postgraduate research by students from rural backgrounds.

Ethics statement

The study was conducted in partial fulfilment of requirements for a PhD study in Education (Humanities), at the University of Pretoria. Ethical clearances to conduct the study were obtained from both the University of Pretoria and the research site university. Participation in this study was voluntary.

Potential conflict of interest

Although the lead author worked for the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) while this research was being conducted, the DHET had no further influence on this study and, therefore, the authors declare no conflict of interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student experiences of attending the first online Southern African Students Psychology Conference at an open distance e-learning university in South Africa

Maitemogelo a Baithuti a go tsenela Khonferentshe ya pele ya inthanete ya Saekoloji ya Baithuti ba Afrika Borwa yunibesithing ya e-learning ya kgole ye e bulegilego ka Afrika Borwa

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ABSTRACT

The devastation and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to pervade almost every sphere of human existence, albeit arguably increasingly nuanced. As we move into the post-pandemic world, it is essential to reflect on the lessons learned and forge transformed, decolonised ways of knowledge production in higher education. To ensure the continuation of academic socialisation, academic conference organizers have had to introduce virtual conferencing during the pandemic. In this article, we discuss the experiences of students who attended the first online Southern African Students Psychology Conference (SASPC) during the pandemic in South Africa within a distance e-learning context. We use academic socialisation as a theoretical framework to understand student experiences attending the first online SASPC and to discuss the student conference as a site for decolonisation. From the focus group discussion with student attendees, the historical and current format of the conference unexpectedly emerged as a colonised space of academic socialisation that the students challenged. Opportunities for using the student conference space as a site of decolonisation are explored to contribute to the dearth of scholarly literature aimed at actively incorporating students' voices in the decolonisation of academic spaces in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Online academic conferences, students, psychology, COVID-19, South Africa, academic socialisation, student experience

NAGANWAGO

Tshenyego le ditlamorago tša leuba la COVID-19 di tšwela pele go aparela mahlakore a mantši a go phela ga batho, le ge ka nako yengwe koketšego ya se e se pepeneneng. Ge re tšwela pele go phela morago ga COVID-19, go bohlokwa go naganišiša ka maitemogelo le go hlama ditsela tše di fetotšwego tša go tloša ga bokoloniale tša tšweletšo ya tsebo thutong ya godimo. Go netefatša tšwelopele ya tša thuto, barulaganyi ba dikopano tša thuto ba ile ba swanelwa ke go tsebagatša

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dikhonferentshe tša mararankonding a inthanete nakong ya leuba. Mo sengwalong se, re ahlaahla maitemogelo a baithuti bao ba bilego karolo ya khonferentshe ya mathomo ya inthanete ya Southern African Students Psychology Conference (SASPC) nakong ya leuba la COVID-19 go la Afrika Borwa, mokgweng wa go ithuta o le kgole wa inthanete. Re šomiša academic socialisation bjalo ka teori go kwešiša maitemogelo a baithuti a go ba karolo ya SASPC ya mathomo ya inthanete le go ahlaahla khonferentshe ya baithuti bjalo ka lefelo la go tloša bokoloniale. Go tšwa poledišanong ka sehlopha le baithuti bao e bilego karolo ya khonferentshe, sebopego sa khonferentshe sa kgale le sa bjale se tšweletše bjalo ka lefelo la dikgopolo tša bokoloniale leo baithuti ba bilego kgahlanong le lona. Ka fao, go lebelelwa menyetla ya go šomiša khonferentshe ya baithuti bjalo ka lefelo la go tloša bokoloniale, go tsenya letsogo go tlhaelelo ya dingwalo tša borutegi tšeo di lebišitšwego go hlohleletša dikgopolo tša baithuti ge go etla go go tloša bokoloniale mafelong a thuto go Borwa bja Lefase..

MANTŠU A BOHLOKWA

Dikhonferentshe tša thuto tša inthaneteng, baithuti, thuto ya monagano, COVID-19, Afrika Borwa, go gwerana ga thuto, maitemogelo a baithuti

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 in South Africa instigated and indeed necessitated major transformations in many sectors, at a personal and professional level, accelerating technological change in the lives of many and changing the manner in which we interact with one another. Higher education in the Global South was no different (Devkota, 2021; Gelber et al., 2021; Seetal et al., 2021). Mandated social distancing measures forced rapid changes from the traditional face-to-face learning method towards online open distance e-learning (ODeL) to maintain student and staff access to academic programmes (Stanistreet et al., 2020). The ODeL university in which we teach was no exception, despite the university's strategic plans to move fully online before the pandemic. This accelerated movement to the online space created opportunities and challenges, particularly in hosting the 7th Southern African Students Psychology Conference (SASCP) online for the first time. Due to the relatively new emergence of research regarding the experiences of online conferencing concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, limited scholarly literature has explored student experiences of attending online conferences. However, it should also be noted that research concerning student experiences of online or in-person conference attendance is all but absent within the context of the Global South.

In this article, we discuss the experiences of students who attended the first online SASPC during the pandemic in South Africa within an ODeL context. We used a focus group comprising five students. Two of the five students also served on the conference organizing committee as the scientific chair and the media online liaison. The sixth participant was the conference chair, who also started their journey as a student at a previous SASPC. The conference chair acted as the facilitator of the discussion. We use academic socialisation as a theoretical framework to understand student experiences attending the first online SASPC. We also use academic socialisation to discuss the student conference as a site of contestation and decolonisation. Findings from the focus group discussion demonstrate the layered complexities of hosting the student conference during the pandemic within a context of structural inequalities and a

student-directed drive towards the decolonisation of academic spaces within the South African context.

Moving the SASPC online

The SASPC is a biannual conference that provides undergraduate and postgraduate students from Southern Africa, who are studying psychology, the opportunity to present their research in an appreciative and collegial space. Presenters at SASPC are masters and doctoral students, while undergraduate psychology students often participate in the conference as delegates. The conference rationale has been to academically socialise and create a learning space for postgraduate students to present their completed or in-progress research to their peers and academics from the host and collaborating universities. The structure of the conference replicated traditional academic conferences with a 15-minute presentation format and a 5-minute question-and-answer session. This structure was purposeful to academically socialise our students in the skills needed for presenting their postgraduate research to professional, national, and international audiences. In addition to the two days of postgraduate presentations, the conference hosted a day of strategically student-centred workshops. Since the first SASPC, held on 27 June 2009 (Southern African Students Psychology Conference, 2023), the conference has been successfully convened with in-person attendance only.

However, the pandemic forced us, as the conference organizers, to re-evaluate, and after much deliberation we decided to host the conference online. Initially, we approached two professional conference hosting companies for their expertise but could not secure funding since funders were facing financial challenges due to the pandemic. One of the conference organizers had experience attending an online conference, but none of us had any experience in organizing an online conference. Like many other industries, we had to adapt quickly. Indeed, we forged ahead, and the 7th SASPC was the first to be hosted fully online from 7 to 9 September 2021.

A ‘new’ reality

As virtual interactions became our new reality and academic conferences moved into online spaces as well, conference organizers were presented with novel challenges, as well as innovative, positive opportunities for inclusive reforms. This mode of conferencing, known as online conferencing, virtual conferencing, or web-based conferencing, has been explored and documented by researchers (Bray et al., 2022; Newman, 2021; Pedaste & Kasemets, 2021; Sarabipour, 2020; Woodruff et al., 2021), albeit in a limited scope due to the relatively new emergence of the phenomenon. Significant advantages of online conferencing include the reduction of costs associated with invited speaker and attendee travel, as well as no cost for venue hire, accommodation, and catering, resulting in conferences becoming more accessible (Pedaste & Kasemets, 2021). Most importantly, inclusivity is increased (Hacker et al., 2020) as the accessibility of online conferences improves attendance opportunities for those relegated by the lack of equity in terms of the costs and travel involved in attending in-person conferences: students and early-career researchers; researchers from developing countries; hospitalised

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attendees, attendees who are parents with small children; and attendees living with a disability or with a chronic illness (Bray et al., 2022). Researchers have also noted that in addition to the fact that online conferences are cheaper to run and more inclusive, CO_2 emissions are reduced due to less long-distance air travel, thus improving the heavy carbon footprint of international conferences, making virtual events more sustainable (Newman, 2021). The advancement of digital skills literacy was also mentioned by researchers, with the virtual environment providing academics with opportunities to discover online presentation and moderation technologies, as well e-posters, electronic question forums, and polling tools (Newman, 2021).

However, while researchers have noted the online conference dimension of equitable access, which facilitates broader participation by reducing inequalities that can result from factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, social class or (dis)ability (Hanson et al., 2017, cited in Sá et al., 2019), there are significant issues that arise from this complex socio-technical mode of conferencing that cannot be overlooked. Unfortunately, research (Mpungose, 2021; Sá et al., 2019) conducted with organizers and attendees of online conferences has noted numerous challenges encountered in online conferencing, which include technical issues related to data costs and internet connectivity, exclusion of attendees who may not have a sufficient level of digital literacy or access to the digital infrastructure needed to participate; the lack of informal and social interaction among participants; and the limiting factor of the number of participants allowed due to technical restrictions on online conference platforms. These concerns are significantly compounded within the South African context of structural inequalities due to our history of colonialization, apartheid, and poor governance.

Structural inequalities

While advances in ODeL offer great opportunities for access to education and have the potential to address education inequalities in a context such as South Africa, considering its history of exclusionary practices (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Maphalala & Adigun, 2021), successful ODeL requires resources for both students and members of staff and the necessary digital infrastructure. Reliable internet connection and access to digital devices are common issues across many countries, and access to digital devices is of concern, particularly in many developing countries (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The digital divide and inequalities in the South African context pose challenges heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the major hindrances to ODeL is infrastructure and its related costs (Mpungose, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021), which disadvantage those from rural, and/or poor communities from accessing information and education.

Challenges of learner support have long been identified in the ODeL context (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2014). Learner support is defined here according to Thorpe, (2002, p. 107) and refers to “meeting of needs that *all* learners have because they are central to high quality learning – guidance about course choice, preparatory diagnosis, study skills, access to group learning in seminars and tutorials, and so on”. However, the migration to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated new ways of thinking about student support. To address issues of data costs during the lockdown

period in South Africa, the government partnered with network providers to offer zero-rated applications and educational websites (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). This meant that students could use these applications and websites without cost. However, some still did not have access. Similarly, some universities partnered with network providers to afford students free data during their examination periods. Research also indicates that students used social media sites (mainly for communication) via free data bundles provided by network service providers. However, universities did not support these as learning platforms (Mpungose, 2020). Researchers have reported challenges with the use of an e-learning platform such as IT infrastructure, internet access, insufficient technical support, and inadequate training (Maphalala & Adigun, 2020). Issues of training relate to the preparedness to use digital platforms during the emergency online learning space (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021).

In addition to the material impact of the pandemic, students and university staff experienced psychosocial impacts on their well-being, which affected productivity (Laher et al., 2021; Olawale et al., 2021). For example, findings revealed that a majority of participants from two rural South African universities indicated that an undefined work schedule affected their psychosocial wellness in the domain of workload management and productivity (Olawale et al., 2021)it is expected to be very significant considering the high incidence of emotional reactions amongst university students and staff. While fears around COVID-19 exposure, anxieties, and the challenges of support normalize stress, anxiety, and depression as emotional reactions in the face of the pandemic, this psychosocial impact has negative consequences for the university community. Thus, in order to salvage the higher education institutions from the debilitating effects of the pandemic, there is a clear need to safeguard the welfare of students and staff. Hence, it becomes vital to examine the experience of members of the university community during the COVID-19 crisis in order to develop measures and implement interventions that will assist in navigating psychosocial challenges. To achieve this objective, the study employed a mixed-method research approach in which data was collected using web-based survey and online interviews. Concurrent triangulation sampling technique was employed to select a sample of fifteen (15. The increased workload led to increased work-related stress. Another concern related to online spaces is the lack of in-person interaction. Undergraduate psychology students at a traditional (contact) university in South Africa reported difficulties with understanding their course material in the absence of face-to-face interaction (Laher et al., 2021). In this study, some students experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout. Due to limited social interactions, students also reported feelings of isolation. Indeed, as Olawale and Mutongoza (2021) posit, it is important to cultivate opportunities and ways of collaboration for ODeL students intentionally.

Academic socialisation

Pre- and post-pandemic, academic conferences have offered researchers the platform to share their expertise and research. Scientific conferences have themselves been the focus of research attention, especially since the advent of COVID-19 (Becerra et al., 2020;

Bray et al., 2022; Fakunle et al., 2019; Lortie, 2020; Raby & Madden, 2021). Becerra et al. (2020) provided three purposes for attending academic or professional conferences, namely, advancing existing skills, discovering and exploring new areas of interest, and networking. However, networking and other social dimensions of professional spaces, such as conferences, are diminished in online spaces (Cassidy et al., 2023). In South Africa, scientific research is an important aspect of psychology studies and professional training. Healthcare practitioners are registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and have the responsibility to update their professional knowledge and skills (HPCSA, 2023) through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes, such as conferences. As such, academic conferences are valuable for advancing existing skills or being exposed to new areas of research and practice. For students, as novice researchers, conferences are a space to connect with new (and established) collaborators, to co-learn and build community (Lortie, 2020). Participation in academic conferences is therefore crucial in developing students' research expertise, presentation skills, and professional networks.

One of the primary objectives of the SASPC, and a major instigator of its inception, was the identified need for a space for psychology students to improve their academic socialisation. Prior to the pandemic, the in-person conferences had indeed provided the opportunity for students to network, share their research interests and endeavours, as well as develop new research interests and collaborations. The development of skills in public speaking and debate to improve academic solicitation was also encouraged. Therefore, a major challenge encountered by conference organizers and attendees of online conferencing is the lack of academic socialisation. This absence of informal and spontaneous in-person interactions is noted with serious concern for academic advancement, particularly in relation to community of practice functions such as professional networking and discussions where academics interact and develop new research intentions and collaborations (Bray et al., 2022). Similarly, at the International Conference on Advanced Learning Technologies and Technology-Enhanced Learning in July 2020 at the University of Tartu in Estonia, Pedaste and Kasemets (2021) noted the lack of support for socialisation, with many of the 131 attendees reporting difficulties in engaging and socialising with people at the online event. In addition, researchers have documented professional development concerns raised by attendees, who felt hampered in this regard, as they could not practise public speaking skills in answering questions, taking feedback, and defending their research (Medina & Shrum, 2022; Woodruff et al., 2021).

Across the globe, academics and students alike have had to face numerous challenges in the wake of the pandemic, in particular feelings of isolation and anxiety, compounded by the lack of in person communication with colleagues, classmates, friends and relatives (Alghamdi, 2021; Al-Maskari et al., 2022; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Muthuprasad et al., 2021). The shift to online classes and conferencing has seen researcher reports of students, most often students from vulnerable backgrounds, struggling with disengagement, digital exclusion, and poor technology management (Bennett et al., 2022; Estien et al, 2021; Drane et al., 2020, cited in Al-Maskari et al.,

2022; Mpungose, 2021). These factors impact students' ability to engage and develop within the academic context as essentially there is a loss of 'community of practice'' in online conferencing. This convention, which sees academics interact formally through presentations and informally through networking at in-person conferences, is considered crucial to scientific advancement and not easily replicated in online spaces (Bray et al., 2022). Therefore, the loss of academic socialisation for students can have dire implications for these emerging scholars attempting to start their professional development in academia.

The process of socialisation

In the field of psychology, a person's development includes the complex process of socialisation, that is, how we interact with individuals, groups and institutions. Indeed, socialisation theory most commonly "refers to the developmental processes through which individuals acquire the values, behaviors, and motivations necessary to become competent members of a culture" (Morawski, 2014, p. 1820). Agents of socialisation which exert the most impact on a person's early development include parental figures, siblings and other family members, and, in later years, their peer groups. As we grow older, social institutions also inform our socialisation, with formal institutions, such as our schools and workplaces, informing us on how to behave in, and navigate through, these systems (Little & McGivern, 2012).

In academia, socialisation practices start during the student's undergraduate years and support their transitional processes towards starting their academic careers and subsequent professional development (Farnese et al., 2022). As such, it is a dynamic process that is both complex and diverse, dependant on "the student's past experiences, the reflective nature of the process and the beliefs and values promoted in the course" (Howkins & Ewens, 1999). For students in academic institutions, the socialisation process includes a radical reappraisal of their role perceptions, and follows a transition through which they learn about, adjust to, and change their knowledge base, skillsets and attitudes. International research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fűzi et al, 2022; Li & Zhang, 2022), indicates that there is a dynamic interconnection between digitalisation and socialisation, and that the digitalisation of learning has actually increased the need for academic socialisation, with institutions of higher learning needing to do more to facilitate students' professional identity development.

Although the general theoretical framework for the socialisation process is well established, there is a scarcity of literature exploring academic conferences specifically for psychology students in this context, particularly in the Global South. Research is lacking in terms of understanding both undergraduate and postgraduate students' experiences at conferences and how these events contribute to academic and professional socialisation. Therefore, this dearth of research regarding these students' experiences of conference attendance online versus in person, will be addressed through the course of this article, more specifically from the context of the Global South.

The *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* student protest campaigns in South Africa radicalised the decolonisation movement in higher education in South Africa (Mashiyi et

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al., 2020). Student protests called for a decolonisation of the curriculum and questioned the slow transformation in higher education sector post democracy (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017). The student protests unearthed other issues of access and inclusion, and issues relating to the physical spaces of learning (i.e. racial and colonial symbols in universities). We, like many other academics, struggled to decolonise subject content that we were academically socialised to accept as the only truth. Additionally, the decolonisation debate focused on content. We neglected to interrogate how we could decolonise the spaces and modes of teaching and learning in higher education. We neglected to consider how academic socialisation through the student conference could be seen as sites for further colonisation. The student conference, therefore, provided an appropriate, yet unexpected space from which we could contribute to practical steps towards decolonising not just knowledge production but also the spaces within which we become academically (colonised) socialised (Kehdinga et al., 2019).

Using student experiences to reflect on academic socialisation as a space for decolonisation was essential in challenging traditional pedagogical practice that inadvertently perpetuates the status quo. This was an essential step in challenging what Cummins et al. (2022, pp. 66, 73) call "entrenched power dynamics and patterns of knowledge creation and use that have emerged from the accidental historical power relations of colonial domination" through the use of student voices. In so doing, challenging our academic socialisation of our students in traditionally accepted academic ways of being takes us to a 'post-normal; decolonial practice of challenging established ways of doing within the academia (Khoo, 2024, p. 4). We view this as necessary in moving from ethnocentric traditions to self-aware pedagogical practices that speak to the needs of our students.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research design and followed a social constructivist approach. Social constructivist theory is premised on the understanding that we make meaning of social phenomena through active engagement and collaboration with each other (Amineh & Asi, 2015). Data were collected using a focus group of 6 participants, five students, and the conference chair, lasting approximately 2 hours. Two of the five students were part of the conference organizing team. Four students were female, and one was male, all above the age of 25 years. The aim of the focus group discussion was to understand the experiences of students who attended the first online SASPC. The discussion was guided by semi-structured interviews and open-ended guiding questions (Kornbluh, 2022). The use of a focus group discussion allowed us to collect rich, in-depth information in a relatively short period through reciprocal meaning-making and collective participation (Kornbluh, 2022).

We had originally wanted to host the focus group during the conference but, unfortunately, did not receive ethics clearance in time. Ethics clearance was eventually received from our institutional ethics committee. We encountered a series of delays with our information and communications department (ICT), which was responsible for sending out the invitation emails to our students. The emails contained information

about the research study and invited participants to contact us if they were interested in participating in the study. It also contained the informed consent form that needed to be signed by each study participant. University policy, in line with the Protection of Information Act (POPIA) in South Africa, dictated that even though we had access to our conference attendees' email addresses, we could not contact them for reasons other than the original intention of the initial interaction. We, therefore, used purposive sampling to send the list of student participants to ICT for their consent to participate in the study. The delays we experienced with ICT resulted in us collecting data only 6 months after the conference and a small sample size. Many of the email addresses we had were not in use because they were student email addresses that had since been deactivated. This was not ideal, but we believe that our informal conversations with our students during the conference confirmed the results we obtained from our focus group through their recall of the conference and their personal reflections.

Ethics and self-reflexivity

The study obtained ethics clearance from the College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) of the College of Human Sciences of the University of South Africa. Additionally, ethical clearance was also obtained from the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC) because the study involved the institution's members of staff and students. We used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. As academics, psychological researchers and psychological practitioners, we are cognisant of the importance of critically reflecting on the research process and our engagement with our participants. Organizing our first online conference was extremely stressful because it was at the height of the pandemic in South Africa. Even though we had been involved with SASPC before in various organizing and participatory capacities, this was the first online conference we had organized. We were inexperienced in the online space. This inexperience of organizing a conference in the online space was framed within our own personal experiences of the pandemic.

We were grateful that the conference was a success, and we were eager to then learn from this success by engaging with the conference attendees. However, delays in hosting the focus group were frustrating because we knew that we would have decreased participation with each passing month. Interacting with our focus group did reinforce the sentiments that were expressed to us during the conference. But it also highlighted the deep need for human interaction and the sense of craving normalcy. However, this normalcy seemed almost mythical at times. We, therefore, had to make the online space productive.

Results and discussion

Challenges with the online space

The first challenge we experienced at the conference was the unmet expectations that students had. The early in-person formats of the conference were rigid in their structure based on international best practices. However, during an open student dialogue at the

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5th SASPC, held in 2017, students expressed a need for open dialogue and for their voices to be heard in the wake of the *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall*. We subsequently modified the 6th SASPC conference format to include roundtable discussions and symposiums that were student led. Despite reaching out personally to colleagues from various universities in Southern Africa to submit student-led roundtable discussions and symposiums for the online 7th SASPC, we did not receive any submissions. The reasons given were personal and professional obligations that were overwhelming within the context of the raging pandemic. As a result, the gains we achieved in the format change from the 6th SASPC were lost. What we did learn, however, was a consistent need for more student engagement within the ODeL context. Even though students were studying psychology within an ODeL context, there were knowledge gaps that are taken for granted in contact universities:

> *MM: Eish yeah. I want to learn more about the psychology as a topic mm-hmm and then again, on the side of research …*
>
> *KS: … as I've mentioned before, our opinions, our perspectives, and more also learning, uh, from each other and the other one, definitely networking. Um, I believe in the space we need each other, uh, in, in all that we do as [other participant name] spoke, uh, we need more learning in, in the field that we in, but we also need to learn each other as well. Yeah. That is my expectation for future, um, conferences.*

The students' unmet expectations left them unsettled and wanting more:

> *KS: Yes. I, I, I can concur that, that, that's what I was looking forward to, to be more involved with the presenters. Um, I felt that, you know, many of them merely read you know, as, you know, portions of what they prepared and then, you know, left us kind of not, not being able to, to ask more questions and get engaged, you know, on a more, more call it personal level.*

There were a variety of challenges that our participants experienced with the online space. The lack of interaction and connection that we experienced during face-to-face conferences was evident. The social dimension of conferences diminished in the online spaces (Cassidy et al., 2023) as similarly experienced in virtual classes. This is a concern even for presenters with an invisible audience:

> *KS: … I don't know. Um, you know, we just felt like we were just part of the crowd and, you know, some people asked questions and then, then everything fell flat kind of thing. You left wanting a little bit more and, you know, hence the interaction was uhm, lacking, which I, which I realise is difficult to achieve or on a virtual platform.*
>
> *AB: Um, I have attended online conferences, but there were not, uh, psychologically or academically, uh, related. Um, but in terms of the, the very conference, um, as for students, um, the expectations were honestly not that bad. Uh, but I think as KS, uh, mentioned, um, I, I also expected more interactions, you know, I, I believe when it all started, there were a lot of us, you know, who wanted to be there, wanted to listen. And I think most of us wanted to participate as well, but as I've learned, it was more of,*

uh, presentations and then questions are followed later and that's how, um, most of us participated in a sense, and how most of us actually, um, as well, our answers were not, um, our questions rather, sorry, were not answered, or some other aspects, um, were probably hanging in our heads, uh, when it was all finished. But in all essence, it was a great platform. Um, as KS said as well, I do not have much more experience, but it was very great.

AB elaborated further on their expectations:

… I thought it was gonna be a discussion, like if there's a topic that way to come about, we would all pitch in and give in our ideas, our opinions as well … I honestly thought it was gonna be more of a discussion, uh, instead of just, uh, presentations.

In South Africa, we experience unique structural issues such as scheduled electricity outages (due to ailing infrastructure and poor governance) called 'loadshedding'. These power outages typically last two and a half hours at a time and can occur multiple times in a day:

AB: … I think the first three days I were having loadshedding when the conference started …

Socio-economic issues such as the affordability of the devices needed to connect to the conference in addition to the cost of data also emerged as barriers to accessing the online space:

AB: … there are also students who don't have devices, you know, uh, where they can access the, the conference, whether it be a smartphone or a laptop, um, especially those who, who are in rural areas. They might make a plan to write exams and assignments to submit, but not to attend a conference, just to prioritise.

MM: … I was struggling, struggling with the network … Uh, if times allows and then considering the situation we are right now with this thing, the pandemic things mm-hmm I think, uh, if it was possible to be better, maybe we do it face-to-face so that we can able to discuss whatever the problem that we have, but still with the online thing, it's also a, a productive, irrespective of networks and everything where people, where other people are, are struggling with. I, for one, it took me some 45 minutes to get a network where I am.

Participants also noted a challenge in using the online platform:

KS: … And one other thing from my side was, um, and this is my own criticism of my inadequacies dealing with technology is that I wasn't that, um, clued up about MS Teams. So that, that became a bit of an issue for me. Um, so I, I found myself, you know, getting lost, um, within the, within the MS Teams, um, environment. So, um, you know, but, but that's, that's something for me to sort out. I mean, there, there must be, you know, a hundred thousand YouTube videos that I could watch on how to navigate, um, you know, the platform.

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> *AB: I think for me, it's also having the difference between Teams and Zoom. Uh, like today, I, I always forget that, uh, when I'm using my, my, my phone, I have to put it on speaker, uh, uh, the, not the device itself, but I have to put it on speaker so that I can be more audible and, and everyone can hear me. Uh, it's not like Zoom, uh, Zoom, you just plug and play.*
>
> *KS: You know, I was expecting a little bit more, um, into interaction and I dunno if that's possible on Teams. Um, because I've, I've, I've participated in some Zoom meetings mm-hmm and, and they seem to, to work a little, little better than Microsoft Teams.*

This is another example of feedback from the students which highlights the importance of democratised access to online higher education and academic conferences, and the need to improve digital literacy across a variety of online platforms to improve their experiences of active engagement.

SASPC as a site for academic socialisation but also decolonialisation

As previously stated, since its inception the SASCP has been student-centred in its aim to academically socialise students within the conference space:

> *AB: Cause I was doing my final year, in my BA. So, it was something that actually made me look forward into, um, viewing or seeing something, um, in related to academics if I may put it that way. But what was interesting for me was the topics, the different and random topics that were given. And from that day on I never looked back, and just to cut the story short, and here I am today interested, um, willing to learn, and as I've said before, I've never been in such a platform, be it live, me being there or online, but yeah, I'm very much thankful for such platforms.*

However, despite the student conference being a site of academic socialisation, it was also surprisingly a site for decolonisation, with students actively debating the need for creating innovative South African spaces for student learning. The need to create uniquely South African learning spaces emerged as a surprising discovery. Prior to this, we believed that we had created an innovative space for our students, but they felt that they needed something that was sensitive to their context and the challenges within those contexts:

> *KS: … we need to acknowledge that we are South Africans, and, um, I always feel that sometimes we base a lot of our decisions on Western … And, and, and, you know, that, that always feel, um, disappointed in not only with psychology, but with other, other conferences that I do attend, you know, it's always, you know, you know, the, the United States is the best in this mm-hmm or maybe then they, they are for them, but not for us.*

We probed our students further to understand what they meant by uniquely South African. Their primary concern was with the structure of the conference. They voiced the need to discuss each presentation in-depth instead of the 5-minutes allocated to the question-and-answer session. They also communicated the need to have roundtable discussions on papers that were already published so that they could learn and gain knowledge and skills through active engagement with one another. They, therefore,

highlighted the need for active learning through engagement and interaction rather than being passive recipients of knowledge dissemination:

> *AB: And then in terms of, uh, interaction, um, hence I'm saying uh, I never had any experience with psychology, uh, conferences. Uhm, particularly this one, I thought it was gonna be a discussion, like if there's a topic that way to come about, we would all pitch in and give in our ideas, our opinions as well. Uh, as what we have learned from, university and, what we look forward to, um, I honestly thought it was gonna be more of a discussion, uh, instead of just, uh, presentations, um, as you've mentioned, uh, JM that, would separate and have those interesting discussions and as peers and all of that and we come together and discuss our additional views and, yes.*

The participants also expressed the need for a space to discuss psychology student-related issues and concerns through networking with other students and psychological professionals already working in the field:

> *AB: Um, I believe in the space we need each other, uh, in, in all that we do as MM spoke, uh, we need more learning in, in the field that we in, but we also need to learn each other as well. Yeah. That is my expectation for future, um, conferences.*
>
> *JM: there's a dire need for greater networking opportunities, greater collaboration, greater opportunities for undergraduate and honour students to also have the voice, um, in discussing topical issues.*

Additionally, they expressed a need for a wider variety of conference presentation topics. However, we explained that the content of the topics was largely dependent on the paper presentation abstract submissions that we received:

> *BP: I think, I think to give you a bit of an idea of the structure, we do just open up for anybody to submit, um, a paper pre, uh, presentation. Okay. Um, and, and abstracts that we get those submissions of those abstracts. We accept, I would say all of them. I, I, there's no student who turn away. So the scientific committee will read that abstract and they will, um, you know, find merits in it, help the student to improve it a little if necessary, but we accept every abstract that comes through for a presentation.*

Conclusion and recommendations

Our research participants alerted us to several useful suggestions for future conferences. The first was the necessity of a hybrid model allowing conference attendees to attend online or in person. Such hybridised solutions would include both the utilisation of virtual formats for conferences with increased participation, and so a wider dissemination of knowledge, whilst providing on-site participation of attendees and speakers as well. As stated by Newman (2021, p. 1) it will fall to the organizers of such events in the future "to ensure an equitable participation for both categories, respecting not only the contingencies but also the ethos of each participant, and by making these events more accessible, affordable, inclusive, and environmentally friendly". The need to use our institution's satellite campuses as a contact point for students around the country also

emerged as a possible solution for structural inequalities such as the high costs of data and out-of-town travel.

Additionally, our research participants wanted to see a broader scope of research topics. This is not easily solvable because the topics for the presentation are dependent on the topics that we receive from presenters. It did, however, highlight the need for including student symposiums and roundtable discussions for students, and by students so that they are able to discuss psychological discourses of relevance to them that may be outside their curricula. The conference team has traditionally formulated a conference theme that is socially relevant at the time. We were deliberate in leaving the interpretation of the theme as broad as possible to ensure that we remain student-focused and inclusive. However, we realised from the focus group discussions that students do not want to be passive recipients in this process but rather want to be included in every detail of the conference. We shall, therefore, be incorporating students throughout the planning stages of the student conference.

Participants were also eager for increased opportunities for engagement, especially within the context of the pandemic. While feelings of isolation, loneliness and distance can be attributed to the pandemic, the experiences of our students also speak to the distance they feel within an ODeL context. We believe that creating spaces for conversation for our students throughout the year may facilitate their feeling connected in an ODeL context. It would therefore be additionally beneficial for us to schedule structured and unstructured sessions with our students before the conference to ensure continuous conversation that culminates in the next SASPC conference.

The academic shift towards a decolonisation of knowledge systems in South Africa has become pervasive in students demanding knowledge and the delivery of knowledge in uniquely African ways. This is not an easily reconcilable task since we are academics trained in western dominated ways of thinking, learning and teaching. However, from the insights we gained from our students; we realise the importance of talking as a form of catharsis for our students within the ODeL contexts. They are eager to learn and grow in the field of psychology. They have a hunger to know more which is indicative of the social inequalities that most students in our ODeL context are subject to. Decolonial perspectives of and democratised access to online higher education and academic conferences emphasise the need to open up the "space for new interdisciplinary encounters" and in times of instability and insecurity, form a refuge for some as "alternatives to large on-site conferences which require excessive and extensive academic mobility" (Goebel et al., 2020, p. 797).

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics and Integrity Committee at the University of South Africa (reference number 90206223_CREC_CHS_2021). Ethics approval was also obtained from the University of South Africa's Research Permissions Subcommittee because staff members and students from the university were involved in data collection.

Potential conflict of interest
We confirm that there is no conflict of interests.

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Book Review

Reimagining South African higher education: Towards a student-centred learning and teaching future by D. de Klerk, G. Krull, T. Maleswena & F. MacAlister (Eds.). (2024). Stellenbosch, SA: Sun Press

Reviewed by Xena Cupido[1]

In the past decade, South African higher education institutions have experienced significant shifts. One such shift was the call for decolonised, free education by the *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* movements. While a decolonised curriculum has not yet been fully realised, Ngubane and Makua (2021, p. 1) write about the need for learning and teaching approaches that are transformative and responsive "cognisant of social justice issues" pervasive in South African higher education. A critical gap remains in South African higher education learning environments in the development and application of comprehensive frameworks that adequately integrate principles of social justice. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity, particularly in a post-apartheid context where educational systems were historically racialised and exclusionary, existing frameworks often lack the flexibility and adaptability necessary to meet the diverse needs of students and educators. This timely edited collection offers an opportunity to reflect and rethink current practices through a student-centred approach. *Reimagining South African Higher Education: Towards a Student-Centred Learning and Teaching Future* outlines both practical methodologies and theoretical insights relevant to the South African higher education context and broader international higher education frameworks.

The careful curation of the book chapters offers a seamless flow, making it easily accessible and enhances engagement with the content. Structured around core thematic areas – such as curriculum and learning design, context and care in education, student learning, and the development of both students and staff – the book provides an articulate framework that aids in understanding the complexities of concepts and its applicability in the sector. The flow of the chapters engages the reader on specific themes but still manages to maintain the interconnectedness of the topics within the broader context of South African higher education transformation. By doing this, the editors have managed to create a balance between the deep and meaningful theoretical reflections and practical applications. The focus on student-centred education, a particularly relevant theme in the South African context of entrenched inequalities, this book presents an approach that resonates with current global educational trends. The emphasis on participatory and humanising pedagogies challenges traditional

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educational hierarchies, encouraging an inclusive learning environment where students are viewed as active participants in their own education, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Internationally, Cook-Sather and Matthews (2021) refer to this as a "pedagogical partnership" between the teacher and learner that integrates the principles of active student engagement, inclusive teaching, and democratic ways of knowing and being. The holistic approach of *Reimagining South African Higher Education* weaves together the key themes in ways that enable achieving such pedagogical partnerships by offering both depth and actionable insights. This becomes evident in the author narratives on "promoting quality and care frameworks towards change", a humanising pedagogy based on values of justice, fairness and morality (p. 85), reminding us to be vigilant about enacting such practices.

The contributors' engagement with lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic mindfully reflects on the impact of the global pandemic on educators and learners, and the changes made by educational institutions towards rethinking pedagogical methods. This volume skilfully captures that moment of reflection. Several chapters, particularly those embedded in the third thematic area, explore how a move to online education highlighted even further the need for flexibility, responsiveness, and collaboration in higher education. Further, like Hobden in Chapter 5, authors recognise the agency of students by reflecting on concepts such as "person-as-learner", "political-agent-as-learner", cultural wealth and community cultural wealth. These valuable insights provide helpful approaches that foster open discussions based on respect and understanding, where participatory approaches are enabling of students epistemic becoming. In integrating these reflections, the text draws a contemporary perspective that is relevant both to the recovery following the pandemic and to the sustained development of a transformed higher education system.

As a scholarly contribution, the authors have advanced the discourse on decolonisation in higher education. They do this by suggesting ways in which to reconceptualise curricula, urging for more inclusive, contextually grounded, and socially just educational practices. Across the various chapters which present deep engagement with the issues of inequality, colonial legacies, and social justice, the authors argue for practices and the development of educational frameworks that reflect the lived realities of students, especially those from historically marginalised communities. In addition, contributors advocate for embedding decolonial thought within the fabric of higher education, encouraging a critical examination of existing power structures and knowledge hierarchies. This commitment to decolonisation is evident in the exploration of how curriculum design can be reshaped to address societal issues, as demonstrated in discussions around ethics education and public service. Here, the authors propose that pedagogical structures must enable students to critically engage with the pervasive inequalities and injustices they encounter in society, reflecting a distinctly South African socio-political context while offering insights relevant to the broader Global South. Furthermore, the emphasis on creative and innovative pedagogical approaches illustrates the contributors' commitment to pushing beyond traditional educational models. Examples such as the use of podcasting to promote student engagement

and the creation of collaborative learning spaces for postgraduate students highlight the need for educational systems to evolve in response to the diverse and complex needs of today's learners. These forward-thinking contributions not only enrich the decolonisation debate but also offer practical pathways for transforming teaching and learning practices, challenging conventional methods that no longer serve the dynamic realities of higher education today.

In conclusion, this book makes a valuable, timely contribution to the ongoing discourse on transformation of the higher education sector, not only in South Africa but across the continent and abroad. This is done through the promotion of student-centred pedagogies, consideration of the socio-political backdrop of educational practices, and contemplation on the insights gained from the COVID-19 pandemic. The book is an important resource for those who are committed to systemic change. In this regard, it interrogates current entrenched practices and offers a vision of an educational system that is more equal, collaborative, and responsive. The conceptions advanced in the chapters provide a strong foundation for addressing the pressing issues related to social justice. The insights presented in this volume serve as an important step towards realising the full potential of higher education in South Africa, offering both theoretical guidance and practical pathways for positive change.

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Call for Papers

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, Vol. 13(2) Guest-edited issue

Considering student success: The integral role of well-being in African higher education

Promoting holistic student success is increasingly recognised as a critical issue in African higher education. However, the role of well-being as a determinant of students' success is often overlooked. In light of this, the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA) is inviting student affairs professionals and academic researchers to submit manuscripts for a special issue (13(2)) in 2025. This issue will focus on student success and emphasise the importance of well-being within the African context.

We are particularly interested in submissions that explore intrinsic factors such as hope, gratitude, and resilience; address interpersonal dynamics, including the value of engaging relationships; and examine contextual issues and societal influences, notably creating inclusive learning environments and establishing positive and engaging institutions. Submissions can use various methodologies, including theoretical frameworks, reflective analyses, and empirical studies.

All submissions will undergo a double-blind peer review process to ensure academic rigour and integrity. Authors are advised to adhere to the submission guidelines of JSAA. Submissions need to be marked 'special issue student well-being' to be included in this issue due for publication in second semester 2025.

We welcome you to join us in enriching the academic community's understanding and dialogue on this pivotal topic. Your contributions are integral to the success of this special issue.

For further inquiries, please get in touch with Dr Henry Mason at masonh@tut.ac.za or henrymason1006@gmail.com, who is the guest editor of this special issue.

Author biographies

Dr Xena Cupido is the director of the Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development, at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Her scholarly pursuits centre around the critical domain of student engagement and success, with a specific focus on designing for social justice. Recently, Dr Cupido has also demonstrated a growing interest in the integration of digital technologies as an instrumental pedagogical tool to optimise the process of learning and teaching.

Dr Dalray Gradidge is a research psychologist at Emthonjeni Student Wellness, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa. Dr Gradidge has worked as a research psychologist in the field of student mental health in higher education for two decades. In recognition of her expertise, she was appointed as the chairperson of the Nelson Mandela University's Research Ethics Committee for Human Research in 2022. Furthermore, she was appointed in 2022 to serve on the inaugural Research Ethics Committee for the Council for Higher Education, showcasing her commitment to promoting ethical research practices at a broader national level.

Reggiswindis Thobile Hlengwa has practised child and youth care in various residential settings from 1991-1998. She is registered as an assessor with the Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority (HWSETA). In 2004 she obtained a B. Tech degree in child and youth development at the then Durban Institute of Technology (DIT). She has an Honours degree in social development from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and a master's degree in education (higher education) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research interests include child and youth care practice and issues affecting students in institutions of higher learning. Ms. Hlengwa has been a lecturer in the Child and Youth Care Programme at Durban University of Technology from 2007 to date.

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Prof. Matete Madiba is Deputy Vice Chancellor: Student Development and Support at the University of the Western Cape. She also holds the position of associate professor in

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Dr Curwyn Mapaling is a research associate and clinical psychologist in the Department of Industrial Engineering at Nelson Mandela University. His research explores student and staff well-being as well as student success in higher education, particularly in engineering education contexts, and beyond. He is currently investigating the well-being of engineering lecturers and their discourses related to teaching and learning, conducting comparative analyses between the Global South and the Global North.

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role and application of positive psychology and student development theory in relation to student success.

Andile Samkele Masuku is a young dynamic and goal-oriented student affairs professional with a Master of Health Sciences and a Bachelor in Child and Youth Care. Currently pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy in Health Sciences, he has extensive experience working with tertiary-level students. Highly proficient in enhancing the quality and participation in student leadership within student governance, he excels in coordinating co-curricular programmes and community service activities for Student Representative Councils (SRCs), as well as facilitating effective induction programmes for student leaders. As a dedicated scholar, he has published research focusing on student mental health, disability, and the child and youth care field. His passion lies in holistic student support and student success, actively contributing to initiatives and committees that play a pivotal role in student development and engagement.

Dr Gregory Mitchell is a senior clinical psychologist at Nelson Mandela University's Emthonjeni Student Wellness unit in Gqeberha, South Africa. He earned his psychology degrees, from undergraduate to doctorate, at Nelson Mandela University and holds a Bachelor in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas. Practising as a psychologist since 2014, Dr Mitchell is also an ordained minister with two decades of pastoral and non-profit experience in the Eastern Cape.

Dr Irene Patience Mohasoa is a Walter Sisulu University Senior Leadership Committee member, serving as the executive director of student affairs. She previously was executive director of student affairs and residences at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University and served as the acting dean of students at the University of South Africa. Additionally, she served as the deputy director of student development and the Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities at the same university. She was a part of a project team that integrated HIV and AIDS into the academic curricula of colleges at the University of South Africa. She is the deputy chairperson of the Student Services Council at Walter Sisulu University and the Governance and Policy Committee chairperson within the Institutional Forum. She established and launched the Walter Sisulu University Graduate Employability Programme in collaboration with various faculties. She has also overseen the creation of the Student Women Economic Empowerment Programme (SWEEP) and supported a research project to explore the barriers female entrepreneurs face in higher education institutions in collaboration with Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE). She has supported entrepreneurship exchange programmes for female students, giving them a unique opportunity to collaborate with female student entrepreneurs from the London School of Economics and Political Science, Oxford University, and Strathmore University. She has worked with several African universities, including the University of Kampala and the University of Dar es Salaam, on student governance and leadership development

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Prof. Janice K. Moodley-Marie, PhD, is a psychological practitioner and associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa. She is presently seconded to the College of Human Sciences as the college's research ethics and integrity advisor. She serves as the deputy chair for the College of Human Sciences Academic Integrity Committee. She has also served as a member of the University of South Africa's Institutional Student Disciplinary Committee and is a member of the Institutional Academic Integrity module development team. She obtained her PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research is multidisciplinary and critically oriented and challenges the discursive interactions between psychology, health, gender, racial inequalities and politics within the Global South. She is, therefore, well positioned to serve as an international representative on the Executive Committee for the International Society of Critical Health Psychology.

Dr Clement Moreku is the dean of students at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) where he oversees the design, development and implementation of a comprehensive set of student services and development (SSD) policies, plans, procedures and systems in the following student areas: counselling and health; student governance and development; student housing; sports administration; and financial aid. Dr Moreku has significant experience in dealing with students as well as an in-depth understanding of student affairs. His research interest is in co-operative governance in higher education institutions and holistic student support and student success. He has supervised Honours students and co-supervised a master's and a PhD student.

Kitso Morgan is an intern at the UFS Health and Wellness Centre. Being a recent master's graduate, her work focused on student leadership development; this centred around

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Dr Bianca Rochelle Parry is the programme director for research at the Centre for Mediation in Africa (CMA) at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. As a National Research Foundation (NRF) Y2 rated researcher, she has published widely on the lived experiences of marginalised and vulnerable communities in South African society, with a specific concentration on women and gender. Her research has been recognised with a Special Commendation from the British Psychological Society's Psychology of Women and Equalities Section. In addition, her research findings have been broadcast by the local media via radio, television, podcast, and news articles, garnering much public interest. Her research project on the development of academic resources and accessible online platforms to democratise educational opportunities for women in conflict with the law, was awarded a research grant by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS).

Dr Neo Pule is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Johannesburg and visiting research fellow at the University of Central Lancashire (UK), while also registered

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Prof. Birgit Schreiber, PhD, is a consulting expert for the international higher education sector, has served in senior leadership positions, with expertise in Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe higher education with a focus on student success, leadership, digitalisation, DEI and gender. Birgit has worked with a range of national and trans-national bodies, notably USAf South Africa, DAAD and ERASMUS, teaches, does research and supervision, programme design and policy development. She is extraordinary professor at her alma mater, UWC, in Cape Town. Her PhD is in psychology, and she is registered as a psychotherapist with the HPCSA. Birgit has published over 90 articles, chapters and books, on various themes around social justice, student affairs, student engagement and higher education leadership, gender and SDGs. She is the founding editor and member of the editorial executive of the *Journal for Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA); she is on the board of the *Journal of College Student Development* (JCSD) and a column editor for the *Journal of College and Character* (JCC). After being the Africa chair, she serves as the vice-president of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services. She has received numerous awards, most recently the Noam Chomsky Award for international research and the NASPA Award for International Practice. She is a member of the Africa Centre at the Albert Ludwig University Freiburg, Germany, research associate at Pretoria University, Germany director for the STAR Scholars Network and sits on the board of the South African National Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg and the CASHEF at the University of Pretoria.

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structures, contributing to the student community at the institution. She has also worked on community engagement projects. She has a strong passion for research and has also worked as a researcher. Shozi-Nxumalo is also known for her involvement in university committees, actively contributing to the growth and development of student leaders. She has participated in many policy developments and implementations. Her hard work and excellence were recognised when she was awarded the prestigious DUT's Vice Chancellor's Hlomisa Leadership Scholarship in 2020.

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Dr Kolisa Siqoko is an executive operations manager for the School of Dentistry at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University. She is interested and will continue to publish in education humanities and on the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Dr Riashna Sithaldeen holds a PhD in archaeology and began her career with 10 years teaching in the science extended degree programme. Through integrating her disciplinary skills with her educational practice, her work now largely focuses on academic advising and academic analytics for student success. In her role as deputy director in the Academic Development Programme she has responsibility for several strategic projects for student success, including academic advising and also serves as institutional lead to the national Siyaphumelela network for student success.

Nokukhanya Thembane is a senior lecturer at Mangosuthu University of Technology, where she engages in initiatives in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to foster reform in higher education. A certified clinical pathology medical laboratory scientist, her research aims to address disparities in medical education and public health issues particularly for disenfranchised communities. She believes in the philosophy of higher education as a tool for social reform, aiming to integrate education, science, and community-based solutions to promote health equity.

Prof. Saloshna Vandeyar, a National Research Foundation rated scientist, is Deputy Dean: Research and Post Graduate Education at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Her research focus is on social, cultural and cognitive justice education with a focus on (race) inequalities.

Thank you to our reviewers and editors

The JSAA Editorial Executive wishes to thank the peer reviewers and editors of Volume 12 of the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa for their time and expertise in evaluating and helping to select and improve the submissions received:

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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 reflective 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. 5,000 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.
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- **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.

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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.

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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).
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☐ 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

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☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

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