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Considering student success: The integral role of well-being in African higher education

Guest editor
Henry D. Mason

AFRICAN MINDS

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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.

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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 Douwrie at bronwin.douwrie@up.ac.za.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

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

Henry D. Mason[1]

Introduction

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

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

Building on the evidence: Why well-being matters

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

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

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

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

This special edition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Synthesis and implications for student affairs

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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EDITORIAL

Redesigning student affairs in Africa with a care-centred approach to student well-being

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Welcome to this special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (Vol. 13, Issue 2), guest-edited by Dr Henry Mason who is also part of the editorial team of JSAA. In this edition, we turn our focus to the vital theme of student well-being as a critical and often underappreciated dimension of student success across African higher education.

Towards a humanising theory and praxis of student affairs

Student affairs and services in Africa stands at the heart of the social justice, well-being and student success project (Schreiber, 2014). In the contemporary African university, we can no longer view student affairs as a peripheral or merely administrative function that manages students or delivers transactional services. Such hegemonic notions, often promoted in traditional and outdated student affairs theory emanating from the USA, diminish the transformative potential of our work. Rather, student affairs must see itself as a critical voice of visioning, beyond the transactional service provision that supports and manages students. Student affairs needs to envisage itself at the heart of the African transformation project (September, 2025). Universities in the Global South are becoming caring spaces, indeed humanising, as highlighted, for example, in the University of Cape Town's Strategic Framework 2035 for the Department of Student Affairs (DSA, 2025), which sees its vision as "Creating an environment where every interaction is a humanising encounter, nurturing the spirit and fostering a deeper connection in our shared journey."

In this regard, student affairs across Africa needs to envisage itself at the heart of this human-centred transformation. Our role extends far beyond service delivery and support; we are the architects of student belonging and advocates of holistic well-being.

The time has come for student affairs to emancipate itself from inherited, often colonial and bureaucratic traditions that defined our role as reactive, regulatory, or welfare-oriented. In the African context, student affairs must be reimagined as a

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liberatory project, one that centres on human flourishing, relational care and well-being, and social justice. We do not simply respond to student needs. We shape the very conditions that enable agency, equity, hope and personal transformation. Our practice must therefore move from managing to meaning-making, from service to solidarity, and from procedural compliance to visionary leadership and innovation.

Joan Tronto's ethics of care in the African student affairs context

At the core of this transformative vision lies an *ethics of care* not as a soft or sentimental ideal, but as a rigorous, political, and justice-oriented framework (Tronto, 1998). Caring work in African student affairs is about restoring dignity, recognising interdependence, and affirming our shared humanity. It is a praxis of justice, rooted in empathy and guided by the belief that well-being and success are collective, not individual, achievements. Through an intentional ethics of care we operationalise our commitment to inclusion, belonging, and transformation, creating contexts that enable students to feel seen, valued, and empowered.

Well-being is possible in a caring context and Joan Tronto's work on ethics of care (1998) offers a powerful framework for rethinking how we live, learn, and work in caring ways. Her insistence that care is not merely a personal virtue, but a political and professional ethic challenges us to reconsider what it means to act caringly towards our students, among each other as practitioners, and within our institutions and society. For both students and practitioners, Tronto's five dimensions of care (i.e. attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity**)** provide an ethical compass for caringly navigating the complexities of higher education and professional practice.

According to Tronto (1998), care begins with attentiveness, noticing the needs of the self and others. In our African context, student affairs professionals operate within deeply diverse and often unequal and resource-constrained environments. Attentiveness therefore means recognising the varied personal, familial, socio-economic, and cultural realities that shape students' experiences. It requires sensitivity to issues such as food insecurity, mental health, housing, disability, ethnicity and religion, and the lingering legacies of colonial and structural inequities, such as ethnicism, racism, sexism, xenophobia and homophobia. To be attentive is to listen carefully, to notice who is struggling, who is excluded and to note and rectify when the system is marginalising, excluding or simply uncaring.

From attentiveness follows responsibility (i.e. the ethical obligation to respond to what we observe). In student affairs, this entails taking active steps to ensure that policies and programs promote equity and belonging. It means not turning away from systemic challenges but working collaboratively to improve the conditions under which students learn and live. Responsibility follows attentiveness by taking ownership of a situation and ensuring wrongs are made right; what needs addressing, is addressed; what needs fixing is repaired. Responsibility also involves self-reflection, which is caring for ourselves and our teams so that we can sustain the emotional and professional demands of the work. In the African context, where resources are often limited, responsible care includes advocacy, which is ensuring that student well-being is prioritised in institutional

decision-making, and accountability, which ensures that limited resources are allocated in a fair and just way.

Tronto's (1998) third dimension is competence, which is the dimension that ensures that care is both effective and ethical. Student affairs professionals must develop systemic understanding, understand critical theory and practice, counselling, advising, program design, and research. Caring competently involves using relevant, indigenous and evidence-based practice while remaining grounded in empathy, context, and relevance. It is about caring with competence, not just doing it but doing it in the best possible and professional manner, thereby ensuring that understanding and interventions genuinely contribute to student success and institutional transformation.

The fourth dimension, responsiveness, invites professionals to engage in dialogue with students and to adapt to the students' and the institution's evolving needs. For our African higher education landscape responsiveness means to listen, being flexible, inclusive, and innovative, and being willing to consider new ways of caring for students and institutions. It involves hearing students' voices, acknowledging their agency, and co-creating solutions that affirm dignity and empowerment, and create transformative experiences.

Finally, Joan Tronto's fifth dimension of her ethics of care focuses on solidarity and connects individual acts of care to collective transformation. To care for student affairs in Africa is to commit to justice, diversity, and sustainability, that is, to care not only for students, but also for colleagues, communities and the environment that supports diverse living and learning. Solidarity compels professionals to work together within and across institutions and borders, building a culture of kindness, collegiality, and shared purpose.

Through Tronto's framework, care in student affairs becomes a profound act of social commitment. It encompasses care for the self and others, care for learning and knowledge, care for institutions and their cultures, and care for the societies and ecosystems in which universities are embedded. A praxis of care has the potential to transform student affairs into a profession that not only serves students but also helps build interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge that promotes caring, equitable, and resilient contexts in which our institutions and our students are embedded.

Tronto's framework in the context of African student affairs research

Three recent publications that centre well-being in African student affairs illustrate the benefits that research has for an evidence-based student affairs praxis and the application of the ethics of care framework. Between 2018 and 2022, Thierry Luescher, Angelina Wilson-Fadiji, Keamogetse Morwe and others conducted a series of studies using photovoice and world café methodologies into the well-being implications that student exposure to violence during #FeesMustFall and its aftermath had for students. In the photovoice book *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath: Violence, Wellbeing and the Student Movement in South Africa* (Luescher et al., 2022), they provide a rich, grounded conceptualisation of student well-being, built directly from students' narratives and photographs. The authors synthesise the students' reflections on the ways in which they

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restored well-being after traumatic exposure to violence into a powerful framework of what well-being is to students. Here, students frame well-being as a set of relational, cultural, material, and psychosocial "wellbeing resources", which enable functioning, protect against ill-being, and support flourishing under adverse conditions. The key well-being dimensions identified are:

- Well-being is social: Found in togetherness, collective action, singing, dancing, debating, storytelling, and sharing ideas; well-being emerges through relational connection and mutual recognition.
- Well-being is familial: Grounded in the emotional, moral, and practical support of extended family networks and "kin-like" figures in the struggle.
- Well-being is epistemological: Students find sustenance in knowledge, especially through black intellectual traditions, political education, and historical consciousness, which provide pride and resilience.
- Well-being is spiritual: Collective chanting, revolutionary songs, connection, and communion that nurture the soul and heal wounds.
- Well-being knows limitations: Fair rules, predictable institutional responses, and justice-oriented boundaries provide a sense of stability and safety.
- Well-being is a vector: Purpose, political clarity, and moral conviction give direction and strength; activism becomes a source of meaning.
- Well-being is material and spatial: Safe physical spaces, places to escape harm, hide, gather, rest, and commune matter deeply; even small material resources can protect and restore well-being. (Luescher et al., 2022, pp. 156-157)

Taken together, this becomes a distinctly *ubuntu*-oriented conception of well-being, foregrounding the notion "I am well because we are" (Luescher et al., 2022, p. 156). The book also emphasises that well-being involves a dialectical dance between the positives and negatives of life, whereby students find meaning and transformative growth amidst hardship and forms of emancipatory engagement and resistance.

The second, related contribution "The dance of the positives and negatives of life: Student wellbeing in the context of #FeesMustFall-related violence" picks up on the conclusions of the photovoice book. Here, Wilson-Fadiji et al. (2023) use a distinct psychological well-being lens to both complement and deepen the photovoice findings. Drawing on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being theories, the article shows that well-being involves "purpose, autonomy, personal growth, mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance" (Ryff & Singer, as cited in Wilson Fadiji et al.) and that violence interacts with all these domains.

The key empirical insights from their analysis include that students' experiences of violence generate psychological risk but can also catalyse social identification, meaning-making, and collective self-esteem, which buffer the negative effects; and identity affirmation, group belonging, and recognition of shared struggle can indirectly enhance well-being, reduce post-traumatic stress, and create pathways to empowerment. The study shows that students use a mix of adaptive and non-adaptive coping strategies, but the critical variable is the presence of protective resources (i.e. connection, purpose,

mastery of space, and supportive relationships). In this regard, well-being improves when students feel they can act, influence their environment, and articulate grievances meaningfully.

The third publication in this trio directly addresses itself to student affairs practitioners as the manual *Restoring Wellbeing After Student Protests: Lessons from #FeesMustFall* (Morwe et al. 2022). The manual translates the research into actionable guidance for student affairs. It identifies two core responsibilities: (1) preventing confrontation and violence through accountability, engagement, responsiveness, and care; and (2) restoring well-being after violent confrontations through counselling, mindfulness, objective well-being supports, and innovation.

The manual frames well-being as "a state of contentment, meaning, life satisfaction, and ability to manage stress … not a problem-free life, but the dance of positives and negatives" (Morwe et al., 2022, p. 8), thus echoing key insights of the other two publications. It emphasises that student affairs practitioners often encounter students before, during, and after crises, and are thus uniquely positioned to foster trust, guide students through conflict, and support healing. It thereby seeks to position student affairs as *a professionalised, restorative, student-centred care system* within the university.

Evidently, Tronto's ethics of care aligns strongly with all three sources in terms of:

- Attentiveness: Universities must recognise that student experiences often involve structural, cultural, symbolic, epistemic and even physical violence, and understand student well-being as relational and collective – not merely individual. The photovoice narratives reveal students' deep need to be seen, heard, and believed.
- Responsibility: Student affairs practitioners, university leadership, and academics share responsibility for preventing harm, responding timeously to grievances, and nurturing caring environments that support purpose and belonging.
- Competence: The manual in particular stresses that universities must be capable caregivers, able to provide counselling, safe spaces, restorative practices, predictable rules, and effective engagement strategies (echoing the insight that "well-being knows limitations").
- Responsiveness: Students judge care by how institutions respond – not by intentions but with interventions. Delayed or indifferent responses breed frustration, escalate grievances and harm well-being. Conversely, timely, reciprocal engagement restores dignity.
- Solidarity: The *ubuntu* ethos that emerged from the students' photovoice contributions ("I am well because we are") and the findings on collective identification highlight care as a socially just, shared endeavour.

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In this Issue of JSAA

Linked to the ideas above are the articles this issue, where our guest editor Dr Henry Mason brings together this collection of articles that explore the various aspects that reflect a caring approach to students' well-being.

Together, these contributions illustrate that student well-being is both a shared responsibility and a central measure of success in higher education. They remind us that thriving students are not just academically successful, but also connected, resilient, and supported within their learning ecosystems.

Just as fostering student well-being is an act of care that sustains learning communities, so too is the care work of our reviewers. This reminds us that the health of our students and the vitality of our scholarly field depend on the same ethic of generosity, attentiveness, and shared responsibility.

Enjoy the read!
Birgit, Thierry and Teboho

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Resilience, motivation, and persistence in engineering at a South African university of technology

Résilience, motivation et persévérance en ingénierie dans une université technologique sud-africaine

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ABSTRACT

What helps engineering students persist through their demanding academic journey? This qualitative study explores that question through the lens of Ungar's socio-ecological model of resilience, focusing on senior undergraduates at a South African university of technology. We interviewed seven students and used deductive thematic analysis to trace how resilience operates across multiple layers of their lived experiences. Resilience emerged from dynamic interactions across ecological levels. At the microsystem level, motivation was supported by faculty encouragement, peer relationships, and structured curricula. Family, community support, and mentorship formed strong mesosystem influences. At the exosystem level, institutional infrastructure and policies – particularly challenges related to financial aid and load shedding – both hindered and, at times, strengthened resilience. Macrosystem influences included societal perceptions of engineering as prestigious but difficult, shaping students' motivations and stress. Rather than viewing resilience as an individual trait, this study reveals it as a socially embedded process shaped by context. We offer practical recommendations for multi-level support: simplify funding systems, invest in empathetic teaching, align curricula with local realities, and strengthen partnerships with families and communities.

KEYWORDS

Resilience, motivation, engineering students, persistence, socio-ecological

RÉSUMÉ

Qu'est-ce qui aide les étudiants en ingénierie à persévérer dans leur parcours universitaire exigeant? Cette étude qualitative explore cette question à travers le prisme du modèle socio-écologique de résilience d'Ungar, en se concentrant sur les étudiants de dernière année d'une université technologique sud-africaine. Nous avons interrogé sept étudiants et utilisé une analyse thématique déductive pour retracer le fonctionnement de la résilience à travers les multiples facettes de leur expérience vécue. La résilience est née d'interactions dynamiques entre les différents niveaux écologiques. Au niveau microsystémique, la motivation était soutenue par l'encouragement des professeurs, les relations avec les pairs et des programmes structurés. Le soutien familial et communautaire et le mentorat ont exercé une forte influence au niveau mésosystémique. Au niveau exosystémique, l'infrastructure et les politiques institutionnelles, notamment les difficultés

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liées aux aides financières et aux délestages, ont à la fois entravé et, parfois, renforcé la résilience. Les influences macrosystémiques comprenaient la perception sociétale de l'ingénierie comme prestigieuse mais difficile, ce qui a influencé la motivation et le stress des étudiants. Plutôt que de considérer la résilience comme une caractéristique individuelle, cette étude la révèle comme un processus socialement ancré et façonné par le contexte. Nous proposons des recommandations pratiques pour un soutien à plusieurs niveaux : simplifier les systèmes de financement, investir dans un enseignement empathique, aligner les programmes sur les réalités locales et renforcer les partenariats avec les familles et les communautés.

MOTS-CLÉS
Résilience, motivation, étudiants en ingénierie, persistance, socio-écologique

Introduction

Engineering education in South Africa faces significant challenges related to student retention and success (Maphosa et al., 2023), particularly among students from backgrounds that left them less prepared for university (Bladergroen, 2021). Despite the demanding nature of engineering programs, many students manage to persist and succeed in the face of adversity (van Wyk et al., 2022). Our research investigates the role of resilience in supporting engineering students' persistence through a socio-ecological lens, focusing on students at a South African university of technology. The study's findings provide valuable insights for developing interventions aimed at improving student retention, success, and the broader STEM workforce in South Africa.

The South African higher education system is characterised by a complex interplay of socio-economic challenges, institutional limitations, and cultural factors that affect student success. Engineering programs, in particular, are known for their academic rigour, which often leads to high dropout rates, especially among first-generation and financially disadvantaged students (Mkhize, 2024). As noted by several scholars (Bengesai & Pocock, 2021; Motsabi et al., 2020), socio-economic barriers such as financial constraints, poor living conditions, and limited access to resources significantly impact students' ability to persist in their studies. Load shedding (planned electricity outages), and inadequate infrastructure, are also common barriers that impact students' academic progress (Thembane, 2024).

At the same time, societal attitudes like support from family, peers, and mentors towards engineering, coupled with institutional policies can either support or hinder students' resilience (Tinto, 1993). This study aims to fill the gap in the existing literature by focusing specifically on the resilience of engineering students at South African universities of technology and how different ecological factors interact to influence their persistence.

The article starts with a brief overview of relevant literature, situating the study in current conversations around resilience in education, and a motivation for the use of the socio-ecological framework as a lens. The methodology of the study is presented next, followed by the findings and discussion of these. The article concludes with recommendations for practice and suggestions for further research.

Literature review

Resilience in education

Resilience has been defined as the capacity to recover from difficulties and adapt in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001). In the context of education, academic resilience refers to the ability of students to overcome significant barriers and achieve success despite facing challenges such as financial hardship, academic pressure, and personal difficulties (Martin & Marsh, 2009). Resilience reflects the dynamic interaction between the challenges an individual faces and their ability to respond and adapt positively to those challenges (Southwick et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2013). At its core, resilience involves a dynamic balance between external challenges and a person's capacity to respond adaptively, fostering well-being even under pressure (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Southwick et al., 2014).

Both personal traits and external resources contribute to resilience, particularly in academic settings. Students, for instance, may draw on developed beliefs such as a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), or on personal qualities like optimism (Seligman, 1991) and grit (Duckworth, 2016). Externally, access to supportive networks, socio-economic stability, and campus-based mental health services can strengthen their ability to manage stress (Dockrat, 2016; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2019; Van Zyl, 2016). These factors position resilience as a critical psychological asset linked to academic achievement and student well-being in higher education (Elizondo-Omaña et al., 2007; Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013).

The interplay between personal traits and external resources holds particular significance for students in lower- and middle-income countries, such as South Africa, where systemic challenges – including poverty, limited resources, and higher rates of trauma – amplify stress and mental health risks (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Strengthening resilience among university students in these contexts may mitigate the impact of such stressors and also enhance academic persistence and success. As van Breda (2018) emphasises, resilience is best understood as a *process* of navigating and negotiating resources, while being resilient is the positive outcome of that process. This process-oriented view aligns with Theron's (2023, p. 1032) observation that resilience among sub-Saharan youths is "complexly interwoven with African ways-of-being and -doing."

Knowledge gap

While resilience is increasingly studied in higher education globally, most research originates from the Global North. In contrast, relatively few studies have explored resilience among South African university students, and even fewer in the context of engineering education. This gap is significant because engineering programs are often highly demanding and can present distinctive challenges that influence students' well-being and success. By investigating how environmental systems and individual factors intersect within South Africa's culturally and structurally complex context, this research can inform how universities and communities design more effective support mechanisms that promote student resilience.

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Frameworks

Several frameworks have been developed to understand resilience, including Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which provides a comprehensive view of how individuals' development is shaped by multiple layers of environmental influences. While Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work was not specifically resilience-related and focused on the development of individuals and how they adapt to circumstances, it provided a conceptual foundation for later resilience frameworks. Ungar (2011) extends this foundation by shifting attention from human development in general to resilience in particular, reframing resilience as a function of both individual agency and systemic interdependence. Whereas Bronfenbrenner conceptualised layered and relatively distinct systems (micro, meso, exo, macro, chrono), Ungar's (2011) socio-ecological model of resilience emphasises the importance of negotiating between these systems and argues that resilience depends on access to and meaning of resources within specific cultural, social, and political contexts. Ungar (2018) further argues that resilience is not just about individual attributes, it is more about the capacity of an individual's social and physical environment to enable positive adaptation amid adversity.

This relational, systems-based understanding of resilience aligns with African perspectives such as Ebersöhn's (2019) "flocking together" model, which emphasises collective, culturally grounded responses to hardship. Drawing on the principle of *ubuntu*, and in line with van Breda's (2018) position of resilience as process, the flocking together model recognises that in contexts of resource scarcity, resilience emerges through shared responsibility and mutual care, where communities actively mobilise to protect and support their members.

In this study on the resilience and persistence of engineering students at a university of technology in South Africa, microsystem factors include encouragement by lecturers, positive relationships with fellow students, and well-structured curricular requirements. Family and community support as well as mentorship create strong pillars within the mesosystem and are supported at the campus level. Exosystem factors include institutional policies and infrastructure such as access to financial aid and problems like load shedding. At the macrosystem level, societal perceptions of engineering as both prestigious and demanding shape students' aspirations and pressures, underscoring the need for broader cultural and systemic support.

As Ungar et al. (2013) note, Bronfenbrenner himself understood that his model's concentric circles were never meant to imply strict hierarchy or separateness. No one system is inherently subordinate to another: mesosystemic processes are not less important than exosystemic processes, and boundaries between systems are fluid. The nature of any single system is to exist in reciprocal relationships of dependency and influence with all others. This non-hierarchical, interdependent understanding of systems provides a strong foundation for conceptualising resilience as a dynamic, contextually embedded process, which serves as the theoretical foundation for this study.

Research design and methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design. According to Sandelowski (2010), qualitative descriptive studies offer detailed, low-inference insights into participants' lived experiences, making this design suitable for understanding complex processes, such as in the higher education context explored in this study.

Sampling procedure

Participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling, aligning with the study's focus on students who could provide rich, insightful narratives regarding resilience (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The primary criteria included students beyond their first year, ensuring ample exposure to rigorous academic and practical engineering challenges. Initially, emails detailing the study objectives, ethical considerations, and confidentiality measures were sent to senior undergraduate students enrolled in electrical and computer engineering programs. From eleven initial respondents, seven students were selected based on academic seniority and ability to offer rich contextual insights, although gender diversity and representational balance across engineering fields were limited (one female, six males; aged early to mid-20s; one white postgraduate and six black undergraduate students).

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams, lasting 45-60 minutes. Interviews utilised an open-ended, flexible interview guide aligned with the systems in the socio-ecological framework. Pilot testing refined the interview questions to enhance clarity and conversational tone, thereby facilitating rich participant narratives. The first author conducted the interviews and corrected the verbatim auto-transcription of the audio recordings, ensuring accuracy in data representation.

Data analysis: Deductive thematic analysis (DTA)

Deductive thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) methodology, was employed to systematically interpret data. This was achieved by using the six established phases: (i) familiarisation, (ii) coding, (iii) theme development, (iv) theme refinement, (v) theme finalisation, and (vi) reporting. The first author began by immersing himself in the transcripts to gain an overall sense of the material (data familiarisation); this entailed multiple readings of the transcripts, listening to audio recordings, and reflecting on emotional and contextual cues. Coding involved the use of NVivo software for effective data management. Initial coding involved line-by-line reading to ensure no significant data were overlooked. The first author began by immersing himself in the transcripts to gain an overall sense of the material (data familiarisation). Key excerpts were highlighted, such as the following comment from one participant:

> *What I really like about positive friends is that they don't really help you only academically, but then they help you also in your everyday needs and in your emotional wellbeing ... that's how they really help me to cope with academic and life generally.*

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Initial codes, such as, for this example, 'support from friends' and 'emotional resilience' were assigned to relevant segments of text (coding). These codes were then grouped into preliminary themes, labelled, for example, 'Social support network' (theme development). The theme development phase included identifying patterns and relationships among codes. For example, personal coping strategies like 'self-regulation,' 'time management,' and 'grit' were grouped into a cohesive theme reflecting students' internal resources for resilience.

Themes were refined through iterative processes, merging similar themes and separating overly complex ones to enhance clarity and coherence. For instance, to better capture how peer interactions supported both emotional and academic coping strategies, the theme, 'Social support network' was revised to a more precise theme: 'Peer relationships and social support' (refining and defining themes). The theme was finalised in consultation with the full team, ensuring it captured students' lived experiences accurately (finalising the themes).

Finally, the findings were written up with supporting quotations to demonstrate how peer support can significantly influence students' academic persistence. NVivo enabled the research team to track coding decisions and maintain methodological rigour throughout the process. To ensure validity and trustworthiness, reflexivity was actively practised by documenting potential biases and assumptions in a reflective journal throughout the analysis. Peer debriefing and member checking were also conducted, allowing themes to be critically assessed and validated by external perspectives.

Findings and discussion

Based on participants' narratives, the data show how resilience among engineering students arises from the interplay of personal attributes, social support networks, institutional policies, and societal attitudes. The insights are grouped thematically according to these four dominant themes.

Personal attributes

Participants demonstrated various personal attributes that facilitated their resilience, such as self-motivation, a growth mindset, and proactive coping strategies. A common thread in interviews was the students' drive to persevere despite adversity. One participant explained, "*I also motivate myself ... I tell myself that, no, I'm gonna make it ... I should learn from my mistakes, I should just keep on pushing.*" Students consistently noted how shifting their mindset, seeing setbacks as chances to grow, helped them stay focused.

Some participants also relied on organised study methods, such as keeping journals or breaking large projects into smaller tasks. Some also highlighted stress-management techniques, ranging from "*I do some breathing techniques to calm myself down*" to spiritual or meditative practices. This finding echoes definitions of academic resilience as the capacity to overcome adversity through adaptive personal effort (e.g. persisting despite financial or academic hardships). In line with prior studies, students often drew on individual qualities like optimism, *grit*, and a belief in improvement to navigate

challenges. Such personal attributes have been widely identified as resilience-enablers in educational contexts – for instance, *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2006) and *grit* (Duckworth, 2016) have been linked to students' ability to bounce back from setbacks.

Despite the importance of individual determination, our findings also reinforce the observation that resilience is not merely an intrinsic trait. Participants acknowledged that their personal tactics (e.g. positive self-talk, time management, stress-control techniques) were effective only when combined with external support. This aligns with socio-ecological theories of resilience: Ungar (2018) argues resilience depends less on *willpower* and more on the capacity of one's environment to provide support. In other words, even the most determined students thrive best when their personal efforts are met with resources and encouragement from their surroundings. The present study therefore contributes theoretically by highlighting the interplay between individual agency and context – confirming that personal resilience alone is insufficient in a resource-constrained setting.

Practically, this finding implies that while universities should help students develop personal skills (e.g. through workshops on self-regulation or mindset), they must simultaneously ensure supportive conditions, since even the most resilient individuals can be overwhelmed if left to 'sink or swim' on their own. Strengthening personal attributes should be seen as one piece of a larger resilience puzzle, complementary to social and institutional support. While these personal tactics were critical in a highly demanding program, students stressed that they only worked well when combined with broader support systems.

Social support networks

The theme of social support networks emerged as a cornerstone of student resilience. Participants consistently credited family encouragement, peer collaboration, and mentorship with helping them persist through difficulties.

Family influence

Family often provided the first line of emotional and financial support. One participant remarked, "*My mom is always there for me whenever I need anything. She makes sure that I get it ... She's all the support that I have.*" Such encouragement nurtured an optimistic outlook and bolstered students' commitment to continue their studies. However, elevated familial expectations introduced stress, with one student sharing, "*I want to do well so I don't disappoint my parents who expect high marks.*"

Peer collaboration and friendships

Peer support played a powerful role, especially in a resource-constrained context. As one student explained, "*Me and my friends ... we do this thing where every now and then we'd say, 'Okay, for this particular module, we are cross-nighting for this one' ... It made me realise problems that I didn't even know I had because some people would bring up problems that I didn't think to bring up.*" This collaboration not only eased feelings of isolation but also created a sense of shared responsibility. Another student shared, "*we are busy helping each other with our studies in order to be able to understand ... When*

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I'm wrong, he corrects me, and when he's wrong, I correct him," illustrating the mutual learning process that fosters both academic and emotional resilience.

This corroborates extensive literature showing that social support is a key protective factor in academic resilience. Decades ago, Tinto (1993) theorized that students' persistence is strongly influenced by their integration into supportive academic and social communities, including affirming faculty and peer relations. Our findings align with Tinto's model: students who felt *connected* – whether through a parent's moral support, study groups with friends, or guidance from a mentor – were better able to withstand academic pressures. Indeed, strong family relationships and peer bonds have been described as the 'social glue' that keeps students anchored during adversity. In a recent South African study, Mapaling (2024) similarly found that resilient engineering students benefitted from constellations of support – family, friends, and institutional allies – operating in concert. This integrated support system echoes Bronfenbrenner's concept of the *mesosystem*, where linkages between home, school, and community reinforce student development.

Notably, our participants also revealed a nuance: while family support was largely motivating, it sometimes came with heightened expectations that added pressure. For example, students felt a strong need to "not disappoint" their parents, which could amplify stress. This duality adds depth to the generally positive portrayal of familial support in resilience literature. It suggests that the *quality* and context of support matter – supportive networks must provide encouragement without becoming sources of undue stress. Theoretically, this underlines the importance of understanding resilience as a relational process with potential tensions; support can both empower and inadvertently burden students. From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight opportunities to leverage and enhance these social networks. Institutions might create programs that formally engage peer support and mentoring, building on organic study groups and mentor relationships that students already find helpful. For instance, participants who benefitted from peer study sessions demonstrated improved problem-solving and reduced isolation, which suggests that facilitating peer mentorship or learning communities could systematically bolster resilience. Likewise, recognising families as partners in student success – through parent orientation sessions or family-inclusive communications – may help align expectations and enlist familial encouragement as a positive force. In summary, reinforcing students' social support networks, while managing the pressures attached to them, is crucial for sustaining resilience in challenging engineering programs.

Mentors and role models

Whether a committed lecturer, a high-achieving senior student, or a community figure, mentors and role models provided students with a morale boost and made them feel understood and encouraged. One participant noted, "*I have a high school teacher who taught me electrical technology ... He's now helping me with electrical engineering and electronics. I called that teacher last week ... He said, 'I believe in you. Just keep on going and never give up'.*" Another participant found mentorship and spiritual guidance from his pastor, who had also studied engineering: "*Luckily he also did the same course, and*

then he'd advise me ... go and have a group ... consult the lecturer." The combination of practical advice on navigating difficult modules or dealing with administrative hurdles, and motivational support reinforced students' belief in their capacity to succeed.

Institutional policies and practices

Students' experiences underscored that institutional structures and practices significantly influence their capacity to persist. Supportive academic environments – exemplified by accessible support services (libraries, tutoring, counselling) and engaged faculty – were frequently cited as resilience boosters.

Financial aid and administrative efficiency

Financial pressures, including the cost of housing, tuition, and everyday expenses, were commonly cited as major hurdles. Virtually all participants faced financial constraints – from difficulty paying fees and securing housing to limited funds for textbooks and transport – reflecting the broader socio-economic barriers documented in South African higher education. In response, many students became adept at budgeting or pooling resources with peers. One student said "*Sometimes we form a group ... share anything we have, like slides or notes, so you don't spend more buying stuff. It really helps.*" Some described inconsistent or delayed financial aid as a trigger for periods of uncertainty and stress but also noted that these hardships reinforced their determination: "*I told myself I was not quitting. I was going to figure out a way to pay for this and finish.*" One student recalled having to commute long distances due to late housing subsidies, stating, "*I was staying in other residences, moving from a residence to another ... close to seven or so ... I also feel like that's something that affected my studies.*" These disruptions highlight the fragility of resilience when institutions operate with inefficiencies that intensify an already constrained environment.

Prior studies confirm that financial stress is a major threat to student persistence: for example, Bengesai and Pocock (2021) and Motsabi et al. (2020) identified *financial constraints, poor living conditions,* and *limited resources* as significant predictors of dropout among university students. In our study, these constraints often forced students to make tough trade-offs (like skipping meals or commuting long distances) and to seek creative solutions such as pooling resources with peers. This resourcefulness can be seen as a form of adaptive resilience, wherein students mobilise whatever is at hand to survive academically. Indeed, some participants remarked that overcoming funding shortfalls ultimately *bolstered* their determination to finish ("*I told myself I'm not quitting; I'll find a way to pay and finish*"). This resonates with Masten's (2001) notion of 'ordinary magic,' where individuals find ways to cope and adapt in the face of everyday adversities. However, it is crucial to recognise that such adaptability has limits. Chronic financial instability is an external stressor that can overwhelm even the most resilient individuals if not addressed. As our findings illustrate, periods of uncertainty due to delayed scholarships or insufficient funds caused significant anxiety, loss of study time, and in some cases, risk of dropout. These outcomes underscore Ungar's (2008) insight that access to material and financial *resources* is a core component of resilience. In other

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words, resilience is not just about personal grit – it hinges on whether students can reliably access the economic support they need to focus on learning.

The interplay between financial constraints and other support systems was also noteworthy. Students from low-income backgrounds often leaned more heavily on social networks to compensate for lack of money – for instance, sharing study materials to avoid extra costs or relying on family for small cash infusions when university aid was delayed. This reflects patterns observed by van Zyl (2016), who found that socio-economic disparities tend to ripple into differences in academic experience, necessitating greater external support for poorer students. Our study adds qualitative depth to that understanding by showing how those supports play out in day-to-day student life. Theoretically, the prominence of financial constraints in our data highlights the importance of situating resilience in a structural context. It supports a socio-ecological view (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ungar, 2018) wherein *economic factors* at the exosystem level either supply the resources that enable resilience or, when lacking, become relentless stressors that students must navigate. Practically, this theme points to clear interventions: simplifying bursary and scholarship processes, providing emergency financial assistance, and synchronizing funding disbursements with students' needs would remove significant obstacles to persistence. As one student's experience with late housing funds showed, delays and uncertainties in financial aid can derail academic progress – a preventable problem. By ensuring more reliable financial support structures, institutions can dramatically reduce the 'resilience tax' on disadvantaged students, allowing personal and social strengths to be directed towards learning rather than mere survival. In sum, addressing financial constraints is not only a matter of equity but a strategic investment in student success, amplifying the efficacy of all other resilience-promoting efforts.

Academic support services

Students' experiences underscored that institutional structures and practices significantly influence their capacity to persist. Supportive academic environments – exemplified by accessible support services (libraries, tutoring, counselling) and engaged faculty – were frequently cited as resilience boosters. One participant states "*What I like about our library is that it's always full of people ... every time when you go to the library, you get motivated, you get to study also.*" Another participant characterised counselling as "*Every student can go there [counselling], can sit and express their emotions, their difficulties, their pressures that they're having.*" underscoring its role in sustaining mental health and helping students remain on track academically when stressors mount.

Lecturer engagement

The most frequently cited institutional factor in fostering resilience was supportive lecturers. One student stated, "*We had this one lecturer in second year ... He was so personally involved with his students ... That was a pretty big influence as well for actually continuing and finishing your studies.*" Personal involvement from lecturers reduced the intimidation factor of rigorous engineering modules, while feedback and practical guidance boosted self-efficacy. Another participant also pointed out the importance of

supportive faculty members, sharing his appreciation for a lecturer who extended help beyond his assigned duties: "*There was a time whereby I was doing a different module, and it was really tough ... my lecturer was like, I can help you, and then he helped me*." On the other hand, lecturers contributed to stress when test schedules were changed at short notice as one participant commented about a postponed test: "*Now the work is also piling up ... it's stressful because you were ready for one date, and then suddenly it's changed.*"

This accords with research on student success in South Africa, which emphasises the role of inclusive institutional cultures and effective support interventions in mitigating unequal preparation and resource gaps. When lecturers showed personal involvement and approachability, or when campuses provided safe study spaces and mental health resources, students reported greater confidence and 'room to breathe' amid their workload. Such findings validate the idea that academic resilience is not developed in isolation but through a supportive campus ecosystem. As the socio-ecological model suggests, the *exosystem* level – institutional policies, infrastructure, and services – can either reinforce or undermine student adaptation. Our data illustrate this vividly: empathetic teaching, clear communication, and well-structured curricula helped cushion students against stress, whereas bureaucratic inefficiencies and resource shortfalls forced students to divert energy toward basic survival needs. This is consistent with Thembane's (2024) observation that inadequate infrastructure (e.g. frequent power outages) and other campus resource challenges are pervasive barriers to academic progress in South Africa. In Thembane's study, as in ours, students had to develop improvised workarounds for institutional shortcomings – a form of resilience that, while commendable, exacts a hidden cost in time and anxiety.

A key pattern in our findings is the 'invisible labour' students perform to compensate for unreliable institutional support. For example, participants described rushing to finish assignments before load shedding or repeatedly chasing administrative offices about delayed bursaries and exam schedules. This aligns with other analyses of previously disadvantaged students' experiences, which note that those from under-resourced backgrounds often face additional hurdles navigating the university system. The significance of this pattern is that it reframes resilience as *relational* rather than *individual*: students' success was facilitated not only by their own tenacity but by how well their university's structures functioned (or failed). Theoretically, this reinforces calls by scholars like Ungar (2008) to view resilience as a quality of the system around the student, not just of the student themselves. Our study contributes to this discourse by documenting specific institutional sore points – e.g. irregular course scheduling and inefficient financial aid processes – and showing their direct impact on student well-being and persistence. In terms of practical implications, the message is clear: universities must actively reduce structural barriers and create a climate of support. Streamlining administrative procedures, communicating schedules and requirements clearly, and training faculty in responsive, *student-centred* teaching are not ancillary tasks; they are central to fostering resilience. This echoes recommendations in the literature advocating for *system-level interventions* to improve student retention. Ultimately, by strengthening institutional structures – making them more reliable, fair,

and attuned to students' realities – higher education institutions can convert resilience from a personal burden into a shared institutional responsibility.

Societal attitudes in a resource-constrained context

Community perceptions of engineering

Many participants described how their communities view engineering studies as both *prestigious* and *formidable*. On one hand, being an engineering student conferred a sense of pride. As one participant remarked, *They think studying engineering is a very big thing … like you're the smartest person in the community.*" Another participant mentioned that "*Everybody thinks engineering is ... like they see it as ... you know, a difficult course and if you can manage to qualify for it then you are very, very smart.*" Similarly, a participant faced scepticism from his community regarding the viability of an engineering career, highlighting a broader cultural sentiment that leaned toward safer, more traditional job choices: "*I would get ... they'd say that you were doing this course, and you've been doing it, and it's unlikely for people to get jobs for this course.*" Such remarks may test a student's resolve but also reinforced their commitment to proving doubters wrong and demonstrating that success is possible through persistence.

This positive cultural valuation of engineering aligns with the concept of aspirational capital in resilience literature (e.g. Shelton & Thompson, 2023), where individuals draw strength from the hopes and high regard placed on them by their communities. On the other hand, the same cultural narrative introduced pressures: students felt a profound responsibility to live up to expectations and to leverage their education for upward mobility. In the South African context, it is common for successful students to feel obliged to improve their family's economic situation – a dynamic sometimes referred to as the 'black tax.' Participants shared experiences of relatives expecting them to start earning and contributing financially even before graduation, which added stress to their already heavy academic load. This finding highlights a nuanced pattern: cultural norms can be a double-edged sword, fueling resilience through purpose (the drive to "*change my background*" or make one's family proud) while simultaneously creating anxiety through unrealistically high expectations and role strain.

Cultural norms and economic expectations

In a country where socio-economic disparities are widespread, engineering is often viewed as a pathway to upward mobility. This perspective amplified a sense of responsibility: "*I want to change my background so badly. I want to make it easier for them [family]. They don't have to worry about financial issues like I did when I was growing up.*" explained one interviewee. Yet the same cultural narrative sometimes created unrealistic timelines or outcomes, as relatives expected immediate financial contribution, thereby intensifying stress on the student as one student said, "*I've been told that, yes, hey, you've been doing this course, and you are old now ... you should be helping your siblings now.*" This pressure to contribute back to his family, while daunting, also fueled his resolve to complete his studies.

Linking these observations to theory, it becomes evident that resilience must be understood within its cultural-macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem level – the broader social beliefs, values, and customs that surround an individual – was palpably present in our data. As noted in Ungar's socio-ecological framework, societal perceptions and cultural context shape what forms of coping are available and how success is defined. Our participants' resilience was not just an individual or even micro-social phenomenon; it was intertwined with cultural narratives of education as a route to socio-economic upliftment. This corroborates Ungar's (2008) argument that resilience is culturally embedded, meaning that what 'counts' as resilient adaptation can vary across cultures. Here, persevering in a tough engineering program *despite* financial hardship and community skepticism can be seen as a culturally resonant form of resilience – a way of defying odds and fulfilling a collective hope. The theoretical contribution of this theme lies in illustrating how culture-specific pressures and supports modulate the resilience process. It reminds scholars and practitioners that resilience in a South African township or rural context may manifest differently than in a Western middle-class context, precisely because of these communal expectations and obligations.

Practically, acknowledging cultural norms means that universities and support services should adopt a culturally responsive approach. For example, career counsellors and academic advisors might need to engage with students' families or community leaders to set realistic expectations about the timeline and outcomes of an engineering degree. By doing so, they can help relieve undue pressure on students while maintaining the positive encouragement that families and communities provide. Universities could also celebrate and harness the *collective pride* in student achievements – for instance, through community outreach or family-inclusion events – so that cultural norms become an asset rather than a stressor. In essence, understanding the cultural context allows institutions to better support students in a holistic way, ensuring that resilience is bolstered by cultural values without students bearing an unfair emotional burden. This theme underlines that resilience is not culture-blind: effective strategies to promote persistence must resonate with students' cultural realities and leverage the strengths of those norms, all while buffering students against the possible strains.

Summary

Each of these themes – personal attributes, social support, institutional structures, financial constraints, and cultural norms – illustrates a layer of the complex ecosystem that contributes to student resilience. The patterns in our data reflect an interplay of factors consistent with the socio-ecological model, reinforcing the idea that resilience in higher education is a multi-dimensional, context-dependent process. By integrating our findings with existing literature, we see that our participants' experiences both support and enrich current theories: personal grit matters but is buoyed by external supports; social networks act as safety nets and springboards; institutional efficacy can empower or exhaust students; economic hurdles continue to test resilience in profound ways; and cultural narratives give meaning to the struggle, for better or worse. The practical implication is that improving student success in challenging programs like engineering

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requires comprehensive strategies that address all these layers. Interventions must not only cultivate resilient mindsets in students, but also build robust support systems around them, from family and peer engagement to responsive university services and broader socio-economic support. Such an integrated approach acknowledges resilience as a shared endeavour, aligning with emerging frameworks that view student success as a 'geared' interaction of personal, relational, and structural support mechanisms. Ultimately, our study's discussion highlights that to foster resilience and persistence, higher education must move beyond viewing students as solely responsible for their success and instead nurture the environments that enable every student to thrive.

Practical implications and recommendations

This study points to several areas where universities can strengthen the support structures that promote student resilience and academic persistence. While the findings reflect the experiences of a small sample, the patterns across ecological levels suggest a number of practical, system-level interventions.

Improve administrative clarity and timing

Unpredictable bursary disbursements and vague communication about test dates created significant stress for students. Streamlining these systems and improving transparency could free up students' time and energy to focus on learning, rather than managing uncertainty.

Strengthen lecturer–student relationships

Participants valued encouragement, accessibility, and simple acts of recognition from their lecturers. Workshops that support lecturers in building relational teaching practices – including active listening and clear feedback – could improve students' confidence and academic engagement, especially in large or high-pressure courses.

Create peer mentorship and study group structures

Students often turned to peers for academic and emotional support, particularly when formal services felt impersonal or difficult to access. Building on this strength by formalising peer mentorship programs and study group facilitation would build on this existing strength and help create a stronger learning community.

Curriculum design for flexibility

Engineering programs that rely heavily on labs and fixed schedules need to account for external factors like load shedding and transport disruptions. Additional universal timetable slots for missed classes, open-access software (student licensed) or open labs for after-hour use, and additional tutorial support like lecture recordings can help students keep up when conditions are unpredictable.

Connect students with community-based support

Several participants drew strength from local mentors, religious leaders, or family members working in engineering fields. Universities can benefit from recognising and

engaging these community relationships, for example by inviting external mentors into orientation or career events.

Review the scope and relevance of academic support services
Students who used counselling and tutoring services found them useful. Periodic review of the effectiveness of these services helps ensure they remain responsive to evolving needs.

Targeted support for first-year students
Informed by Motsabi et al. (2020), institutions should consider gathering detailed profile data to guide the design of personal and social development programs, especially for first-generation students. These could include assertiveness and self-regulation workshops, peer mentorship, counselling, and structured team-building activities during orientation.

These recommendations highlight that nurturing student resilience is not the job of a single office or department. It requires coordinated, ongoing attention to the systems that shape students' everyday experiences of learning and belonging.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the sample was small and context-specific. With only seven participants, the study prioritised depth over generalisability. While this allowed for rich, detailed accounts, it may not capture the full range of student experiences across different departments, years of study, or socio-economic backgrounds. Future studies could expand the sample or include multiple institutions to explore how resilience manifests in other contexts.

Second, the study used a deductive framework based on the micro, meso, exo and macro systems in the socio-ecological model, which provided structure but may have limited the emergence of unanticipated themes. A combined inductive and deductive approach could enrich the analysis and allow more space for novel insights, especially those specific to South African higher education.

Third, the research offers a snapshot in time. Resilience is dynamic, shaped by personal growth, shifting responsibilities, and changing external conditions. A longitudinal design could help capture how students' coping strategies and support systems evolve over their academic journey.

Lastly, while this study focused on students' voices, future research could include the perspectives of lecturers, advisors, and support staff. Understanding how they perceive and respond to student resilience could inform more coordinated institutional approaches.

Conclusion

This study explored the factors that support or undermine resilience among engineering students at a South African university of technology. Drawing on Ungar's (2011) socio-ecological model, it showed that student persistence is shaped not just by individual

characteristics, but by the dynamic interaction of personal, social, institutional, and cultural systems.

Students described how relationships with lecturers, support from peers, and encouragement from families and community mentors helped them navigate a demanding academic environment. At the same time, recurring challenges such as delayed funding, unreliable infrastructure, and inflexible teaching practices made their academic journeys more difficult. While many students found ways to adapt, the pressure to continually overcome systemic barriers came at a cost to their time, energy, and mental well-being.

The findings point to the need for coordinated efforts across all levels of the university experience. Rather than expecting students to carry the full burden of resilience alone, institutions can shape learning environments that foster a sense of connection, trust, and responsiveness. This includes timely administrative systems, flexible curriculum structures, and teaching approaches that recognise students as whole people with complex lives.

These findings are echoed in Mapaling's (2024) 'gears of connectivity' framework, which builds on Ungar's (2011) socio-ecological model by emphasising how student support must operate across interconnected levels. Like mechanical gears, support mechanisms in higher education must shift in tandem to meet students' evolving personal, academic, and social needs. This approach highlights the importance of integrated, flexible strategies that not only address gaps but also proactively nurture student development and well-being.

In focusing on students' lived experiences, this research invites universities to see resilience not as an individual trait, but as a collective outcome – one that emerges when systems work together to support student success in meaningful and sustainable ways. Ultimately, resilience grows strongest not in isolation, but through the everyday workings of a system that listens, adapts, and cares.

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Ethics statement
Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection.

Potential conflict of interests
We have no conflicts of interest with this study.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empowering student agency in academic advising through design thinking: Voices of academic advisors

Ukuxhobisa ukuzimela kwabafundi kucebiso ngezemfundo ngokusebenzisa ukucinga ngoyilo: Amazwi abacebisi bezemfundo

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ABSTRACT

Design thinking is a human-centred approach that offers practical methods and tools that can be used by academic advisors to enhance innovation, develop meaningful problem-solving strategies, and drive change in student academic advising sessions. Academic advising can be regarded as a critical component of student success; however, many students and advisors struggle to engage deeply in the advising process in a shared and reciprocal manner. This study addresses this issue by adopting a design thinking approach to support students during the academic advising process. The study explored how the adapted design thinking process at a particular institution enhanced student–advisor agency, collaboration, and student-centred engagement. The study employed a qualitative research methodology, drawing on Schön's (1991) reflective model. Qualitative data were collected from the three advisors' reflective reports and one focus group interview. Thematic analyses were used to identify key patterns and themes. The design thinking approach gave rise to four key themes: (1) timely and focused advising, (2) knowledge building and information sharing, (3) reciprocal conversations, and (4) agency. The findings reveal that the application of design thinking in academic advising enabled advisors to shift their advising sessions from a prescriptive to a developmental approach, thereby fostering a deeper and more collaborative engagement with students.

KEYWORDS

Academic advising, design thinking approach, student agency

ISISHWANKATHELO

Ukucinga ngoyilo yindlela egxile ebantwini, enika iindlela nezixhobo ezisebenzayo ezinokusetyenziswa ngabacebisi bezemfundo ukuphucula ukuveliswa kwezimvo ezintsha, ukuphuhlisa izicwangciso zokusombulula iingxaki ngendlela enentsingiselo, nokukhuthaza utshintsho kwiintlanganiso zokucetyiswa kwabafundi. Ukucebisa ngezemfundo kungathathwa njengelinye icandelo elibalulekileyo ekuphumeleleni kwabafundi. Nangona kunjalo, abafundi abaninzi kunye nabacebisi

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baye baphazamiseka ekubandakanyekeni ngokunzulu kule nkqubo ngendlela eyabelana ngayo nenobudlelwane obuphinda-phindayo. Olu phando lubhekisa kulo mba ngokusebenzisa indlela yokucinga ngoyilo ukuxhasa abafundi ngexesha lenkqubo yocebiso ngezemfundo. Uphando luye lwaphonononga indlela inkqubo yokucinga ngoyilo ehlenga-hlengisiweyo esetyenziswe kwisikhululo esithile eyakhuthaza ngayo ukuzimela kwabafundi kunye nabacebisi, intsebenziswano, kunye nokubandakanyeka okugxile kumfundi. Olu phando lusebenzisa indlela yophando yohlobo, luqwalasela umzekelo kaSchön (1991) yokuzicingela ngokuzibuyekeza. Iinkcukacha zohlobo ziqokelelwe kwiingxelo zokuzicingela zabacebisi abathathu nakudliwano-ndlebe enye yeqela elijoliswe kulo. Ukuhlalutya ngokwemixholo kusetyenzisiwe ukufumanisa iindlela nemixholo ephambili. Indlela yokucinga ngoyilo iveze imixholo emine ephambili: (1) ukucebisa ngexesha elifanelekileyo nelijolise kwinjongo ethile; (2) ukwakha ulwazi nokwabelana ngolwazi; (3) iingxoxo ezibuyiselanayo; kunye (4) nokuzimela. Iziphumo zophando zityhila ukuba ukusetyenziswa kwendlela yokucinga ngoyilo kucebiso ngezemfundo kuye kwabavumela abacebisi ukuba batshintshe kwiindlela zokucebisa eziyalelayo baye kwindlela ephuhlisayo, ngaloo ndlela bekhuthaza ukubandakanyeka okunzulu nokusebenzisanayo nabafundi.

AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO
Ukucebisa ngezemfundo, indlela yokucinga ngoyilo, ukuzimela kwabafundi

Introduction

Kuhn (2008, p. 3) defines academic advising (AA) as "situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach". NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising defines academic advising as

> A series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic Advising synthesises and contextualises students' education experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities, and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes. (NACADA, 2006)

In recent years, particularly in the South African higher education context, AA has moved from the periphery to find its place at the centre of student success initiatives. Academic advising plays a pivotal role in ensuring students' overall development during their academic journey, promoting their success, and enhancing their retention (Obaje & Jeawon, 2021). According to Masengeni (2019), AA is not simply about supporting students in passing at the end of each year; rather, the emphasis is on creating an environment that enables students to reach their full academic, social, and emotional potential. Many researchers have included the above concepts when defining academic student success advising. ELETSA ('advising' in Sesotho) is a non-profit organisation operating in the South African region, which holds allied membership status at NACADA, and describes AA as a continual, purposeful approach to teaching and learning that gives students the tools they need to investigate, align, and achieve their academic, professional, and personal objectives (ELETSA, n.d.).

However, many of the definitions mentioned by researchers above do not explicitly include the relational aspect of AA. This study focuses on reciprocity and relational engagement during advising sessions between students and advisors. We utilise a contextually informed definition of academic advising developed by stakeholders from

across the University of Western Cape (UWC) during a series of consensus workshops on conceptualising AA at UWC (Pather et al., 2022). In workshop 2, the following definition was collaboratively conceptualised to represent our institutional context:

> Academic Advising is about student success and providing integrated support that guides and assists students both academically and psycho-socially throughout their academic journey. Through collaborative, interactive, and agentic conversations, advisors work holistically with students to enhance their university experience and foster their personal and academic development. (Pather et al., 2022)

In the intentional use of collaborative, interactive, and agentic conversations, this definition emphasises the importance of relational reciprocity and agency in the advising process at UWC. The reference to student agency in this definition refers to a student's capacity to make choices, set goals, and take action to achieve their academic objectives (NACADA, 2006). Other studies that consider the relational include Swecker (2013), who describes AA as a process involving a student and academic advisor establishing a relationship to coordinate decision-making, problem-solving, and resource identification in a student's personal and academic endeavours. Tiroyabone and Strydom's (2021) study also acknowledges this. It defines AA to include the relationship between the academic advisor and student, indicating that it is a continuous and purposeful practice that explores the shared responsibilities of both parties in this relationship. They further note that shared responsibilities foster the development of student agency, growth, and success.

Literature review

Internationally, AA is widely recognised as a cornerstone of student success in higher education, playing a critical role in guiding students through their academic and personal challenges (Drake, 2011). Young-Jones et al. (2013) stress that an essential feature of AA is for advisors to adopt a developmental approach and prioritise relationship-building in addressing the unique needs of each student. By understanding and responding to students' diverse experiences, institutions can optimise advising practices to promote equity and success across student populations. However, traditional advising models often fail to foster a deep, reciprocal relationship between students and advisors, resulting in surface-level engagement and limited student ownership over their academic journeys (Kuh et al., 2005). Advising sessions, which explore a shared responsibility, provide students with tools to develop agency. According to Bandura (2020), student agency is not fixed and can change throughout a student's educational journey as they engage with, and take control of, their learning. In their study, which maps the conceptualisation of student agency, Torres Castro and Pineda-Báez (2023, p. 1183) refer to agency as the capacity of individuals to engage in intentional, self-defined, meaningful, and autonomous actions in circumstances constrained by power relations and structural and contextual factors. Advising sessions are ideally placed to play a key role in enhancing student agency, as a successful advising relationship empowers students to take ownership of their learning. Advising is a shared responsibility between

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the advisor and student, where the advisor plays an important role in creating a space that welcomes and fosters student agency.

However, failing to develop agency in their academic careers can hinder first-year students' transition into the university's academic and social environment. One approach to enhancing student agency is through the use of the design thinking process, particularly in the advising space. In Kaui et al. (2021), which examined the relationship between design thinking and student agency, the researchers noted that design thinking enhances self-efficacy, promotes perseverance in the face of challenges, and supports individual expression within a collaborative context. The study further suggests that by engaging with the design thinking's creative processes, students can develop their own creative knowledge and abilities, while also strengthening their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In this regard, design thinking fosters a learning environment in which students are encouraged to view mistakes as valuable opportunities for growth and learning. Several studies have employed the design thinking process to achieve various outcomes in AA. In Alvarado's (2025) study, design thinking was used to reimagine student services by engaging students as co-creators. In this study, empathy-driven methods were employed to identify genuine student needs, resulting in innovative redesigns of services. The approach emphasised student-centred innovation and iterative prototyping to improve engagement and satisfaction (Alavarado, 2025). In another study by Almaghaslah and Alsayari (2022), conducted at the College of Pharmacy in Saudi Arabia, a design thinking framework was employed to enhance AA services within the college, to improve students' experiences with AA. Several prototypes were suggested during the design thinking process that have proven effective in enhancing students' experiences in university life and overcoming challenges, including work–life imbalance, a lack of social life on campus, limited awareness of academic rules, and a lack of trust in academic staff. In this study, we employ the design thinking process in the advising sessions with students and explore its use as an alternative approach to traditional student–advisor advising. Our focus was to examine the potential of using the design thinking process in advising sessions to enhance student–advisor agency, collaboration, and engagement.

UWC context, conceptualisation of academic student success advising (ASSA) and a shift to the design thinking framework

In 2022, a deliberate shift in the term 'academic advising' to 'academic student success advising' (known as ASSA) at UWC was implemented. The intentional use of the new concept of ASSA was to underscore its holistic approach to student support, extending beyond purely academic and curricular concerns, but also encompassing the psychosocial well-being and transition of students into the university environment. The ASSA initiative was intentionally designed to address two key goals in the institution's strategic plan: Goal 1: Student experience: to enrich the student experience through, amongst others, the building of "a supportive environment for all students that addresses barriers to success" and the provision of "optimal support services" and Goal 2: Learning and teaching: to strengthen learning and teaching and to "develop an

environment conducive to excellence in learning and teaching in support of student success and retention" (UWC, 2021, p. 22, 28). The ASSA initiative is offered at the institutional level and is located in the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic, indicating the institutional priority of student retention and success. At the inception of the ASSA at our institution, the priority was to focus on students enrolled in identified high-priority modules (HPMs), which are commonly referred to as at-risk modules in many institutions. Institutional data revealed that students who failed in the identified HPMs ran the risk of extending their degree completion time by an additional year. In this regard, the advisors reached out to students in the HPMs via email, inviting them to the ASSA sessions. In the design of our ASSA initiative, the collaborative partnership between the student and the advisor is central to this model, emphasising agentic and interactive conversations. Advisors were assigned specific high-priority modules, and all enrolled students were introduced to the services of the ASSA unit. Before the advising sessions, students completed a pre-appointment survey to help advisors prepare for the session and to identify their current challenges.

Initial observations revealed that while many students received necessary assistance, a considerable number tended to rely heavily on advisors to provide solutions, such as contacting lecturers, tutors and support services on their behalf. This reliance indicated a lack of student agency and a potential disconnection from the advising process. The advisors noted that some students appeared disempowered or detached from suggested strategies, leading to feelings of overwhelm, frustration, or isolation. These students struggled to internalise the proposed solutions as personally relevant tools for academic success, hindering their motivation and limiting the depth of engagement with their challenges. To counter this challenge, the ASSA unit sought alternative strategies to promote active and collaborative participation among students and advisors, enabling them to co-create solutions. Design thinking was identified as a potentially suitable framework for both strategic and operational levels of ASSA. The five stages were identified as being easily transferable into actionable steps within the advising context, thereby shifting the dynamic towards a more reciprocal relationship where students could feel more in control of their academic journeys.

Design thinking framework

The intentional use of the design thinking process in the advisor–student advising sessions, which is regarded as a human-centred approach, offers practical methods and tools to enhance innovation, meaningful problem-solving strategies, and change in a student's advising session. Rooted in empathy, iterative problem-solving, and co-creation, design thinking empowers advisors and students to redefine challenges and develop actionable solutions collaboratively (Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Liedtka, 2015). The design thinking process comprises five key steps: (i) empathise, (ii) define, (iii) ideate, (iv) prototype, and (v) test. This process is regarded as non-linear and iterative, providing an opportunity for advisors to gain a deeper understanding of their students and challenge their assumptions. In this study, we explored how the adapted design thinking process

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used by the advisors at the UWC enhanced student–advisor agency, collaboration, and student-centred engagement.

Design thinking, with its innovative approach, focuses on solving problems and offers a process that helps with gaining a deeper, more holistic understanding of students' complexity. The Stanford design thinking (SDT) model, as seen in Figure 1 below, was used in this study to support and guide the advisor–student advising process at our institution. Stanford design thinking has become a powerful tool used in various departments within higher education institutions to solve complex problems with innovative solutions. According to O'Donoghue (2022), the SDT process involves understanding people's needs, empathising with their experience, reframing the challenge to generate out-of-the-box solutions, prototyping, and continuously refining ideas, and testing these prototypes with real users to create successful products. In this regard, the SDT process encourages teams to prioritise the user while fostering creativity in exploring potential solutions. In the area of AA, the SDT model, as suggested by Watson (2015), provides advisors with a guiding approach and tools to overcome creative blocks, enabling the student and advisor to generate innovative insights and promote more ideas. In Mann's (2020) study, she examines the role of design thinking in AA, applying it at both strategic and operational levels. Her analysis reveals that using the human-centred design thinking process can be a powerful tool in bridging the gap that many students perceive between the institutional offering and the student experience.

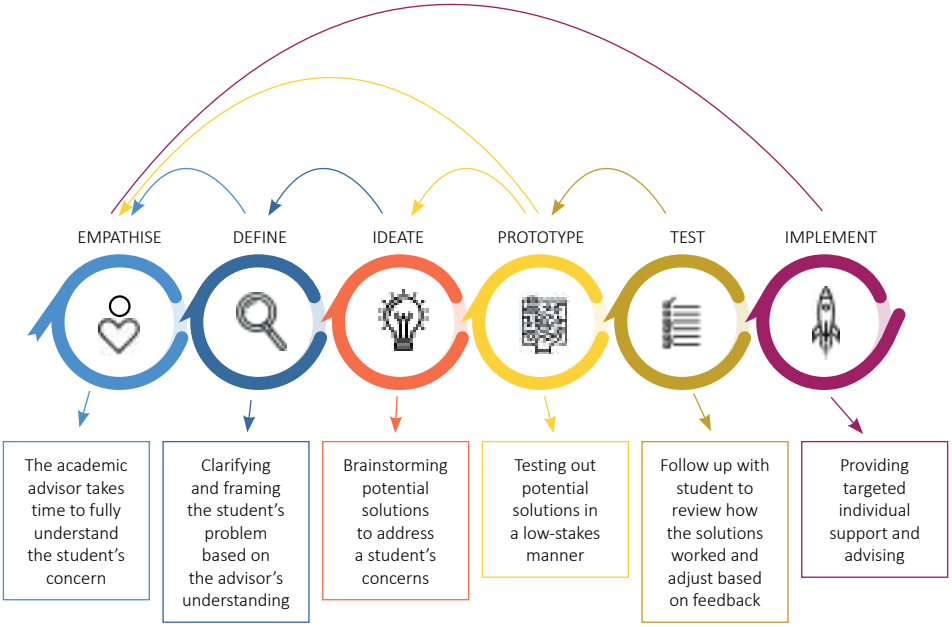

Figure 1: Applying a design thinking approach to academic student success advising (ASSA)

Figure 1 illustrates the phases employed by the advisors at UWC as they interacted with their students during AA sessions. Per Mann (2020), the first phase of empathising with the student is a crucial starting point in the advising relationship. In this phase, the advisors in the study observe students and their behaviours, interact with them, listen intently, and immerse themselves in understanding students' experiences and perspectives. These insights allow the advisors to approach the rest of the design thinking process with a stronger understanding of the context and problem, allowing them to step into the student's shoes. In the second phase, which is the define phase, advisors used insights gathered from empathising to focus on the problem. As stated in the diagram, this stage involved clarifying and framing the students' problems to go beyond superficial engagement, as students described their complexities, problems, and contexts of their challenges. In the ideating phase, the advisors articulate a problem based on the details and understandings they gained from the student. They focus on brainstorming possible solutions with the students. In this third phase, the focus is on exploring diverse solutions and innovative ideas. Students work collaboratively with their advisor to foster creative thinking through a brainstorming activity, addressing the problem at hand. In the prototype phase, the ideas are made tangible (but still in the development stages), the advisor and student work together to explore possible short-term and long-term actions. In the fifth stage of testing, the ideas discussed are put into action by the student. Implementation of short- and long-term solutions is tried out. Reflection and changes are also considered in this next phase.

As mentioned earlier in the article, the process is not linear, and the iterative design thinking process allows advisors and students to loop through the process or re-enter phases as needed to understand or explore problems and solutions together, even bringing in other support professionals to support students. This SDT process creates an environment where the advisor and the student experience a sense of comfort in sharing their thoughts, and the student actively takes ownership of their decisions, thus fostering a greater understanding of agency and accountability on the part of the student. Through the collaborative engagement between the advisor and student, effective solutions could be integrated into the student's routine. Additionally, joint reflection on the process can facilitate the recognition of growth and key lessons learned, leading to further reinforcement of the student's sense of empowerment. This process, when intentionally applied, can create a sense of connectedness or bond between the student and advisor.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, and Schön's (1991) reflective model was applied to examine the reflections-in-action and reflections-on-action of the three institutional AAs during and after the advising sessions.

Schön's (1991) conceptualisation of reflective practice distinguishes between reflection-in-action, where professionals critically analyse and adjust their actions in real time, and reflection-on-action, which involves a retrospective analysis of decisions and their outcomes to inform future practice. This dual lens provided a framework for

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the three advisors to capture both the immediate, real-time adjustments they made during the advising sessions and the retrospective sensemaking that informed their future practice. This iterative process was valuable in the advising process, as it enabled advisors to refine their pedagogical strategies and improve student engagement based on their lived experiences.

Participants

Three institutional advisors participated in this study. They were trained in SDT and implemented this process in their AA sessions in the second semester of 2024. They followed a structured ASSA program incorporating SDT processes into their sessions. All three participants were also co-researchers in the study, and their participation was voluntary.

Data collection instruments

Multiple data collection methods, including weekly written reflections, bi-weekly dialogue sessions, and an end-of-semester focus group interview, were employed to facilitate a rich and triangulated understanding of the advisors' experiences with using design thinking processes in their advising sessions. The weekly written reflections were completed individually by the three advisors at the end of every week to capture their reflections on action. This process enabled the advisors to document the impact of their sessions retrospectively. These written reflections were unstructured but guided by the phases in the design thinking process, documenting insights, challenges, adaptations, and observed student responses. Data were collected from the advisors' reflective reports during and after a session and a focus group discussion. The reflective report writing served as both a data collection and an analytical tool, allowing the advisors to critically engage with their experiences, perspectives, and positionalities as they worked collaboratively with students in the advising sessions, adopting the design thinking process.

The second set of data was collected from the bi-weekly collaborative dialogue sessions in which the program coordinator and the three advisors were involved. These meetings served as a form of collaborative reflection, allowing advisors to share their experiences, seek peer input, and co-develop strategies to enhance their advising sessions. The notes from these meetings, which the program coordinator documented, were used to track evolving perceptions, recurring challenges, and the adaptive use of design thinking. These sessions provided advisors with opportunities for both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, as they could immediately test insights gained from their peers in subsequent advising sessions.

The third data collection method was a focus group interview conducted by the program coordinator at the end of the 2024 academic year. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the three advisors to explore their overall experiences with applying design thinking to the advising sessions, the extent to which it supported relational engagement with students, and its influence on their own sense of agency and that of the students. The focus group discussion was recorded, transcribed, and systematically

analysed by the advisors and the program coordinator to identify recurring themes and patterns, aiming to answer the following research question: How did the implementation of a design thinking approach in the AA sessions enhance the ASSA experience? The focus group session enabled a deeper exploration of patterns and themes that emerged from the written reflections and bi-weekly dialogues.

Their engagement in the reflective process allowed for a deeper analysis and learning. By using this reflective lens, the academic advisors were able to critically examine their application of the design thinking approach in the advising sessions and evaluate how their engagement with students evolved during interactions. The reflective lens also allowed for post-session reflections, which informed future practice. This iterative process of reflection enabled the academic advisors to refine their strategies, fostering a more student-centred and responsive advising framework.

Data analysis

A three-cycle coding process was used to analyse the transcripts, reflective reports, and notes from the bi-weekly dialogue sessions (Saldaña, 2015). In the first round, we worked in pairs to summarise excerpts and add descriptive codes. In the second cycle, we worked together as a team to collapse codes into common descriptions, and during the final third cycle, we grouped codes into categories and identified themes. For this article, we focused on themes related to the academic advisors' experiences with using design thinking in advising sessions and the advisors' perceptions of students' engagement in these sessions. Table 1 outlines the coding, categorisation, and emergence of themes derived from the data analysis of the advisors' reflections on using the design thinking process in the advising sessions.

Table 1. Themes, codes, and categories derived from advisors' reflections on using the design thinking process

Theme	Category	Code
1. Timely and focused advising	Collaborative problem-solving	Collaboration reduces back-and-forth, co-creates solutions
	Structured process	Design thinking offers clear direction and steps
	Proactive engagement	Acting in-the-moment during sessions
	Student-centred focus	Addressing immediate student needs
	Targeted problem identification	Narrowing challenges for quicker resolution
2. Knowledge building and information sharing	Needs-based conversations	Discussing students' academic challenges and needs
	Resource awareness and access	Helping students discover and use available resources
	Guided decision-making	Enabling informed academic and career choices
	Learning strategy sharing	Advising on effective study techniques

Theme	Category	Code
3. Reciprocal conversations	Student–advisor collaboration	Working together to find solutions
	Trust and rapport	Creating comfort and emotional safety in sessions
	Empathy-led engagement	Building deeper connection through empathic listening
	Probing and persistence	Drawing out guarded students through patient questioning
	Mutual learning	Advisors learning from students, and vice versa
	Ongoing feedback and reflection	Students returning with updates and seeking iterative support
4. Agency	Co-created solutions	Students contributing to solution ideation
	Self-initiated action	Students taking steps to connect with resources independently
	Critical reflection and iteration	Students evaluating what works and adapting approaches
	Ownership of learning	Students taking responsibility for implementing learning strategies
	Boundary setting by advisor	Advisors fostering independence by not over-accommodating
	Student self-awareness	Students identifying personal needs and acting on them
	Supportive institutional relationships	Students gaining confidence knowing someone cares

Limitations to the study

A key limitation of this study is its restriction to time and context. This study was conducted over one semester at a single institution, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The findings of this study are specific to a particular organisation, structure, context, and group of students and, in this regard, may not be fully transferable to other institutions. In addition, the small number of participants in the study, comprising only three institutional advisors, implies that the study represents a limited range of experiences and narratives of insights into how design thinking processes were applied to academic student success advising.

Findings and reflections

Four key themes identified are discussed below, providing direct quotes to support the emerging themes from the data analysis:

Did the design thinking process allow for precise and time-efficient advising?
Using the design thinking approach allowed the advisors to provide timely and focused student advising. The empathetic phase created a safe space for students to open up to advisors. Both advisors and students felt relaxed, creating a supportive environment that reduced feelings of awkwardness and allowed the student to share their challenges. The advisor actively listened and gathered detailed information, providing more targeted and responsive support to the student.

As one advisor noted, "*the design thinking process involves collaboration with the student, making it easier and more effective to address a student's problem, thereby reducing the back and forth with probing.*" Another advisor highlighted that the design thinking process provided a structure and a clearer direction for them to advise the student:

> *Having that process in place, also gave us a clearer direction of what we need to be doing. I think sometimes we get into the space and then there's so many things that comes up and you don't always know, but then by having that design thinking process, you're able to know this is the steps that I need to follow to help the student.*

The advisors were able to filter down and reach students' challenges at a quicker pace and offer time-efficient advising, as noted: "*Being very specific in following the design thinking approach helped a lot in narrowing the students challenge and zoning into the challenge quicker to make it easier for the student to get the assistance as quick as possible*." The advisors acknowledged that the design thinking approach allowed a proactive approach and for them to focus on the immediate needs of the student which resulted in reducing the number of repeat consultations.

Was there professional development and knowledge building?
The clarity and structured guidance provided by the student and the advisor during the defining and ideating stage of design thinking assisted the advisors in sharing critical information and resources with students. In seeking information to assist students, the advisors were able to strengthen their own knowledge and understanding of university policies and program requirements. As one of the advisors noted:

> *... looking for resources and information to support the student in reaching their academic goals in the short term as well as in the long term, personally helped me develop a deeper understanding of university structures, policies, and resources, enabling me to navigate and support the student more effectively.*

In guiding students through academic challenges, the advisors refined their ability to diagnose learning difficulties and provide appropriate support. This enhanced their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as noted by one of the advisors:

> *I became good at identifying patterns in student struggles and crafting effective interventions for them, for example, a student struggling with programme choice in the Education faculty, I actually researched some special needs schools as well to give her*

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> *advice, and then she can make an informed decision, I was glad that I could assist her and learn in the process.*

This process allowed the advisors to reflect on their advising approaches and enhance their own knowledge and skills in advising.

Did the reciprocal conversation allow more collaboration and information sharing?
Using the design thinking framework enabled a reciprocal nature of communication between the student and advisor, where both parties engaged deeply in conversation, building trust and understanding throughout the advising process. The advisors tailored their communication to diverse student needs, strengthening their ability to explain complex academic concepts in accessible ways. One advisor noted how building trust made the reciprocal conversation easier to support the student:

> *... the student felt more comfortable to speak to me because it almost felt like they had this trust in me, as if I knew what they were doing and feeling because I was able to say 'okay what is your concern?, what is your challenge?, what is your immediate need?, how can I help you?'...*

In addition, the advisor noted: "*... just by empathising with the student they really felt comfortable to engage further with you as the advisor and then sharing things that would not have come out easily if I opted to just start off the engagement in a very formal non-empathetic manner.*" Engaging with students from different backgrounds fostered cultural competence and empathy, which allowed for effective communication and information sharing, as noted in the following quote: "*many students requested resources from us as the advisor, they would always return to an advising session to give me feedback, they would sit here and say what helped them, what challenged them and how they changed things to work for them … they would also feel comfortable to say … 'I've tried to implement what we've discussed, but it's now not working in a different module. So how can we have a different way around it?'*" The return of students to engage in conversations with the advisors can also be attributed to intentional engagement through active listening to students' experiences, challenges, and goals, along with the encouraged mutual exchange, where students' voices shape the advising process rather than engaging in the traditional one-way advisory model, allowed for reciprocal conversations and the sharing of information.

Was student agency enhanced in the advising process?
The intentional use of the design thinking process by the advisors provided an opportunity for students to develop agency in the advising process. This approach shifted advising from a directive model, where advisors provide solutions and challenges, to a collaborative, student-centred process that empowered students to take ownership of their academic journeys. Here is an example of a student exercising agency after their advising session: "*… after we had the conversation about special schools, the student demonstrated her agency when she contacted the school principal, and now she's going to the school to do her observation sessions ...".* Another example of

students demonstrating agency is in the following quote: "*… the collaboration within the solutions during ideation made it easier for the student to say, 'Okay, I got this, I know what I'm meant to do, and will implement it'... And then they will pop an email saying, 'It's working', … it's always great to get feedback.*" These reciprocal conversations encouraged shared ownership in the advising process, thereby validating students' agency in shaping their learning paths. This sense of ownership empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning, making informed decisions about their academic journey and seeking support when needed.

Discussion

Sellon et al. (2023) emphasise that incorporating design thinking into AA has the potential to provide advisors and students with a framework for addressing and overcoming challenges through open communication, reflection, and planning. As reflected in the advisors' comments above and supported by Mann's (2020) study, the engagement between students and their advisors encourages students to actively participate in academic experiences while simultaneously expanding and developing those experiences (Mann, 2020). In this study, it was evident that the student–advisor relationship evolved into a partnership built on trust and reciprocal conversations, with the student and advisor listening and learning from each other. The reciprocal relationship between advisor and student involves information sharing and knowledge building. Ige et al. (2023) describe this partnership as going beyond simply acknowledging students' voices, but also recognising the value of students' contributions to the conversations and the role of both student and advisor in resolving issues of concern. This study reveals that the use of the design thinking process in AA fosters a collaborative and iterative approach where advisors and students engage as co-creators in shaping meaningful learning experiences. This aligns with Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) emphasis on partnership as a reciprocal process, ensuring that both advisors and students contribute equally, though in different ways, and bring their unique perspectives, experiences, and expertise to problem-solving and decision-making in the advising process.

Conclusion

The study reveals that integrating design thinking principles into ASSA at our institution offers a transformative approach that places students at the heart of the advising process. Co-creating solutions alongside students, rather than for students, shifted our approach from being top-down to fostering a collaborative and reciprocal partnership. This process cultivated shared agency, enhanced knowledge building, facilitated information sharing, and strengthened professional competencies for both the advisor and the student. By the advisors intentionally engaging in design thinking and co-creating with students during advising sessions, both parties participated in a mutually beneficial learning process that fostered critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, listening skills, reciprocal conversations, and a sense of agency. This dynamic interaction not only empowered students to navigate their academic journeys with confidence but also

enabled academic advisors to refine their advising practices through continuous learning and reflective engagement.

The advisors found the use of design thinking to be highly beneficial in the ASSA process at UWC, as it streamlined student engagement and enhanced problem-solving efficiency. The advisors acknowledged that by facilitating a structured yet flexible iteration through the five stages of empathising, defining, ideating, prototyping, and testing, this approach enabled students to articulate their needs, identify challenges, and access appropriate support more rapidly. The early identification of challenges in the advising session enabled timely interventions, thereby fostering student success and enhancing overall academic outcomes.

In conclusion, while this article adds to the growing body of literature on AA innovation and design thinking by offering empirical evidence of its effectiveness in a higher education context, the limitations outlined create opportunities for further in-depth research that can generate practical insights for academic advisors and institutions aiming to adopt similar methodologies to empower students and enhance academic outcomes.

Ethics statement

This reflective study was conducted within the institutional ethical guidelines. All participating staff provided informed and voluntary reflections, and anonymity was safeguarded throughout. As the authors also occupy roles within the program, steps were taken to minimise dual-role bias and maintain professional boundaries. No identifiable information is reported, and participation had no impact on staff members' professional standing.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conceptualising student resilience in higher education: A scoping review

Ukuqonda ingqiqo yokomelela kwimfundo ephakamileyo: Uphononongo olubanzi

Deerdré le Roux[1]

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ABSTRACT

The construct of resilience has received growing attention in the higher education literature over the past three decades. However, conceptualisations of resilience are widely varied. Since resilience has often been viewed as a fixed trait an individual either possesses or lacks, the influence of context on resilience is frequently underestimated. The purpose of this review is to gain a better understanding of how resilience is conceptualised in the broader context of higher education literature. A scoping review of the conceptualisation of resilience within higher education is provided based on the methodological framework for scoping reviews developed by Arksey and O'Malley. The scoping study method is guided by the need to identify all pertinent literature, irrespective of study design. The initial search via the EBSCO, ERIC and PsychINFO databases yielded 189 records. Altogether, 41 contributions were included in the scoping analysis. Each resource was evaluated thematically to identify key categorisations of resilience. Three overarching themes were identified, including (1) resilience as an internal construct, (2) resilience as an external or environmental construct, and (3) resilience as a malleable, growth construct. These categorisations can equip universities to design more comprehensive student support programs that do not focus on a singular interpretation of resilience. For educators, practitioners and policymakers this review highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to fostering resilience in higher education. Future research on how resilience is conceptualised specifically within an African context is recommended.

KEYWORDS

Resilience, higher education, student, mental health, student experience

ISISHWANKATHELO

Uluvo lokomelela lufumene ingqwalasela ekhulayo kwiincwadi zophando zemfundo ephakamileyo kule minyaka ingamashumi amathathu idlulileyo. Nangona kunjalo, iindlela zokuyiqonda nokuyichaza le ngcamango zahlukene kakhulu. Ukusukela oko ukomelela kudla ngokuthathwa njengopawu olungaguqukiyo umntu anokuba nalo okanye angabi nalo, imeko-bume ekomeleleni ihlala ingahoywanga ngokwaneleyo. Injongo yolu phononongo ibikukufumana ukuqonda okungcono malunga nendlela ukomelela okuqondwa ngayo ngaphakathi komxholo obanzi wemfundo ephakamileyo. Uphononongo olubanzi lwemigaqo yokuchazwa kokomelela kwimfundo ephakamileyo lunikezelwe, kusetyenziswa indlela yo-Arksey no-O'Malley njengesiseko solu phononongo. Le ndlela ijolise ekufumaneni yonke imithombo efanelekileyo, nokuba iyahluka kuyilo lophando. Uphando lokuqala ngeziseko zeenkcukacha ze-EBSCO, ERIC, kunye ne-PsychINFO lufumene iirekhodi ezili-189.

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Ekugqibeleni, inani elingama-41 leminikelo lafakwa kwingxoxo ephambili. Umthombo ngamnye wahlalutywa ngokwemixholo ukuze kuchongwe iintlobo eziphambili zokomelela. Kwachongwa imixholo emithathu ephambili: (1) ukomelela njengopawu lwangaphakathi, (2) ukomelela njengopawu lwangaphandle okanye ehlobene nendawo-bume, (3) nokomelela njengopawu elinokuguquka okanye eliphuhlayo. Ezi ntlobo zinganceda amaziko emfundo ephakamileyo ukuba ayile iinkqubo ezibanzi zokuxhasa abafundi ezingajolisi kuphela kwindlela enye yokuyiqonda inkalo yokomelela. Kubafundisi, iingcali, kunye nabenzi benkqubo olu phononongo lubonisa isidingo sendlela ebanzi, enamacala amaninzi, ekukhuliseni ukomelela kwimfundo ephakamileyo. Uphando oluzayo luyacetyiswa ukuze kuhlolwe ngakumbi indlela ukomelela okuqondwa ngayo ngokukodwa kumxholo waseAfrika.

AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO
Ukomelela, imfundo ephakamileyo, umfundi, impilo yengqondo, amava omfundi

Introduction

Understanding how resilience is fostered in higher education students has been a topic of interest amongst researchers for over thirty years (Brewer et al., 2019). Higher education students have been identified as a 'high-risk' group predisposed to mental health issues, mostly due to a combination of academic, social, economic, and personal stressors (Larcombe et al., 2024). Higher education students are particularly more vulnerable than the general population due to their lack of life experience, limited psychological tolerance, instability, underdeveloped cognitive capacities, immature defence mechanisms, and frequent inability to handle unexpected life events (Li & Peng, 2022). The transition to university is often a period of significant upheaval, necessitating rapid adjustment and substantial personal resources. When transitioning to university, students may face the challenge of relocating to a new environment away from trusted friends and family. Students are therefore challenged to work on forming new social connections, overseeing household responsibilities, and managing their time and finances, all of which can be daunting new experiences (Brett et al., 2023). According to Jillani et al. (2023), students find the transition from school to university a demanding experience that can either adversely affect their lives or offer substantial personal satisfaction. Fortunately, studies have shown that students with higher resilience during this transitional phase are better equipped to meet emerging challenges and maintain positive subjective well-being (Liu et al., 2022).

This period of transition can be viewed through the lens of Ungar's social-ecological resilience framework, which views resilience not as an individual or internal trait, but as a product of students' ability to make use of the resources around them to cope with challenges (Ungar, 2012). This theory shifts the focus more to the student's social and physical environment as the primary source of resources to facilitate personal growth (Ungar, 2008). The shift in how resilience is understood is similar to how Bronfenbrenner (1979) shifted the focus from the individual to the multiple systems within which the individual interacts (Ungar, 2012). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), resilience should be seen as a dynamic process within in individuals' context, specifically their family (microsystem) and broader community and cultural value systems (macrosystem), rather than internal individual capacities (Antony, 2022).

It is important to note that an increasing amount of research has reported that apparently universal definitions of resilience are relative to culture and context (Masten, 2014). Within African contexts, culture (macrosystem) plays a key role in fostering resilience, largely due to the principles of collectivism and *ubuntu*. African cultural norms emphasise communal living, mutual reliance, and shared responsibility, rather than focusing on individual traits (Balogun & Woldegiorgis, 2024). Mbiti's (1970, p. 141) renowned statement, "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual" serves as a powerful illustration of this worldview. From this perspective, resilience is embedded within cultural practices and collective support systems. According to Theron et al. (2012), extended family networks, community bonds, religious customs and spirituality offer protection to individuals facing traumatic life events. As an example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, African students leveraged community traditions of reciprocal aid, emphasising that collective duty plays a key role in upholding resilience (Cockcroft et al., 2024).

Until now, the perspective on the mental health of university students has been a deficit one, emphasising the individual's discomfort, anxiety, and depression without considering the socio-cultural environment or the resilience that many students build in the face of stress and/or hardship (Brewer et al., 2022). The resilience portfolio model challenges this notion, shifting the focus from the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of students to the use of strengths and internal capacities that enable students to navigate challenges better (Fang et al., 2024). This theory claims that the functioning of a student after experiencing stressful conditions is determined by the individual's coping strategies (Grych et al., 2015). Those with more or higher levels of protective factors may deal with stress or adversity more effectively and in turn demonstrate better functioning over time than those with fewer or lower levels of protective factors. The model proposes that internal protective factors for healthy functioning in response to stress consist of individuals' inner strengths or assets, such as optimism, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence and reflective ability (Turner & Holdsworth, 2023).

The increased interest in resilience has prompted responses from universities. In health professional education, for instance, a recent evaluation of the literature indicated a move toward the proactive promotion of resilience strategies. The evaluation also brought attention to the lack of consensus surrounding the definition of resilience and the limited number of studies addressing the enhancement of student resilience (Brewer et al., 2019). In general, resilience is regarded as a crucial factor that distinguishes between success and failure in overcoming life's challenges. However, as noted by Idris et al. (2019), there is no universally accepted definition of resilience. Brewer et al. (2019) reported that a review conducted in the context of teacher education revealed resilience to be a developing topic that lacked methodological rigour and conceptual clarity. Duchek et al. (2023) point out that to date, there has been limited research on resilience within the higher education context. Although the education literature offers insights into promoting resilience among children and adolescents through school programs, and the management literature addresses resilience promotion in organisational settings,

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there is scant research on how universities can cultivate students' resilience and effectively prepare them for their future careers.

The purpose of the current review was to enhance the understanding of student resilience in the context of higher education, going beyond a focus on health and teacher education. Conceptualisations of resilience differ greatly; many see resilience as a fixed quality that a person either possesses or does not, and the influence of context on resilience is frequently overlooked (Datzer et al., 2022). Although variations in definitions or conceptualisations of resilience could be anticipated due to the diverse fields and professions covered in the reviewed research, this presents challenges for educators and researchers.

Against this background, a scoping review of the conceptualisation of resilience in higher education is provided. The following research question was posed:

How is student resilience conceptualised within higher education literature?

The research question prompts scrutiny of the conceptual clarity of resilience in higher education. This focus on conceptualisation and description seeks to enhance understanding of the diverse perspectives within higher education that contribute to the concept of student resilience.

Method

A scoping review serves the following basic purposes: it orients the reader on the current status of the research literature on a particular issue; it helps clarify concepts and relevant conceptual aspects; it comments on the evidence that is now available; and it identifies knowledge and research gaps (Brewer et al., 2019). The methodological framework for scoping reviews developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) served as the basis for this review. Instead of being driven by a narrowly focused research question suited for searching specific study designs, as seen in a systematic review, the scoping study method is guided by the need to identify all pertinent literature, irrespective of study design. The current scoping review was guided by the framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), and the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist (Tricco et al., 2018) was used to guide methodological quality and transparency (Tricco et al., 2018).

Search strategy and data sources

Given the scoping review's constrained scope, depth, and limited timeframe, only the EBSCOhost, ERIC and PsychINFO databases were utilised. Boolean connectors (AND, OR) were used to combine search terms such as 'higher education', 'university', 'college', 'student' and 'resilien*'. To narrow the focus to the most recent published literature, the search will be limited to the last five years (2019-2024).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were used when conducting the literature search. Inclusion criteria included English publications published between

2019 and 2024. The study population was required to include higher education students. Exclusion criteria for the literature selection included research published in a language other than English, studies focused on school-aged children or on higher education corporate structures or higher education staff, and studies for which the full paper was not accessible (abstract only), as well as grey literature. The detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Studies in which resilience related to higher education students was clearly defined	Study population focused on school-aged children or on higher education corporate structures or higher education staff
English publication in peer review journal	Published in a language other than English
Published between 2019 and 2024	Grey literature
Full paper accessible	Only abstract accessible

Literature selection

Figure 1 displays the flowchart depicting the search strategy and the process of study selection. The initial search via the EBSCO, ERIC and PsychINFO databases yielded 189 records. A review of the titles, abstracts and keywords indicated a large number of studies which did not include a clear discussion and definition of the concept 'resilience'. A number of studies were also identified in which the focus was on the university as a corporation or on resilience in school-aged children. A total of 148 records were excluded based on one of the inclusion criteria not being met or at least one of the exclusion criteria being present. No further studies were identified through the reference list of 41 records. As a result, a final total of 41 contributions were included in the scoping review.

Table 2 contains information regarding the 41 included contributions. The aim of the subsequent sections is to outline the pertinent themes that surfaced regarding how resilience was conceptualised in the 41 studies incorporated in this scoping review. First, the significant characteristics of each article are examined to establish context. Thereafter, the three identified themes are discussed in more detail.

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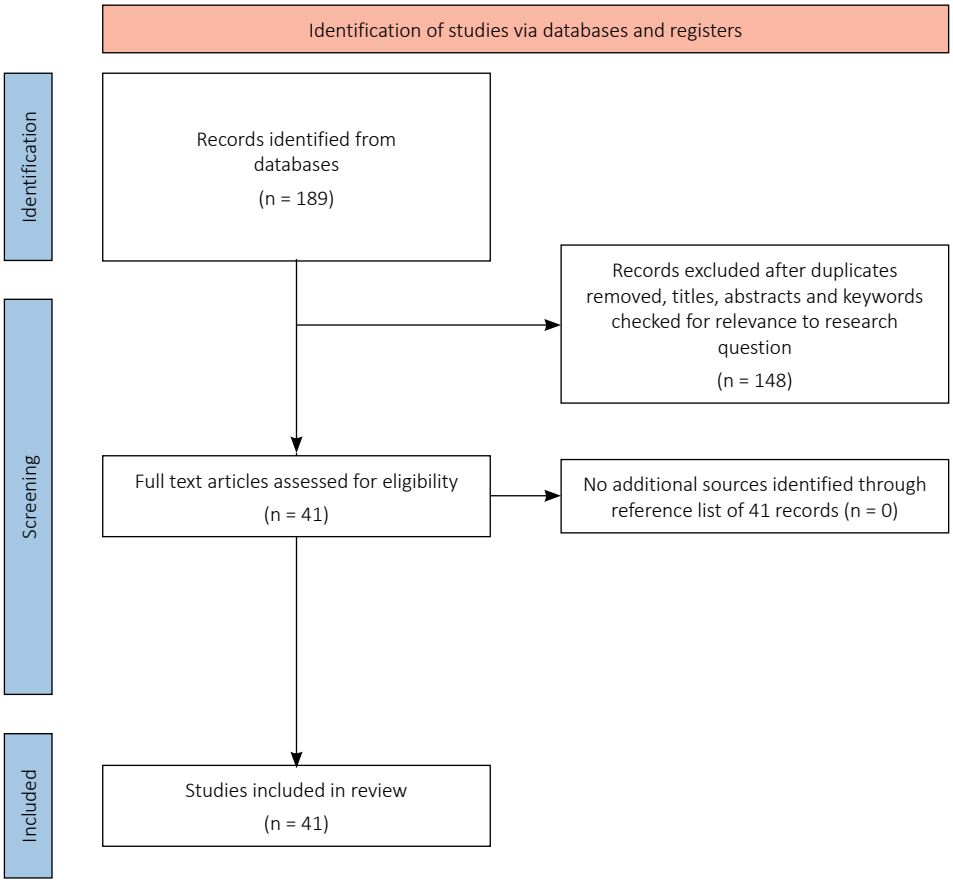

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of search strategy and selection (Adapted from Page et al., 2021)

Table 2. Overview of included contributions

Year	Author	Title	Resilience definition	Research approach
2023	Abdolrezapour et al.	Self-efficacy and resilience as predictors of students' academic motivation in online education	"students' ability to cope with adversities and succeed in life"	Quantitative
2023	Al Omari et al.	Correlates of resilience among university students in Oman: A cross-sectional study	"the resilience of a person is a dynamic adaptive process to manage stress and return to the normal state"	Quantitative

Year	Author	Title	Resilience definition	Research approach
2022	Ang et al.	Generation Z undergraduate students' resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study	"Resilient students are characterised by their ability to utilise resources or seek help to mitigate the challenges and excel in their academic pursuits"	Qualitative
2023	Bharti et al.	Mindfulness and subjective well-being of Indian university students: Role of resilience during COVID-19 pandemic	"resilience has also been conceptualised as a dynamic process by some researchers"	Quantitative
2023	Brett at al.	Determinants of wellbeing in university students: The role of residential status, stress, loneliness, resilience, and sense of coherence	"the process by which an individual 'bounces back' from adversity, enabling them to respond to stressful situations in a positive way and both maintain their well-being and/or use the experience to flourish by developing their personal skills and resources"	Quantitative
2019	Brewer et al.	Resilience in higher education students: A scoping review	"resilience enables people to withstand stress or adversity, maintain well-being and return to their pre-existing state"	Scoping review
2022	Brewer et al.	Enhancing student resilience by targeting staff resilience, attitudes and practices	"from a socio-ecological perspective views both healthy structures (e.g., how we design the curriculum), and healthy processes (e.g., how we interacted with students) being preconditions for positive student outcomes"	Qualitative
2022	Ceglédi et al.	The effect of resilience and gender on the persistence of higher education students	"The word is of Latin origin and signifies rebound, spring, elasticity, and the perseverance despite adverse circumstances"	Quantitative

Year	Author	Title	Resilience definition	Research approach
2022	Cruz et al.	The effect of resilience on entrepreneurial intention in higher education students in a Post-Covid Stage 19	"resilience in a person depends on a series of factors that influence the individual, such as social interactions, external factors, and beliefs, and events that influence a person"	Quantitative
2022	Datzer et al.	Support and perceived social support in first year university students	"students' capacity to overcome setbacks"	Qualitative
2019	Demir & Aliyev	Resilience among Syrian university students in Turkey	"resilience can be described as having developable characteristics which make individuals remain standing, overcome difficulties and show a better development than expected despite the negative and stressful life experiences"	Qualitative
2023	Duchek et al.	Mastering team crises: A play-oriented approach to foster resilience capabilities in student teams	"resilience can be generally defined as positive adaptation in the face of risk or adversity"	Qualitative
2022	Ellis & Johnston	Resilience, higher education and widening participation: Generating change for care experienced students	"when individuals are personally able to determine their own outcomes, despite their circumstances, without additional help"	Mixed-method
2023	Emerson et al.	Psychological distress, burnout, and business student turnover: The role of resilience as a coping mechanism	"conceptualised by Connor and Davidson (2003) as one's capacity to persevere and rebound under adversity"	Quantitative
2022	Fernández-Castillo & Fernández-Prados	Burnout, resilience and self-esteem in school teaching university students	"an adaptive ability to transform challenges into opportunities, to learn from demanding situations, or, ultimately, to react and face adversity efficiently and recover from it"	Quantitative

Year	Author	Title	Resilience definition	Research approach
2019	Idris et al.	The influence of resilience on psychological well-being of Malaysian university undergraduates	"nurture resilience by cultivating positive emotions in order to recover from adversities. The ability to bounce back from adversities also enhances psychological well-being"	Quantitative
2023	Jillani et al.	Role of emotional intelligence, resilience, and year of enrollment for adjustment among university students	"a personal capability to use internal and external available resources for dealing with various situational and ongoing challenges"	Quantitative
2024	Kashif et al.	Effect of emotional intelligence on resilience among university students at undergraduate level	"the capacity to twist yet not break"	Quantitative
2023	Kaya et al.	Investigating the relationship between university students' resilience, cognitive emotion regulation strategies and metacognitions	"an individual's capacity to overcome adversity in his or her life, to achieve positive outcomes despite the risk factors influencing his or her life, and to the behavioural adaptation determined by the individual's internal and external circumstances"	Quantitative
2021	Kennett et al.	The indirect effects of academic stress on student outcomes through resourcefulness and perceived control of stress	"to overcome, potentially even prosper despite misfortune"	Quantitative
2020	Kotera et al.	Mental health of Malaysian university students: UK comparison, and relationship between negative mental health attitudes, self-compassion, and resilience	"a comprehensive construct embracing internal resources and behaviours, which enable people to cope with challenging life circumstances, and strengthen themselves from such experiences"	Quantitative

Year	Author	Title	Resilience definition	Research approach
2024	Larcombe et al.	Are international students relatively resilient? Comparing international and domestic students' levels of self-compassion, mental health and wellbeing	"when students engage in adaptive or positive coping strategies to manage the various stressors they encounter"	Quantitative
2022	Li & Peng	Evaluation of expressive arts therapy on the resilience of university students in COVID-19: A network analysis approach	"capabilities to adapt well and promote positivechange in the face of adversity, stress, trauma, and even a direct threat"	Mixed-method
2023	Litwic-Kaminska et al.	Resilience, positivity and social support as perceived stress predictors among university students	"an enduring characteristic of a person that manifests itself in two dimensions: personal competence and acceptance of self and life"	Quantitative
2022	Liu et al.	The association between mindfulness and resilience among university students: A meta-analysis	"an individual's capacity to achieve positive adjustment and development during adverse and stressful circumstances"	Meta-analysis
2022	Maniram	Exploring the resilience and epistemic access of first-year female students in higher education	"described as a process, a personal trait or an outcome"	Qualitative
2024	Moriña & Martins	Success and self-determination: A systematic review of the narratives of students and graduates with disabilities	"resilience is linked to self-determination"	Systematic review
2019	Munro et al.	International field school reciprocity: Using a whole-of-university approach to create positive change in Northern Uganda	"ways in which students navigate through environments in which the parameters are not always known and where failure is possible"	Qualitative

Year	Author	Title	Resilience definition	Research approach
2022	Pertegal-Felices et al.	Resilience and academic dropout in Ecuadorian university students during COVID-19	"a positive attitude towards the ability to maintain or regain mental health in the face of adversity"	Quantitative
2023	Price	A review of resilience in higher education: Toward the emerging concept of designer resilience	"the ability to bounce back from adversity and cope with stress"	Scoping review
2022	Sağar	The effect of solution-focused group counseling on the resilience of university students	"the ability to adapt positively to difficult and stressful processes in life"	Mixed-method
2022	Saifullah & Khan	Relationship between grit and academic resilience among university students	"one's capacity to recover from adversity or the capacity to sustain psychological equilibrium in the face of adversity"	Quantitative
2023	Serpa-Barrientos et al.	The relationship between positive and negative stress and posttraumatic growth in university students: The mediating role of resilience	"adaptation to new, critical, and unexpected circumstances or situations to return to normality"	Quantitative
2023	Tanacioğlu Aydin & Pekşen Süslü	The mediating role of difficulties in emotion regulation in the relationship between childhood trauma and resilience among university students	"a dynamic process including the positive adaptation of a traumatized person who has had severe life experiences"	Quantitative
2019	Traş et al.	A review on university students' resilience and levels of social exclusion and forgiveness	"focuses on the strengths of individuals and their ability to overcome negative situations by using their own sources"	Quantitative

Year	Author	Title	Resilience definition	Research approach
2023	Valverde-Janer et al.	Study of factors associated with the development of emotional intelligence and resilience in university students	"the capacity to overcome emotional pain or difficult experiences and to be ourselves again"	Qualitative
2019	van Agteren et al.	Make it measurable: Assessing psychological distress, wellbeing and resilience at scale in higher education	"student's perceived ability to manage the stressors in their life"	Quantitative
2022	Vilca-Pareja et al.	Emotional intelligence, resilience, and self-esteem as predictors of satisfaction with life in university students	"the ability to show courage and adaptability when facing life's misfortunes" "It is a positive trait that moderates the negative effects of stress and helps individuals adapt"	Quantitative
2023	Xing et al.	Mobilising resilience to symbolic violence with Chinese international research students in Australia: A Bourdieusian perspective	"after a stressful event, is able to restore balance"	Quantitative
2021	Zainoodin et al.	Gratitude and its relationship to resilience and academic performance among university students	"a skill to overcome any difficulties or challenging problems that create stress, as the person can bounce back and continue in their lives and grow"	Quantitative
2020	Zembylas	Against the psychologization of resilience: Towards an onto-political theorization of the concept and its implications for higher education	"proper functioning of the person after life difficulties"	Conceptual and theoretical analysis

Discussion

Resilience holds a significant place in contemporary higher education discussions as it pertains to how students navigate unpredictable environments with unknown parameters, where the prospect of failure is present (Munro et al., 2019). The term 'resilience' is derived from the Latin word *resilire*, signifying the ability to bounce back or rebound. In the realm of research, the concept of resilience finds its roots in material sciences, symbolising a material's capacity to revert to its initial state following the impact of external forces (Duchek et al., 2023). Although the results of the analysis show that over the past five years there has been a rise in interest in resilience in the literature on higher education, there are several problems that have affected how this concept is understood. One such problem is the absence of a generally agreed-upon definition of resilience (Brewer et al., 2019).

While definitions of resilience vary considerably, the foundation of the concept primarily stems from the research conducted by Connor and Davidson (2003). This includes the definition that resilience encompasses the personal attributes that facilitate an individual's ability to flourish amidst adversity. Resilience has the capacity to transform life during times of adversity. While it may be present in various aspects of life, it tends to develop more robustly during unanticipated challenges (Pertegal-Felices et al., 2022). In agreement with this understanding, Sağar (2022) states that resilience is characterised as the process of grappling with stressful experiences and successfully adapting to these negative life events. Although previous studies have offered varying definitions of resilience, there is a consistent consensus that resilience is an adaptive process that enables individuals to manage stress and return to a normal state (Al Omari et al., 2023). Several studies have demonstrated the importance of resilience in adapting to new, critical, and unexpected circumstances or situations, facilitating a return to normality (Serpa-Barrientos et al., 2023). It encompasses the process of being flexible to adapting to numerous challenging life experiences. Being flexible does not imply the absence of difficulties or negative situations; rather, it refers to the ability to successfully recover and return to the prior state in the face of risky conditions, despite significant threats to adaptation and development (Traş et al., 2019). Emerson et al. (2023) define resilience as an individual-level attribute that fosters adaptation, mitigates the adverse impacts of stress, and facilitates coping with challenging situations. Bharti et al. (2023) state that resilience can be conceptualised according to two different schools of thought: one perspective views resilience as a relatively stable personality trait, while the other considers it a capacity that can evolve over time, depending on the circumstances. Brewer et al. (2019, p. 1109) note that resilience has been defined in some ways as "thriving" rather than just "surviving". According to Price (2023), in the context of higher education, resilience is a particular skill to be utilised to deal with obstacles and unfavourable situations. Price claims that resilience can be conceptualised as a distinct capability that individuals can tap into when navigating setbacks and negative events in the higher education environment and can be viewed as a precursor to well-being (Price, 2023).

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Expressing a wider view, Ang et al. (2022) contend that resilience can be developed through both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors that enhance resilience in students include the desire to succeed, and personal motivation. Extrinsic factors involve support from friends, family, and teachers, and religious influences. Jillani et al. (2023) regard resilience as the student's ability to utilise both internal and external resources to manage various situational and ongoing challenges. It is a process that evolves over time, influenced by age-related maturation and increased interaction with the environment. As resilience develops, it concurrently enhances the student's psychological and physical health. Consistent with this perspective, Kaya et al. (2023) contend that resilience refers to an individual's capacity to overcome adversity, achieve positive outcomes despite the presence of risk factors, and adapt behaviourally, based on internal and external circumstances. The loss of a loved one, physical or mental abuse, abandonment, failure, and poverty are all examples of challenging situations. However, students can generate the necessary biological, psychological, or social factors to withstand and eventually recover from these adversities (Valverde-Janer et al., 2023).

Three broad conceptualisations of resilience are discussed below, namely resilience as an internal construct, resilience as an external/environmental construct, resilience as a malleable, growth construct, which will be unpacked into sub-themes.

Resilience as an internal construct

Resilience as a stable trait

Findings from the review indicate that most authors view resilience as an internal construct or trait. Up to the present, most higher education research has concentrated on traits at the individual level (Duchek et al. 2023). According to research, resilience was initially viewed as a set of fixed traits of an individual, which was investigated through the use of psychometric questionnaires, such as the Hammadi Dispositional Resilience Scale (Litwic-Kaminska et al., 2023). Datzer et al. (2022, p. 2562) reported that respondents in their study held implicit beliefs regarding "resilience as a stable personal characteristic".

Resilience as a skill or capacity

Brewer et al. (2022) characterise resilience as either a skill (such as using coping mechanisms, self-motivation, or managing conflicting interests) or as an inherent and unchanging personality trait within the individual. Respondents in the study by Datzer et al. (2022) regarded individual-inherent resources as less flexible due to the belief that students can only develop positively if they are able to adapt to adversity in their own personal capacity. Supporting this notion, Duchek et al. (2023) comment that previous studies focused on the individual abilities and traits of students to foster resilience. The literature has similarly indicated that individuals' personal characteristics, such as intrinsic determination and desire, serve as foundational elements of resilience (Ang et al., 2022).

Internal resources, self-sufficiency and intrinsic motivation

Resilience is often linked to an individual's inner resources and their capacity to be self-sufficient. According to Cruz et al. (2022), individuals who exhibit high levels of resilience are characterised by perseverance, self-sufficiency, and goal-setting. They persist in striving to achieve their objectives despite the difficulties or challenges involved. Datzer et al. (2022) also note that respondents in a study viewed these personal resources as vital to their adjustment in the face of adversity, suggesting that individuals should rely on their internal capacities to cope with difficulties. The role of intrinsic motivation and self-determination in fostering resilience is closely related, as personal determination, aspiration and tenacity enable students to reach their goals despite challenges (Ang et al., 2022). Moriña and Martins (2024) emphasise the connection between resilience and self-determination, noting how self-determination and inner drive are key elements in the formation of resilience. Ellis and Johnston (2024) contend that resilience is an individual's ability to control their outcomes on their own by independent of external factors

Resilience as a protective factor for mental health

Resilience has also been linked to benefits for mental health. According to Kennett et al. (2021), while there is ongoing dispute regarding its precise definition, resilience is widely acknowledged as a comprehensive construct that encompasses internal resources and behaviours that empower individuals to manage difficult life circumstances and consequently overcome difficulties. Resilience has been fundamentally associated with flexibility, positive adaptation, the maintenance of psychological well-being despite difficulties, and the reacquisition of psychological health (Tanacioğlu Aydin & Pekşen Süslü, 2023). According to Brewer (2019), resilience can be defined as an adaptive response that is constructive in the face of major adversity or as a means of assisting a person in maintaining their psychological well-being through the management of obstacles, failures, and other stressors. Emerson et al. (2023) describes resilience as a coping strategy that might lessen psychological suffering and academic burnout.

Resilience as external/environmental construct

Shifting the focus from individual to environmental resilience

Past research on resilience predominantly focused on how students could cultivate their resilience on their own. Ellis and Johnston (2024) found a tendency in research to overly highlight an individual's resilience while neglecting the role of environmental factors in the development of resilience. Duchek et al. (2023) argue that greater emphasis should be given to exploring how environmental factors, such as support networks, might contribute significantly to the development of student resilience. Brewer et al. (2019) found that by engaging in facilitated discussions about resilience and presenting a resilience model grounded in current research, the participants of a study transitioned from viewing resilience as an inherent attribute or skill possessed by individuals in their pre-program perspectives to adopting a more contemporary understanding of resilience

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as an ecological process after the program. In a study conducted by Datzer et al. (2022), it was found that framing resilience as an inherent trait, whether malleable or fixed, may lead to the stigmatisation of failure as a character flaw, especially if it is considered independent of the context. Kaya et al. (2023) explicitly state that resilience is not a personality trait.

Community resources

Social cohesion and community support are considered significant external resources that contribute to the development of resilience (Datzer et al., 2022). While the historical focus of resilience theory has been on the strategies and adaptations employed by individuals surpassing expectations, it is crucial to also contemplate the modifications that can be made to environmental factors to facilitate the flourishing of individuals (Ellis & Johnston, 2024). According to Ang et al. (2022), resilient students can be distinguished by their capacity to effectively utilise resources and seek assistance to overcome challenges, thereby excelling in their academic pursuits. Datzer et al. (2022) note that the exosystem approach to resilience has surprisingly received little attention. Within the exosystem, elements such as community and social services interact with individuals, providing support and enhancing their resilience in the face of adversity. Intrinsic values, including strength, determination, and a future-oriented mindset, combined with the development of a sense of belonging and social support, are qualities commonly found in resilient students.

Relationship building

In the study by Ang et al. (2022), participants primarily developed resilience through social connections. Relationships with parents, friends, and significant others, such as teachers, fostered students' resilience. One crucial approach to enhancing resilience is fostering healthy family and community environments, which enable individuals to develop and utilise natural defence mechanisms effectively. A supportive family and community environment provides emotional support and economic stability and contributes to the overall health and well-being of students (Zainoodin et al., 2021).

A socio-political perspective

There is growing debate regarding the conceptualisation of resilience as an individual character trait, as this perspective is problematic because it depoliticises resilience, detaching it from its broader socio-political context, including issues of race, racism, inequality, and social change (Zembylas, 2020). Zembylas (2020) argues that a contextualised approach views resilience as the result of cultural, social, economic, political, and psychological factors, in addition to its biological correlates. This perspective emphasises that resilience is influenced by structurally embedded social inequalities, including dimensions such as gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. Resilience is therefore not limited to individual factors but rather emphasises the structural embeddedness of individuals within their contexts. Specifically, an ecological approach to resilience highlights the concept of 'ecologies of resilience,' which asserts

that resilience is a social and political process rather than an attribute that individuals possess or develop in isolation.

Resilience as a malleable, growth construct

Understanding resilience as a dynamic process

Per Datzer et al. (2022), respondents' beliefs align with what can be termed the process perspective of resilience. From this standpoint, resilience is defined as a dynamic process that entails positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity. Emerson et al. (2023) acknowledge the capacity of resilience to lessen the effects of factors contributing to attrition. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence supporting the idea that resilience is a flexible trait that can be nurtured in the classroom. From this perspective, individual resilience is not necessarily an inherent trait one is born with but can be developed and cultivated throughout a student's life. Resilience is inherently multifaceted and multidimensional. In a study by Al Omari et al. (2023), it was conceptualised as a dynamic, context-dependent adaptation mechanism that can be enhanced and acquired through learning.

Resilience as a developable trait

Datzer et al. (2022) claim that the flexibility of inherent personal factors ultimately shapes the perception of students' capacity for positive adaptation. Others agree that individuals' resilience can evolve over time and that their ability to cope with challenges is influenced by circumstances and additional support that acts as a buffer against disadvantages (Ellis & Johnston, 2024). According to Demir and Aliyev (2019), resilience can be characterised as a set of developable traits that enable individuals to persevere, overcome difficulties, and achieve better outcomes than anticipated despite experiencing negative and stressful life events. The Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) introduced a new perspective on resilience, recognising that resilience levels are not constant and may vary depending on different experiences, health states, and overall functioning (Litwic-Kaminska et al., 2023). According to Sağar (2022), resilience is indeed a feature that can be developed over time. A review of the literature indicates that resilience can be developed or enhanced through various interventions, including group counselling, cognitive-behavioural approaches, positive psychology, and realistic approaches. These studies have demonstrated that interventions grounded in different psychological counselling methodologies positively impact individuals' resilience.

Resilience and personal growth

Research by Emerson et al. (2023) depicts resilience as the constructive transformation of individuals in the face of adversity, ultimately leading to personal growth or learning. This awareness has the potential to strengthen their resilience and dispel the misconception held by some students that resilience is an unchanging trait. Instead, it emphasises that resilience is a quality that can be developed, ultimately contributing to improved mental health in students (Kotera et al., 2021). According to Litwic-Kaminska

et al. (2023), resilience is understood not merely as an individual trait but as a process. When viewed as a process, resilience pertains to the effective management of difficult phenomena and events throughout a person's life. Some researchers emphasise that resilience involves a dynamic process of positive adaptation in response to emerging adversities. Brewer et al. (2019) align with this view, defining resilience as a process rather than a skill or trait. A limited number of authors explored the link between resilience and growth. In recent years, many researchers have recognised resilience as a developmental process rather than an innate personal trait (e.g. hardiness) and believe it can be strengthened through effective strategies (Liu et al., 2022). According to Saifullah and Khan (2022), resilience is not innate; rather, it is a skill that individuals learn to regulate as they navigate various situations and emotions.

Implications for future research

The insights from this review present several key implications for higher education research, policy and practice. For educators, practitioners and policymakers, this review indicates that more comprehensive strategies are required to promote resilience in higher education students. Foremost, the categorisation of resilience into the three themes can equip universities to design student support programs that do not focus on a singular interpretation of resilience. Practitioners should use the identified resilience categories to establish a shared understanding amongst students and staff, which could in turn guide the development and implementation of resilience-building interventions and initiatives. Further research should be conducted to refine the categorisations of resilience, particularly how resilience is context-dependent, especially from an African perspective. It is important to note the scarcity of research on the development of resilience within the context of African higher education students, where culture, collectivism, and ubuntu play a key role in fostering resilience. Further research on this topic within the African context is crucial to ensure that resilience programs and initiatives are culturally relevant, considering the unique social and communal factors relevant to fostering resilience in students within African contexts.

Limitations

The study had some limitations. The use of filters, such as date (2019-2024) and academic journals with full text availability, for database searches meant that neither pertinent studies published before 2019 nor studies in languages other than English from non-peer reviewed publications, such as the grey literature, would have been accessible. Since the author alone created the inclusion and exclusion criteria, it is possible that other pertinent articles were overlooked, and the reasoning was limited. One criticism of the scoping review approach is that it usually does not involve a process of evaluating the quality of the literature, which raises the risk that conclusions would be drawn based more on the availability of studies than on their inherent value.

Conclusion

In recent years there has been a significant increase in literature focusing on the application of resilience in the field of higher education. Despite variances in definition, consensus has been reached on the general core components of resilience, such as the ability to withstand change or disturbance, adversity, difficulty, trauma, and stressors, despite definitional diversity. It is apparent that the most notable contributions emphasise three primary themes: (i) resilience as an individual characteristic, (ii) resilience as a social or environmental concept, and (iii) resilience as a flexible rather than static entity, being perceived as a developmental trait that can evolve over time. The categorisations of resilience can also function as a sensemaking tool which aims to create a common understanding of resilience, which could inform decision-making with regard to resilience training programs. Future studies are needed to refine these resilience classifications. Further research conceptualising resilience as an external and growth construct is recommended, as there is a lack of research viewing the concept of resilience through these lenses. Further studies on conceptualisation of resilience within African higher education is recommended to reach a more culturally relevant understanding of resilience in the African context.

Ethics statement

This review used publicly available literature and therefore did not require ethics approval.

Potential conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Experiences of health sciences students residing on campus during university recess: A photovoice study

Maiphihlelo a baithuti ba saense ya bophelo ba dulang khamphaseng nakong ya phomolo ya yunivesithi: Thuto ka mokgwa wa photovoice

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, health sciences students who live in university residence must often remain on campus during university recess to fulfil work-integrated learning obligations. Some of the observed challenges during this time are relocating to a temporary residence, having limited access to supplies and services as well as concerns about safety. These challenges were further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, literature on factors and dynamics that affect student well-being and learning during these periods is sparse. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the experiences of health sciences students residing on campus during recess at a specific university. Participatory research utilising the photovoice method was conducted. Four health sciences students volunteered to participate in three workshops to complete the research process. Captioned photographs and narratives were used to document their on-campus experiences during university recess. During a public photo exhibit, which concluded the project, essential stakeholders wrote anonymous reviews in the visitors' book. Collaborative thematic data analysis was performed, leading to the identification of four themes: (1) sharing personal space, (2) support services and structures, (3) security, and (4) personal development. The findings revealed a sense of lost belonging due to inadequate support during recess, which could affect student learning and well-being. Remaining on campus during recess can have adverse effects on students' learning and well-being, due to experiences of extreme loneliness and feelings of being out of place. At the same time, this period can create opportunities for quiet self-reflection and personal growth. Using methods such as photovoice to document these experiences can empower students to advocate for necessary institutional changes. Future research should include more participants from various disciplines and extended recess periods to better inform policies and guidelines.

KEYWORDS

Health sciences students, student experience, campus residence, university recess, photovoice

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KAKARETSO

Mona Afrika Borwa, baithuti ba saense ya bophelo ba dulang mafelong a bodulo a yunivesithi hangata ba dula khamphaseng nakong ya phomolo ho phethela dithuto tsa bona tse kopanngwang le mosebetsi (work-integrated learning). A mang a mathata ao ba tobanang le ona nakong ena a akarelletsa ho fallela bodulong ba nakwana, ho haella ha disebediswa le ditshebeletso, le matshwenyeho ka tsa tshireletso. Mathata ana a ile a mpefala le ho feta nakong ya COVID-19. Le ha ho ntse ho le jwalo, ho haella dingolwa tse hlalosang hore na dintho tsena di ama jwang boiketlo le katleho ya thuto ya baithuti nakong eno. Sepheo sa patlisiso ena e ne e le ho hlahloba maiphihlelo a baithuti ba saense ya bophelo ba dulang khamphaseng nakong ya phomolo yunivesithing e itseng. Ho ile ha sebediswa patlisiso ya kopanelo ka mokgwa wa photovoice. Baithuti ba bane ba ile ba ithaopa ho nka karolo ditherisanong tse tharo tse ileng tsa phethela tshebetso yohle ya patlisiso. Ba ile ba nka dinepe tse nang le ditlhaloso le ho ngola dipale tse bontshang kamoo ba phetseng kateng khamphaseng nakong ya phomolo. Qetellong ya projeke, ho ile ha tshwarwa pontsho ya dinepe moo bankakarolo ba ka sehloohong ba ileng ba ngola maikutlo a sa tsejweng bukeng ya baeti. Tlhatlhobo ya data ka mokgwa wa dihlooho e ile ya bontsha dihlooho tse nne: (1) ho abelana sebaka sa poraefete, (2) ditshebeletso le mehaho ya tshehetso, (3) tshireletso, (4) le kgolo ya motho ka mong. Diphuputso di bontshitse hore ho haella ha tshehetso nakong ya phomolo ho baka ho lahlehelwa ke maikutlo a ho ikutlwa o le karolo ya setjhaba, e leng se ka amang boiketlo le katleho ya baithuti. Ho sala khamphaseng nakong ya phomolo ho ka ama baithuti hampe ka lebaka la ho ikutlwa ba le bang haholo le ho se be moo ba ikutlwang ba tshwanelwa teng. Empa nako ena e ka boela ya ba monyetla wa ho itekola, ho nahana ka bophelo le ho hola. Mekgwa e kang photovoice e fa baithuti matla a ho phetela maiphihlelo a bona ka tsela e matlafatsang, le ho buella diphetoho tse hlokahalang ho tsamaisa ditaba tsa thuto hantle. Patlisiso ya nakong e tlang e lokela ho akaretsa baithuti ba bangata ho tswa mafapheng a fapaneng, le ho kenyelletsa diphaposi tsa nako e telele ya phomolo, ho ntlafatsa melao le maano a yunivesithi.

MANTSOE A BOHLOKWA

Baithuti ba saense ya bophelo, maiphihlelo a baithuti, bodulo khamphaseng, phomolo ya yunivesithi, photovoice

Introduction and background

Students living on campus during university recess experience a unique and diverse set of circumstances, particularly those in health sciences programs. The students' experiences are shaped by the mandates of various health professions governing bodies such as the South African Nursing Council (SANC), the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), the Allied Health Professions Council (AHPCSA), the South African Pharmacy Council (SAPC), and the South African Dental Technicians Council (SADTC) (NDoH, 2020). These bodies require students to attain clinical competence through work-integrated learning, preparing them for professional practice by bridging theoretical classroom education with clinical practice (Du Plessis, 2015; Lewis et al., 2010; Govender & Wait, 2017; Saad et al., 2023).

Dual engagement in academic and clinical learning significantly increases their stress levels (Langtree et al., 2018; Masri et al., 2019; Worku et al., 2020). Factors such as heavy academic workloads, long hours, assessments, fear of errors, residence safety concerns, high parental expectations, and financial pressures contribute to this stress (Worku et al., 2020). Additionally, confronting life-and-death scenarios in clinical settings could adversely affect their mental health, potentially leading to anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and substance abuse, which in turn could impact their academic and clinical performance (Racic et al., 2017).

Moreover, to complete their clinical learning outcomes, health sciences students often remain on campus during recess, when life in campus residences presents additional challenges. Students face safety issues linked to substance abuse and disruptive behaviours from peers during events such as arts festivals on campus that attract public attendance (Gopal & Van Niekerk, 2018). At the research site, standard practice requires students to vacate residences during official recess, moving to temporary on-campus accommodations where they might share rooms with unfamiliar peers, which could limit their sense of privacy (Research Site Housing and Residence Affairs, 2021; Ndofirepi, 2015). During these periods, essential academic, administrative, health, and support services are typically unavailable, contrasting with the regular academic calendar when students have access to well-equipped facilities and supportive environments (Ndofirepi, 2015).

The Covid-19 pandemic brought additional complexities, with health sciences students returning to campus to meet clinical learning requirements under restructured living arrangements to comply with safety protocols, which often led to social isolation (Baloyi et al., 2022). These pandemic-induced changes highlighted gaps in understanding the experiences of health sciences students who remain on campus during recess. Various studies have explored student experiences at the research site (see Calitz, 2016; Coetzee, 2018; Mahlala, 2015; Martinez-Vargas et al., 2019; Mutanga, 2015; Ndeya-Ndereya & Van Jaarsveldt, 2013; Ts'ephe, 2015; Senkhe et al., 2018). However, none have specifically addressed the unique challenges faced by health sciences students residing on campus during recess or how the impacts of Covid-19 adjustments affected these students. This empirical gap is addressed in this article which is based on findings from data collected for a master's study. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of health sciences students residing on campus during recess at a specific university. Ultimately, the aim was to uncover the factors shaping their learning and well-being.

The article is divided into six main sections. Following this introduction is a review of literature, which provides an overview of research related to student residence issues in South Africa. Thereafter the methodology and photovoice process is described. This is followed by a description of the conceptual framework. The discussion of findings is then presented, followed by the conclusion.

Literature review

The concern of whether student housing is a necessary component of university infrastructure or a social issue is an ongoing debate (Newell & Marzuki, 2018; Swift, 2019), but what is agreed upon in this literature in that on-campus accommodation serves students' educational, social and recreational requirements well. This is because residing on campus allows ease of access to libraries, sports facilities, and health services – all of which can contribute to an outstanding student experience (Newell & Marzuki, 2018; Swift, 2019; Xulu-Gama, 2019). Moreover, some research suggests that students who reside on campus academically outperform those who do not (Dlamini & Mafumbate, 2021; Makenzie, 2021; Mbandlwa, 2021; Van Zyl & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021).

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Their academic achievement has been linked to the fact that living off campus can lead to increased financial strain from higher living and transportation costs, reduced access to campus resources, less time for academic activities due to commuting, and limited social integration – all of which may hinder students' academic success and well-being (Callo et al., 2021; Rammuki, 2019; Walker et al., 2022).

However, residing on campus does not guarantee a perfect student life experience. Safety concerns, crime and antisocial behaviour have been prominent issues in higher education settings (Myeza, 2025; Lekganyane et al., 2023). Incidents of crime such as theft and violence are prevalent, with reports of severe cases at various institutions in recent years (Govender, 2020; Mthethwa, 2021). Importantly, reports of crime often come from both sides; students who live on campus as well as those who live off campus (Ross & Rasool, 2019). This indicates that higher education institutions in general are challenged with ensuring a secure and safe living environment for students, which is crucial for their well-being (Buyung et al., 2018).

Both local and international literature emphasise that students' living arrangements and overall satisfaction with their residence play a significant role in their psychological health and academic success (Beiter et al., 2015; Alloh et al., 2018). Among the factors influencing the psychological health of students include their choice of university, and involvement in sports but also their adjustment to campus life (Pretorius & Blaauw, 2014; Campbell et al., 2022). Issues such as poor roommate relationships, struggles to fit in and isolation were found to negatively affect students' well-being (Worsley et al., 2021b).

Another impediment to student well-being is poor sleep and poor dietary habits alongside food insecurity, which are widespread among university students and affect both physical health and academic performance (Chung et al., 2008; Du et al., 2021). In South Africa, food insecurity is particularly challenging among low-income students, including those funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Van den Berg & Raubenheimer, 2015; Sabi et al., 2020). Many of these students struggle to afford balanced meals (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2021). The fact that universities in South Africa provide limited access to healthy options in their food courts on campus further contributes to students' poor dietary choices (Clinton-McHarg et al., 2018; Malambe, 2021).

Literature therefore highlights that living on campus has many benefits, including ease of access to educational and recreational facilities, and limited time spent commuting to and from lectures. However, to bring nuance into discussions on the benefits of university residence life, these benefits should be considered in light of the identified challenges. Some of these nuances were brought into sharp relief during the Covid-19 pandemic which disrupted global higher education, forcing universities to temporarily close or transition to online teaching and learning (Chavarría-Bolaños et al., 2020). This shift created a more isolated educational experience and challenged fields reliant on hands-on training, such as the health sciences (Rose, 2020; Moodley et al., 2022). Health sciences students thus faced unique difficulties as they balanced remote learning with frontline roles in the pandemic response. Some of these unique challenges

emerged in the findings of this article and illustrate how an exploration of student experiences, particularly during recess periods, offers a valuable opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of university residence life from a student perspective.

Research methodology

This study employed a participatory research paradigm, focusing on the collaborative creation of knowledge through the lived experiences of the researcher and co-researchers. Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) was selected for its effectiveness in gathering and analysing qualitative and visual data, including drawings, photographs, captions, and group discussions. Traditionally used in marginalised communities, photovoice was adapted for a higher education context, involving health sciences students as the community of interest. Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSREC) at the university. To enhance research integrity virtues-based ethics guided the process. The co-researchers held one another accountable to the seven Cs described by Zuber-Skerritt (2018) namely, communication, collaboration, commitment, coaching, critical and self-critical attitudes, competence, and compromise.

The study population consisted of all health sciences students living in campus residences at the university. This campus houses 18 residences, including a newly constructed co-ed health sciences residence with 250 beds. The exact number of health sciences students on campus during the study was unknown, as the department of Housing and Residence Affairs did not provide the statistics. Heterogeneous purposive sampling was employed to include information-rich co-researchers with diverse perspectives.

Although guidelines for photovoice suggest a ratio of five to six co-researchers per facilitator, only four students volunteered to participate. The research continued because the focus was on capturing the depth of experiences rather than a large sample size. Three workshops were held, with the first coinciding with Level 3 of the Covid-19 lockdown, restricting campus access to the selected students. To minimise exposure and time commitment, the first two workshops were merged, adhering to strict Covid-19 protocols, including sanitisation and social distancing. The third workshop involved co-researchers presenting their experiences through photos, illustrations and spoken narratives. The PHOTO[4] acronym, used for photo analysis, and the VOICE[5] principle, emphasising the importance of each participant's perspective, guided the analysis. The final workshop, held at a local restaurant, followed Covid-19 safety measures. Co-researchers and supervisors contributed voluntarily, with refreshments provided.

4 P – Describe your Picture; H – What is Happening in your picture?; O – Why did you take a picture Of this?; T – What does this picture Tell us about your experience of residing on campus during university recess?; O – How can this picture provide Opportunities for us to improve the student experience and contribute towards policymaking?

5 Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience

The study concluded with a public exhibition at the research site which was held on 4 April 2022. Delayed by two years to accommodate logistical and approval processes, the exhibition allowed students and viewers to engage with the photographs and provide feedback, fostering a broader dialogue than during the pandemic.

In a typical photovoice study, co-researchers individually craft their narratives by selecting a limited number of photographs that align with a specific storyboard. For instance, a collection might consist of a series of six or more photos that capture their unique experiences of staying on campus during recess. However, this study took a different approach. Instead of presenting each person's photo essay separately, the photo essays were organised according to themes that were collectively developed. This method was selected to highlight the unity among co-researchers and the common goal of increasing awareness of campus life during recess.

The process of analysis utilised a collaborative coding approach. In the initial phases, codes were generated inductively from group conversations where co-researchers freely expressed their interpretations of the pictures, aligning with participatory visual methodologies that centre student voice (Mitchell et al., 2018). Categories included examples such as noise levels, food security, and social isolation. These inductive insights were subsequently integrated with a deductive approach, as relevant literature on student well-being and residential life (Fife & Gossner, 2024) was revisited to validate and refine the thematic framework. The process incorporated validation by means of member checking (Birt et al., 2016). The draft themes were returned to the group for review during the workshops, and co-researchers engaged in active discussions on how to handle overlapping concepts. For instance, there was a lively discussion on whether access to healthcare should be independent or part of support services. These conversations not only improved the credibility of the findings but also fostered the cooperative element of the study (Kara, 2020). Quotes from the exhibition viewers, including the stakeholders, staff members and other attendees, further validated the results. A reflexive thematic analysis process was used in this study (Alhojailan, 2012; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Additionally, the workshop facilitator diligently documented her role in shaping the analysis and maintained a reflective diary during the workshops.

In the end, the themes were collaboratively recognised, reflected on, and selected for incorporation into the public exhibition. The discussed topics comprised: personal space sharing, diversity, hygiene, noise levels, loneliness and isolation, support systems and services, help with relocation, access to campus amenities, healthcare service access, security, personal safety, food availability, character development, and personal growth. These were subsequently grouped into four larger categories: (i) sharing personal space, (ii) support systems and services, (iii) security, and (iv) personal growth and character development. Accompanying the explanations of the photographs are quotes from the co-researchers' captions, as well as feedback from exhibition viewers, who are identified by the letter 'V' and their visitor book number. Co-researchers names are substituted by pseudonyms as established in the first workshop. In the findings section, the four main themes are explored in detail and supplemented with additional

data, including photo captions, workshop discussion excerpts, and transcriptions from the visitors' book. Next, the conceptual framework that guided the interpretation of the themes is described.

Conceptual framework

In their narrative review of literature that addresses notions of belonging, Allen et al. (2021) define sense of belonging as a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems. These systems can range from individual and collective experiences within and outside of families, to school environments or physical places. As Allen et al. (2021) highlight, having a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need that can affect various dimensions of well-being including the mental, physical, and social. In the context of higher education research, studies have indicated that having a strong sense of belonging within one's university matters not only for students' academic achievements and success (Ahn & Davis, 2019) but also for their well-being (Calitz, 2016) and for their expansive learning outcomes (Walker et al., 2022). As the findings in the next section show, there are various ways in which students' sense of belonging on university campuses can be disrupted during recess, with implications for their well-being and learning. Drawing on the framework proposed by Allen et al. (2021), we conceptualise students' sense of belonging in this article as a dynamic feeling and experience that is shaped by four interrelated components: (1) competencies for belonging; (2) opportunities to belong; (3) motivations to belong; and (4) perceptions of belonging.

Competencies for belonging

The first component refers to having abilities and skills to feel connected to and relate with other people, for example through identifying with their cultural background and developing a sense of shared identity (Allen et al., 2021). It also refers to being able to develop a sense of connection to place (Allen et al., 2021). In the context of this study, this could mean the ability to develop a shared sense of identity with fellow health sciences students across different disciplines; behave in ways that are consistent with professional norms in the health sciences faculty; feel at home on the university campus or feel at ease with the university institutional culture and values.

Opportunities to belong

The second component is related to the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur (Allen et al., 2021). This component considers the fact that the ability to connect with others is useless in the absence of opportunities to connect (Allen et al., 2021). For instance, students from rural communities could face unique challenges with the school to university transition, especially when having to migrate to urban universities (Walker & Mathebula, 2019). They might have social competencies, but their circumstances (e.g. not having the confidence to speak to new peers or spending limited time on extra-curricular activities within the university space) could limit opportunities to foster belonging.

Motivations to belong

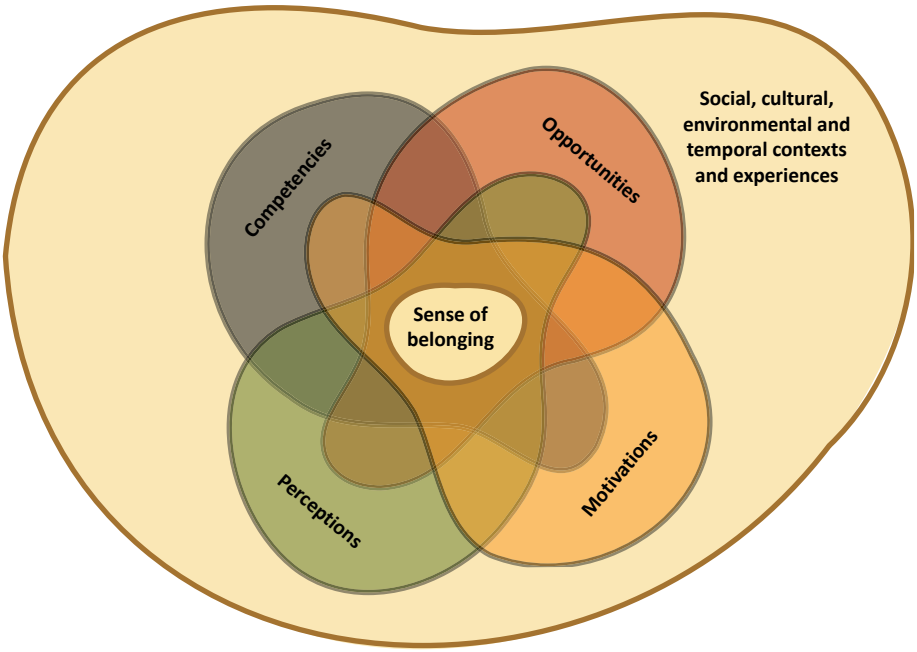
The third component refers to the basic need for people to be accepted, to engage in social interactions and to form connections with others (Allen et al., 2021). Being motivated to belong means enjoying positive interactions with others, seeking out interpersonal connections, having positive experiences of long-term relationships, and on the flip side, disliking negative social experiences, and resisting the loss of attachments (Allen et al., 2021). Students who are motivated to belong will actively seek out similarities and things in common with fellow students, be it in terms of culture, ethnic background or nationality, degree program and field or study, or other belonging attributes.

Perceptions of belonging

The fourth and final component is related to a person's subjective feelings and experiences as well as thoughts and evaluations of whether they fit in with those around them (Allen et al., 2021). This component considers scenarios where a person has skills to connect to others, opportunities to belong and the motivation to belong, but still feels out of place and disconnected (Allen et al., 2021). In the context of our study, this could happen for instance when students from low-income households question their belonging in a university where socio-economic class and/or wealth disparities are easily observable. Being unable to afford expensive items from the campus food court and being unable to afford a laptop or a car, while observing other students afford such things, can make poorer students feel like they do not fit in or that they do not belong.

We understand the four components discussed above as a dynamic social system in the sense that they reinforce and influence one another over time, as students move through different social, environmental, and temporal contexts and experiences during their time at university. We thus borrow the framework proposed by Allen et al. (2021) – see Figure 1 – but we apply it in the context of higher education, and specifically to the experiences of health sciences students who remain on campus during recess. This helped us not only to explain our interpretation of the data in more conceptual terms, but it also helped us to think about university policies and practices that unwittingly hinder students' sense of belonging under normal circumstances.

In the findings discussion we explain how the four components dynamically interact with and are supported or hindered by the university campus milieu during recess. The evidence provided in the discussion of findings illustrates different ways in which these components work together to result in varying levels of students' sense of belonging. The discussion that follows our presentation of findings reflects on some implications for health science students' well-being and learning.



Source: Allen et al. (2021, p. 92)

Figure 1: An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging

Findings

Theme one: Sharing personal space

The theme of sharing personal space will be explored and broken down into subthemes in the following order: diversity, hygiene, noise levels, isolation and loneliness, and the effects of Covid-19. For many students, sharing their personal space with strangers is inevitable, given the diverse and inclusive nature of South African higher education institutions. This often involves living with someone of a different race, age, culture, or academic background, which can lead to discomfort. For instance, *Yesum,* an introvert, found it challenging to coexist with her extroverted roommate who constantly wanted to talk, leading to misunderstandings. *Nice* shared similar concerns, noting the discomfort of sharing space with a roommate who was always present, particularly during practical work periods when she needed more privacy.

Despite acknowledging the diversity, the co-researchers expressed unease and a preference for not sharing their space with others, citing noise, silence, and unhygienic conditions as significant stressors. The lack of cleanliness during recess was a constant reminder that they were away from home, intensifying feelings of isolation and loneliness. These issues were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which imposed

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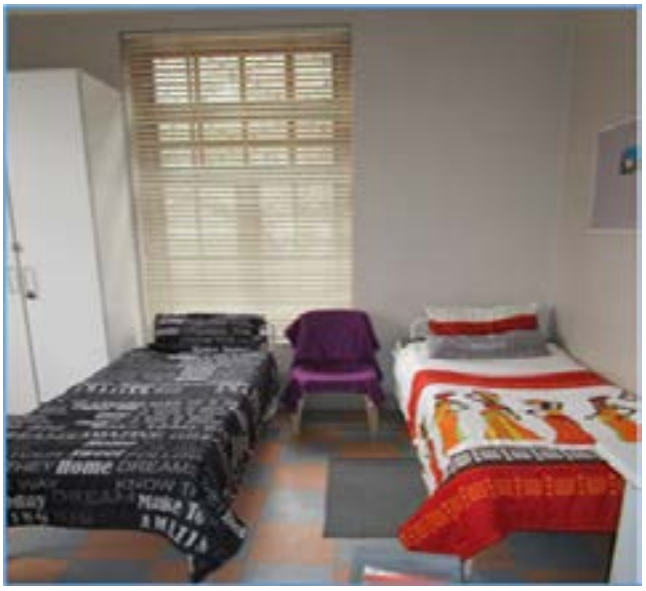


At least, during this time, I can have some privacy and not share a room with anyone. Yes, both beds are mine. The aim was to make the room "homely" since I could not go home (Yesum).

Figure 2: Yesum's photo representing 'sharing' with caption

unfamiliar rules and restrictions, further impacting students' mental well-being. *Yesum* highlighted the importance of personal space by capturing a photograph that depicted her enjoying a homely environment when alone.

Studies by Barsukova et al. (2015) and Costa (2024) indicate that students greatly appreciate personal space, however differing personalities in cohabiting situations frequently create difficulties. This diversity – be it in personality, social background, or academic routes – shapes opportunities and drives to belong, which are two essential elements in Allen et al.'s (2021) framework. Dutta et al. (2021) emphasise that fostering a sense of belonging through inclusive policies and enhanced facilities is crucial for student well-being and learning.

Diversity

Understanding how we view variety among our peers – including racial, ethnic, gender, and social class – as well as their abilities, languages, and study programs, is vital, according to Trentham et al. (2020). A student's personality and character have an enormous impact on how well they acclimate to university life. *Bold*, who identifies as a social butterfly, found it simpler to accept variety. According to Dutta et al. (2021), a sense of belonging is cultivated by feeling at ease with peers and is vital for learning and growth, a phenomenon, elaborated by Allen et al. (2021), which is shaped by competencies, opportunities, motivations, and feelings of belonging. Institutions must consequently have strong policies to foster inclusion and address discrimination.

Research indicates that although there are additional resources available to the university, facilities including sanitation and hygiene continue to require improvement

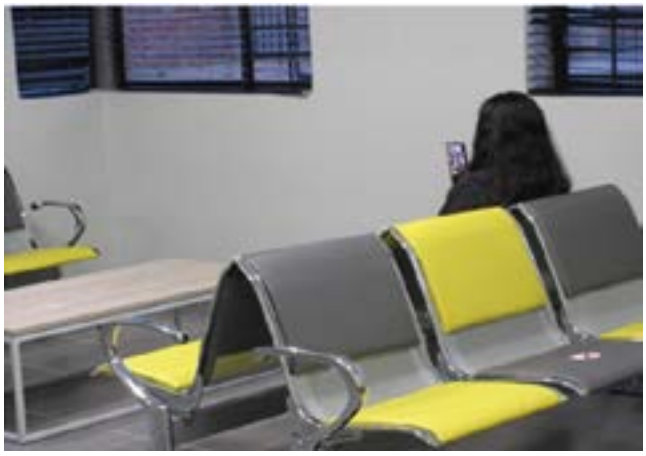
(KabirI et al., 2021). The ongoing deficiencies in university facilities, especially in sanitation and hygiene, directly influence students' opportunities and feelings of belonging, as substandard services could cause them to feel less at home on campus.

Hygiene

Based on experience, hygiene in university residences during recess has always been a significant issue. Three co-researchers highlighted inadequate cleaning services during this time. *Nice* mentioned that people leave food to rot in the kitchen, *Bold* noted that refuse removal is neglected, and *Yesum* observed that bathrooms often run out of toilet paper and are poorly maintained. Viewers of the exhibition were able to relate to the images portraying these problems because they had experienced comparable inconveniences, such as running out of toilet paper and having to buy their own (V23). In addition to hygiene issues, the campus setting during recess could also impact students' comfort and well-being, as noise levels – both inside and outside – further influence their sense of belonging and capacity to concentrate.

Noise levels

During the workshops, co-researchers were particularly concerned about noise levels during university recess. Some, like *Nice*, enjoyed the quieter environment with fewer people around. However, *Yesum* highlighted the persistent noise from first-year students and external events, like concerts at a nearby stadium, that disrupted the peace. While some students and exhibition viewers noted the quietness during recess as a time for reflection, others were troubled by noise from both internal and external sources. Thattai et al. (2017) and Chere and Kirkham (2021) emphasise that noise can negatively impact health and learning. A viewer, V45, also stressed the need for quiet spaces, especially for students who stay behind during recess.



Kitchen-cum-phonebooth: One would think that with less people around, the residence would be quiet enough to check in on Mom in peace. However, seeing as the neighbours sought to fill the silence themselves, yet it was quiet enough to hear the phone call next door, this student sought privacy in the kitchen (Indomitable).

Figure 3: Indomitable's photo referencing 'noise' with caption

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Noise can negatively affect academic performance and frustrate some students. During the Covid-19 pandemic, with fewer students on campus and social events either prohibited or limited, the environment became quieter and more peaceful. While some students appreciated this calm, the silence also led to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Achieving this balance is essential, as restricted chances for interaction and diminished feelings of belonging may lead to students experiencing isolation and loneliness.

Isolation and loneliness

Students at tertiary institutions often experience isolation and loneliness, impacting their mental health. Worsley et al. (2021a) and Mzileni (2018) note that loneliness is common, with some students dissatisfied with the support offered in residences. Factors contributing to mental health issues include bereavement, family and relationship problems, peer pressure, trauma, anxiety, mood disorders, psychotic disorders, and substance abuse (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). Depression, anxiety, and loneliness tend to increase when students feel uncomfortable in their living space due to sharing with unfamiliar individuals (Candini et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2021a). The co-researchers shared how Covid-19 intensified their feelings of loneliness and isolation, which *Indomitable* captured in a photograph expressing these emotions.

She's the only one small enough to keep you sane. This childhood friend was a keen ear for the psychosis that streamed from her lonely owner's mouth (Indomitable).

Figure 4: Indomitable's photo representing 'loneliness' with caption

The childhood toy depicted in Figure 4 offered *Indomitable* consolation and mental stability during recess, as she lacked other forms of support. At the photovoice exhibition, both a parent and an alumnus resonated with the loneliness and isolation shown in the photograph. The parent shared:

> *I relate because my daughter also experiences loneliness and stress when her roommate is away and she is alone, living far from home. It would help if there were measures for students who stay behind while others are with their families, as this loneliness causes them stress.* (V15)

An alumnus (V6) reflected that, as a former student and staff member, the image reminded them of the isolation students endure, exacerbated by diminished access to resources during recess. The co-researchers noted that while loneliness has always been an issue, the Covid-19 regulations intensified these feelings.

Effects of Covid-19

As this study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic its effects were a reality, not only in the requirement to observe protocols during data collection, but in the lives of the co-researchers. At the university where this study was conducted, Covid-19 compliance officers were appointed to advise and assist with compliance to regulations and protocols.

Indomitable, however, believed that, during recess period, the students did not adhere to Covid-19 regulations. In her photograph she captured that everything looked good on the outside, however, there was little adherence to basic rules and protocols on the inside.

Health stops at the door: On the outside, this residence would impress the Health Minister himself, but within is blatant disregard for basic non-pharmaceutical interventions (Indomitable).

Figure 5: Indomitable's photo representing the 'effects of Covid' with caption

This period, during which drastic protocols and measures had to be implemented for the well-being of the students and the community at large, was one of a kind.

Collectively, the sub-themes demonstrate how the sharing of personal space affects students' sense of belonging through the interactions of diversity, hygiene, noise levels, loneliness, and the impact of Covid-19. According to Allen et al.'s (2021) framework, difficulties in these aspects hinder opportunities for connection and the motivation to interact with peers, while also diminishing feelings of comfort and competence in the residential setting. Consequently, the co-researchers faced increased stress, isolation, and diminished well-being, which in all probability destructively impacted their capacity to focus, feel enthused and engage completely in their educational pursuits.

Theme two: Support services and structures

Support services and structures are essential for creating a positive environment that helps students succeed academically, develop personally, and maintain their overall well-being. This theme encompasses sub-themes that relate to assistance with moving, access to campus facilities, and access to healthcare services.

Assistance with moving

Martin (2021) notes that accommodation changes often stress pupils. Moving their possessions to different residences proved to be very difficult for the co-researchers. As *Nice* expressed, they had to bring their own refrigerators which they were not strong enough to carry themselves. Additionally, this massive fridge was carried down the stairs alone. That was the last time *Nice* moved the fridge out. V26 wrote in the visitors' book:

> *As health sciences students we are expected to return earlier to school. We are allocated to different residences every time, sometimes the support structure provided is not enough or provided at all. I relate with both those. This tends to be problematic as a student because we can't settle into a residence, knowing you might be told to move back to your own residence at any time. This also affects how one gets comfortable academically.*

Yesum visually documented the struggle of moving belongings without adequate assistance.

I understand I have to stay behind during recess, but can I at least stick to one place? Moving around every now and then is like adding fuel to the blasting flames of emotions and thoughts already going on in my mind (Yesum).

Figure 6: Yesum's photo representing 'moving without assistance' with caption

Their lack of physical strength and inability to move large appliances put the co-researchers at a disadvantage when they had to move physical objects that were heavy and burdensome. These physical constraints not only posed practical difficulties for the co-researchers but also impacted their chances and feelings of belonging, emphasising how access – or the absence of it – to campus resources can affect students' overall sense of inclusion and well-being (Allen et al., 2021).

Access to campus facilities

Price et al. (2003) and Nwedu (2019) explain that, when universities recruit students, they market the availability and quality of accommodation, together with other accessible facilities (canteen, sport facilities, academic facilities, etc.). During recess times, co-researchers reported that these vital facilities were not operational – the very same facilities they were promised would be operational throughout to assist them. *Indomitable* shared:

> *You cannot really be social in the gazelles during holidays because some students will be studying there. And most gazelles are not homey; there are plastic chairs stacked in ours and a projector. You are not even allowed to touch the computer. I feel like the mere fact that you have a student card means that you have access to the entire campus, why should I be treated like a prisoner of some section?*

Bold captured a photograph illustrating that the inaccessibility to facilities made her feel "imprisoned" and kept her away from home.

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Is it my home away from home or my home is just kept away from me? (Bold)

Figure 7: Bold's photo regarding 'accessibility' with caption

Concerning these sentiments of 'imprisonment', the co-researchers indicated that the unavailability of facilities served as a continuous harsh reminder that they were not in their own space, and limited access to campus healthcare further worsened their experiences. These obstacles demonstrate that restricted access to vital resources can hinder students' abilities to interact with their surroundings, diminish chances and motivations for participation, and adversely influence their feelings of belonging, ultimately impacting their wellness and sense of inclusion (Allen et al., 2021).

Access to healthcare services

Section 27 of the Constitution of South Africa (1996) states that access to healthcare is a constitutional right in South Africa. We noticed during discussions and feedback that we all had experiences of being either sick or in need of medical attention during university recess. However, during this time the on-campus health facility was closed or operated with restricted hours.

> *"If you are sick, you are sick until you heal".* (Yesum)

The difficulties encountered regarding relocation, access to vital campus amenities, and health services highlight not only logistical and administrative flaws but also the emotional and psychological weight students subsequently carry. These structural constraints hinder students' capacity to feel stable, safe, and supported – elements that are crucial for their academic involvement, social integration, and emotional health. These interruptions directly influence students' feelings of social connectedness, safety, and comfort within their surroundings (Allen et al., 2021). In the absence or inconsistency of these support mechanisms, students might find it difficult to view

themselves as valued members of the university community, thus diminishing their overall feeling of belonging.

Safety is also a concern for students, particularly when students must go off campus to seek help, especially at night. The general safety and security of the students was flagged as one of their major concerns.

Theme three: Security

This theme contains no sub-themes, since only a single issue was classified here. The co-researchers voiced that personal safety was a major cause for concern, because there were fewer people on campus during recess. The presence of protection services personnel was rare, and this contributed to feelings of uncertainty and mistrust. Even with measures in place for safety on campus, for example, panic buttons, students still felt unsure and doubted whether protection services would respond. The co-researchers expressed that they perceived a distant relationship between students and campus protection services According to Allen et al. (2021), limitations on skills, chances, motivations, and viewpoints can weaken students' general feelings of belonging and safety. Not only was personal safety a concern, but food safety as well as captured by *Yesum*.

Believe it or not: these are my meals for the next three weeks. So much for being a "health science" student hey? (Yesum)

Figure 8: Yesum's photo relating to food security with caption

The institution has organisations in place to assist students with food security. These are well established and known to students, however, the efficiency thereof, especially during recess period, was deemed inadequate. *Indomitable* agreed that there was

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functional support in their residence during university recess through a foodbank. However, the protocols of the process, she felt, were belittling. She stated:

> *There is something like a foodbank in our residence and I went to the relevant person to go ask about it and hoping for a referral to maybe the 'No Student Hungry campaign'. That person just told me to send them a message of what I need, and they will bring it to me. I just felt I am not a beggar; I am not going to beg like that.* (Indomitable)

The co-researchers typically faced challenges with nutrition and food security during recess, depending on the food they possessed or were able to purchase. The shutdown of campus dining services during recess and due to Covid-19 measures intensified this insecurity, especially for students from underprivileged backgrounds.

Using Allen et al.'s (2021) conceptual framework, these experiences can be interpreted through the four interconnected aspects of belonging: restricted access to nutritious food limited students' full engagement with campus life; inadequate competencies, such as budgeting or cooking under challenging conditions, further obstructed their adaptation; their motivation to belong diminished as the anxiety of food insecurity lowered their desire or energy for social participation; and their feelings of belonging were compromised, resulting in a sense of disconnection and marginalisation. These elements demonstrate how fundamental requirements such as food security are closely connected to students' overall feelings of inclusion, well-being, and academic involvement on campus.

Theme four: Personal development

The theme of personal development also contains a single focus without sub-themes. The co-researchers expressed that, despite their struggles in difficult periods, an opportunity for personal growth and development was unexpectedly created. They found themselves having to cultivate various skills to navigate and survive – skills that they believed would be beneficial in their lives beyond graduation. Through the sharing of their experiences, the co-researchers discovered their own strengths and capabilities, as these challenging circumstances compelled them to become resilient individuals. *Nice* mentioned:

> *"… even if it was difficult … I told myself it's okay, it has to be done".* (Nice)

Yesum captured her gratitude:

Rain is a gift from God. To me, it symbolises something new being birthed. Through all these challenges, I'm grateful my character is being developed! (Yesum)

Figure 9: Yesum's photo about character building and personal development, with caption

The co-researchers also expressed gratitude, realising that overcoming obstacles was an essential, if not desired, part of the process. The acknowledgment of the circumstances they faced emphasised the necessity of improving conditions for students during recess while also highlighting the value of recognising the resources and assistance that is available, even if their access is limited.

To conclude, as summarised in Figure 10 below, students' experiences of living on campus during university recess can be clustered into four themes. Depending on their interaction, these experiences can either limit or improve competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions of belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

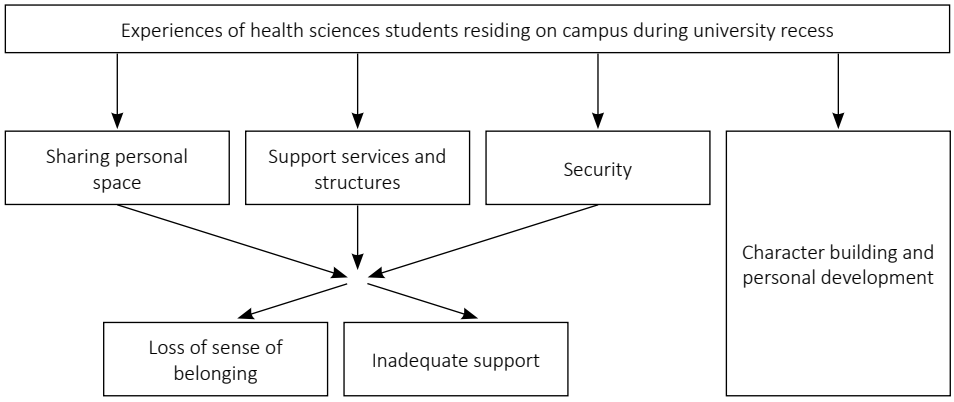

Figure 10: Summary of findings

Theme four highlights how students, despite facing significant challenges during university recess, experienced unexpected personal growth. They developed resilience, independence, and problem-solving skills that contributed to their overall maturity. This personal development enhanced their sense of competence and self-worth, aligning with Allen et al.'s (2021) conceptual framework of belonging. Specifically, it strengthened their perceived ability to cope and succeed, which in turn reinforced their motivation to engage and belong within the university community.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this article suggest that health sciences students' living conditions during recess can be improved through revision of policies and enhancing students' competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions of belonging. As discussed in the review of literature, sense of belonging has implications for students' educational experiences and well-being. The findings thus underscore the significance of providing adequate support and resources to ensure student well-being, not only during term time, but also during recess. Importantly, students' reflections also highlighted the transformative nature of their experiences of remaining on campus during recess, including the personal growth they experienced, and their recognition of the value of resilience and gratitude. This indicates that their experiences are not only negative – there are positive aspects too.

As such, the findings have brought to light the nature of university dynamics and practices during recess – some of them problematic – that should be altered over time. Based on the findings, the following changes can be recommended to universities: updating the policies regarding moving between residences during recess; providing more hands-on assistance to students who are moving their belongings; providing more nutritious food options on campus and organising food drives with more care; enhancing access to facilities and healthcare; guaranteeing that cleaning services are continually provided and expanding security presence. Within reason, these measures need to be taken continuously across the academic year.

Considering the contextual nature and limited number of participants of this research, larger scale studies, including students from various disciplines and institutions, should be conducted to better inform current and future policies and guidelines. Reflecting on the small number of co-researchers: it is possible that persons who are not comfortable with photography or self-disclosure refrained from participating in the photovoice study. Whilst the timeframe of data collection accentuated the difficulties of residing on campus during recess, the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic also limited opportunities for the co-researchers to fully capture their experiences on camera.

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Ethics statement

Access to the co-researchers was gained by requesting approval from the HSREC and permission from the relevant gatekeepers, including, the Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Dean of Students. The authors collaborated with Housing and Residence Affairs, the residence heads and residence committees to identify and approach co-researchers. A campus access Covid-19 permit was issued.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors confirm that no personal or financial commitments influenced the writing of this article.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social-emotional competence and personality traits as key drivers for student teacher well-being in a VUCA world

Bokgoni ba ditsebo tsa maikutlo le kahisano, le ditshobotsi tsa botho jwalo dintlha tsa bohlokwa bakeng sa boiketlo ba matitjhere a Baithuti lefatsheng la VUCA

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ABSTRACT

Initial teacher education programs around the globe are aimed at equipping beginner teachers with competencies that will enable them to be successful practitioners in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. In this South African study, aimed at conceptualising the competencies needed by early-career English teachers who specialise in the Senior (Snr) and Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 8-12), data were generated through a mixed-method approach involving qualitative in-depth interviews with heads of departments (HODs), document analysis and quantitative online surveys administered to early-career English language teachers who had completed their studies at a university, focusing on their training and development during initial teacher training. The overall findings of the study suggest that while traditional competencies such as content knowledge (CK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) remain foundational, there is a pressing need to focus more on the development and support of affective domains such as social-emotional competencies and personality traits. These findings highlight the need for institutional practices that promote holistic student teacher development through accessing support services and acquiring the needed competencies to support their well-being during their studies and to ensure relevant competence when they start teaching.

KEYWORDS

Social-emotional competence, personality traits, teacher training, student well-being, VUCA world

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(Mephato 8-12), deitha e ile ya hlahiswa ka mekgwa e fapaneng e kenyeletsang dipuisano tse tebileng tsa boleng le dihlooho tsa mafapha (HODs), manollo ya ditokomane le tlhahlobo ka dipatlisisopalo tsa khompuitha tse ileng tsa fuwa matitjhere a qalang a thuto ya Senyesemane a qetileng dithuto tsa oona yunivesithing, di tsepamisitse maikutlo ho kwetliso le ntshetsopele ya bona nakong ya thupelo e qalang ya matitjhere. Diphumano tse akaretsang tsa phuputso di fana ka maikutlo a hore le hoja ditsebo tsa ditlwaelo tse kang tsebo ya dikahare (CK), tsebo ya ho ruta (PK), le tsebo ya dikahare tsa thuto (PCK) e ntse e le tsa motheo, ho na le tlhokahalo e potlakileng ya ho tsepamisa maikutlo ho ntshetsopele le tshehetso ya dibaka tse amehang tse kang bokgoni ka ditsebo tsa maikutlo le kahisano le ditshobotsi tsa botho. Diphumano tsena di totobatsa tlhokahalo ya ditheo/ditsi tsa thuto ho kgothalletsa ntshetsopele ya matitjhere a baithuti ka kakaretso ka ho fumana ditshebeletso tsa tshehetso le ho fumana bokgoni bo hlokahalang ho tshehetsa boiketlo ba bona nakong ya dithuto tsa bona le ho netefatsa bokgoni bo nepahetseng ha ba qala ho ruta..

MANTSWE A BOHLOKWA
Ditsebo tsa maikutlo le kahisano, ditshobotsi tsa botho, kwetliso ya matitjhere, boiketlo ba Baithuti, lefatshe la VUCA

Introduction

Research shows that student success in tertiary education is significantly influenced by social-emotional competence and personality traits such as adaptability, social engagement, and motivation (Santos et al., 2023). The development of these soft skills enhances both student performance and well-being, not only during their studies but also when they enter the job market (Sauli et al., 2022) and the multifaceted realities of the modern educational landscape, often described as a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous)[5] world (Salakhova et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in teacher education, where students prepare for unprecedented complexity that transcends traditional pedagogical knowledge and mere mastery of content (Riedler & Eryaman, 2016). In addition, Dinçer et al. (2013, p. 1) postulate that English language teachers "should have socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, subject matter knowledge and personal qualities for better language teaching and learning." These skills should be acquired through academic programs, but higher education institutions have additional structures that run parallel to formal academic classes in the form of student support services that could further foster social-emotional growth and resilience. However, despite their importance, there is still not enough emphasis placed on the acquisition of these skills in teacher training programs (Aspelin, 2019; Hadar et al., 2020).

International studies highlight these gaps. A study by Hadar et al. (2020) indicated that student teachers struggle with volatile and uncertain circumstances, lacking sufficient preparation in social-emotional competencies. In addition, Molyneux (2021) emphasises the need to prepare teachers for emotional labour, suggesting that identity development and social-emotional competence should be addressed during teacher

5 The term VUCA was initially used by the United States Army War College to describe unpredictable conditions and change due to the complex nature of certain situations during times of war. In the current education systems VUCA refers to the environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Canzittu, 2020; LeBlanc, 2018).

preparation. Even before the Covid pandemic (which magnified the challenges of a VUCA world), Carstensen et al. (2019) demonstrated the effectiveness of a social-emotional competence training program for student teachers, showing improvements in emotional self-awareness and cognitive reappraisal. Matischek-Jauk and Reicher (2021) further argue that implementing social and emotional learning in teacher education programs fosters professional growth, equips early-career teachers with essential competencies, and supports emotional well-being. South African researcher, Marsay (2022) confirms the need for tertiary institutions to integrate social-emotional competencies and support skills training within teacher education in South Africa and states that interpersonal relationships, self-awareness and self-management are regarded essential for workplace readiness and teachers' professional resilience. These studies reinforce the argument that teacher education programs must contain both curricular content and practical exposure.

In this article, we want to suggest that tertiary institutions should focus more explicitly on the development of social-emotional competencies alongside the cultivation of certain personality traits in their academic training programs by better integrating and aligning curricular components with parallel structures such as student support services. By doing so, student teachers will not only be equipped to effectively access and utilise institutional support services during their own studies, but also to acquire competencies essential to ultimately thriving as effective practitioners in a VUCA world (Li et al., 2022). As a departure point this article will focus on the importance of the acquisition and development of social-emotional competence and personality traits by prospective English teachers.

Social-emotional competency

Social-emotional competency comprises different characteristics (Sauli et al., 2022), such as socio-affective skills, socio-emotional competency, or soft skills, generally used to define the ability of individuals to direct, regulate and understand thoughts, emotions, behaviours of others and to interact and adapt to changing interpersonal conditions (Schoon, 2021). Literature indicates that socio-affective skills in the education field include enthusiasm, positive attitudes towards learners and responding to their needs in nurturing healthy relationships whilst creating a stress-free learning environment (Dinçer et al., 2013). Hadar et al. (2020) add more specific social-emotional competencies such as showing social and self-awareness, having good communication skills, empathy and making responsible decisions. Research indicates that social-emotional competence has a direct effect on the success and performance of prospective teachers (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Mella et al., 2021) and is therefore of utmost importance that students approach their problems and emotions as a natural part of the learning process.

Personality traits

Certain personality traits are necessary for a teacher to be an effective practitioner. These include being passionate, cooperative, authoritative, creative and patient (Marchbanks, 2000, as cited in Sulistiyo, 2016, p. 401). Several researchers agree that

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an effective English teacher demonstrates personality traits such as being caring, polite, entertaining, helpful, tolerant, authoritative, humanistic, intelligent, helpful, enthusiastic, and culturally literate (Badamas, 2021; Murphy et al., 2004; Özkan & Kesen Mutlu, 2017). Dinçer et al. (2013) affirm that a teacher needs a sense of humor, must be sensible, optimistic, open-minded and flexible. Furthermore, Aydin et al., (2017) found that personality traits such as extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness have a positive effect on student teachers' perceived teaching skills (Aydin et al., 2017). In a study by Spitzer (2009, p. 90) with English Second Language (ESL) teachers, the participants felt that the:

> possession of personal characteristics is of paramount importance for successful ESL teaching. Disposition impacts teaching; any successful teacher will attest to that. Although difficult to quantify, teacher education programmes must do a great deal more to encourage the development of those characteristics that teachers intuitively know are necessary for good teaching.

Personality traits influence not only teaching success, but also student well-being. The interplay between personality traits and student well-being has garnered increasing attention particularly in VUCA circumstances (Saputra et al., 2023). Orrú et al. (2025) further reiterate the importance of tertiary institutions incorporating personality-based training to aid in student well-being (traditionally associated with parallel student support structures at universities) and academic performance (traditionally associated with formal academic programs at universities). It, therefore, is important that different departments and structures at universities collaborate and work closely together in the development of personality traits and social-emotional competencies for students. Academic programs for prospective teachers use policy documents as a departure point for program design and outcomes but in exploring SA educational frameworks, notable gaps were revealed in terms of the emphasis of these documents on social-emotional competence and personality traits.

Identified competency gaps in SA teacher education policy

There are four policy frameworks that have sought to guide the practices of SA teachers over the past two decades (Kimathi & Rusznyak, 2018). These are:

1. The roles of the educator and their associated competences, which forms part of the NSE (RSA, 2000).
2. The SACE Code of Professional Ethics (SACE, 2002).
3. The (Integrated) Quality Management System (QMS) (ELRC, 2003).
4. The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (DHET, 2015).

As part of the literature review, the focus on social-emotional competence and personality were analysed and depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Social-emotional competence and personality traits addressed in SA educational frameworks

SA educational frameworks	NSE	SACE	QMS	MRTEQ
Social-emotional competencies				
Generally mentioned	x		x	
Enthusiasm				
Positive attitudes towards learners		x		
Needs of learners	x	x		
Good relationship with learners and parents	x			
Self-awareness/regulation	x	x		x
Empathy				
Communications skills	x		x	x
Responsibility	x			
Personality traits				
Generally mentioned	*		x	•
Authoritative				
Knowledge of culture	x	•		
Humanistic	x			
Adaptability	x			
Resilience				
Tolerance		•		
Fair	x	x		
Open-minded				
Critical thinking	x		x	
Caring	x	•		
Creativity	x			
Conflict management			•	
Trust				

*Note. * Mentioned to some degree • Implied*

Table 1 indicates that social-emotional competencies and personality traits are acknowledged but not an explicit focus of the policy documents, particularly not within the MRTEQ framework, which is the official teacher-training framework in SA. According to Kimathi and Rusznyak (2018, p. 2), none of these frameworks effectively recognise "the relations between knowledge, skills, judgement and the ethical orientations that underpin professional teaching". Marongwe and Chisango (2022) agree that SA teacher programs should address classroom volatility, behavioural pressures, societal matters, diverse teaching context, as well as coping with constant change. The limited attention

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given to such aspects in policy underscores the need for relevant research that examines how early-career teachers perceive, develop, and apply social-emotional competencies and personality traits in the realities of South African VUCA classrooms and how they can be better supported in their training and education.

Complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) as a theoretical framework for research in and for a VUCA world

Complex dynamic systems theory is underpinned by the belief that the reality of the human and social world is one in which, "first, everything counts, and everything is connected, and second, everything changes" (Hiver et al., 2022, p. 916). Koopmans (2020) and Cameron and Larsen-Freeman (2007) emphasise that systems (such as education systems) often find themselves in states of turmoil or instability, changing quickly and unpredictably (a VUCA situation). Student well-being, viewed through the lens of CDST, is seen as an emergent, fluid phenomenon shaped by non-linear interactions of personal as well as professional contextual factors across all areas of students' studies (Vidal, 2023).

Student well-being in a VUCA world

Teaching is recognised as a highly stressful profession due to the emotional labour required in diverse and demanding classroom environments (Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Social-emotional skills are increasingly acknowledged as essential and are concrete factors in the overall success of teachers (Jones et al., 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). On the other hand, poor social-emotional competence negatively impacts student teacher achievement and behaviour (Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Research indicates that personality traits such as resilience, adaptability, openness, caring, responsibility, self-discipline, and conflict management, are crucial for navigating the complexities of higher education and maintaining higher academic achievement (Fru-Ngongban, 2023; Jardim et al., 2021). In SA, these VUCA conditions are often intensified by overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced schools, persistent socio-economic inequality, and curriculum changes (Du Plessis, 2019; Marongwe & Chisango 2022) that amplify the emotional and pedagogical demands placed on student teachers and early-career teachers. Even though social-emotional competencies and personality trait development are necessary for early-career teachers and student teachers' well-being, studies reveal that teacher education programs may not adequately prepare student teachers for the challenges of teaching (Hadar et al., 2020; Chesak et al., 2019).

This gap places pressure on institutions to revisit both their curricular frameworks and support systems. Student support services play a pivotal role and are particularly well-positioned to cultivate personality traits that contribute to overall student well-being and success, addressing not only academic performance but also personal and professional development (Barnard & Henn, 2023). This article thus explores the social-emotional competence and personality traits needed to foster teacher effectiveness by answering the following three questions:

1. To what extent do early-career teachers feel prepared for the profession in terms of social-emotional competencies and sought after personality traits?
2. Which specific personality traits and social-emotional competencies do experienced teachers (HODs) view as crucial for early-career teachers to thrive in a VUCA environment?
3. How does the teacher education and support services curriculum rendered by the institution currently align with the attainment of crucial competencies?

To date, limited research has been done on the perceived preparedness related to social-emotional competencies and the much-needed personality traits, or how existing curricula and support services align with the demands of the SA classroom (Marsay, 2022). The following methodology was employed to address these questions.

Methodology

This study aimed at conceptualising the competencies needed by early-career English teachers who specialise in the Senior (Snr) and Further Education and Training (FET) phase. The data used for this article form part of a larger study that employed a sequential exploratory mixed-method design, grounded in the CDST and framed through a pragmatic lens.

The research commenced with a qualitative phase, wherein voluntary, purposeful sampling targeted English heads of department (HODs) with more than two years' experience from the Sedibeng West District in Gauteng, South Africa. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, representing all school quintiles – a classification based on community literacy and unemployment rates, with quintile 1 indicating the poorest and quintile 5 the most affluent schools. Data saturation was reached by the ninth interview. The subsequent quantitative phase used non-probability, purposeful volunteer sampling to recruit volunteer alumni early-career English teachers who studied at a South African university across three campuses. These early-career teachers had less than three years' experience teaching Grades 8-12 in diverse school contexts across all nine provinces in SA. Ninety-eight participants completed a questionnaire comprising 83 items on a four-point Likert scale, with 91 responses deemed valid. Qualitative data were analysed inductively, employing AI-assisted coding via ATLAS.ti (v 25.01.3). Quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, including the calculation of frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Additionally relevant policy and curricula documents were analysed to contextualise and triangulate data. Validity and reliability were strengthened through third-party recruitment, pre-testing of instruments, pilot testing, supervisor checks, and consultation with a statistician. The reliability of the quantitative instrument was further supported by Cronbach's alpha and Spearman's rank correlation analyses.

Ethics

This study was approved by the North-West University Education Management and Economic Sciences, Law, Theology, Engineering and Natural Sciences Research Ethics

Committee (NWU-EMELTEN-REC) and adhered to the principles of Ethics in Health Research. To minimise the risk, we ensured anonymity and confidentiality after permission and informed consent were obtained from all participants. Anonymity was ensured and limited biographical information was required from the interviewees. Confidentiality was maintained by referring to HOD's by number; participants who completed the questionnaire online remained anonymous via an untraceable link to the questionnaire. All raw data were stored safely.

Findings

The importance of social-emotional competence

Studies show that social-emotional competence is extremely important during teacher training, as it has a high correlation with teacher burnout and academic performance (Jennings et al., 2017; MacCann et al., 2020). HODs 4 and 5 reiterate that emotional intelligence is essential to teach in a VUCA world where teachers increasingly:

> *deal with more emotional and psychological problems of learners than before. Since schools promote inclusive education, learners with learning barriers and emotional/ psychological problems are placed in one class. This is a huge challenge especially for new teachers.* (HOD 4)

This comment underscores the importance of the inclusion of teacher preparation that includes social-emotional competence as learners learn more effectively in a classroom with positive teacher–learner relationships. Conversely, when teachers struggle to manage the social-emotional demands of teaching, it negatively affects both their own well-being and their learners' academic performance (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). HOD 5 adds that "*it is obviously important that teachers should be stable and mature in order to be excellent teachers*".

Here, emotional maturity is framed as a non-negotiable attribute for quality teaching, yet the developmental pathway to such maturity during training remains under-addressed (Shafiuddin, 2022). Research confirms that good social-emotional competence is related to lower burnout symptoms and thus lower attrition among teachers (Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017). HOD 13 echoes this in stating:

> *there are very few teachers that have not gone through that particular set of challenges [social-emotional challenges] and those that have stayed have, I suppose, worked a little at it. But there are teachers that have actually left because of those challenges. It's too hard and too much.*

This remark supports the reality that prospective teachers struggle to manage stress during their studies, and that, left unaddressed, these challenges persist and remain unresolved when they enter the profession. This was alluded to by Peterson and Baule (2023) who state that inadequate emotion and stress management during training can lead to persistent wellbeing challenges when student teachers begin professional practice. HODs further identified specific social-emotional competencies that were

underdeveloped in early-career educators. These included, struggling to be inclusive, adapting to an ever-changing environment, challenges in relationship and trust building, managing insecurity and engaging in sensitive topics. These align with the competencies outlined by Lozano-Peña et al. (2021) and De Azevedo et al. (2021) and were corroborated by the quantitative data.

An overall average mean of 3.36 and standard deviation of 0.49 suggested that participants felt only 'moderately' prepared after their training with respect to social-emotional competence, graduating without feeling confident in the core affective skills needed to sustain themselves or their learners in volatile school environments. This reflects a disconnect between theoretical training and situational practice. The particularly low mean for 'coping with workload' (mean = 2.82, SD = 0.980) suggests that time and stress management were inadequately addressed in training programs. Participants also indicated a limited ability 'to cope with aspects in my environment that often change' (mean = 2.86, SD = 0.82) and deal with any 'emotional stresses at school' (mean = 2.82, SD = 0.84), indicating persistent gaps in social-emotional competency development.

While in their research some scholars, such as Carstensen and Klusmann (2021) and Hamer et al. (2024), indicated that the development of adaptation is possible during teacher training, and this could help teachers remain resilient and optimistic, the findings in this study suggest that such development is not automatic and needs explicit attention. The document analysis of the eight Module Outcome Documents for the curriculum of English for Education reveals that the development of resilience and dealing with insecurities and stress management are not explicitly addressed in any of the English for Education modules. In contrast soft skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity are explicitly included and appear to contribute, as these were reported as competencies gained 'to a large extent'. We believe that intentional alignment of academic curriculum and parallel support structures could promote sustainable student teacher and early-career teacher well-being. In addition to social-emotional competence, personality traits (discussed in the next section) further contribute to teacher effectiveness, adaptability and resilience.

The importance of personality traits

Students' perceptions and attitudes are directly influenced by their personality traits and these, in turn, influence student well-being and the mastering of certain learning outcomes (Fandos-Herrera et al., 2023). Teachers' personality traits include the unique combination of behaviours, attitudes and the general characteristics that affect learners' learning experiences (Dinçer et al., 2013; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). During the qualitative phase of the study, in interview, the HODs highlighted the following personality traits as being of utmost importance for successful teaching: flexibility, openness, caring, responsibility, self-discipline, conflict management, and resilience: "... *flexibility is one of the biggest struggles for some teachers*" (HOD 6). Further, "... *to be open that there are different interpretations to the poetry*" and that teachers "*have to be open to the different ideas and technologies … that our learners are thinking of*" (HOD 4).

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HOD 3 shared that literature teaching is a perfect opportunity to build relationships and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to have "*open*" inclusive conversations: "*you cannot close yourself off*". HOD 4 added that "*you have to make the kids comfortable, if you make them comfortable, then immediately they won't be so resistant to learning or you trying to teach them*."

HOD 13 shared the observation that "*new teachers don't take responsibility for the outcomes that the children achieve in class or for the kids and for their marks*" and later concluded that "*they don't seem to worry about that too much*". Moreover, according to HOD 5, "Teachers find it difficult to deal with conflict in the workplace, with reference to colleagues and parents". HOD 3 later shared that novice teachers lacked "inner strength"; elaborating, "...resilience despite your circumstances, you cannot be a snowflake, you cannot melt."

These quotations reflect the interpersonal demands of teaching and simultaneously suggest that early-career teachers are underprepared not due to individual gaps in personality traits but rather due to training that failed to prioritise the development of certain personality traits, like flexibility, interpersonal maturity and resilience. Le Cornu (2013, p. 13) agrees that resilience in early-career teachers can be built "through developing and nurturing relationships that were mutual, empowering and encouraging, and by being the recipient of relationships that had these attributes". Most HODs added that commitment was the ultimate personality trait that could lead to a successful practitioner. As HOD 8 sums it up:

Being a successful teacher is being all in. It is not only about the subject content. It is a 24-hour deal. Some of the skills come naturally for some students. However, if you are committed to becoming a great teacher you can better your skills. For me it all boils down to COMMITMENT!

Regrettably, the quantitative data indicated that early-career teachers only 'moderately' felt 'commitment to the school without looking for another school/place to work at' (mean = 3.03, SD = 0.912). Other moderate mean scores with higher standard deviation scores indicate an uneven internalisation of certain personality traits such as 'confronting conflict constructively' (mean = 3.20, SD = 0.749) 'coping during challenging circumstances at school' (mean = 3.24, SD = 0.812) and being 'flexible in all aspects of my work to accommodate changes' (mean = 3.26, SD = 0.77). The variability and lower mean scores reflect a gap in the curriculum, where such traits are often assumed to be inherent or develop implicitly. Unfortunately, emotional and practice-generated issues tend to not be explored and even avoided during teacher training (Lindqvist, 2019). This was confirmed when the Module Outcome Documents for English were analysed. There, no explicit attention was given to the development of personality traits. One would trust, however, that all factors that pertain to personality traits would be developed during the training in content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, however the findings confirm that it was not.

We agree with Çetin and Halisdemir (2019) and Tidhar (2023) to some extent that the generation born between 1997 and 2012 (Generation Z) often avoid introspection, they tend to be reserved, are challenged by interpersonal interactions and prefer to only

be committed to their own success rather than that of the organisation. But we feel that while generational traits may influence emotional engagement, it is reductive to frame this purely as a personality issue. The findings highlight the importance of personality traits, and their development and we feel strongly that teacher training programs should cater for training to counter these behavioural tendencies. Kell (2019) and Bavlı and Alcı (2020) emphasise the experiential evidence of the relationship between personality traits and teaching competencies. Integrating traits such as flexibility and openness into teacher training enhances student teachers' ability to adapt to the ever-changing VUCA world. Possessing personality traits such as care, self-discipline, resilience and commitment, contribute to the conscientiousness required for effective teaching.

Recommendations

The findings in this study underscore the need for increased focus on social-emotional competence and personality trait development in teacher education curricula. This aligns with international research supporting the need to better equip early-career teachers with essential emotional and interpersonal skills to succeed in the workplace (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Dung & Zsolnai, 2021; Hadar et al., 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). These competencies are also linked to student well-being, job satisfaction and broader systemic issues (Dicke et al., 2020; Kurt & Duyar, 2023) which have not been adequately addressed in the institution's teacher training material. This was evident as HODs and early-career teachers indicated a lack in the ability to manage conflict, change, stress or workload. Other factors, such as insufficient commitment, difficulty coping with challenging circumstances, and limited flexibility, further indicate underlying development needs. Chesak et al. (2019, p. 32), agrees that a training program that caters for "stress, anxiety, resilience, gratitude, happiness, life satisfaction and quality of life" enhances the overall well-being of an individual, it aids in positive interactions and enhances overall resilience.

Counselling centres, psychosocial support and the university climate could assist with the well-being of students whilst studying as these play a vital role in fostering the professional identity development of student teachers (Wu et al., 2023). The institution that formed part of this study offers student counselling and development services that focus on the optimal well-being of the student. However, there is a misalignment when referring students for additional support. This requires collaboration and better communication between academics and support departments to explicitly work on a holistic approach to training teachers. HODs further indicated that early-career teachers did not show strong commitment and refrained from taking responsibility for learner outcomes, skills that should be acquired during teacher training. In the year following this study (2025) the institution's Centre for Teaching and Learning started workshops targeting academic soft skills development. The workshops included aspects such as conflict management, collaboration, time management skills and dealing with academic anxiety and stress.

Additional research is being conducted to deepen the understanding of student well-being and enhance the overall academic experience at the institution. Findings from

this study could further guide the development of more targeted support initiatives in collaboration with student support services. Clear guidelines should be established for conceptualising, assessing, and fostering social-emotional competencies and personality traits through structured interventions (Lozano-Peña et al., 2021; Hadar et al., 2020; Chesak et al., 2019).

Conclusion

There is an increasing gap between what is taught in teacher preparation programs and what is needed in the complex, emotionally charged realities of students that will work in global VUCA contexts. Clinging to traditional ideas of teacher preparation is no longer sustainable. This article aimed to contextualise the competencies that student teachers need to acquire during their training with a focus on social-emotional competence and personality traits that promote effectiveness in practice and to improve student well-being whilst studying. Guided by three questions, this article explored early-career teachers' perceived preparedness in terms of social-emotional competencies and sought after personality traits; the competencies prioritised by experienced teachers (HODs); and the extent to which the institutional curriculum and support services currently align with the attainment of crucial competencies.

The moderate levels of perceived readiness in social-emotional competence and essential personality traits indicate that student teachers seem only partially prepared to manage the emotional, interpersonal, and professional demands placed upon them. This points to a clear mismatch between the realities that they face, the competencies needed and the preparation that they receive. By prioritising the training of teachers with a focus on their holistic development, teacher education institutions may be more successful in ensuring that early-career teachers are better prepared to thrive in dynamic and uncertain environments. These findings are contextually relevant, and they cannot be generalised across all teacher education institutions in South Africa. However, educational institutions should aim to produce graduates that thrive amidst volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. To achieve this, teacher education programs should focus more on the development of social-emotional competencies and the cultivation of key personality traits, through better alignment and integration of the academic curriculum and student support services.

Ethics statement

The study reported in this article was approved by the NWU-EMELTEN-REC and adhered to the principles of Ethics on Health Research. The anonymity of participants was ensured through the requirement of limited biographical information.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors of this article have no competing interest to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Disorienting dilemmas, self-efficacy and well-being: Exploring student teachers' perceptions of unpreparedness to teach English

Iingxubakaxaka eziphazamisayo, ukusebenza ngokuzithemba kunye nokuphila kakuhle: Ukuphononongа iimbono zabafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala zokungakulungeli ukufundisa isiNgesi

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ABSTRACT

The transition from student to teacher can be a challenging journey. This article explores how perceived unpreparedness – experienced as a disorienting dilemma – influences final-year student teachers' self-efficacy and overall well-being. Using an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach, data were generated through questionnaires, visual representations, and focus group discussions with twelve student teachers at a South African higher education institution. A conceptual framework is developed by merging Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. The case study reveals that while most student teachers initially felt prepared to teach English, self-examination of their preparedness based on teaching practice experiences exposed feelings of anxiety, low self-confidence, and self-doubt, impacting their self-efficacy. The findings reveal that enhancing student teachers' self-efficacy is essential for their well-being, as higher self-efficacy promotes resilience, confidence, and preparedness for teaching. Emotional health and psychological support are critical for fostering student teachers' sense of hope, resilience and self-efficacy. Addressing these challenges can help higher education institutions foster self-efficacy development, ensuring that student teachers transition from uncertainty to confidence. This article advocates for a holistic approach to teacher preparation, highlighting the role of higher education institutions, student affairs, and counselling services in strengthening self-efficacy and reducing anxiety through targeted support.

KEYWORDS

Well-being, teaching readiness, student teachers, disorienting dilemmas, self-efficacy

ISISHWANKATHELO

Utshintsho lokusuka kukuba ngumfundi ukuya kubutitshala kunokuba luhambo olucela umngeni. Eli nqaku liphononongа indlela ukungalungeli – okufunyanwa njengengxubakaxaka ephazamisayo – ekuphembelela ngayo ukusebenza ngokuzithemba nokuphila kakuhle kwabafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala abakunyaka wokugqibela. Kusetyenziswa indlela yokulinganisa izinto (paradigm) yokutolika kunye nophando lohlahlelohlobo, iinkcukacha ziqokolelwe ngephephamibuzo, iinkcazo ezibonwayo, neengxoxo zamaqela ekugxilwe kuwo kunye nabafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala

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abalishumi elinesibini kwiziko lemfundo ephakamileyo eMzantsi Afrika. Isakhelo sengqiqo siphuhliswe ngokudibanisa isithako sokuhlalutya sikaMezirow, ukufunda okuguqula izinto (transformative learning), kunye nesikaBandura, sokusebenza ngozithemba (self-efficacy). Nakubeni uphandomba lutyhila ukuba ngelixa uninzi lwabafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala ekuqaleni babeziva bekulungele ukufundisa isiNgesi, ukuzihlola kokulungela kwabo okusekwe kumava okuziqhelanisa nokufundisa kutyhile iimvakalelo zonxunguphalo, ukungazithembi, nokuzithandabuza, okunefuthe ekusebenzeni ngokuzithemba kwabo. Iziphumo zophando zityhila ukuba ukuphuculwa kokuzimela kwabafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala kubalulekile kwintlalontle yabo, njengoko ukuzimela okuphezulu kukhuthaza ukomelela, ukuzithemba, kunye nokulungela ukufundisa. Impilo yeemvakalelo kunye nenkxaso yengqondo ibalulekile ekukhuthazeni abafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala ukuba babe nethemba, ukomelela kunye nokuzimela. Ukujongana nale mingeni kunganceda amaziko emfundo ephakamileyo akhuthaze uphuhliso lokuzimela, nokuqinisekisa ukuba abafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala basuka ekungaqinisekini baye ekuzithembeni. Eli nqaku likhuthaza indlela equka konke yokulungiselela ootitshala, liqaqambisa indima yamaziko emfundo ephakamileyo, imicimbi yabafundi, kunye neenkonzo zengcebiso ekomelezeni ukuzimela nokunciphisa ixhala ngenkxaso ekujoliswe kuyo.

AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO
Intlalontle, ukulungela ukufundisa, abafundi abaqeqeshelwa ubutitshala, iingxubakaxaka eziphazamisayo, ukusebenza ngokuzithemba

Introduction

The ability to succeed in teacher training programs depends on student teachers' emotional and psychological aspects. Critical factors are their emotional well-being and their teaching self-efficacy. These factors are interrelated; a low self-efficacy can lead to feeling that tasks are more difficult than they are, which heightens stress, while a strong self-efficacy can alleviate the effects of stress (Hitches et al., 2022). Exploring these dynamics is important for understanding student teachers' challenges and resultant perceptions of preparedness to teach.

Teaching anxiety is prevalent amongst prospective teachers, significantly affecting both their performance and overall well-being (Soriano, 2023). One reason student teachers leave their programs before graduating is due to a decline in their well-being and rising levels of emotional exhaustion (Hartl et al., 2022). This underscores the urgent need to prioritise teacher well-being and respond to both their emotional and professional needs as the emotional strain can make it difficult for them to continue their training, ultimately resulting in student teachers abandoning the profession before even entering the classroom.

The challenges are closely linked to a decrease in teaching self-efficacy, which refers to the belief in one's ability to plan, execute, and manage successful teaching experiences (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy is an important personal resource that influences the extent to which teachers can effectively utilise their skills and abilities (Lipińska-Grobelny & Narska, 2021). Teachers' self-efficacy is primarily influenced by personal factors, such as teaching experience and teaching practice (Chen et al., 2024). Moreover, evidence suggests that there is often a disconnect between the way teacher training is delivered at the higher education institution and the realities student teachers encounter in classrooms (Phillips & Condy, 2023). The gap between training and realities

of the classroom needs to be addressed to better prepare future teachers for the challenges of real-world teaching.

Teaching is widely recognised as a high-stress profession, often accompanied by numerous challenges that can negatively impact teachers' psychological well-being (Fourie & de Klerk, 2024). When student teachers encounter this stress early, especially in the context of misaligned training and real-world expectations, it can further undermine their preparedness and mental health, emphasising the need for more supportive and aligned teacher education programs. Thus, the emotional and mental well-being of student teachers is crucial to their development and success as educators.

This article forms part of a broader study that explored final-year student teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach English the following year. The larger study explored various aspects influencing preparedness, and documented both the areas in which student teachers felt prepared to teach and those in which they felt unprepared. This article specifically examines how student teachers' perceived unpreparedness to teach English, often due to inadequate training to deal with the realities of the classroom, leads to emotional strain, including stress, self-doubt, and anxiety. The article begins by unpacking the conceptual framework. Subsequently, the literature concerning student teachers' perceived unpreparedness, anxiety, and well-being is examined. The methodology is then outlined followed by findings, discussion, limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, and conclusion and recommendations.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Bandura's self-efficacy concepts

The broader study was grounded in transformative learning theory. The present article also incorporates Bandura's self-efficacy theory to examine student teachers' perceived unpreparedness to teach English. While Mezirow's theory explains the process of self-examination in response to disorienting dilemmas, highlighting how students revise their perspectives (Mezirow, 2009), Bandura highlights that self-efficacy beliefs are evaluated through four primary sources: (i) performance/mastery experience, (ii) vicarious experience, (iii) verbal persuasion, and (iv) emotional and psychological states (Bhati & Sethy, 2022). By combining aspects of these theories, this article provides a comprehensive view of how student teachers not only reflect on their teaching practice experiences and perceptions of unpreparedness, but also how components that impact self-efficacy influence their teaching readiness.

Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory states that it is through personal experiences and experiences with other significant people in education that one can reflect on, and challenge, one's existing perceptions, thus changing the way one thinks or feels about something. Mezirow highlighted that it is not only experiences or situations that aid in transformation, but that one's reaction to such is what causes the transformation.

There are ten phases of transformative learning, according to Mezirow (2000, p. 22):

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame.
3. A critical assessment of assumptions.

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4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions.
6. Planning a course of action.
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles.
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives.

This article will consider the first two phases. The transformative journey begins with encountering a disorienting dilemma (the first phase), which refers to a challenge that disrupts the way one understands the world. This often triggers emotional disruption and a sense that things no longer make sense or fit together as they once did (Fleming, 2018). Howie and Bagnall (2013, p. 7) define a disorienting dilemma as "a dilemma that causes a disruption or disturbance in a person." Moreover, the triggering event can be a significant incident, a series of events, a deliberate effort to initiate change, or a natural developmental progression (Cranton, 2006, as cited in Khabanyane et al., 2014). A transformative learning experience can be initiated by such an event or disorienting dilemma (Cranton, 2006; Howie & Bagnall, 2013). This aligns with this article which chronicles how student teachers' perceived unpreparedness to teach English serves as a disorienting dilemma that challenges their existing beliefs and expectations of teaching English.

"Occasionally, or at different stages in life or in response to life events, there emerges an unease or sense that things do not fit and that we may need to change how we construe meanings" (Fleming, 2018, p. 122). In the broader study, student teachers initially felt prepared, but upon participating in teaching practice, they realised gaps in their readiness (disorienting dilemma), leading to anxiety and self-doubt upon self-examination (the second phase). Moreover, teaching efficacy, a construct closely linked to student teachers' preparedness for teaching (Chen et al., 2024), aligns with the self-efficacy framework described by Bandura (1977), which emphasises the role of personal belief in one's teaching abilities in shaping their confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. Therefore, the reaction to their teaching readiness drove their transformation, which was shaped by Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy factors.

Bandura's (1977) four self-efficacy factors can be defined as follows:

1. Performance/mastery experiences is the most influential source of self-efficacy "as it is based on personal mastery experiences" (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). Performance experience refers to the outcomes of one's own direct experiences where successes build self-efficacy and failures lower it. In the current study. when student teachers ponder over their experiences during teaching practice, their perceived successes or challenges in the classroom directly affect their confidence in their ability to teach English. The mastery or lack of mastery in specific teaching skills shapes their self-efficacy.

2. Vicarious experience is a concept that refers to how one's self efficacy may also be influenced by the experiences of others (Bandura, 1977). In other words, if individuals see others succeed at a task, they are more likely to believe they can succeed as well. Conversely, seeing others fail can reduce self-efficacy, particularly if the observer perceives the failure as tied to personal weaknesses.
3. Verbal persuasion refers to the encouragement and positive reinforcement from others (such as lecturers and teaching practice mentors in this study), as well as negative feedback, that affects efficacy beliefs (Bhati & Sethi, 2022). While positive feedback enhances self-efficacy, negative feedback will do the opposite (Bandura, 1977).
4. Emotional arousal speaks to the emotional and psychological state of a person and is the final element of self-efficacy. It refers to how emotions and stress during tasks can affect someone's belief in their abilities. Bandura (1977) reinforced that elevated stress can negatively influence performance. In essence, high levels of stress or emotional arousal can undermine self-efficacy, whereas the ability to cope with stress can enhance it (Bhati & Sethi, 2022).

Merging certain concepts from Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory provides a comprehensive conceptual framework (see Figure 1) for understanding the transformative journey of student teachers in this article.

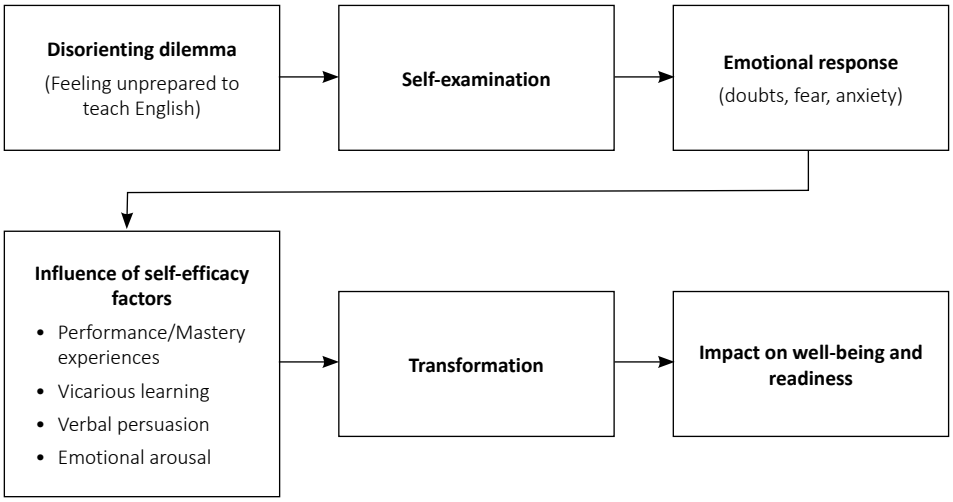

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 represents the process that student teachers navigated when reflecting on their teaching practice experiences in this study. Initially, the student teachers encountered a disorienting dilemma, where they felt unprepared for certain aspects and uncertain in the classroom, causing feelings of anxiety and doubt about their ability to teach English effectively. Drawing on their teaching practice

experiences, the broader study, on which this article is based, prompted student teachers to engage in self-examination via multiple data-generation methods, helping them identify specific areas in which they felt unprepared to teach English.

The conceptual framework was not only used to structure the theoretical orientation of this article, but also served as an analytical lens during data analysis. Each stage of the framework was directly aligned with the themes generated from the data. For example, instances of emotional discomfort and pedagogical uncertainty during teaching practice reflected the disorienting dilemmas student teachers expressed in their questionnaire responses, visual representations, and focus group discussions. The phase of self-examination was evidenced in student teachers' reflections on their perceived gaps in teaching English, particularly as they engaged further with the visual representations in the focus group discussions. Themes related to mentorship, peer experiences, and recollections of prior successes or failures were mapped onto the four sources of self-efficacy, as articulated by Bandura. Finally, the theme of heightened awareness without full confidence signalled a nuanced transformation: one that did not resolve into certainty, but rather into a deeper understanding of their developmental needs. This framework thus enabled a systematic engagement with the data, providing coherence between conceptual constructs and empirical findings.

Student teachers' perceived unpreparedness, anxiety and well-being

Student teachers develop their perceptions of teaching readiness throughout their education. However, being prepared to teach is a complex process, which is influenced by individual factors as well as interactions with the context and others around them (Çelik & Zehir Topkaya, 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Teachers play a significant role in shaping their learners' academic, social, and emotional growth; the demands of teaching, like lesson planning and addressing different learning abilities, behavioural, and emotional needs, often lead to high levels of stress for teachers (Zito et al., 2024).

One of the major challenges and stressors that student teachers encounter is teaching practice. This component is crucial for becoming a fully qualified teacher, as it provides student teachers with practical experience in real teaching and learning environments (Maulimora, 2019; Gorospe, 2022). Despite its importance, teaching practice frequently exposes rather than alleviates student teachers' insecurities. Mpate et al. (2023) found that student teachers in Tanzania demonstrated limited skills in lesson preparation and classroom management during their teaching practice. Such limitation in skills may result in lack of preparedness that in turn negatively impacts the student teachers' learning experiences. Similarly, Zito et al. (2024) reported that pre-service teachers identified classroom management and managing learner behaviour as key stressors which impacted their well-being. Furthermore, Pan et al. (2023) further revealed a negative association between well-being and the demands related to teaching responsibilities and student behaviour management. Together, these studies suggest that teaching practice, while pedagogically vital, may also exacerbate stress and reduce confidence when adequate support is absent.

The significance attributed to teaching practice is justifiable, as it provides a context in which student teachers apply and demonstrate the pedagogical skills they have developed, while also receiving feedback to support their professional growth (Koşar, 2021). The effectiveness of teaching practice is closely linked to the mentorship provided. While it offers a context for student teachers to demonstrate their pedagogical skills and receive feedback, this process depends on the mentor teachers' own competencies. Phillips and Condy (2023) found that some mentor teachers lacked the necessary skills to offer timely and constructive guidance. This issue undermines the potential of teaching practice to build teacher efficacy, given that mentor feedback plays a critical role in student teachers' professional growth (Çelik & Zehir Topkaya, 2023).

Anxiety among student teachers is another recurring concern. Soriano (2023, p. 765) reports moderate anxiety levels characterised by "mild to moderate 'uncomfortable feelings' (such as worry, uneasiness, or trepidation)," reflecting a developing self-efficacy rather than debilitating stress. This finding contrasts with research by Zito et al. (2024) and Pan et al. (2023), which associates anxiety with diminished well-being and confidence. The divergence indicates that anxiety may function differently across contexts or individual differences, pointing to the need for a more differentiated understanding of how anxiety impacts teacher readiness and how it can be constructively addressed within teacher education.

The studies above collectively highlight that student teachers face considerable anxiety and challenges during teaching practice, largely related to classroom management and meeting diverse learner needs. Understanding these sources of stress is crucial for designing more supportive learning environments that enhance student teachers' well-being and professional growth (Gorospe, 2022).

Empirical studies demonstrate the potential of targeted interventions to support student teachers' well-being. Hepburn et al. (2021) investigated changes in perceived stress, mindfulness, subjective well-being, and coping among student teachers, and found that a yoga-based intervention, which included breathing techniques, physical postures and guided meditation significantly reduced stress and increased mindful attention. Similarly, Hoferichter and Jentsch (2024) reported that an online positive psychology program improved student teachers' self-efficacy, emotion regulation, and coping skills. In a related study, Briscoe (2019) found that virtual mentor–mentee partnerships enhanced student teachers' professional growth, confidence, and emotional well-being by providing empathetic support and authentic classroom insights. Together, these studies demonstrate the value of proactive, research-informed interventions in building resilience and well-being among future teachers.

While most research focuses on whether student teachers are prepared or not, and the aspects for which they are prepared or not (Koşar, 2021; Gorospe, 2022; Mpate et al., 2023; Phillips & Condy, 2023), limited studies focus on how student teachers' unpreparedness to teach directly influences their self-efficacy or well-being (Soriano, 2023; Gorospe, 2022; Zito et al., 2024). There are several interventions that have been developed for teachers, but there is a clear gap in research and practice concerning proactive, structured well-being programs for student teachers (Wang et al., 2025),

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suggesting a further gap. This lack limits opportunities to develop essential emotional regulation and resilience skills before student teachers enter the profession.

While resilience and mentoring are recognised as important in teacher education, much of the literature remains conceptual. Mansfield et al.'s (2016) BRiTE framework and Orland-Barak and Wang's (2021) integrated mentoring model offer valuable approaches to supporting pre-service teacher well-being, with some evidence of implementation. However, little empirical research has explored how these frameworks relate specifically to pre-service teachers' perceived preparedness to teach English and its impact on well-being. This suggests a gap in understanding the subject-specific dimensions of preparedness and how they intersect with emotional support in initial teacher education.

Methodology

This study was situated within an interpretive paradigm, using a qualitative case-study approach to explore the perceptions of student teachers. While well-being was not the initial focus of the broader study, the data revealed the significant impact that perceived unpreparedness had on the student teachers' emotional states, including anxiety, self-doubt, and their overall self-efficacy. These factors ultimately influenced their general well-being while grappling with the disorienting dilemma – their perceptions of unpreparedness to teach English. This section unpacks the research paradigm, approach, design, data generation and instruments, ethics, and participants and sampling.

Paradigm

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm, grounded in the view that reality is socially constructed and contextually experienced (Check & Schutt, 2012). Interpretivism focuses on how individuals make meaning of their world rather than seeking a single objective truth. Aligned with transformative learning theory, which emphasises critical reflection and the re-evaluation of assumptions (Mezirow, 2009), this paradigm enabled an exploration of how final-year student teachers perceived their preparedness to teach English. The approach valued participants' subjective interpretations and acknowledged the influence of context and personal experience (Cohen et al., 2011).

Approach

A qualitative research approach supported the study's aim to understand complex, individual experiences; qualitative studies allow researchers to explore the subjective experiences of their subjects (Lim, 2024). Qualitative research privileges depth and context over generalisability, offering insight into participants' beliefs, values, and frames of reference (Creswell, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Open-ended tools such as visual representations, questionnaires, and focus group discussions enabled participants to express their experiences narratively, facilitating thick description and thematic analysis (Atieno, 2009).

Design

This study adopted a case-study design to explore a specific, real-world situation (Rule & John, 2011), focusing on final-year student teachers' perceptions of their readiness. The case-study approach was suitable as it allowed for a comprehensive examination using diverse data sources over time, offering rich, contextual insights (Creswell, 2009). In the context of this article specifically, the 'case' refers to the perceived unpreparedness of final-year student teachers to teach English, which falls under the broader category of teaching preparedness. Given the study's focus on investigating this particular phenomenon, the case study method proved to be an appropriate and effective choice.

Data generation and instruments

Data were collected through a combination of questionnaires, visual representations, and focus group discussions, allowing for a rich, in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and reflections on their readiness to teach English. These methods provided valuable insights into the emotional and cognitive processes involved in their transition from student to teacher. The questionnaire and visual representations were completed first, followed by a focus group discussion conducted sequentially. The focus group built on the visual data to further explore participants' responses.

The questionnaire was specifically designed by the researcher for the broader study and based on the aims and objectives. It was given to various members of staff as well as a small group of five students in the English Major 310 class for the purpose of piloting. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions related to students' perceived readiness to teach English. Two sections incorporated Likert-type scales requiring student teachers to indicate their level of preparedness from 'not at all prepared' to 'very well prepared' in relation to teaching specific aspects of the English curriculum, and broader teaching practices. The final section comprised open-ended questions designed to capture reflective, detailed responses. It was anticipated that completing the questionnaire would facilitate a degree of self-examination, the second phase of learning outlined in Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2009).

The second data instrument was a visual representation task designed to elicit student teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach English through non-verbal, creative means. All 12 student teachers were invited to use any visual form, such as a poster, collage, mind map, cartoon strip, photographs, or drawings, to represent their thoughts and experiences. Visual representations were used to access the deeper, often unspoken aspects of participants' experiences that might not emerge through words alone. They enabled student teachers to express complex feelings and perceptions about their preparedness to teach English, enriching the data and supporting more reflective, nuanced insights (Theron et al., 2011; Rose, 2016). Student teachers were asked to visually represent their perceived readiness to teach English and provide a brief written explanation to accompany their visual. They were prompted to reflect on the areas of English they felt prepared to teach, exploring the reasons behind this perception and the influencing factors. Likewise, they identified the aspects they felt unprepared to teach, visually representing their lack of confidence and the factors that contributed to it.

A focus group of six participants, randomly selected, was utilised. The focus group discussion was video- and audio-recorded to capture both verbal and non-verbal data. The recordings were carefully reviewed, transcribed, and analysed using transcript-based analysis. The focus group was guided by semi-structured open-ended questions designed to foster a relaxed atmosphere and encourage in-depth discussion of participants' preparedness to teach English. The researcher facilitated the session to support rich, verbal interaction. In this focus group, student teachers were also asked to comment on their own and others' visual representations. Aligned with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the focus group was designed to foster rational dialogue and critical reflection, providing participants with an opportunity to express their views on their readiness to teach English and to share their personal experiences (Taylor, 2009). The group discussed the similarities and differences in the visuals, exploring how they reflected on their perceived readiness to teach.

Data analysis

In this qualitative case study, data analysis involved transforming raw data into descriptive narratives and thematic categories (Ryan et al., 2007), aligning with the case study design and qualitative methodology (Cohen et al., 2011). Thematic analysis was used, as it is well-suited to qualitative data presented in the form of rich textual descriptions (Creswell, 2009). This method enabled the categorisation of data into central themes, providing a clear and effective way to present the case (Rule & John, 2011).

The researcher conducted all data analysis independently, drawing on skills developed through postgraduate studies, including qualitative research methods and data analysis techniques. Guidance from the research supervisor was also instrumental, particularly in identifying best practices for analysing visual and textual data, as well as relevant literature to support methodological decisions. This collaborative support contributed to a rigorous and informed approach to data interpretation.

Multiple strategies were implemented in the broader study to minimise misinterpretation and over analysis across the three data sources. Questionnaire responses were thematically analysed using participants' own words to preserve meaning and reduce researcher bias. In terms of the visual representations, student teachers were asked to provide a paragraph explanation to accompany their visual, offering insight how it reflected their perceptions of preparedness to teach English. These visual representations were later elaborated on during the focus group discussion, ensuring that these were not misinterpreted by the researcher.

An observer, a lecturer from a different department, was invited to the focus group discussion to make notes that supplemented the recordings, further ensuring that misinterpretation of the data was prevented. Furthermore, member checking, which ensured credibility and trustworthiness of interpretations (Elo et al., 2014), was employed by sharing transcripts, a summary of the study, and key conclusions to student teachers for further verification (Varpio et al., 2017).

Ethics

Gatekeeper permission to conduct research with students in the School of Education was granted by the Registrar. The Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee provided full approval for ethical clearance (Protocol Reference Number: HSS/0624/017M). Consent forms were also presented to all participants in the study and all ethical issues regarding research were obeyed. The consent form outlined key details of the study, including what participation involved, the expected time commitment, participants' rights to voluntarily participate and withdraw at any stage, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned and used.

In recognition of the potentially personal and emotional nature of the broader study, especially in the focus group discussion, student teachers were informed that they could skip any question, pause, or withdraw at any point without consequence. Emotional safety was supported by creating a respectful and non-judgemental environment, and by providing information about the discussion prior.

Research data is stored securely in a locked cupboard in the research supervisor's office. Paper documents containing confidential information are shredded and disposed of, and recordings deleted, in accordance with the institution's ethical guidelines.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was appropriate for this study due to the specific characteristics required of the participant group. The broader study, on which this article is based, investigated final-year English major student teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach English the following year. Therefore, the sample intentionally included final-year student teachers preparing to complete their formal training and transition into the teaching profession. This aligns with purposive sampling as it entails choosing individuals or groups who possess significant knowledge or experience related to the specific phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In essence, the purposive sampling strategy further enabled the collection of thick, meaningful data specific to the context of initial teacher education (Cohen et al., 2011).

The study included 12 students (11%) from the English Major 420 module, the final module in the Bachelor of Education program. These students, part of a cohort of approximately 107 who had completed 7 of the 8 semesters, were nearing graduation and preparing to enter the workforce. This placed them in a unique position to reflect on their readiness to teach, having nearly completed the Bachelor of Education program. Their insights are distinct and cannot be substituted by those of students at earlier stages of study, given the combination of theoretical coursework and practical experience acquired by final-year student teachers. The same group of student teachers was involved across all three data collection phases: the questionnaire, visual representations, and the focus group discussions.

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Findings

The student teachers' feelings of unpreparedness revealed emotional responses such as increased anxiety and self-doubt. The influence of self-efficacy factors plays a role in how they process these emotions. Building upon their teaching practice experiences, final-year student teachers engaged in self-reflection through various data generation strategies. This process allowed them to identify specific areas in English where they felt unprepared, drawing from both their own teaching experiences, and observations of mentors (during teaching practice) and lecturers. This is important as feedback from mentors and peers, through verbal persuasion, can not only offer support but also highlight areas where they still lack preparation. Through this process, student teachers experienced transformation; but rather than gaining confidence and preparedness, they became more aware of the gaps in their readiness to teach English. This heightened awareness of their unpreparedness led them to focus on developmental areas.

In the context of this article, the sources of self-efficacy – performance/mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal – directly relate to student teachers' well-being as they shape their confidence, resilience, and emotional health, influencing their perceptions of preparedness to teach English. Ultimately, this process had a profound impact on their well-being and teaching readiness. While their confidence may not have been immediately restored, the process of self-examination provided student teachers with a guide for ongoing professional development. This reflective practice not only highlighted areas for improvement but also served as a motivational tool, encouraging them to address these aspects for further transformation.

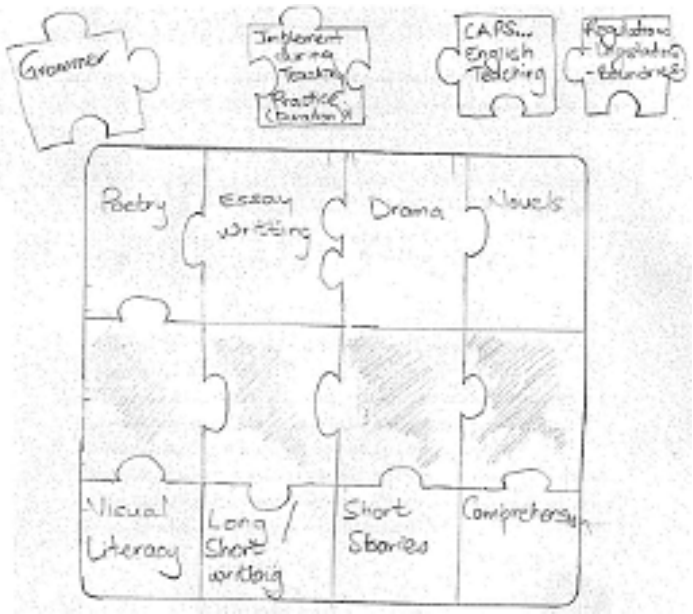
The following sections present an analysis of the data, focusing on how student teachers' perceived unpreparedness impacts their well-being and self-efficacy.

Disorienting dilemma: Reality check after teaching practice

The disorienting dilemma experienced by student teachers following their teaching practice experiences served as a rude awakening in this study, where the gap between theoretical preparation and the challenges of the classroom became evident.

Jay's visual representation (see Visual Representation 1) depicted a puzzle with missing pieces, including "grammer [sic]," which symbolised neglected aspects of the teacher education program. He associated his unpreparedness to teach grammar with these gaps, suggesting that the program fails to fully equip student teachers for teaching English. His description implied that the missing pieces represent areas of knowledge inadequately covered, leaving graduates feeling unprepared for certain aspects of teaching English.

Jay's visual representation illustrates how perceived gaps in the teacher education program serve as a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2009), disrupting his confidence in his preparedness to teach English. This realisation triggers self-examination and uncertainty, key components of transformative learning. If unaddressed, such dilemmas can negatively impact self-efficacy and well-being, highlighting the need for more comprehensive teacher preparation.



Visual representation 1: Jay's visual

In the questionnaire, Ash shared, "*Before I enter a classroom, I will have to research and prepare for all of the language sections on my own …*". This reflects a disorienting dilemma, as the lack of support from both the mentor teacher and lecturers in grammar instruction left him feeling unprepared, prompting a process of self-examination where preparedness is concerned and heightened anxiety about his readiness to teach. Similarly, in the focus group, when asked about the link between theory and practice in the classroom, Jay responded:

> *I think we all strive for getting settled down in schools with our approaches and our strategies and we find ourselves trying to navigate our way and finding new parts to teach learners and … the expectation is that what we learn in university we take it through into schools, but we find that we are so unsettled in schools that our entire paradigms of learning are upside down.*

Jay's use of "unsettled" and "upside down" signals a profound misalignment between expectation and reality, further reflecting the experience of a disorienting dilemma.

In response to a question regarding the relevance of the modules in the Bachelor of Education program at the site of the study, Ashnee indicated that she was "*under prepared to teach English next year*" because she felt that modules cover a lot of content but seems to be lacking the "*how-to*." In the same light, Zuko shared, even though she thought modules were relevant, that they did not teach them "*exactly how to go about in the classroom*" and the program needs more method courses or "*how to teach the content*".

From the above, it can be inferred that some student teachers perceive the teacher education program as focusing more on content knowledge than on pedagogical methods, an aspect they consider critical for their preparation to teach English the following year. This perceived imbalance in their preparation can be seen as a disorienting dilemma, prompting self-examination and contributing to the fear and anxiety student teachers experience – emotional responses that will be explored further in the following section. These results reflect the idea emphasised by Le (2013) that student teachers' perceptions are transformed when the ideal classroom scenarios portrayed in teacher education programs clash with the realities of the classroom. Resultingly, they undergo a shift in their perceptions of preparedness, highlighting a disorienting dilemma that prompts self-examination of their teaching practice experiences. The disorienting dilemma the student teachers describe may challenge their self-efficacy, but it also offers an opportunity for growth, resilience, and emotional regulation, all of which are crucial for their well-being and readiness for the teaching profession.

Self-examination: Emotional well-being and self-efficacy

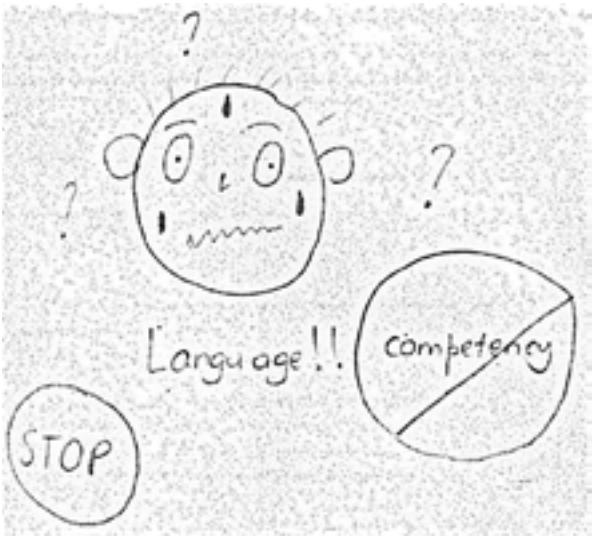
Self-examination revealed how student teachers assessed their perceived strengths and weaknesses, shedding light on the interplay between emotional states and their belief in their teaching abilities.

In her visual representation (see Visual representation 2), Thandi expressed her concern about feeling unprepared to teach grammar through a drawing of a person lost in tall grass, with a fearful or worried expression on their face. She included questions like "what?" and "how?" next to the figure, along with words like "barrier," "lost," and "stop," which conveyed a sense of uncertainty and negativity. The image suggests that Thandi feels overwhelmed and in need of help.

Thandi's visual representation illustrates her emotional and cognitive conflict regarding her preparedness to teach grammar. These expressions align with Mezirow's (2009) concept of a disorienting dilemma, where her use of "lost" and "barrier" reflects her internal conflict and perceived challenges. This finding is also in keeping with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory which emphasises the impact of emotional states and perceived competence on one's belief in one's abilities. Thandi's visual highlights the role of emotional support in enhancing self-efficacy, as addressing her feelings of uncertainty can improve her confidence and overall well-being.

Similarly, Fizoh's visual representation (see Visual representation 3), including a face marked by droplets of perspiration and surrounded by question marks, clearly illustrates her anxiety and fear regarding teaching grammar. In her explanation, she describes feeling "*scared, worried, anxious*," and even physically sweating when thinking about teaching the language section in English. The term "competency" with a line through it underscores her belief that she is "*not competent at all*" to teach it. During the focus group discussion, self-examination revealed that Fizoh had to learn certain language sections independently during her teaching practice experience. While she acknowledged that her mentor teacher at the allocated school could have offered

Visual representation 2: Thandi's visual



Visual representation 3: Fizoh's visual

support, she felt too "*embarrassed*" to ask for help, fearing that it would negatively affect her mentor's trust in her and her ability to teach the learners.

In terms of Bandura's self-efficacy theory, Fizoh's reluctance to seek assistance reflects the influence of emotional arousal on self-efficacy. In this case, her fear of judgement hindered her willingness to seek support, ultimately impacting both her self-efficacy and well-being. In contrast to Usha, who attributed her unpreparedness to the teacher education program, Fizoh's inability to ask for assistance shows how emotional factors, such as fear and embarrassment, can impede the development of self-efficacy and negatively influence well-being.

While this was not a specific code where data analysis is concerned, Thandi and Fizoh's anxieties about teaching grammar, especially Fizoh's reluctance to ask her mentor for help due to feelings of embarrassment, may be rooted in their language backgrounds: both participants indicated that their home language is isiZulu on their biographical information forms. While this theme did not emerge as widespread, it could be noted that their anxiety might also be linked to their linguistic backgrounds and, resultingly, their confidence to teach English.

Discussion

This article highlights that student teachers' perceived unpreparedness to teach English not only affects their professional competence but also significantly impacts their emotional and mental well-being. When student teachers feel unprepared, especially in a high-stakes subject like English, it can lead to self-doubt and stress. This state of uncertainty can trigger a perception of incompetence and feelings of despondency, reducing their confidence as future teachers of English. Ultimately, this emotional strain may lead to burnout, anxiety, and reduced motivation, all of which are indicators of compromised mental and emotional well-being.

From a transformative learning perspective, the feeling of unpreparedness represents a disorienting dilemma that forces student teachers to engage in self-examination of their abilities and beliefs about teaching. While disorienting dilemmas and the process of self-examination are central to personal and professional growth, they can also lead to significant emotional distress. The lack of adequate pedagogical training can exacerbate this, as students struggle to reconcile their theoretical knowledge with their perceived inability to teach effectively. Left unsupported, the emotional strain arising from this reflective process can undermine their self-efficacy and hinder their development into confident, resilient educators.

According to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, belief in one's abilities is a crucial predictor of motivation and persistence in the face of challenges. When student teachers feel unprepared, their self-efficacy is diminished, which can lead to a lack of motivation, feelings of inadequacy, and difficulty in overcoming obstacles, resulting in prolonged consequences for their future careers in education. Therefore, fostering strong self-efficacy is critical for both their professional development and mental well-being.

Limitations of the study

As with many qualitative case studies, this study is subject to certain limitations. The study was conducted within a single institution, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the small sample size, while appropriate for in-depth qualitative analysis, may not capture the full diversity of experiences and perspectives found in broader educational settings. These limitations are acknowledged while emphasising the depth and richness of the insights gained through a detailed exploration of student teachers' perceptions of unpreparedness.

Suggestions for future research

Building on this study's findings, future research could explore the long-term impact of the learning and reflection processes on student teachers as they transition into their professional teaching roles. In particular, studies could explore whether the perceptions of unpreparedness, especially in areas of English teaching, transform during their early years of teaching. Drawing on Mezirow's transformative learning theory, such research could examine whether critical reflection during teacher education leads to perspective transformation and improved teaching practices as novice teachers confront real classroom challenges.

Additionally, given student teachers' references to their mentor teachers and lecturers, some of whom served as negative models, further research should explore the role of modelling, as conceptualised in Bandura's self-efficacy theory, in shaping teaching identity and competence. Future studies might investigate how student teachers internalise both positive and negative modelling from lecturers and mentors, and how these experiences influence their pedagogical choices and classroom behaviours, especially in English language teaching.

Finally, acknowledging that perceptions of preparedness to teach can vary across contexts, it is recommended that this study be replicated in diverse national and international teacher contexts. Comparative studies could provide a broader understanding of how different programs at different higher education institutions influence perceptions of preparedness, the development of teaching competence, and ultimately, the well-being of future English teachers.

Conclusion and recommendations

The intersection of perceived unpreparedness and student teachers' emotional well-being is complex and significant. When student teachers feel ill-equipped to teach, it not only affects their self-efficacy but also hinders their mental and emotional well-being. It is important for teacher education programs to address these issues by placing emphasis not only on content and pedagogical knowledge, but emotional support. Higher education institutions can better equip student teachers to thrive in their training and beyond by fostering self-efficacy, providing reflective spaces, and prioritising well-being.

Based upon the insights in this article, the following recommendations are proposed to better support the emotional and psychological well-being of student teachers: teacher education programs should embed well-being as a core principle by taking a

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holistic approach that includes mental health support and peer networks for reflection and problem-solving where teaching practice is concerned. Reflective spaces such as mentoring, group discussions, or journaling should be provided to help students process emotions and grow from challenging experiences. Support during school placements must be enhanced through strong mentorship that acknowledges small successes and nurtures self-belief.

In essence, student teachers face various challenges that might impact their well-being (Sulis et al., 2021). Self-efficacy is closely linked to teachers' psychological well-being (Lipińska-Grobelny & Narska, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to prioritise the development of these competencies in the training of student teachers to ensure their professional and emotional success as future teachers (Lipińska-Grobelny & Narska, 2021). A first step for teacher education programs is to normalise reflection on well-being and to encourage seeking pastoral support from mentors and lecturers. These programs should also equip student teachers with the skills to recognise early signs of stress and burnout. Beyond offering coping strategies, the focus should be on providing clear, proactive guidance aimed at preventing stress-related challenges before they escalate (Sulis et al., 2021).

In conclusion, this article argues that teacher education programs must go beyond content knowledge and focus on the holistic development of student teachers, integrating strategies to support their emotional resilience and self-efficacy. By addressing emotional and psychological needs, teacher education programs can better equip student teachers to manage challenges related to their preparedness for the reality of the classroom and build confidence in their ability to teach.

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Ethics statement
All ethical procedures have been followed after obtaining ethical clearance from the institution where this study was conducted.

Potential conflict of interests
The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enhancing student well-being and success through AI-driven mental-health support: A case study of AI mental-health chatbot implementation at a South African university

Go matlafatša go phela gabotse ga moithuti le katlego ka thekgo ya tša maphelo a monagano yeo e sepetšwago ke AI: Tshepedišo ya nyakišišo ya go tsenya tirišong ga lenaneo la khomphutha la poledišano ya tša maphelo a monagano ya AI yunibesithing ya Afrika Borwa

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is a critical determinant of student success in higher education. University students continue to face significant psychological challenges, including anxiety, stress, and trauma, issues further intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic. These realities underscore the need for accessible, scalable, and technology-driven mental-health interventions. This study investigates the implementation of Wysa, an AI-powered mental-health chatbot, at a South African higher education institution (HEI). Through a mixed-methods design, the research draws on secondary dashboard analytics and primary user survey data to evaluate adoption rates, engagement patterns, and the nature of interventions accessed. Results reveal that AI-driven mental-health tools can offer cost-effective, confidential, and scalable support to students, with evidence of meaningful usage across diverse student groups. However, amongst some student cohorts, adoption is uneven, influenced by the students' academic disciplines, help-seeking behaviours, and concerns related to data privacy and trust. The study concluded with practical recommendations for integrating AI chatbots into institutional support services, advocating for a blended care model and student-centred digital mental-health strategies suited to the African higher education context.

KEYWORDS

Student well-being, mental health, AI chatbots, African higher education, preventive interventions, student success

KAKARETŠO

Maphelo a monagano ke sehlodi se bohlokwa sa katlego ya moithuti thutong ya godimo. Baithuti ba yunibesithi ba tšwela pele go lebeletšana le ditlhohlo tše dikgolo tša monagano, go akaretša tlabego, kgatelelo ya monagano, le letšhogo, mathata ao a okeditšwego ke leuba la Covid-19. Dinnete tše di

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gatelela tlhokego ya ditsenogare tšeo di ka fihlelelwago, tšeo di ka katološwago, gape tša maphelo a monagano ao a sepetšwago ke theknolotši. Nyakišišo ye e nyakišiša go tsenya tirišong ga Wysa, Lenaneo la khomphutha la poledišano ya tša maphelo a monagano la bokgoni bja khomphutha bja go dira ditiro la go matlafatšwa ke (AI), go sehlongwa sa thuto ya godimo (HEI) sa Afrika Borwa. Ka moakanyetšo wa mekgwa wya go hlakahlakana, nyakišišo e šomiša diphetleko tša tešepoto tša bobedi tša datha ya phatišišo ya modiriši ya mathomo go lekanyetša dikelo tšeo di amogelwago, dipaterone tša dipoledišano, le mokgwa wa ditsenogare tšeo di fihleletšwego. Dipoelo di utulla gore didirišwa tša maphelo a monagano di ka fana ka thekgo go baithuti yeo e sa bitšego, ya sephiri, gape ya katološo, ka bohlatse bja tirišo ya kwagalo go seleganya dihlopha tša baithuti ba go fapafapana, Le ge go le bjalo, magareng ga dihlopha tše dingwe tša baithuti, kamogelo ga e lekalekane, moo go tutuetšwago ke dithupišo tša thuto tša baithuti, mekgwa ya go tsoma thušo, gammogo le matshwenyego a go amana le datha ya sephiri le tshepo. Nyakišišo e feleletša ka ditšhišinyo tša go tlwaelega tša go tswalanya lenaneo la khomphutha la poledišano la AI le ditirelo tša tša thekgo tša sehlongwa, go šišinya mottlolo wa tlhokomelo yeo e kopantšwego le maano a tša maphelo a monagano a titšithale ao a lebišitšwego go moithuti ao a swanelago kamano ya thuto ya godimo ya seAfrika.

MANTŠU A BOHLOKWA

Bophelo bjo bobotse bja baithuti, bophelo bjo bobotse bja monagano, di-chatbot tša AI, thuto e phahameng ya Afrika, ditsenogare tša thibelo, katlego ya baithuti

Introduction

Mental health is a foundational component of student success across global higher education contexts. In many regions, including African universities, the demand for mental health services increasingly outpaces the availability of qualified professionals and support structures (Browne et al., 2017; Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019). Despite continued institutional efforts to expand services, universities face growing challenges in responding to the evolving mental health needs of diverse student populations. The prevalence of psychological distress among university students is well documented, with anxiety, depression, and trauma ranking among the most commonly reported mental-health conditions (Bantjes et al., 2023). Within the South African context, students must navigate a complex matrix of academic pressure, financial hardship, and interpersonal struggles, contributing to heightened vulnerability (Pillay et al., 2024). These challenges are compounded by the lingering effects of systemic inequality and historical injustices embedded within the South African education system, further constraining access to adequate care (Musakuro & Gie, 2024).

The shift to digital mental-health solutions

The Covid-19 pandemic intensified mental-health challenges and spotlighted the need for scalable, tech-based interventions (Becker & Torous, 2019). While in-person counselling remains essential, it is often insufficient. This has accelerated interest in AI-based solutions that offer timely, accessible, and cost-effective support (van der Schyff et al., 2023). AI mental-health technologies include predictive tools, automated screening, and chatbots (Marsch & Gustafson, 2013). These systems rely on machine learning, natural language processing (NLP), and cognitive computing to simulate human-like interaction and deliver targeted support (Sinchana B U et al., 2024). They

help reduce stigma, overcome geographic limitations, and provide real-time assistance (Inkster et al., 2018).

AI chatbots and cognitive behavioural therapy

AI-driven mental health chatbots, many based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), provide 24/7 emotional support in private, judgement-free settings (Inkster et al., 2018). Cognitive behavioural therapy is a widely used, evidence-based psychotherapy that focuses on identifying and modifying maladaptive thought and behaviour patterns (Radhu et al., 2012). It is grounded in the principle that thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are interconnected and that altering negative or distorted cognitions can improve emotional well-being (Boucher et al., 2021). CBT employs techniques such as cognitive restructuring, helping individuals identify and challenge harmful thoughts, and exposure therapy, where individuals gradually face anxiety-inducing stimuli in a controlled way to reduce avoidance behaviours. Although AI lacks the depth and cultural sensitivity of human therapists (Bracha, 2004; Persons, 2008), its immediate accessibility may foster student engagement and self-efficacy (Farzan et al., 2024).

One example of such a chatbot is Wysa, a therapist-informed, neurosymbolic AI-powered platform designed to deliver scalable and evidence-based mental-health support (Marsch & Gustafson, 2013). Neurosymbolic AI combines the pattern recognition capacity of neural networks with the logic-based reasoning of symbolic systems, allowing for more contextually relevant and interpretable responses (d'Avila Garcez et al., 2019). At a South African university, Wysa was implemented as part of a larger institutional response to mental-health needs through the development of the Integrated Mental Health and Wellness Policy (IMHWP) (University of the Western Cape, 2021). This policy emerged from a comprehensive research process that mapped existing mental health service gaps and included consultative engagements with students and staff.

The finalised policy included tailored implementation strategies at the faculty level, ensuring that mental health interventions were responsive to the unique needs of various academic communities. Within this framework, Wysa offers students confidential, stigma-free access to guided self-help tools and conversational support. It functions as an accessible first line of support, offering CBT-informed and mindfulness-based activities while complementing, rather than replacing, counselling services. Through its escalation protocols, cases flagged as high risk are referred to institutional counsellors or external crisis services, ensuring human oversight. Student Support Services staff have been trained to guide students in using Wysa and integrate it as a supplementary referral resource, particularly for students hesitant to engage in formal therapy. Operating alongside peer support programs, campus-based clinical services, and community referral pathways, Wysa forms part of a layered care framework that addresses resource constraints, lowers barriers to early help-seeking, and promotes student well-being within the broader institutional ecosystem.

Ethical and cultural considerations

Despite these advancements, the use of AI in mental-health support also introduces a set of complex ethical and practical challenges. While chatbots provide enhanced access to care, concerns remain about the quality and appropriateness of their responses in sensitive mental-health contexts (Khawaja & Bélisle-Pipon, 2023). Central to these concerns are issues of data privacy, informed consent, and the ethical use of sensitive personal information (Balcombe, 2023). Furthermore, the inability of AI systems to fully replicate the empathy, intuition, and cultural sensitivity of human therapists raises questions about their effectiveness in addressing complex, individualized experiences (Khawaja & Bélisle-Pipon, 2023). Even when AI tools incorporate evidence-based modalities like CBT, the absence of real-time contextual awareness can limit their therapeutic value (Boucher et al., 2021). Mollick (2024) warns against the use of unconsented data, AI-generated misinformation, and the imitation of human responses, emphasising the need for transparent, ethical, and culturally attuned implementation.

In light of these benefits and risks, the integration of AI-driven chatbots into South African university support systems presents a dual narrative. While they offer scalable, low-cost, and accessible mental-health interventions, they also raise critical ethical and cultural considerations. This article explores the potential of AI-powered mental health technologies, specifically chatbots like Wysa, to enhance student well-being and academic success. It contributes to the growing body of scholarship on the use of AI in higher education mental-health contexts and offers insights for developing more culturally attuned, ethically responsible, and contextually relevant digital mental health interventions.

Theoretical perspective

This study draws on the technology acceptance model (TAM) to explore factors influencing student adoption of the AI-powered mental-health chatbot. TAM posits that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use shape an individual's intention to adopt a technology (Nadal et al., 2020). In this context, TAM provides a lens to examine how students perceive the chatbot's effectiveness in addressing mental-health concerns and its accessibility across platforms.

TAM also acknowledges that external factors such as social influence, organisational support, and individual differences may shape users' perceptions and, by extension, influence technology uptake (Na et al., 2022). For instance, students' awareness of the chatbot's ability to deliver personalised support, reduce stress and anxiety, and align with their needs may enhance perceived usefulness (Nelekar et al., 2021). Similarly, interface design, device compatibility, and required technical skills may affect ease of use (Nadal et al., 2020). However, while TAM helps explain adoption behaviour, it does not fully capture the broader impact on mental-health outcomes.

To bridge this gap, the theory of change (ToC) was integrated not only as a conceptual mapping tool but also as an evaluative framework to connect adoption behaviours with broader well-being outcomes. Conceptually, ToC enabled the mapping of expected pathways from chatbot adoption to improvements in student well-being,

by identifying preconditions (e.g. digital access, student readiness), interventions (e.g. engagement with CBT-informed chatbot activities), and outcomes (e.g. reduced anxiety, better coping, academic engagement) (De Silva et al., 2014; Grové, 2021). Operationally, these pathways informed both survey design and analysis: survey questions were structured around ToC elements (e.g. digital readiness, coping, academic engagement), while thematic analysis of open-ended responses examined whether students' reported experiences aligned with the assumed pathways. Dashboard data, presented only in aggregate, was used to describe general engagement patterns (e.g. session frequency, time-of-use trends) that supported or challenged the plausibility of the ToC pathways at a collective level, without linking to individual student responses.

This operationalisation means ToC served a dual role: as a framework for articulating assumptions about how Wysa could create impact, and as a structure against which both aggregated usage trends and reported student experiences were compared. For example, where the ToC assumed that sustained engagement with chatbot-based CBT activities could foster improved coping skills, this was assessed indirectly by examining whether frequent engagement patterns (seen at an aggregate level) coincided with student narratives that described improved stress management and emotional regulation.

Together, TAM and ToC offer a structured and holistic theoretical approach, with TAM explaining initial uptake, and ToC mapping and evaluating how that uptake contributes to improved psychological and educational outcomes. This dual framework allows for a deeper understanding of the drivers, barriers, and impact of integrating AI-driven mental-health tools within existing university support systems (Oghenekaro & Okoro, 2024).

Goal of the study

Given the growing role of digital solutions in higher education, this study explores the implementation and usage of Wysa, an AI-driven mental-health chatbot, at a South African university. While global evidence supports the effectiveness of such tools, limited research exists on their adoption and impact in local contexts. This study investigates student engagement with Wysa, focusing on adoption patterns, perceived usefulness, and barriers to sustained use. It asks: How do students engage with and perceive the usefulness of Wysa in supporting their well-being, and what influences its adoption in South African higher education? The findings aim to inform AI-based mental-health strategies in resource-constrained university settings.

Research design and methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to analyse Wysa's adoption and impact at a South African higher education institution. Quantitative data from Wysa's dashboard and user surveys were analysed using SPSS to assess usage patterns across student demographics, including adoption rates, session frequency, and engagement trends. Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses were examined through thematic analysis to capture student perceptions, perceived benefits, and challenges with the chatbot. By triangulating both data sources, the study offers a comprehensive

understanding of how students engage with AI-driven mental-health tools in this context.

Data collection and sample

Data collection was conducted in two phases:

1. **Dashboard data extraction**: Engagement analytics were retrieved from the Wysa platform, capturing user trends since adoption in September 2023. Dashboard reports are generated monthly, and the latest report (April 2025) has been used for this article.
2. **User surveys:** A structured online survey was disseminated and open for responses for 3 months during the last few months of the 2024 academic year (September to November 2024) to students, targeting those who had interacted with Wysa. A total of 325 users completed the survey, which included undergraduate and postgraduate students with a diverse demographic profile, reflecting diverse perspectives on AI mental-health interventions.

Context and ethics

The student population at this South African HEI largely comprises historically disadvantaged and first-generation students from lower to middle-income households, with varying levels of digital and mental-health literacy (Makgahlela et al., 2021). Most Wysa users are female (approximately 70%), aged between 17 and 25, and span a wide range of academic faculties. While a majority live in university residences or nearby private accommodation, the student body reflects significant linguistic and cultural diversity, with isiXhosa, English, and isiZulu as common home languages. Wysa is integrated into the institution's mental-health support system as outlined in the Integrated Mental Health and Wellness Policy, offering students accessible digital support. The study considers how socio-economic status, digital access, and cultural attitudes influence chatbot engagement.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC Ref: HS24/3/19), with strict adherence to informed consent, confidentiality, and POPIA (Act 4 of 2013) compliance. For survey participants, an information sheet and consent form were embedded at the start of the online survey, outlining the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality assurances, and data storage protocols. For dashboard data, no personally identifiable information was collected or accessed. The Wysa platform only generates aggregated analytics that reflect collective usage trends across the student cohort, such as session frequency, time-of-use, and user trends. These datasets do not allow the identification of individual students.

Given the sensitivity of student mental-health data, particular attention was given to issues of vulnerability and algorithmic governance. The chatbot's automated triage function designed to flag potential risk cases and escalate referrals to human counsellors raises ethical dilemmas around accuracy, accountability, and the reliance on AI for high-stakes decisions. While Wysa complies with international data privacy standards,

questions of algorithmic transparency and governance remain critical in higher education contexts, where students are both digitally literate and potentially vulnerable. Institutional oversight, transparent communication with students, and adherence to national data protection law were central safeguards, though the study recognises the need for ongoing dialogue around AI ethics in mental-health support.

At the same time, a reflexive stance was maintained regarding the study's limitations. Generalisability is constrained as findings are drawn from a single institution with a specific socio-economic and cultural profile that may not represent other South African or international contexts. The voluntary nature of the user survey introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as students with particularly positive or negative experiences may have been more inclined to participate, while non-users or passive users are underrepresented. Reliance on self-reported data also carries interpretive limitations, given the influence of recall accuracy, subjective perception, and social desirability bias. Dashboard analytics, while more objective, reflect only surface-level engagement patterns and cannot fully capture the motivations or lived experiences behind usage trends. These limitations highlight the interpretive boundaries of the study while also underscoring the value of triangulating quantitative and qualitative data to generate a more holistic picture of student engagement with AI-driven mental-health tools.

Discussion and analysis

Adoption and engagement trends

Since its introduction in September 2023 until April 2025, Wysa has been adopted by 4,871 users, reflecting an overall adoption rate of 18.73%. Usage data showed an average of 7.1 sessions per user, with each session lasting approximately 25.86 minutes. Engagement levels were particularly high during periods of heightened academic stress, such as examination seasons, as evidenced by survey responses indicating that students found Wysa most beneficial during these critical times. The AI-driven application facilitated access to tools that effectively addressed the mental-health challenges encountered by students and staff, especially during periods of high stress, leading to improvements in emotional regulation and adaptive thinking (Zhang, 2025).

Students highlighted the importance of Wysa in managing stress, with one participant noting, "*During exam time, I felt overwhelmed, but Wysa helped me break things down and feel more in control.*" Another student emphasised its accessibility, stating, "*It was reassuring to have something available 24/7 when I needed to vent or get support*." These responses align with the literature on digital mental-health interventions, which demonstrate their effectiveness in promoting emotional resilience (Becker & Torous, 2019).

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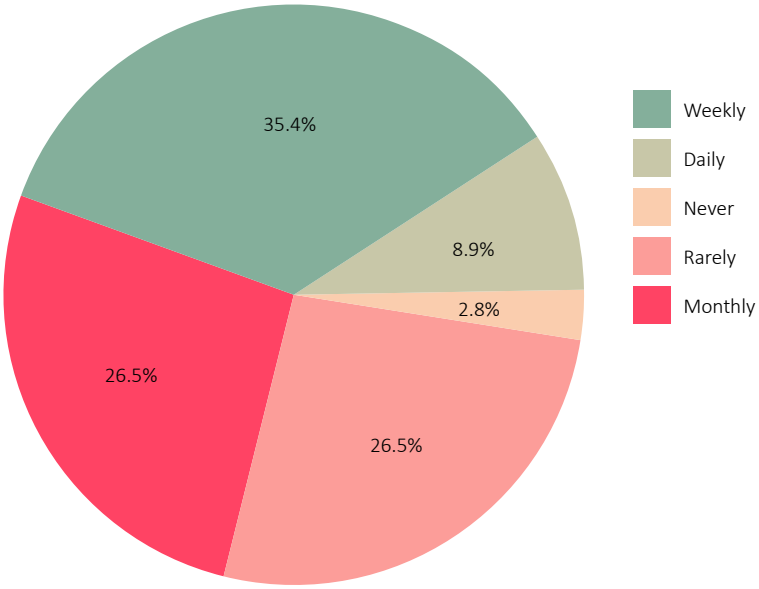

Figure 1: Wysa user frequency

Survey data indicated that weekly usage was the most common frequency, with 35.4% of respondents using Wysa weekly, followed by monthly and rarely (26.5%), daily (8.9%), and never (2.8%). This suggests that while a significant proportion of students engage regularly with Wysa, a notable segment underutilises the resource, necessitating increased awareness and engagement efforts. According to TAM, perceived usefulness and ease of use are critical determinants of technology adoption (Nadal et al., 2020). Low engagement may indicate gaps in students' perceptions of the chatbot's value or usability, highlighting the need for targeted awareness campaigns and user-centred design enhancements to improve uptake and sustained use.

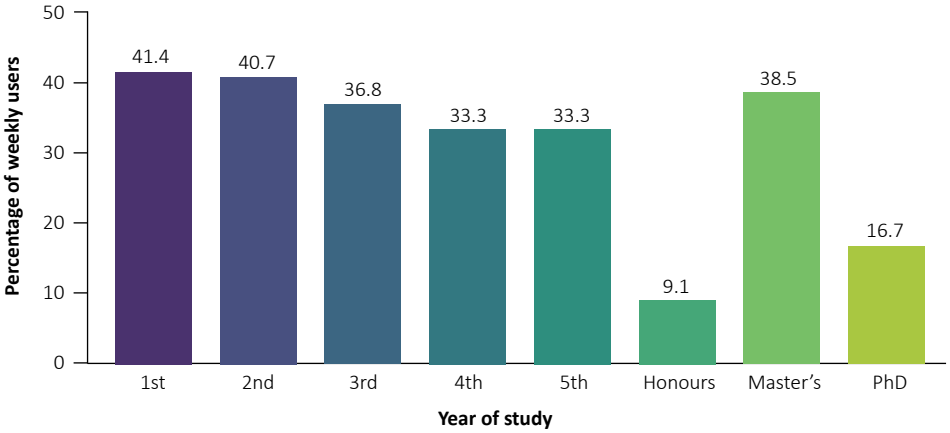

Figure 2: Weekly Wysa usage by year of study (students only, in %)

The widespread adoption of Wysa, particularly among undergraduate students, underscores its potential as an accessible and flexible tool for mental health management. However, variations in engagement across student cohorts and academic disciplines emphasise the importance of targeted strategies to ensure equitable access and impact (Becker & Torous, 2019). AI-based mental health interventions can significantly reduce symptoms related to various mental health issues (Alhuwaydi, 2024). One study comparing a text-based chatbot using cognitive behavioural therapy techniques against a control group receiving a psychoeducational e-book demonstrated measurable enhancements in participants' mental health outcomes (Boucher et al., 2021).

User patterns

First-year students reported the highest well-being improvements, likely due to their heightened need for stress adaptation during the transition to university (Wada et al., 2019). One first-year student reflected, "*Starting university was overwhelming, and Wysa really helped me deal with my anxiety, especially in the first few months.*" This suggests that AI-powered mental-health interventions can play a crucial role in supporting students during this critical period of adjustment.

Conversely, the lower engagement among postgraduate students suggests a possible preference for traditional face-to-face counselling or alternative support mechanisms (Cooper, 2024). One postgraduate respondent explained, "*I prefer speaking to a real person rather than an app, but I can see how it might help undergraduates who are still adjusting.*" This indicates that future interventions may need to explore hybrid models that integrate AI-based support with human-led counselling to better serve this demographic. According to TAM, perceived usefulness significantly influences technology adoption, meaning that if students perceive a digital tool as less effective than traditional support, their likelihood of using it decreases (Nadal et al., 2020). This highlights the need to address students' perceptions of AI's therapeutic value to improve engagement, particularly among those with a strong preference for in-person support. It further demonstrates the importance of shifting the narrative around non-traditional mental-health offerings to foster broader acceptance (Lattie et al., 2019).

The nature of engagement with Wysa varied across academic disciplines. Students in economic and management sciences, education, and community and health sciences reported greater well-being improvements, aligning with higher engagement in mindfulness-based interventions offered by the app. One student in education commented, "*The breathing exercises and self-reflection tools really helped me with stress and classroom anxiety.*" Conversely, students in law and dentistry reported lower well-being improvements, potentially due to the perceived lack of mental-health support related to legal or ethical concerns within Wysa's framework. A law student noted, "*Sometimes, the advice felt too general. It didn't really apply to the pressures of law school.*"

These faculty-specific differences in usage patterns reveal crucial considerations for enhancing the effectiveness of Wysa. Tailoring the content to incorporate industry-specific stress management techniques, such as addressing ethical dilemmas for law

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students or managing high-performance anxiety for dental students, could improve engagement and relevance (Basudan et al., 2017). Incorporating AI and machine learning can enable the personalisation of these interventions to improve outcomes (Nepal et al., 2024).

Mental-health impact and well-being contribution

An analysis of mental-health screening data from 2,087 users who completed the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) assessments revealed that a significant proportion, 50.79% (PHQ-9) and 59.93% (GAD-7), respectively, screened positive for symptoms of depression and anxiety. Overall, user satisfaction with the Wysa application was high, with 91.24% of respondents rating the app as beneficial in managing stress and emotional well-being.

One respondent shared, "*I used Wysa when I was feeling down, and even though it's not a substitute for therapy, it really helped me get through tough days.*" Another student mentioned, "*I appreciated that Wysa gave me practical tools to deal with my anxiety without having to book an appointment or wait for a session.*"

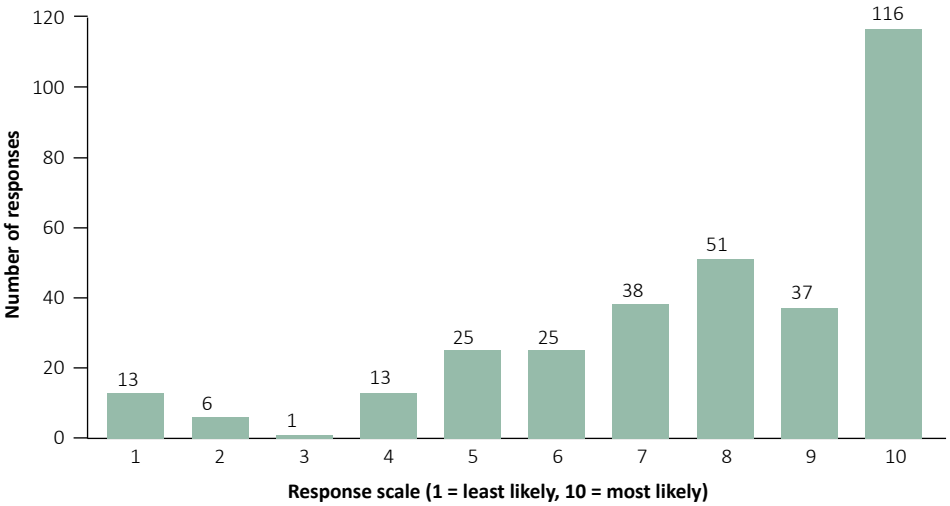

Figure 3: Likelihood scale of continuing to use Wysa in the future

Analysis of user ratings on a likelihood scale provides valuable insights into overall satisfaction and potential for continued engagement with the Wysa mental-health platform. The data reveal a strong inclination among users to keep using Wysa, reflecting its perceived effectiveness and value. This aligns with findings that AI chatbots can offer accessible, scalable support, enhancing emotional well-being and resilience (Manole et al., 2024). Importantly, this aligns with the theory of change (ToC), which emphasises that effective interventions must address key preconditions, such as user trust and perceived usefulness, to achieve long-term impact (Silva et al., 2014). Understanding these user perceptions is critical for refining chatbot features and ensuring ongoing

relevance, which in turn supports the sustained behaviour change needed for improved mental-health outcomes (Grové, 2021). This approach also highlights the importance of continuous feedback mechanisms to adapt the platform based on evolving student needs, thereby reinforcing the positive feedback loop essential for long-term adoption and impact (van der Schyff et al., 2023).

Approximately 35.7% of respondents indicated that they were extremely likely to continue using Wysa in the future, underscoring a strong level of user confidence and satisfaction with the platform. The concentration of responses at the upper end of the scale suggests a positive perception of Wysa's capabilities and its potential to address users' mental-health needs. Cumulatively, the higher ratings reveal a generally positive sentiment towards continued engagement, suggesting that a significant majority of users find the platform valuable and intend to maintain their usage. This pronounced positivity aligns with findings that AI-driven mental-health tools can foster therapeutic bonds and engagement, which may lead to improved mental-health outcomes (Farzan et al., 2024). The significant number of users who express strong positivity towards Wysa highlights the platform's potential as an accessible and effective tool for mental-health support, especially in contexts where traditional resources are limited or difficult to access (Sinha et al., 2022).

Such positive engagement may foster not only improved mental health but also greater resilience among students, equipping them with the emotional and psychological resources to navigate academic and personal challenges (Edward & Warelow, 2005). Resilience, often defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity (Srivastava, 2011), is crucial for students facing the pressures of academic life and broader societal challenges. Furthermore, promoting mental-health literacy – the knowledge and understanding of mental-health conditions – and help-seeking strategies can empower students to proactively manage their well-being and build stronger support networks (Grové, 2021). By increasing connections within the adaptive systems in a young person's life, mental-health literacy may promote resilience and positive well-being (Grové, 2021). This is particularly relevant in the context of a South African university, where access to mental-health resources may be limited (Oghenekaro & Okoro, 2024). By providing readily accessible and confidential support, AI chatbots can play a crucial role in promoting student success and overall well-being. The results highlight the platform's potential as an accessible and effective tool for mental-health support, especially in contexts where traditional resources are limited or difficult to access (Sinha et al., 2022).

Implications and future considerations

This study underscores the value of AI-powered mental-health tools as complementary interventions to traditional support services in higher education. With growing evidence supporting their impact on student well-being (Zhang, 2025), integrating digital tools like Wysa into a hybrid support model offers a scalable way to meet diverse student needs. The sustained engagement observed suggests that students benefit from AI tools that foster emotional regulation and adaptive thinking, preparing them for complex academic and social environments (Zhang, 2025).

Future developments should focus on refining features using user data to address specific mental-health concerns and gaps in mental-health literacy. According to TAM, user engagement is closely linked to perceived usefulness and ease of use, suggesting that personalised, context-specific content can significantly enhance adoption and sustained usage (Nadal et al., 2020). Embedding educational modules within the app can improve students' understanding of mental health, making the platform more relevant and valuable (Zhang, 2025). This approach aligns with the ToC framework, which emphasises the importance of addressing foundational preconditions, such as digital literacy and awareness, before achieving meaningful mental-health outcomes (Silva et al., 2014). Personalised interventions that respond to students' academic pressures, emotional states, and help-seeking behaviours can further optimise outcomes, promoting sustained behavioural change and improved well-being (Song & Hu, 2024; Grové, 2021).

Additionally, specialised modules for vulnerable groups such as international students, students with disabilities, and those with pre-existing mental-health conditions are essential for improving perceived usefulness, a critical component of TAM (Ajibade, 2018). For these groups, interventions that foster a sense of personal alignment, such as life-crafting approaches, may enhance motivation and resilience, supporting both mental health and academic success (Studente et al., 2020). ToC further supports this by highlighting the need for structured, goal-oriented interventions that address specific user contexts to drive long-term impact (van der Schyff et al., 2023). Continuous evaluation through feedback mechanisms, including in-app surveys or focus groups, is also critical, as it allows for real-time assessment of user experiences and iterative improvement, ensuring the platform remains responsive to changing student needs (Manole et al., 2024).

Scalability and sustainability of AI interventions also depend on institutional conditions. Adequate digital infrastructure, ongoing technical support, and training for staff are necessary to maintain smooth integration with existing student support services. Differences in digital literacy, resource availability, and policy environments across universities must be considered when implementing similar platforms elsewhere (Boucher et al., 2021). Embedding AI tools into broader mental-health policies and support frameworks, as Wysa has been at this university, promotes institutional buy-in and ensures long-term viability (Inkster et al., 2018). Ultimately, AI-driven solutions can improve the accessibility, responsiveness, and contextual relevance of mental-health support in South African higher education, contributing to an emerging global body of knowledge on digital mental health in academic settings.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the Wysa AI chatbot has contributed meaningfully to addressing student mental-health needs, especially during high-stress periods. Its accessibility and user-friendly interface have supported a diverse student population, although engagement varies across academic levels and faculties. While adoption and satisfaction rates are generally positive, utilisation gaps, particularly among

postgraduate students and those in high-pressure faculties, highlight areas requiring further attention. To enhance effectiveness, institutions should invest in faculty-specific awareness efforts, especially for first-year students, and improve communication about data privacy to build trust among more cautious user groups. Adapting the chatbot's tools to align with the unique stress profiles of faculties such as law and dentistry, and strengthening the integration between AI support and traditional counselling services, will be essential. These measures can create a more responsive, trusted, and comprehensive mental-health support system within South African higher education.

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 interest.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"It's not always neat": Psychological resources in the messy reality of university life

"It's not always neat": Sielkundige hulpbronne in die komplekse werklikheid van universiteitslewe

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined how first-year university students perceive the roles of psychological resources (resilience, hope, and optimism) in relation to student success (academic performance and well-being). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 first-year university students (7 female, 6 male, age range: 18-25). The analysis revealed that resilience played a crucial role in promoting well-being and managing emotional stressors. Students referred to the relevance of hope as a driving force for them to persist in pursuing long-term academic goals. Additionally, hope, especially in the form of critical hope, sustained motivation by combining realistic acknowledgement of systemic challenges with a forward-looking commitment to personal and collective transformation. Optimism helped students reframe setbacks positively and maintain confidence in their long-term goals. The data indicated that these psychological resources form an interdependent ecosystem that students draw on to navigate the complexity of university life. The study emphasises not only the individual importance of these constructs but also their integrative and justice-oriented role in promoting student success. Findings support the need for holistic, contextually responsive student development and support services.

KEYWORDS

First-year university students, hope, optimism, psychological resources, resilience, student development and support (SDS)

OPSOMMING

Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie het ondersoek ingestel na hoe eerstejaar-universiteitstudente die rolle van sielkundige hulpbronne (veerkragtigheid, hoop en optimisme) beskou in verband met studentukses (akademiese prestasie en welstand). Data is ingesamel deur middel van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude met 13 eerstejaarstudente aan die universiteit (7 vroulik, 6 manlik, ouderdom tussen 18 en 25 jaar). Die analise het getoon dat veerkragtigheid 'n deurslaggewende rol gespeel het in die bevordering van welstand en die hantering van emosionele stresfaktore. Studente het verwys na die belangrikheid van hoop as 'n dryfkrag om volharding in die strewe na langtermyn-akademiese doelwitte te ondersteun. Daarbenewens het hoop, veral in die vorm van kritiese hoop, motivering volgehou deur 'n realistiese erkenning van sistemiese uitdagings te kombineer met 'n toekomsgerigte verbintenis tot persoonlike en kollektiewe transformasie. Optimisme het studente gehelp om terugslae positief te herinterpreteer en selfvertroue in hul langtermyn-doelwitte te behou. Die data het aangedui dat hierdie sielkundige hulpbronne 'n onderling afhanklike ekosisteem vorm waarop studente staatmaak om die kompleksiteit van universiteitslewe te navigeer. Die studie

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beklemtoon nie net die individuele belang van hierdie konstrukte nie, maar ook hul geïntegreerde en geregtigheidsgerigte rol in die bevordering van studentukses. Bevindinge ondersteun die behoefte aan holistiese, konteks-sensitiewe studentontwikkeling en ondersteuningsdienste.

SLEUTELWOORDE
Eerstejaar-universiteitstudente, hoop, optimisme, sielkundige hulpbronne, veerkragtigheid, studentontwikkeling en -ondersteuning (SDS)

Introduction

Transitioning from high school to university is a crucial developmental milestone and achievement for young people (Arnett, 2014; Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Cameron & Rideout, 2020). Researchers agree that this transition is particularly stressful because first-year university students must navigate multiple demands, including adapting to a new academic environment, establishing new interpersonal relationships, and managing greater academic workloads (Amirkhan et al., 2023; Gause et al., 2024). Schlossberg and colleagues' transition theory provides a valuable framework for understanding this adjustment period by emphasising how individuals experience, interpret, and cope with transitions (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

According to Schlossberg (1984), the transition to university can be categorised as an anticipated transition; however, its impact varies greatly depending on the student (self), their situation, support, and strategies (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Among these, the self plays a crucial role, encompassing psychological resources such as personal resilience, hope, and an optimistic belief in one's ability to succeed. Previous research has highlighted the positive associations between psychological resources, such as resilience, hope, and optimism, and student success (Xiang et al., 2024; Yıldırım et al., 2022). The concept of student success encompasses not only academic achievement but also personal well-being, life satisfaction, and the development of self-regulatory capacities (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Sinclair, 2019; van der Zanden et al., 2018).

Given the inherent challenges associated with the transition into and challenges during the higher education journey, student development and support (SDS) services provide guidance and support relating to academic and psychological challenges (Blokland & Kirkcaldy, 2022; Gause et al., 2024; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These services, which are included in the overarching framework of student affairs, are particularly relevant in South Africa, where access to higher education has transformative potential, especially for students from historically marginalised communities (Eloff & Graham, 2020; Luescher et al., 2023; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014).

SDS services help students develop and cultivate, inter alia, psychological resources such as resilience, hope, and optimism, which are essential for navigating university life (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Maniram, 2022; Van Wyk et al., 2022). By fostering psychological resources and offering support through various avenues, SDS services help students manage stressors, meet academic demands, and develop self-efficacy, which are critical for ensuring a successful university experience (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Maniram, 2022; Van Wyk et al., 2022).

However, despite the growing body of research highlighting the importance of resilience, hope, and optimism, much of the existing work has primarily utilised quantitative approaches (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Mlotshwa, 2019; Sabodogo, 2024). While valuable, quantitative methods may not fully capture students' lived experiences of navigating university life (Sabouripour et al., 2021). Moreover, limited attention has been given to understanding these psychological resources within the diverse South African higher education context (Cherrington & De Lange, 2016; Mason, 2024). Addressing these gaps is crucial for supporting South African university students. The concepts of resilience, hope and optimism are discussed in the following section.

Psychological resources for student success: Resilience, hope and optimism

A growing body of research has indicated that resilience, hope, and optimism are important psychological factors influencing student achievement (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Rashid et al., 2024; Van Wyk et al., 2022). Resilience, which refers to the capacity to adapt and flourish despite adversity, provides students with essential coping strategies to navigate the inevitable obstacles and stressors encountered throughout their academic pursuits (Gause et al., 2024; Leon, 2021). Students demonstrating resilience can recover from setbacks, such as academic pressures, acclimate to the novel university setting, and sustain well-being amidst the pressures associated with academic life (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Maniram, 2022). Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2008) self-authorship theory reiterates these sentiments, indicating that students who cultivate psychological resources, such as internal confidence and self-authored beliefs, are more likely to successfully navigate transitions by viewing difficulties as opportunities for development and growth. In this regard, Richardson's (2002) resilience theory emphasises the role of adversity in shaping personal growth, suggesting that resilient students who develop hope and optimism as protective factors are better equipped to overcome academic and social challenges.

Hope, a motivational drive that encourages students to establish and pursue long-term goals, has been linked to positive adjustment to the university context (Mason, 2020; Zhu et al., 2025). According to Lopez (2013) and Snyder (2002), hope comprises two interlinked components: (i) pathways thinking (finding and believing in possible ways to achieve one's goals) and (ii) agency (believing one can make changes and move closer to their objectives). Additionally, hope includes envisioning a favourable future, which can promote students' capacities to remain focused and persevere, even when facing challenges (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Snyder, 2002). Peters et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of a future vision that pulls students toward their yet-to-be-actualised potentialities. Hence, a vision of a positive future can motivate students to approach present-day challenges constructively (Mason, 2024). Whereas research has highlighted the importance of hope-based goal setting and motivation among South African university students, it can also be conceptualised beyond individualised strategies, particularly through the lens of critical hope (Freire, 1994; Giroux, 2018).

The concept of critical hope refers to a grounded optimism that recognises systemic barriers to success but maintains a commitment to transformation through reflective

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action (Bozalek et al., 2014). Critical hope is particularly relevant in the South African higher education context, where socio-economic inequities remain pervasive. Building on this, critical hope empowers students not only to adapt to adversity but also to interrogate and challenge the structures that perpetuate educational disadvantage (Giroux, 2018). It cultivates a sense of collective agency, encouraging students and educators alike to engage in transformative practices that reimagine what equitable and inclusive education can look like (Grain & Lund, 2018). In doing so, critical hope becomes both a psychological resource and a sociopolitical stance that sustains resilience without denying the realities of structural injustice (Cherrington & De Lange, 2016).

Optimism, intrinsically linked to resilience and hope, entails sustaining a constructive perspective and belief in one's potential to succeed (Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Guardino et al., 2023). Students who report higher levels of optimism are more likely to approach rather than avoid academic challenges, thereby mitigating stressors and enhancing student success (Rand et al., 2011). Empirical studies have demonstrated that optimism can act as a buffer against stress, facilitate coping, and promote psychological well-being, all of which are critical for sustaining academic performance during periods of heightened stress (Lai et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2023; Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). However, Osche (2012) warns that overly optimistic students may overpredict their academic performance, which could prove maladaptive in the academic context. Other researchers have noted that realistic optimism among students can enhance their success (Mason, 2024; Rand, 2011).

Viewed through the student development theory lenses of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory, Richarson's (2002) resilience theory, and Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2008) self-authorship theory, resilience, hope, and optimism serve as critical psychological assets that support students in navigating the challenges they could encounter in the higher education context. Collectively, these theories provide a holistic framework for understanding how psychological resources influence student success. The literature also emphasises that resilience, hope, and optimism are adaptive traits that promote independent identity development, academic persistence, and long-term well-being (Leon, 2021; Lopez, 2013; Maniram, 2022). However, there is a paucity of qualitative research that captures how students themselves perceive and make meaning of these psychological resources, particularly within the unique socio-educational landscape of South Africa (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Mason, 2024; Sabouripour et al., 2021).

The present research

Transitioning from secondary education to university is an important developmental milestone that presents students with academic, social, and personal challenges (Cameron & Rideout, 2020; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Zhu et al., 2025). As students acclimate to the university environment, they encounter a range of additional stressors that can impact student success (Eloff & Graham, 2020; Scott, 2018). In response to these challenges, SDS services aim to help students enhance their internal psychological resources, such as resilience, hope, and optimism, to promote academic success and overall well-being.

While the importance of resilience, hope, and optimism for student success has been widely acknowledged (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Mason, 2024; Snyder, 2002), much of the existing research is dominated by quantitative research designs (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Sabouripour et al., 2021). Although valuable, these approaches often fail to capture the nuanced, subjective realities of students' lived experiences (Colla et al., 2022; Mason, 2020). In particular, the role of psychological resources from students' perspectives remains underexplored within the South African higher education context, where structural inequalities and unique socio-cultural factors may shape these experiences in distinct ways (Cherrington & De Lange, 2016; Marsay, 2020).

This study aimed to address these gaps by examining how first-year university students perceive and experience resilience, hope, and optimism in relation to their academic success. The study was guided by the following research question: How do first-year university students perceive the roles of resilience, optimism, and hope in student success?

Research design and methodology

Building on the need to deepen understanding of how students qualitatively experience resilience, hope, and optimism, this study adopted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the guiding methodological framework (Brocki & Wearden, 2016). IPA is particularly suited to investigating how students interpret, apply, and develop psychological resources in the context of their academic and personal transitions and experiences. A phenomenological approach enables an in-depth, idiographic examination of participants' subjective experiences, resulting in a rich, participant-driven exploration of the psychological factors influencing university adaptation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and setting

Participants were recruited through open invitations extended to students who had attended a psycho-educational program to support first-year university students. A total of 13 students (7 female, 6 male; age range = 18-25) volunteered to participate. The study was conducted at a South African metropolitan university, which enrols approximately 40,000 students annually, half of whom are first-year students. This setting was selected due to its diverse student population and the unique challenges students face within the South African university context.

Data collection and procedures

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The following five questions guided these interviews:

1. What do resilience, hope, and optimism mean for you?
2. How would you describe the role of resilience, hope, and optimism in your academic life?
3. Can you share an experience where resilience, hope, and optimism helped you at university?

4. Reflecting on your first year of studies, how have these psychological resources impacted your academic performance and well-being?
5. What advice would you give incoming first-year students about managing their well-being and academic success?

Various prompts (e.g. "Can you provide an example to illustrate that point?") and invitations to share additional information (e.g. "Please tell me more about that experience.") were used to gather further feedback from participants. The semi-structured format allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of the key themes. Participants could freely express their thoughts and experiences while the interviewer guided the discussion to cover the key topics. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data representation. The research ethics committee of the university where the data were collected approved the study (REC2020/08/002).

Data analysis and trustworthiness

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Henning et al. (2011). First, the researcher immersed himself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and engaging in qualitative memoing regarding initial impressions. Second, the transcripts were systematically coded to identify significant data features relevant to the research questions. This process entailed line-by-line and descriptive coding based on participants' phrasing. These initial codes were then grouped into clusters of focused codes based on recurring ideas. Third, the focused codes were collated into potential themes, bringing related ideas together into broader categories. The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the intended meaning and were relevant to the research objectives. Fourth, each theme was assigned clear definitions and names, encapsulating their essence and relevance. The final step involved writing a detailed account and integrating the themes into a coherent narrative.

In line with the interpretive nature of this study, it is important to note that, although the analysis was grounded in participants' voices, the development of themes required active participation from the researcher (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). As such, the researcher engaged with the data, the research questions, and theoretical framing to identify and report on patterns that were most consistently present in the data. Henning et al. (2011) explain that such a process ultimately requires disciplined subjectivity, analytical reasoning and interpretive judgement. Hence, the qualitative interpretation was thoughtfully developed by the researcher in dialogue with participants.

Several strategies were adopted to ensure trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the participants were requested to review and comment on the accuracy of the transcripts and the interpretations of their data, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings. Second, descriptions of the context and participants' experiences were provided to allow readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other settings. Third, peer debriefing and discussions were conducted to refine the analysis and ensure

that the findings were credible and well-supported by the data. Finally, the qualitative interpretation was evaluated, and a discussion was conducted in relation to a literature check (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Four key themes emerged following the qualitative analysis, namely (1) resilience as the path to maintaining balance, (2) hope as the fuel for motivation, (3) navigating academic challenges with optimism, and (4) the synergy of inner strengths. Table 1, a coding summary, summarises the developed themes, providing definitions, identified sub-themes, key supporting quotes, and associated theoretical frameworks.

Table 1. Coding summary

Theme	Definition	Sub-themes	Examples: Quotes
Resilience as the path to maintaining balance	Students' ability to adapt, persist, and recover emotionally amidst academic and personal challenges.	Adapting to change Recovering from poor grades Emotional coping strategies	*"There were times I felt defeated …"* (Participant 8, 18, male)
Hope as the fuel for motivation.	Hope is the emotional driver that sustains students' commitment to long-term goals despite the obstacles they face.	Future career aspirations Persistence despite difficulties 3. Critical hope	*"… believing in a better future keeps me from quitting when things get tough."* (Participant 13, 20, male)
Navigating academic challenges with optimism	Optimism helps students reframe challenges in a positive light and maintain a belief in their success.	Positive mindset during exams Belief in future success 3. Overcoming setbacks	*"Even when I felt unprepared, telling myself that I could do it made a big difference ..."* (Participant 7, 18, female)
The synergy of inner strengths	Resilience, hope, and optimism are not isolated qualities but dynamically interwoven to create an adaptable psychological ecosystem.	—	*"… not always neat, but often messy or chaotic experience"* (Participant 13, 20, male)

In addition to the coding summary presented above, a thematic map (Figure 1) was developed to illustrate the interrelationships among the key themes.

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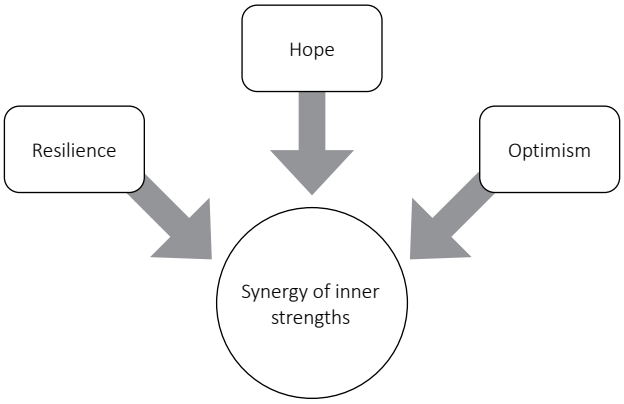

Figure 1: Thematic map

The thematic map presented in Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship between the three key psychological strengths – resilience, hope, and optimism – and their integration into a central theme: the synergy of inner strengths. Each theme contributes dynamically to this unifying construct, highlighting how students draw on multiple psychological resources to adapt, persist, and thrive within the often complex and unpredictable university environment. The qualitative themes are now discussed. The referencing system used to attribute the verbatim quotes in parentheses denotes participant numbers (e.g. Participant 1), age (e.g. 20, indicating 20 years of age), and sex (male or female).

Resilience as the path to maintaining balance

Resilience emerged as a critical factor in helping first-year university students maintain their mental well-being amidst the stressors associated with university life. This theme highlights how students utilise resilience to cope with challenges, recover from setbacks, and adapt to new environments. Three sub-themes emerged, namely (1) adapting to change, (2) recovering from poor grades and (3) emotional coping strategies.

Adapting to change

Students mentioned the difficulties they experienced adjusting to the university context. Participant 4, a 20-year-old female, noted that "*the change from school to university was big. There were emotional challenges, finances were uncertain, I didn't know people or have any friends*." Participant 8, an 18-year-old male, added, "*academics were tough, it was difficult to understand how to study and deal with all the new experiences … that was where resilience was important. I was resilient because of the strength not to give up and keep going when things were very hard*." As a follow-up to the student's response, the question was posed "How did the strength of not giving up play out for you in the university context?" Participant 8 responded by explaining that strength was not linear but cyclical: "*there were times I felt defeated … I knew I couldn't give up on this chance to be here. It was me picking myself up again and again. When I think about it, learning*

from failure made me stronger" (18, male). This cyclical process of experiencing ongoing challenges reflects Richardson's (2002) concept of resilient reintegration. Thus, students not only return to baseline functioning after disruption but can also emerge stronger through the use of intentional coping strategies and meaning-making (Mlotshwa, 2019). This sentiment was also expressed by others, for example Participant 10 (23, male) explained "*I tried to have plans ready for everything, but sometimes you need to be strong in the moment and make a plan … you grow from those times that you fail at something … failure is important to grow as a person*".

Students generally regarded resilience as the ability to adapt to changes effectively, enabling them to manage the stress associated with leaving home, making new friends, and facing increased academic demands. They also agreed that resilience was an iterative process during which they were challenged and had to seek out resources ("*Connecting to the tutors was a source of strength for me*" (Participant 9, 18, male)) and focus relevant priorities ("*I was lost at first, but I learned to adapt by focusing on small wins, like getting to know my classmates and getting used to the workload*" (Participant 10, 23, male)).

Recovering from poor grades

Academic setbacks, such as receiving lower-than-expected grades, were common and cyclical challenges that tested students' resilience. Some students reported such setbacks as opportunities for growth ("*That first maths test was difficult, but it forced me to get serious and spend more time in front of my books*" (Participant 12, 19, male)). In contrast, others struggled to deal with the emotional demands associated with poor grades ("*I often felt like giving up. When you study and still don't pass, it isn't easy to be positive. Even now, I think I have this fear of failing, which affects me negatively*" (Participant 6, 18, female)). The data showed that students' inclinations to deal resiliently with challenges, such as poor grades, were critical in remaining engaged in their academic studies. In this regard, a student noted that poor grades in her first test week "*forced me to reassess how I studied, I seeked help, and could then bounce back and get better marks in the second test week*" (Participant 5, 25, female). These qualitative opinions are consistent with earlier studies that pointed to the importance of resilience as a psychological factor in promoting student success (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Van Wyk et al., 2022).

Emotional coping strategies

Resilience also affected how students managed their emotional well-being. They discussed various coping strategies, such as seeking social support, maintaining a balanced routine, and participating in university activities, which helped them stay grounded despite the pressures of university life. For example, a student mentioned, "*When I feel overwhelmed, I take time to talk to my residence friends. It helps me to deal with the worries I have*" (Participant 2, 19, female). Another student indicated that she learned "*dealing with emotions is important in university … I learned that you must*

accept the stress and deal with it, else it keeps affecting your sanity" (Participant 5, 25, female).

Recognising the importance of resilience can help staff working in SDS-related environments establish resources and create programs that enhance students' ability to cope with university-related stress. A critical step in this regard is to normalise the stressful nature of the university experience while reframing challenges as opportunities to engage constructively with various role players (Maniram, 2022; Van Wyk et al., 2022). Additionally, focusing on building resilience through various initiatives such as workshops, webinars, peer support groups, and counselling services, these units can support students in enhancing the quality of their overall university experience (Blokland & Kirkcaldy, 2022).

Hope as a motivational driver for long-term goals

Hope emerged as an important motivational factor for first-year university students, helping them focus on their long-term academic and career aspirations. The theme is explored through three sub-themes, highlighting how students' hope for future success drives their persistence and dedication, particularly when faced with immediate challenges or setbacks.

Future career aspirations

Many students linked their academic efforts directly to their hopes for future career success. Hope was described as a powerful motivator, pushing them to strive for academic excellence as this quote indicates: "*Hope is believing you can achieve what you have set your mind to*" (Participant 13, 20, male). Students expressed that envisioning a successful career also helped them maintain their drive, even during tough academic periods. One student remarked, "*Whenever I feel like giving up, I remind myself of a better future*" (Participant 8, 18, male). Participant 3 (18, female) echoed this sentiment by stating, "*the hope to be better in the future, or to achieve my goals for my life, keeps me moving forward*".

Persistence despite difficulties

The students' hope for future achievements often helped them persevere through immediate challenges, such as difficult courses or personal struggles. One student explained, "*University can open doors for me. I know I must not give up … hold on to that belief that I can do it*" (Participant 11, 19, male). This hope was rooted in the belief that their efforts would eventually lead to success, no matter how difficult the journey. Another student shared, "*It's not easy, but believing in a better future keeps me from quitting when things get tough*" (Participant 13, 20, male). This qualitative interpretation aligns with Snyder's (2002) hope theory, which posits that students' persistence reflects both agentic beliefs and pathways through obstacles as they continue to reimagine and be motivated by a future vision.

Critical hope

In addition to serving a motivational role, hope was also referred to by students as a means of navigating hardship and systemic adversity. Participant 10 (23, male) explained that "*the system is not fair … funds are scarce and paying for nice things at university isn't always possible. The system is sometimes stacked against you, but you must play the cards you were dealt*". Participant 8 (18, male) endorsed this insight, elaborating:

> *there is a history when you come to university. Your parents may struggle, and things are not fair for everyone. There are always challenges, like some have it easy and others have it difficult in life. That doesn't mean you must give up. But it is hard to have hope when there's lots of hardship.*

These reflections align with critical hope, as they express both a recognition of difficulty and a refusal to surrender to despair. Furthermore, students' qualitative perspectives reflect a pedagogical orientation that acknowledges structural injustice while fostering the possibility for change (Bozalek et al., 2014; Freire, 1994). Rather than adopting naïve optimism, students articulated a grounded sense of purpose, what critical hope theorists refer to as educated hope, which is rooted in both awareness and action (Cherrington & De Lange, 2016; Giroux, 2018).

Navigating academic challenges with optimism

Students referred to the role of optimism in helping them persist through difficult academic situations. They described how maintaining a positive outlook kept them motivated, especially when facing challenging coursework or exams. This qualitative perspective is discussed in terms of three interlocking sub-themes.

Positive mindset during exams

The students emphasised that adopting a positive mindset during exams helped reduce anxiety and increase confidence. This mindset enabled them to approach exams with confidence, believing in their ability to succeed, which in turn improved their performance. One student mentioned, "*Even when I felt unprepared, telling myself that I could do it made a big difference*" (Participant 7, 18, female). In this regard, Seligman's concept of learned optimism emphasises that individuals who consciously adopt positive expectations tend to experience reduced anxiety and enhanced performance (Maier & Seligman, 2016). Similarly, Peters et al. (2010) found that visualising success fosters motivation and persistence. However, another student argued that realistic optimism is needed to succeed at university, as this quote indicates: "*It's no good to daydream. You must do the work and understand that your mind and what you do must speak to each other*" (Participant 9, 18, male). This student's reflection aligns with Osche's (2012) argument that being overly optimistic could be maladaptive within the academic milieu. A balance between optimistic beliefs and proactive effort is key to student success (Mason, 2024). Additionally, this observation is consistent with the awareness and action frame of reference espoused by critical hope theorists (Bozalek et al., 2014; Freire, 1994). Finally, these qualitative conceptions are consistent with Schlossberg (1984) and

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Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) emphasis on the relevance of psychological resources and strategic actions for navigating academic challenges effectively.

Belief in future success

Students' belief that their hard work would pay off in the long term was a strong motivator. They described how optimism about their future careers and academic goals kept them focused ("*By focusing on my goal, I motivate myself to keep moving in the right direction*" (Participant 10, 23, male)), even when faced with setbacks ("*When studies and university becomes difficult, you must force yourself to be positive … focus on that goal that matters*" (Participant 12, 19, male)). Viewed through a theoretical lens, students' perspectives on future success, which served as buffers against the immediate pressures of university life, echo Peters et al.'s (2010) argument that imagining a best possible future self increases positive expectancies and persistence. Consequently, long-term academic and career goals could serve as psychological capital, helping students cope with the immediate stressors of university life (Richardson, 2002).

Overcoming setbacks

Optimism played a crucial role in helping students recover from various stressors and setbacks. Instead of feeling defeated, students explained that setbacks were temporary challenges that could be overcome with effort and perseverance. They often reframed failures as learning opportunities, which helped them maintain their motivation and strive towards their goals. One participant shared, "*When my first relationship at university didn't work out, I told myself that it was a learning experience instead of a failure*" (Participant 5, 25, female). Other participants agreed ("*I kept focussing on the next step … one step at a time*" (Participant 11, 19, male)) and pointed to optimistic frames of mind when addressing various challenges, as this quote indicates: "*When I moved into my university residence, I felt lonely… but I focused on the chance to make new friends*" (Participant 2, 19, female)."

The aforementioned qualitative perspectives align with Cabras and Mondo's (2018) findings, which highlight that students with higher optimism are more likely to approach rather than avoid academic challenges. Additionally, the qualitative interpretation is consistent with Schlossberg's perspective, which posits that successful adaptation depends on students' ability to reframe challenges constructively (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The synergy of inner strengths

Whereas the three earlier themes delineated resilience, hope, and optimism as distinct psychological constructs, the student narratives also pointed to more intricate and dynamic interplay among these qualities. Students consistently described university life not as a neatly segmented experience requiring discrete skills at isolated times but as a fluid and "*not always neat, but often messy or chaotic experience*" (Participant 13, 20, male) wherein resilience, hope, and optimism merge into a singular, adaptive inner strength.

This fusion of psychological resources highlights a lived reality of complexity, which cannot necessarily be compartmentalised based on the mentioned qualities in isolation. Thus, there is a synergy between these inner strengths that could enhance students' capacities to deal with the stressful university experience.

Participants agreed that university life is "messy" – a term loaded with unpredictability, emotional turbulence, and uncertainty. One student mused, "*Optimism and being resilient keep me going ... it keeps me pushing forward, no matter what comes my way … it is also not just about being resilient … it is about my strength, my religious conviction, friends, family, everything playing a role*" (Participant 1, 18, female). Participant 13 (20, male) emphasised, "*University is full of challenges … finances, studies, personal things. It's not always neat. Having this strength means finding ways to keep going when things are tough*".

These qualitative reflections illuminate how students do not experience resilience, hope, or optimism as isolated psychological resources but as interdependent and mutually reinforcing capacities mobilised simultaneously in response to evolving challenges. Furthermore, the sense of messiness reflects Schlossberg's (1984) emphasis on situational and personal variables in transition, particularly how the specific nature of the transition influences an individual's ability to adapt, their characteristics, available support systems, and the coping strategies they employ. Moreover, students' emphasis on internal psychological scaffolding reflects Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2008) concept of internalised self-authorship, which involves developing an internal framework of values and identity that shapes decisions and actions independently of external influence.

The interconnection of these constructs emerges not merely as an academic abstraction but as a lived necessity. In this regard, Participant 10 (23, male) poignantly reflected, "*Hope reminds me that every step forward brings me closer to my dreams*", suggesting that hope infuses both resilience and optimism with forward-looking energy. While hope emerged as a motivational driver, the narratives revealed a more profound insight among the participants: a belief in change despite adversity. For example, Participant 13's reflection ("*It's not always neat, but often messy*") signalled a grounded recognition of systemic complexity and personal hardship. These reflections line up with the framework of critical hope, where motivation is sustained by embracing, not ignoring, harsh realities (Bozalek et al., 2014).

In sum, the qualitative insights compels a reconceptualisation: supporting student success requires not the bolstering of individual traits in silos but the nurturing of an integrated psychological ecosystem within a complex world. In this model, resilience, hope, and optimism function as dynamic, interacting forces that collectively enable students to persist, adapt, and thrive in the face of the inevitable complexities of higher education. Therefore, recognising and fostering this synergistic complexity may be essential to designing interventions that authentically reflect the lived experiences of students navigating their academic journeys.

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Discussion

Analysing first-year university students' experiences revealed a complex interplay between resilience, hope, and optimism. The first three qualitative themes – (i) navigating academic challenges with optimism, (ii) resilience as a key to mental health stability, and (iii) hope as a motivational driver for long-term goals – are interconnected and form a comprehensive framework for understanding how students cope with the demands of university life. Additionally, these themes are consistent with Schlossberg's transition theory, highlighting the salience of personal and social supports during life transitions (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Students demonstrated an evolving "self" dimension, actively constructing meaning and drawing upon intrapersonal resources, coherent with Baxter Magolda's (2008) thesis.

With reference to psychological resources, resilience and optimism are closely linked, as both buffer students against the challenges they face. Optimism helps students maintain a positive mindset during exams and academic setbacks, fostering resilience by encouraging them to view failures as temporary and surmountable. This optimistic outlook is essential for resilience, as it empowers students to adapt to change, recover from poor grades, and implement effective emotional coping strategies. For example, a student's belief in future success, fueled by optimism, directly supports their ability to remain resilient in the face of academic pressures and personal challenges (Mason, 2024).

While resilience and optimism operate in the immediate context of academic and emotional challenges, hope is a sustaining force that drives long-term persistence and goal achievement. Hope motivates students to persevere through difficulties by focusing on their future aspirations and goals. This long-term vision, rooted in hope, reinforces students' resilience, helping them stay motivated and committed despite the ups and downs of university life. Hope, as described by Snyder (2002), and the internal decision-making processes noted by Baxter Magolda (2001) converge in students' self-authored motivations and identities, revealing how first-year students anchor long-term goals despite short-term disruptions (Leon, 2021).

The fourth theme suggests that resilience, hope, and optimism do not operate as discrete constructs. Instead, they converge into a dynamic, interdependent psychological ecosystem that students mobilise to navigate the inherent messiness of university life. Rather than sequentially deploying isolated traits, students experience these strengths as a cohesive and fluid inner resource that sustains adaptation, perseverance, and emotional resilience in the face of complexity. This integrated reality challenges reductionist approaches that seek to reinforce singular traits in isolation, giving credibility to the relevance of qualitative research in this area. The findings suggest cultivating a holistic psychological ecosystem wherein resilience scaffolds optimism, and hope infuses forward momentum. Recognising and fostering this synergistic interplay may prove relevant to supporting students in ways that authentically mirror their multifaceted, often turbulent lived experiences within the university context.

In summary, the findings emphasise that resilience, hope, and optimism should not be addressed in isolation but cultivated collectively as an interconnected psychological

network. By reinforcing adaptability through resilience, sustaining long-term motivation through hope, and fostering a positive outlook through optimism, universities can more effectively support students in navigating the complexities and unpredictabilities inherent to academic life. Such a holistic approach acknowledges the dynamic, lived reality of student experiences, offering a more authentic and nuanced foundation for interventions that promote academic success and broader personal growth and well-being.

Implications

The findings from this study have several important implications for practice, particularly for SDS services in higher education institutions. These implications can guide the development of support programs to enhance first-year students' resilience, hope, and optimism, which are critical for their academic success and overall well-being. The following sections discuss these implications.

First, SDS services can focus on developing support programs that enhance resilience, hope, and optimism among first-year students. These could include awareness programs, workshops, and peer mentoring. For example, resilience training could help students develop strategies to cope with academic setbacks and adapt to new environments, while sessions on optimism focus on cultivating a positive mindset and realistic expectations for university life. Drawing from Richardson's (2002) perspective, such programs could facilitate resilient reintegration by helping students build adaptive responses and integrate academic setbacks into narratives of personal growth.

Second, by incorporating resilience, hope, and optimism modules into mental health services, academic advising, and career counselling, SDS can help students develop a well-rounded approach to managing academic and personal challenges. This integration can foster a supportive community where peers and staff encourage and model positive behaviours.

Third, SDS initiatives could benefit from explicitly cultivating critical hope programs that not only build students' internal resources but also acknowledge the social challenges they face. This might include reflective spaces for students to discuss systemic barriers, co-developing action strategies, or engaging in peer-led social justice-related mentoring.

Fourth, staff working in SDS-related units can utilise the insights gained from this study to tailor their approaches to meet the individual needs of students. For instance, practitioners could emphasise the development of hope and optimism in students struggling with long-term motivation. At the same time, resilience training could be a valuable focus for individuals who frequently encounter academic setbacks. Personalised support that aligns with students' unique challenges and aspirations can significantly enhance their university experience and outcomes.

Finally, the study's findings can inform institutional policies to support first-year students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may face additional challenges in their transition to higher education. Policies prioritising the development of resilience, hope, and optimism can help create an institutional culture that values and

supports student well-being as a foundation for academic success. Additionally, resource allocation for SDS services can be optimised to ensure these critical areas are adequately supported.

Limitations of the study and further research

The findings reported here should be read with certain limitations in mind. First, the study was conducted with a small sample of 13 first-year students who volunteered to participate. This small sample size, coupled with the fact that all participants were attending the same psycho-educational support program, limits the qualitative transferability of the findings to the broader population of first-year students. Additionally, the sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of age range, and other demographic factors, such as socio-economic background, were not collected or reported.

Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample that encompasses students from various universities, socio-economic backgrounds, and academic disciplines. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how different groups of students experience and perceive resilience, hope, and optimism within the context of higher education.

Second, the study relied entirely on self-reported data collected through semi-structured interviews. While this method effectively captures qualitative experiences, it may also introduce social desirability bias, where participants may present themselves in a more favourable light or downplay specific challenges. Additionally, the reliance on memory recall can lead to inaccuracies in reporting past experiences. Future studies could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measures such as surveys or psychological assessments that objectively evaluate students' resilience, hope, and optimism. This triangulation of data sources would help validate the findings and reduce potential bias.

Third, the study was conducted within a specific cultural and educational context at a South African university. The findings, therefore, may not be fully applicable to students in different cultural or academic environments, where the factors influencing resilience, hope, and optimism may differ. Future research should consider conducting similar studies in diverse cultural and educational contexts to explore how these factors vary across different settings. Comparative studies could also be undertaken to identify universal and context-specific elements of resilience, hope, and optimism, thereby enriching the understanding of these concepts in various student populations.

Conclusion

This study explored how first-year university students perceive the roles of resilience, hope, and optimism in their academic performance and overall well-being. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research captured the lived experiences of 13 students as they transitioned and adapted to university. Through semi-structured interviews, the study uncovered four key themes: (i) the role of resilience in maintaining mental health stability, (ii) the influence of hope as a motivational driver for long-term

goals, (iii) the importance of optimism in navigating academic challenges, and (iv) how these psychological strengths form an interdependent ecosystem.

Resilience was found to be crucial in helping students adapt to new environments and recover from poor grades, thereby supporting their mental health. Hope emerged as a sustaining force, driving students to remain focused on their long-term academic and career aspirations, even in the face of immediate challenges. While this study identified hope as a key resource, these findings may also be understood as expressions of critical hope, reflecting an ethical stance that affirms human dignity and agency in the face of challenges. Supporting this type of hope involves not only enhancing intrapersonal strengths but fostering collective spaces for dialogue, meaning-making, and transformative possibility.

The findings revealed that optimism helps students maintain a positive mindset, particularly during exams and when facing academic setbacks. Moreover, the qualitative data indicated that the psychological resources are not discrete variables as often investigated in quantitative studies, but form part of a qualitative tapestry reflecting students' efforts to deal with university and related stressors. Hence, the psychological resources form a synergistic whole that can help students navigate the university terrain.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological resources influencing first-year students' success in higher education. It highlights the importance of nurturing resilience, hope, and optimism, particularly in South African universities, where these internal strengths can empower students to embrace higher education as a means to enhance their life chances.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Determining the desire for entrepreneurial education amongst South African university students

Ukumisela umnqweno wemfundo ngobungxowa-nkulu phakathi kwabafundi baseyunivesithi eMzantsi Afrika

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship education is more vital now than ever before, equipping individuals with the skills and mindset to navigate the complexities of today's dynamic business landscape. Higher education institutions need to consider the current state of the labour market and restructure their entrepreneurial curriculums. Supporting entrepreneurship is a national priority. To foster this, higher education institutions must embrace their role and align their programs with the evolving demands of the labour market. The purpose of this study was to determine the desire for entrepreneurship education within institutions of higher education and to ascertain students' opinions on the perceived characteristics of the existing entrepreneurship education curriculum. This study employed a quantitative methodology, administering an online questionnaire to 322 university students. Students at the chosen South African university showed significant interest in entrepreneurship education. By incorporating entrepreneurship education into the higher education curriculum, universities are poised to assume a critical role in shaping and developing future entrepreneurs in South Africa.

KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurship, education, entrepreneurial culture, higher education, curriculum

ISISHWANKATHELO

Imfundo ngobungxowa-nkulu ibaluleke ngakumbi kunangaphambili, kuba ixhobisa abantu ngezakhono kunye nendlela yokucinga efanelekileyo yokukwazi ukujongana nobunzima bendawo yorhwebo etshintsha ngokukhawuleza yanamhlanje. Amaziko emfundo ephakamileyo kufuneka aqwalasele imeko yangoku yentengiso yemisebenzi aze alungiselele kwakhona iinkqubo zawo zemfundo ngobungxowa-nkulu. Ukuxhasa ubungxowa-nkulu yinto ephambili kumgaqo-nkqubo wesizwe. Ukuze

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oku kuphumelele, amaziko emfundo ephakamileyo kufuneka amkele indima yawo aze ahambelane neemfuno eziguqukayo zentengiso yemisebenzi. Injongo yophando olu yayikukufumanisa umnqweno wokufunda ngobungxowa-nkulu phakathi kwamaziko emfundo ephakamileyo kunye nokuvavanya iimbono zabafundi malunga neempawu ezibonwayo zenkqubo yemfundo ngobungxowa-nkulu ekhoyo. Olu phando lwasebenzisa indlela yohlahlelo yobuninzi, apho kwabuzwa imibuzo ngefom ye-intanethi kubafundi aba-322 baseyunivesithi. Abafundi kwiyunivesithi ekhethiweyo yaseMzantsi Afrika babonise umdla omkhulu kwimfundo ngobungxowa-nkulu. Ngokudibanisa imfundo ngobungxowa-nkulu kwinkqubo yemfundo ephakamileyo, iiyunivesithi zilungele ukudlala indima ebalulekileyo ekwakheni nasekuphuhliseni oosomashishini bakamva eMzantsi Afrika.

AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO
Ubungxowa-nkulu, imfundo, inkcubeko yobungxowa-nkulu, imfundo ephakamileyo, inkqubo yemfundo

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is essential for all economies worldwide, as it drives economic development by reducing poverty, creating jobs, fostering innovation, and promoting long-term sustainability (Carpenter & Wilson, 2022). Entrepreneurship appears within all business cycles, contributing towards business success and sustainability through its own distinct set of principles. Diandra and Azmy (2020) define entrepreneurship as a distinct discipline focused on innovating, developing, and leading new or existing business ideas. The business environment is constantly changing due to the various external factors that impact an economy. Higher education institutions (HEIs) must prioritise nurturing entrepreneurial minds to align with the current expectations of the labour market (Cui, 2021; Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2022).

The South African Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) has implemented a policy known as the South African Science Technology and Innovation Decadal Plan 2022-2032. This plan aims to create an innovative environment by promoting entrepreneurship through initiatives such as expanding entrepreneurship curricula in educational institutions across South Africa (Madela, 2024). Additionally, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) supports and encourages this initiative through the deployment of entrepreneurship development programs within technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges. Thus, illustrating the importance of entrepreneurship to the South African economy.

Although there has been an increase in accessibility to entrepreneurship programs, there is still inadequate curriculum content specifically focusing on the economic environment in developing versus developed economies (Jardim et al., 2021). Developing effective, economy-focused entrepreneurship curricula will help entrepreneurs identify and acquire the necessary resources to develop their business ideas in response to the demands of a specific market. The current unemployment rate in South Africa is at an all-time high of 33.2% (Statista, 2024). Although a significant portion of the unemployment rate is made up of individuals without a matric certificate, the unemployment rate among university graduates is rising, and they now account for 10% of South Africa's unemployed (Statista, 2024).

Without an updated approach to entrepreneurship in higher education, an economy will experience entrepreneurial stagnation (Olokundun et al., 2018). Consequently, there

is an appeal for the higher education domain to consider the current state of the labour market and restructure the entrepreneurial curricula of South African universities to align with it (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2022). Therefore, the current study responds to such a call for increased entrepreneurship education and a rethinking of the traditional higher education landscape by exploring university students' attitudes and desires regarding a sustainable entrepreneurial curriculum. This will benefit HEIs, increase the employability of university graduates, and help reshape the entrepreneurial landscape of the economy.

According to Cui (2021) and Olokundun et al. (2018), an entrepreneurial curriculum strongly depends on meeting the expectations of its learners and regulating the entrepreneurial landscape of a nation. Through a quantitative approach, the study offers insights into university students' expectations of an entrepreneurial curriculum, including the importance of the degree qualification, necessary skills, and curriculum modules that enhance employability. Additionally, the overall outlook of entrepreneurial education within a higher institution was identified. The results of this study have implications for university students and HEIs across South Africa.

Literature review

Entrepreneurial education

Entrepreneurial education is defined as a platform provided by formal education institutions to impart the skills, knowledge and attitudes that develop and encourage students to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Mohamed et al., 2023). Research and debate on including entrepreneurial education in tertiary education is ongoing. A key question that has been asked is whether entrepreneurship can be taught or learned (Bae et al., 2014). Some scholars have argued that entrepreneurs are born, while others have argued that there is knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be learnt to become an entrepreneur (Nguyen et al., 2019; Puni et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2019).

While some scholars have established that entrepreneurship can be formally taught and learned (Ahn & Winters, 2022; Krisnaresanti et al., 2020; Arifudin, 2022), there is also a view that entrepreneurial education does not mean that one automatically becomes a successful entrepreneur (Olutuase et al., 2023). With small business development and entrepreneurship being considered part of the solution to challenges such as poverty, inequality, unemployment and economic growth, entrepreneurial education has gained considerable attention as a means through which to increase entrepreneurial activity across the world (Di Paola et al., 2023). Similar trends also prevail in South Africa. Formal qualifications in entrepreneurship have been adopted and incorporated into the tertiary education curriculum. Even so, literature on the interest and attitudes of university students towards entrepreneurship qualifications remains scant. This study adopts the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) as the lens for understanding students' inclination to pursue entrepreneurial education in South African universities.

Theory of planned behaviour

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is applied in entrepreneurship education research to understand why individuals act in a certain way in relation to entrepreneurship education. Besides entrepreneurship, the theory has gained traction in various other disciplines, including health sciences, environmental sciences, and business management (Ajzen, 2011). This research applies the TPB to understand South African university students' desire for entrepreneurial education. The TPB suggests that university students' intention to pursue entrepreneurial education is influenced by factors such as their attitudes towards entrepreneurship, beliefs and social norms about entrepreneurial education, and their perceived control over becoming qualified entrepreneurs (Ajzen, 1991). Attitudes towards entrepreneurial education refer to beliefs about the costs and benefits of entrepreneurial education, while perceived control refers to beliefs about whether students have access to necessary resources and support to pursue entrepreneurship education (Ajzen, 1991).

Entrepreneurial education perspective

While it is widely agreed that entrepreneurial education is an important factor in promoting entrepreneurial activity, there is no consensus on what entrepreneurial education curricula should include. Prasetya and Azizah (2022) suggest that entrepreneurial education is a difficult discipline to teach due to its variability, complexity and contingency. Regardless, the key role of entrepreneurial education is understood to be the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to create and grow sustainable business enterprises (Proença & Soukiazis, 2022; Lv et al., 2021). However, Cho and Lee (2018) state that there is no one-size-fits-all entrepreneurial curriculum.

Yousafzai et al. (2021) suggest that the diversity of entrepreneurial education across the world signals the need for a context-specific curriculum. In other words, entrepreneurial education should be tailored to meet the entrepreneurial demands of a particular context. Notable basic elements that should be included in entrepreneurial education include business fundamentals, innovation and creativity, entrepreneurial mindset, as well as network and mentorship (Puni et al., 2018). In realising the importance of entrepreneurial education amongst university students, the DHET has developed programs such as the Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE), which is intended to develop students' entrepreneurial ability (EDHE, 2022). This initiative aligns with the key goals of entrepreneurial education, with an emphasis on mentorship.

Importance of entrepreneurial education

Two main arguments are presented to explain the importance of entrepreneurial education. First, entrepreneurial education is positively related to an individual's intention to venture into entrepreneurship (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023). In jurisdictions where increasing entrepreneurial activity is a key objective, entrepreneurial education has become a means of turning more people into entrepreneurs (Jena, 2020). The

prioritisation of entrepreneurship stems from the realisation that entrepreneurship and the development of business start-ups play an important role in promoting innovation, increasing gross domestic product, and reducing poverty and inequality (Fahinde et al., 2022). Numerous countries, including Japan, China, the United States of America, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, have introduced or expanded entrepreneurship education to encourage entrepreneurial activity (Miço & Cungu, 2023; Ntshangase et al., 2023; Olutuase et al., 2023; Osman et al., 2023). It is overwhelmingly accepted by the education sector and policymakers that entrepreneurship education at university is important because it enhances entrepreneurship intention, leading to increased entrepreneurial activity (Ilomo & Mwantimwa, 2023).

Second, entrepreneurial education is important because it imparts knowledge, skills and attitudes that are critical for entrepreneurship endeavours (Licha & Brem, 2018). According to Sang and Lin (2019), entrepreneurial education is crucial because it develops entrepreneurial skills, encourages students to engage in entrepreneurial activities, improves their financial performance as entrepreneurs, and, in doing so, boosts employment and drives economic growth. Extant studies on entrepreneurial education have established a positive correlation between entrepreneurial education and the perceived feasibility and attractiveness of creating new ventures (Iqbal et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022).

While there is a sizeable number of scholars who argue that entrepreneurial education has no significant influence on entrepreneurship intention and performance in entrepreneurial ventures (Bae et al., 2014; Cera et al., 2020), the majority of scholars have demonstrated that components/modules of entrepreneurship education which include opportunity recognition, business strategy, business management, business development, financial management, business communication, networking, marketing and relevant digital skills have a positive influence on the performance and sustainability of subsequent business ventures (Bondarenko, 2022; Chahine, 2022; Sang & Lin, 2019).

Furthermore, there is consensus amongst scholars and economists on the important role that entrepreneurship can play in fostering economic growth, innovation and employment (Krisnaresanti et al., 2020). However, this assertion contradicts the works of Lee and Rodríguez-Pose (2021), whose study revealed that entrepreneurship itself does not reduce poverty in some entrepreneurship sectors, such as the tradable sector. The study suggested that for entrepreneurship to yield the desired benefits of reducing poverty, efforts should be made on types of entrepreneurships rather than focusing on overall levels.

By pursuing entrepreneurial education, students acquire knowledge and skills that improve their employability by enhancing their capacity to create their own employment (Amo-Agyemang, 2019). Additionally, entrepreneurs create employment by establishing firms that require labour. With the high unemployment rate amongst South African youth, entrepreneurial careers offer graduates financial independence and a means through which to contribute to the economy by creating jobs (Ndlovu et al., 2023). But this, of course, depends on the existence and/or extent of individuals' entrepreneurial intention. Researchers, including Fabeil et al. (2022) and Melak and Derbe (2022), add

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that since not everyone is cut out for the formal paid market, self-employment offers graduates the opportunity to be job creators rather than job seekers.

Moreover, research has demonstrated a clear correlation between entrepreneurship education's enhancement of self-efficacy and the development of entrepreneurial ambitions (Masnun et al., 2023). Ahn and Winters (2022) support this idea, noting that formal education, including entrepreneurship education, positively influences entrepreneurial outcomes, such as pursuing self-employment in potential high-growth industries and establishing new businesses. Emotions, namely passion, also hold significant importance in the realm of entrepreneurship education – particularly in the domain of artistic entrepreneurship. These emotions notably influence several aspects, including motivation, collaboration, and resilience (de Ávila et al., 2023).

Attitudes towards entrepreneurship education in higher institutions

Education's benefits to individuals and society at large have resulted in favourable attitudes towards learning (Wei et al., 2019). According to Iwu et al. (2021), attitudes towards entrepreneurial education are developed on the perceived benefits of enrolling for entrepreneurial qualifications. Notable outcomes of entrepreneurial education include enhanced entrepreneurial knowledge and skills (Jena, 2020). Other outcomes include increased knowledge, motivation, abilities, skills and experience as well as greater intuition and ability to develop social networks (Jena, 2020). Education generally builds an individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioural capacities, but specifically, entrepreneurial education shapes an individual's beliefs or attitudes towards employment status, and self-employment in particular (Fahinde et al., 2022). In the context of South Africa, where youth unemployment is on the rise, students should be encouraged to embrace entrepreneurial education.

Research methodology

Research approach

The study employed a quantitative research method. Quantitative research involves asking respondents for their opinions in a structured way to produce statistics correlating to a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this case, the desire for entrepreneurial education amongst South African university students. The quantitative research approach was deemed suitable for this study as it assisted with collecting data from a large population, at the same time making it easier to analyse data and produce findings that can be generalised to other similar settings. The quantitative research method has its foundation in the positivistic paradigm utilised in this study. The positivist paradigm aided in ensuring the impartiality and independence of the researchers and assisted with the modification of reality (Nardi, 2018). In this instance, the quest for entrepreneurial education amongst South African university students. Furthermore, given that quantitative data were collected, a descriptive research design was employed for this study. Descriptive information such as demographics, students' intentions and preferences were documented.

Data collection and research instrument

The respondents were recruited through an online survey at a South African university. This type of survey is a research strategy used to compile primary data from respondents through the use of online questionnaires (Brace, 2018). It allows students to complete a questionnaire on their own, negates researcher bias, significantly increases research population size, and, at the same time, achieving an acceptable response rate (Bell et al., 2022). An online questionnaire was administered via a learning management platform, namely Blackboard Collaborate, to collect data. The questionnaire comprised close-ended questions that asked students about their desire for entrepreneurial education.

The research study followed a non-probability convenience sampling technique to access the registered students at the university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. An estimated population of 16,500 registered students was used. Furthermore, a sample of 322 students was drawn from the above population. The sample size is in the same range as similar studies that were conducted in educational settings. A Likert scale was developed for this study. The scale contained 10 items, which were also used for the pilot study to help with the phrasing of the questions.

Data analysis

The pilot study proved that the study scale is reliable and valid as it surpassed the acceptable values, as discussed below. The data were analysed using statistical applications such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. SPSS assisted with descriptive statistics, such as graphs and pie charts, that aided in drawing conclusions from the data. It also assisted in the comparison of data and findings, simultaneously testing inferential statistics such as the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The reliability of the study was deemed acceptable at a Cronbach alpha of 0.7 and above, as purported by Pallant (2020). To ensure validity, factor loadings of greater than 0.5 were considered significant for this study (Clifton, 2020).

Results

This section presents the findings of the research, considering the two proposed objectives of the study: (1) to determine the desire for entrepreneurship education within HEIs, and (2) to ascertain students' opinions on the perceived characteristics of the entrepreneurship education curriculum. Descriptive analysis was used to examine student responses and their varying perspectives with regards to the two objectives. Distribution tables and bar graphs were employed to enhance the clarity, comprehensibility, and visual appeal of the data presentation thereby facilitating a streamlined interpretation of the study findings. In the subsequent section, the sample characteristics are presented.

Sample characteristics

The demographic profile of respondents was examined to provide insights into their backgrounds, as well as characteristics relevant to entrepreneurship education, and encompassed variables such as gender, level of study, familiarity with entrepreneurship,

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prior participation in a high school business course, degree of interest in entrepreneurship, and interest in enrolling for an entrepreneurship degree. A total of 322 responses from students were received, and Table 1 summarises the participants' demographic information. These insights provide the foundation for further analysis of their perspectives on entrepreneurship education and related factors.

In terms of gender, the survey respondents comprised 31.7% male and 68.3% female students. Most of the respondents (61.5%) were first-year students. Second-year students represented only 4.0%, while third- and fourth-year students comprised 12.7% and 11.2% respectively. Honours, master's, and PhD students made up smaller proportions of the sample, with percentages ranging from 1.9% to 6.8%. Interestingly, the majority of participants (88.2%) were from the Faculty of Management and Commerce. Regarding familiarity with entrepreneurship, most respondents (81.1%) reported being familiar with entrepreneurship, while 18.9% indicated partial familiarity. This high level of familiarity suggests that most students have some understanding of or exposure to entrepreneurial concepts, which could influence their perspectives on entrepreneurship education.

Regarding prior participation in high school business courses, more than half of the respondents (54.7%) reported prior participation, while 45.3% did not. This indicates that a substantial proportion of students have prior exposure to business-related education, which could influence their interest in and readiness for entrepreneurship education at the university level. This is supported by the TPB's premise that a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship education can drive entrepreneurial intention. This is further evident by the significant percentage of respondents (60.9%) who expressed interest in enrolling for an entrepreneurship degree, while 34.5% were undecided (maybe), and 4.7% were not interested. The considerable proportion of students expressing uncertainty underscores the need for further exploration of the factors influencing their decision-making processes regarding entrepreneurship education. Additionally, the small percentage of students indicating disinterest highlights the importance of offering diverse educational pathways that cater to varying interests and career aspirations.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the sample

Demographic characteristic		**Percentage**
Gender	Male	31.7
	Female	68.3
Level of study	1st year	61.5
	2nd year	4.0
	3rd year	12.7
	4th year	11.2
	Honours	6.8
	Master's	1.9
	PhD	1.9

Demographic characteristic		Percentage
Faculty	Management and Commerce	88.2
	Law	1.6
	Health Sciences	0.3
	Social Sciences and Humanities	1.2
	Education	7.5
	Science and Agriculture	1.2
Familiarity with entrepreneurship	Yes	81.1
	Somewhat	18.9
Prior participation in high school business course	Yes	54.7
	No	45.3
Degree of interest in entrepreneurship	Extremely interested	65.2
	Somewhat interested	32.3
	Not interested at all	2.5
Interest in enrolling for an entrepreneurship degree	Yes	60.9
	Maybe	34.5
	No	4.7

Among the surveyed students, as projected in Table 1, 65.2% expressed extreme interest in starting their own business. Additionally, 32.3% indicated being somewhat interested in entrepreneurial endeavours, while only 2.5% stated that they were not interested at all in starting their own businesses. These findings underscore the importance of integrating entrepreneurship education into the higher education curriculum to equip students with the skills, knowledge, and mindset necessary to succeed as entrepreneurs.

The perceived influence of entrepreneurship education within higher education institutions

The first research objective, relating to the students' perceived role of entrepreneurship education within HEIs, was analysed based on three dimensions: (i) the perceived importance of a formal degree in entrepreneurship, (ii) the significant benefits of studying entrepreneurship at a university, and (iii) the priority level attributed to entrepreneurship education in higher education. This multipronged approach necessitated a more robust assessment of the overall desire for entrepreneurial education among the students. Table 2 presents an analysis of the sample in terms of the perceived importance of a formal degree in entrepreneurship.

Table 2. Perceived importance of a formal degree in entrepreneurship

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Extremely important	183	56.8	56.8
Somewhat important	104	32.3	89.1
Not so important	23	7.1	96.3
Not at all important	12	3.7	100.0
Total	**322**	**100.0**	

Participants were presented with a questionnaire prompting them to indicate the level of importance they attributed to a university degree in entrepreneurship. Among the surveyed university students, 56.8% considered it extremely important to have a university degree in entrepreneurship. A further 32.3% regarded it as somewhat important, whereas 7.1% viewed it as not so important. Only 3.7% of the students indicated that a university degree in entrepreneurship was not at all important. The findings highlight the need for universities to prioritise the integration of entrepreneurship education into their curricula, ensuring that students are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and mindset to thrive as entrepreneurs in a rapidly evolving economic landscape. By offering tailored entrepreneurship education programs, universities can play a pivotal role in addressing graduate as well as youth unemployment, fostering socio-economic development in South Africa.

To further explore the importance of entrepreneurial education, students' perspectives on the key benefits of studying entrepreneurship at university were gathered. The results (see Figure 1) reveal that 68.6% identified learning how to start and run a successful business as the most significant benefit of studying entrepreneurship at university.

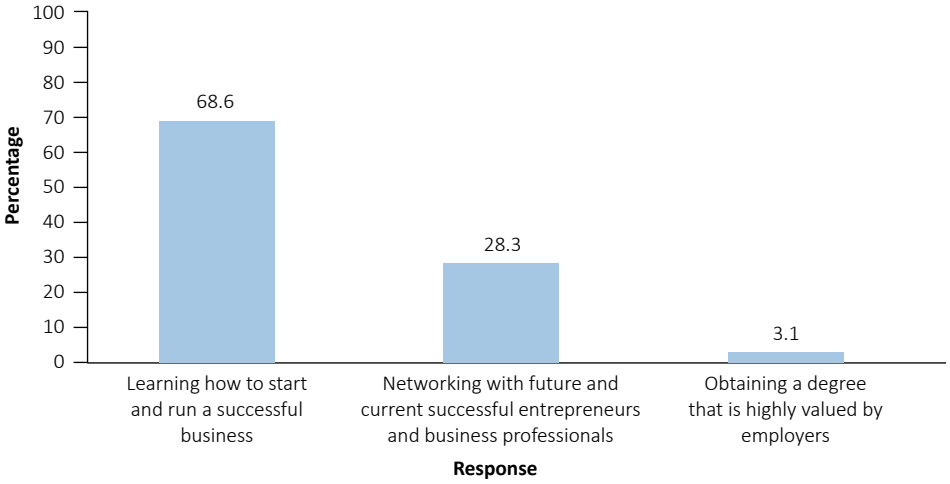

Figure 1: Level of interest in pursuing a bachelor of entrepreneurship degree

Additionally, 28.3% of the students highlighted the importance of networking with current and future successful entrepreneurs and business professionals. A minority of students (3.1%) considered obtaining a degree that is highly valued by employers as a significant benefit of studying entrepreneurship at university.

These findings underscore the importance of structured entrepreneurship education programs that offer students entrepreneurial learning experiences, enhancing their entrepreneurial competencies and fostering their success in the business world. The substantial proportion of students acknowledging the opportunity to network with successful entrepreneurs and business professionals highlights the imperativeness of fostering connections and mentoring opportunities in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. While fewer students emphasised the value of obtaining a degree highly valued by employers, this aspect remains an important consideration, particularly in terms of signalling credibility and competence in the job market.

Students were further asked to indicate the priority level they attributed to entrepreneurship education. Analysing the results (see Table 3) shows that 51.2% strongly agreed that entrepreneurship education should be a high priority in higher education. An additional 39.4% agreed with this sentiment, indicating a significant consensus among students regarding the importance of prioritising entrepreneurship education. A small proportion of students (8.1%) remained neutral about the issue, while only 1.2% disagreed with the notion of prioritising entrepreneurship education in higher education.

Table 3. High prioritisation of entrepreneurship education in higher education

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Strongly agree	165	51.2	51.2
Agree	127	39.4	90.7
Neutral	26	8.1	98.8
Disagree	4	1.2	100.0
Total	**322**	**100.0**	

The prioritisation of entrepreneurship education in higher education, as advocated for by the majority of students, reflects a widespread recognition of the importance of entrepreneurship in today's rapidly changing economy.

Perceived characteristics of the entrepreneurship education curriculum

To measure the second objective of the study, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various statements on aspects of entrepreneurship education, and the response options included 5-point Likert items such as: 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Neutral', 'Disagree', and 'Strongly disagree'. Table 4 represents the results of the analysis.

Table 4. Perceived characteristics of the entrepreneurship education curriculum

Response	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Entrepreneurship education gives you a better understanding of entrepreneurial qualities.	58.7	37.0	3.7	0.6	0
Entrepreneurship education should be embedded as a specific, stand-alone course/program in higher education.	41.6	35.1	18.0	4.3	9
Entrepreneurship education should focus on methods based on actual experience.	55.9	33.5	8.1	2.5	0
Students should have at least one practical entrepreneurship experience before completing an entrepreneurship course.	66.8	25.5	6.2	1.6	0

Analysing the results displayed in Table 4 indicates a significant level of agreement among students, with a majority (58.7%) strongly agreeing that entrepreneurship education enhances their understanding of entrepreneurial qualities. A small proportion of the students (3.7%) remained neutral on the issue, while only 0.6% disagreed. The findings demonstrate a strong belief among students regarding the role of entrepreneurship education in improving their understanding of entrepreneurial qualities.

Upon further examination of the students' perspectives on the integration of entrepreneurship education in higher education, diverse views on introducing entrepreneurship education as a specific, stand-alone course or program were observed, with the greatest proportion of the students (41.6%) strongly agreeing. A notable proportion of students (18.0%) adopted a neutral stance towards the proposition, while only a minimal proportion of students (0.9%) strongly disagreed. Despite this dissenting viewpoint, the high percentage of assenting students suggests substantial support for integrating entrepreneurship education as a specific, stand-alone course/program into the university curriculum. This, as proposed by the TPB, might indicate the influence of subjective norms, where institutional encouragement influences students' educational and career aspirations.

Further analysis of students' perceptions on the importance of entrepreneurship education in higher education, particularly focusing on experiential learning methods like project work with real businesses, revealed that a majority (55.9%) strongly agreed. Only 8.1% were neutral, with a minority (2.5%) of students disagreeing. This relatively small dissenting viewpoint among the surveyed students highlights the consensus among the majority regarding the value of practical, hands-on learning experiences in entrepreneurship education in empowering students to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic entrepreneurial contexts. This strong support for practical, hands-on learning

experience also suggests that the majority of students view entrepreneurship education as a driver of perceived behavioural control as proffered by the TPB, thus reinforcing their entrepreneurial intentions.

Finally, closely linked to the preceding findings, the students were further asked their level of agreement on whether they should have at least one internal practical entrepreneurship experience, such as drafting a comprehensive business plan before completing an entrepreneurship course. A substantial majority of the surveyed students, 66.8% of the sample, strongly supported this proposition. Additionally, a noteworthy portion of students, comprising 25.5% of the respondents, indicated that they agreed with the idea. Although not as ardent as the former group, this subset of students acknowledges the potential advantages of practical entrepreneurship experience in supplementing the theoretical knowledge gained from entrepreneurship courses. Conversely, a small fraction of students, (6.2%) remained neutral while a minority of respondents (1.6%) expressed disagreement. In summary, these results highlight the importance of practical entrepreneurship experiences, such as drafting business plans, in enriching students' educational outcomes and preparing them for entrepreneurial pursuits.

In terms of the study's primary goal of determining the perceived influence of entrepreneurship education within HEIs and the secondary objective of evaluating students' viewpoints on the characteristics of the entrepreneurship education curriculum, the results collectively underscore a significant and widespread interest in entrepreneurship education among students at the chosen South African university. Consequently, it can be concluded that there is an overwhelming desire for entrepreneurial education among students at the selected South African university. By giving precedence to entrepreneurship education and incorporating it into the higher education curriculum, universities are poised to assume a critical role in fostering the development of future entrepreneurs in South Africa.

Managerial implications

The study advocates for an alignment of higher education with ever-evolving labour market needs. Although theory can be important, curriculum development that emphasises practical skills and industry-specific knowledge is necessary (Yaşar & Aslan, 2021). Strong business partnerships and internships can prepare graduates for the workforce, offering hands-on experience and valuable networking opportunities. With unemployment rates among university graduates rising in South Africa (Ndlovu et al., 2023), this approach can bridge the gap between academia and industry, increasing graduate employability. By restructuring their programs to meet current market expectations, universities can better equip students with the skills and knowledge needed for success in today's economy.

The results emphasise the crucial role of entrepreneurial education in promoting economic expansion, creativity, and job opportunities (Arifudin, 2022; Di Paola et al., 2023). Policymakers and educational institutions must prioritise entrepreneurship education and the development of a more entrepreneurial-minded workforce to

enhance entrepreneurial activity and tackle issues like poverty and inequality (Fahinde et al., 2022).

Customising entrepreneurial curricula to a specific market is imperative in higher education. A one-size-fits-all entrepreneurial education is inadequate to its goals (Cho & Lee, 2018). For instance, there is a need to integrate entrepreneurship programs with hands-on experience, where students work directly with start-ups, fostering practical skills and networking opportunities. Similarly, HEIs should consider a blend of academic coursework and real-world application through initiatives which offer resources and mentorship to budding entrepreneurs (Puni et al., 2018; Yousafzai et al., 2021). When HEIs tailor programs to fit diverse student populations' unique needs and interests, universities can ensure relevance and effectiveness.

Fostering creativity and innovativeness is critical to entrepreneurial education (Puni et al., 2018), and HEIs should focus on doing so. Emphasising the development of such attributes enhances critical thinking, problem-solving, and students' resilience in navigating the complexities of entrepreneurial ventures (Cera et al., 2020). An entrepreneurial mindset empowers students to adapt to changing market conditions and seize opportunities, crucial skills necessary for long-term success in the entrepreneurial world (Olutuase et al., 2023). This strategy improves entrepreneurship education by preparing students for business success. HEIs ought to go beyond information distribution, fostering entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours to better prepare students for the dynamic entrepreneurship environment.

Practical experiential learning, such as project work with real businesses and hands-on entrepreneurship experiences, should be integrated into entrepreneurship curricula (Ntshangase et al., 2023; Olutuase et al., 2023; Osman et al., 2023). This aligns with the literature which suggests that natural entrepreneurial intentions can be developed through regular training sessions and exposure to supportive policies (Nguyen et al., 2019). When HEIs allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic entrepreneurial contexts, universities can better prepare them for entrepreneurial endeavours and enhance their employability (Nabi et al., 2017). For students to get experiential learning, HEIs need to partner with industry stakeholders, such as successful entrepreneurs and businesses, to provide students with networking opportunities, mentorship, and real-world entrepreneurial experiences. These collaborative efforts between academia and industry can enrich entrepreneurship education programs and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

This study adds to the body of research on entrepreneurship education by examining how students at a South African university perceive entrepreneurship education. The results show how crucial it is for university courses to align with the changing needs of the job market. The results further highlight the importance of mentoring students in entrepreneurship to promoting economic growth, innovation, and jobs. While the study raises critical ideas, it also encountered limitations. Namely, self-report bias, and a cross-sectional design. Although a cross-sectional design was suitable for the objectives of this

study, an analytical cause-and-effect relationship between variables was not possible (Wang & Cheng, 2020). To overcome this limitation, a large sample unit that represented the study's population was accessed from a single university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Additionally, a reliable and valid research instrument was distributed through which the results of the study were reported with transparency (Maier et al., 2023).

Based on the sample size, self-report bias was initially experienced. This limitation was managed by developing a research instrument that was clear and concise, thus avoiding ambiguity (Lira et al., 2022). Moreover, the research instrument indicated the purpose of the study and emphasised anonymity. Future studies could remedy these problems by using more diverse and representative groups, multiple data collection methods, as well as longitudinal or comparison approaches. The study indicates a strong student interest in entrepreneurial education, emphasising the need for universities to prioritise and enhance the entrepreneurship-related courses they provide. South African universities can significantly contribute to developing business skills, improving the economy, and addressing social issues by implementing this study's management recommendations and suggestions.

While the study does provide valuable insights, employing a cross-sectional design to simultaneously capture students' attitudes and desires towards entrepreneurial education, it is not exhaustive. To establish a more comprehensive understanding, longitudinal studies tracking students' attitudes from enrolment through graduation and into their entrepreneurial endeavours could provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of entrepreneurship education. The study further highlights the need for students to be informed about the content of entrepreneurship programs, thereby ensuring the curriculum can adapt to changing student needs and interests over time. This could involve regular feedback mechanisms and ongoing evaluation to ensure that entrepreneurship education remains relevant and effective in preparing students for current and future challenges.

Ethics statement

The ethical clearance of this study was obtained from the University of Fort Hare (TOW002-24). Participants of the study signed a voluntary informed consent form prior to completing the questionnaire. To respect anonymity students were allocated pseudonyms.

Potential conflict of interests

There are no conflicts of interests to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the value of a fieldwork practicum project at flood relief shelters in KwaZulu-Natal: Reflections of child and youth care students

Ukuhlola ukubaluleka komsebenzi wesu lokuzicija ezikhungweni zokukhoselisa ababandanyeka nezikhukhula esifundazweni saKwa-Zulu Natal: Imibono yabafundi kumkhakha wokunakekela abantwana netsha

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ABSTRACT
This article captures data related to a community-based outreach program that was initiated to assist displaced families affected by the floods in the eThekwini district of KwaZulu-Natal. Guided by qualitative research methodology, eleven child and youth care students, from a university of technology were placed at two shelters to offer psychosocial support to those who had lost their homes and loved ones. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The study found that these community members benefitted immensely from the services offered by students placed at the shelters and that exposure to the physical and emotional hardships of these families created opportunities for the students to utilise their disciplinary knowledge to offer psychosocial support. The study concluded that the university could play a significant role in empowering and supporting disadvantaged community members.

KEYWORDS
Natural disasters, community outreach, child and youth care

ISIFINYEZO
Lesi sihloko siqukethe ulwazi oluphathelene nohlelo lokufinyelela emphakathini olaqalwa ngenhloso yokusiza imindeni eyasuswa ezindaweni zayo ngenxa yezikhukhula ezenzeka esifundazweni saseThekwini KwaZulu-Natal. Ngaphansi kwendlela yocwaningo lwekhwalithi, abafundi abayishumi nanye abafunda ngokunakekela izingane nentsha, abavela enyuvesi yezobuchwepheshe, babekwa ezikhungweni zokukhosela ezimbili ukuze banikeze ukwesekwa ngokwengqondo nangokomphakathi kulabo abalahlekelwe izindlu zabo nabathandekayo babo. Ulwazi lwaqoqwa kusetshenziswa izingxoxo ezihleleke ngokwengxenye futhi lwahlaziywa kusetshenziswa ukuhlaziywa kwezigaba. Ucwaningo luthole ukuthi amalungu omphakathi ahlomula kakhulu ngezinsizakalo ezinikezwa ngabafundi ababekwa ezikhungweni zokukhosela, futhi abafundi bathola ulwazi ngezimo ezinzima zomnqondo nobudlelwane ezibhekene nale mindeni, okuvule amathuba okusebenzisa ulwazi lwabo lobuchwepheshe ukunikeza ukwesekwa ngokwengqondo nangokomphakathi. Ucwaningo luphethe

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ngokuthi inyuvesi ingaba nendima ebalulekile ekunikezeni amandla nasekusekeleni amalungu omphakathi asengozini.

AMAGAMA ABALULEKILE
Izinhlekelele zemvelo, uhlelo lokusiza umphakathi, ukunakekela izingane nentsha

Introduction

Community–university outreach partnerships introduce university disciplinary departments, and their students, to a broader universe of epistemic communities outside the university (Bivens et al., 2015). Such collaborative initiatives have the potential to optimise teaching and service and expose students to a range of community issues in their midst, whilst simultaneously improving quality of life for those in greatest need (Fitzergerald et al., 2016). In this way university students and academics become social change agents who begin to address such problems through scholarly processes (Bhagwan, 2020b). Community engagement has been defined as a partnership of university knowledge and resources with that of the community

> to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015, p. 2)

There are several forms of student community engagement, which include community outreach, volunteerism and service learning. The most common form is service-learning, which reflects a course-based educational experience wherein students engage in activities that meet the needs of communities, whilst engaged in student learning and development (Natarajarathinam et al., 2021). Whilst the current study is aligned with the nature of a community outreach initiative, students' learning was tied to their fieldwork practicum placement requirements, which can be seen as service-learning.

Menon and Suresh (2020) argue that community engagement benefits students as it allows academics to synergise their teaching and learning with contemporary societal issues. Students acquire important skills, through community-based learning and outreach programs, such as critical thinking, the ability to apply course concepts to new situations, civic responsibility, increased self-confidence, a better sense of self, improved career readiness, and a better understanding of the problems communities face (Brand et al., 2019). This article reflects on an opportunity given to child and youth care students to engage in a community outreach program, which focused on providing services to children and their families at two flood relief shelters in the eThekwini district. These students, who otherwise would have been placed at a traditional child and youth care centre for their fieldwork placement, were placed at two shelters, for families who were displaced during the floods. Therefore, this placement not only enabled them to meet traditional fieldwork placement requirements, but also to use the opportunity to engage in a community outreach program. In essence this became a service-learning project.

The frequency of natural disasters has grown consequently affecting many vulnerable communities, not only causing the loss of their homes, but also affecting their psychosocial well-being (Makwana, 2019). Stanke et al. (2021) posit that flooding challenges the psychosocial resilience of the hardiest of people, especially those who lose their loved ones and homes during such disasters (Stanke et al., 2021). In April 2022 torrential rain, caused huge devastation across many parts of KwaZulu-Natal leaving hundreds of families destitute. Due to this many were sheltered at community halls, with little psychosocial support. Whilst faith-based organisations, rallied around to provision them with material aid such as food and clothing, little was available to offer them the mental health support required to navigate their losses and adapt to living in a shelter. The objectives of the study then were to explore how students from a university in eThekwini supported flood victims through a community outreach project.

Literature review

Over the past two decades engagement has been recognised as an indivisible aspect of the two core functions of teaching and research at higher education institutions (Salam et al., 2019). Engaged universities conduct relevant research to prepare students for meaningful roles in the modern world. These aims are realised by maintaining high standards of scholarship, as well as extensive partnerships and collaborations with stakeholders and organisations beyond the walls of higher education institutions (Johnson & Hlatswayo, 2025). The involvement of students in community engagement focuses on their collaboration with communities to "achieve mutually agreed goals that build capacity, improve wellbeing and produce just and sustainable outcomes in the interest of people, communities, and the university" (Bernado et al., 2012, p. 189).

Welch (2023) suggests that higher education institutions should entrench themselves within local communities, in order to have a long-term impact on society. Moreover, to ensure successful collaboration, local communities must establish a constant and persistent network with higher education institutions. Hence when the university was approached to provide psychosocial support at these long-term shelters the child and youth care department opted to use the flood shelters as a site for fieldwork training. Hence the traditional fieldwork placement was changed from a child and youth care setting to a community-based setting, where students could have the opportunity to serve affected families.

The South African Higher Education Quality Committee's Framework for Institutional Audits (HEQC, 2004, p. 15) described community engagement as "initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the higher education institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community." Community engagement assumes several forms, which range "from informal and relatively unstructured activities," such as volunteerism, to more structured and formal academic programs such as service-learning and action research, that are designed to focus on community needs (HEQC, 2004, p. 15). International scholars also support student volunteerism, community outreach programs, service learning and action research as important pathways for higher education institutions to engage

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with communities (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). To some extent, whilst the program under discussion mirrored a community outreach project, the fact that students were placed there for their fieldwork practicum placement made this a service-learning activity as well.

Viewed holistically, engaged scholarship refers to "scholarly outreach and engagement activities that reflect a knowledge-based approach to teaching, research, and service for the direct benefit of external audiences" (Hart et al., 2023, p. 234). Community engagement projects create opportunities for students to strengthen their skills, apply theoretical knowledge to practice, and reflect on their knowledge (Yamamura & Koth, 2023). It is therefore important to create opportunities for students to share their experiences and skills and enhance their social responsiveness to social ills. These strategies aim to nurture better research skills and knowledge for active citizenship, as well as chances for collaboration with community partners and universities (Wabike, 2023). In the current study a community–university partnership was forged to enable a mutually beneficial relationship to occur between the child and youth care department and two flood shelters.

Community-engaged collaborative initiatives optimise teaching and service to deal with community-defined issues as they have the potential to improve quality of life for those in greatest need (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Kwenani and Yu (2018) argue that community engagement benefits students and has innumerable positive outcomes for both the individual and the community at large. Students who have higher levels of contact with their local communities have been found to perform better academically and socially, display lower stress levels and report increased satisfaction. The core benefit of such engagement is the reciprocal reward, as service-learning opportunities are designed to enhance the student's classroom learning, by connecting the theoretical with the practical, while also addressing community needs. Additional benefits for students include skill development, résumé-building, gaining knowledge about community organisations, and meeting other students with similar interests (Kwenani & Yu, 2018). In this case child and youth care students were given the opportunity to engage in a community outreach project, to meet their fieldwork placement requirements, whilst placed at two flood relief shelters in eThekwini district.

The benefits of community engagement for students and community partners have been well documented by several scholars (e.g. Ellenbogen, 2017; Salam et al., 2019; Tyndall et al., 2020). Cress et al. (2023) assert that through community outreach and service-learning, community partners gain access to disciplinary expertise and additional resources, that can help them in their pursuit of solutions to community issues. The benefits for students are immeasurable and include better disciplinary understanding, and the opportunity to cement their own personal values and beliefs (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). More importantly they are exposed to social justice issues and learn to become agents of social change especially when confronted by issues of injustice amongst disadvantaged communities (Bhagwan, 2020a).

Studies by Langhout and Gordon (2021) found that service-learning courses enable students to develop greater understanding of social issues which is linked to positive

academic outcomes, personal insights and greater levels of civic responsibility. Moreover, as in the current study service-learning can become a salient pedagogical mechanism that allows students to connect their academic knowledge to practical issues within their communities (Sterk Barrett & Jenkins, 2018). Community engagement creates rich opportunities for students to develop stronger bonds with their communities and develop relationships with the most vulnerable (Schlesinger et al., 2019). Through this process engagement can enhance awareness of notions of social injustice, privilege, social disparities and inequities (Langhout & Gordon, 2021), which are prevalent within the South African context. The current research study findings contribute to the knowledge gap in student community engagement within the local context.

Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was used to guide this study. Qualitative approaches are used to address questions regarding participant experiences, meanings, and perspectives (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of child and youth care students who were placed at two flood relief shelters in eThekwini. Whilst this began as an outreach project, it was used to meet the fieldwork practicum requirements, as students were placed there for an entire year. This mirrors the nature of service-learning, as students' assessments were tied to their placement. However, the placement at the flood shelter was temporary, geared towards meeting the needs of displaced families as these families were provisioned with other housing after their stay at the shelter. It was therefore not an ongoing placement, due to the crisis conditions of the project. Hence when the university was asked to assist, these community shelters were considered as a context for both outreach and learning as part of fieldwork practicum requirements. Students were therefore also asked to reflect on how this experience differed from traditional fieldwork practicum placements and how this opportunity enabled them to use their disciplinary expertise to support flood victims at these shelters.

The study population consisted of 55 second-year students from the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care degree at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Out of this group, eleven students were placed at two flood relief shelters. Those who voluntarily opted to undertake their placements at the shelter were recruited to be part of the sample. Non-probability purposive sampling, which is suitable for qualitative studies, was used to guide the selection of the participants (de Vos et al., 2011). According to Mason (2017), purposive sampling involves directly selecting groups or categories that are relevant to the study, based on the meaningfulness of the sample. In this case, those who undertook their placements at the shelter were best positioned to reflect on their experiences within this collaborative project. All eleven students voluntarily participated in the study and data saturation was reached.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) (Ethics number, IREC 228/22). The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which entails a systematic

approach to analysing the data by finding themes, coding the data according to those themes and then interpreting the data through discovering patterns, similarities and relationships between them (Terry et al., 2017).

Given that qualitative research explores human behaviour, attitudes, and experiences, ensuring trustworthiness was crucial. Credibility was achieved through checking with participants that the interpretation and analysis of the data were consistent and cohered with their experiences (Ahmed, 2024). Transferability was achieved through providing a detailed and rich description of the sample and the context within which the study was conducted. In terms of dependability, an independent co-coder was used to analyse the data which ensured that the research conclusions were derived mutually. Confirmability occurred through peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling.

Analysis and discussion

Following an analysis of the data, five themes were uncovered. They are presented in the sub-sections that follow.

Theme 1: Students experience of being placed at a flood shelter

In the first theme, students reflected on the experience of being placed at a flood shelter. Of this they shared as follows:

> *This placement was obviously a different placement as opposed to a structured child and youth care centre where you'd have the supervision or mentorship of a senior child and youth care worker.* (P2)

> *Was not very pleasant to watch or be around in an environment like that. I would have preferred to be placed in a centre with just kids, but then at the same time I'm glad that I got the opportunity to see what people are going through like to explore what's happening around us like to see people who are really affected by the flood.* (P3)

> *It was a valuable, learning experience. I wouldn't have wanted to be put in a different placement … I think that kind of set up, it changes you as a person … I think I've had a very closed view of the world, but being there has opened my eyes to different, you know, people's harsh realities. Like it's really opened my eyes, I'm grateful for the opportunity.* (P3)

> *It really opened my eyes. Seeing things like that you'd only see on the news, because I couldn't believe that this was somebody's reality so, I learned from this also.* (P3)

> *I was thrown in the deep end, … because I actually had to come back to residence and I had to go through my notes and you know just make sure I knew what I was doing because there's no supervision the social worker that is there she doesn't come in very regularly so we are really by ourselves.* (P3)

> *It was very emotional. I have never been in such a very sad situation like that.* (P3)

These narratives capture the stark contrast between a traditional placement at a child and youth care setting, where students are normally placed, which have both staff and

organisational infrastructure, as opposed to their placement at the community shelter. This constituted a great challenge for students. As shared, the students' placement at the shelter created awareness of hardship within a real-world community space. Whilst students acknowledged that it may have been easier to be placed with vulnerable children at a child care centre, this experience exposed them to the distress experienced by displaced families who had lost their homes and their belongings. They described it as a valuable learning experience that was transformative as it exposed them to poverty and social injustice. This was because most of those at the shelter were from lower socio-economic areas and had nowhere to go to when their homes were destroyed.

Moreover, students had to work within an environment with minimal mentorship and supervision, which otherwise would have been in place in a traditional child care setting. This constituted a further challenge. As such they had to turn to the theory taught in class to offer counselling and support to children and parents. Moreover, having to be within an overcrowded space with families was also strenuous and distressing. Inevitably, they were affected by the high levels of emotional distress amongst the displaced families and the lack of immediate access to a supervisor for debriefing made the placement more challenging than usual. However, students had access to their university supervisor who helped them manage their emotional distress, whilst providing support in terms of difficult clinical cases. Students also had to share an office within these community halls as a private space for counselling. Despite these structural and personal difficulties, they recognised the benefits of being in the direct life-space of these families, which enabled them to understand their lived realities within the shelter. As one student said, "*I could not believe this one person's reality*," which reflects the deep personal transformation and awareness of issues affecting families outside the university milieu. They supported one of the student's views, that they would not have wanted to be at an alternative setting for their fieldwork placement.

As such Bhagwan (2020a) argues that engaged activities, such as volunteerism and social activism, catalyse opportunities for personal transformation amongst students, creating awareness of the plight of marginalised groups in society. Community outreach and service-learning opportunities encourage students to become more socially responsible, more committed to serving their communities, more empowered and more committed to education (Body & Hogg, 2019; Brady et al., 2020), making it important for disciplinary departments to tap into potential opportunities within community spaces, where students can gain exposure to the real-world realities of communities. It further highlights the need for curricula to be relevant to the contextual realities of the local context.

Theme 2: Effects of the floods on families

The first sub-theme to emerge under theme two, focused on the effects of the floods on community members.

Sub-theme 1: Effects of the flood and living at the shelter

Students shared the distress and hardship experienced by families:

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> *I would say that they were experiencing a lot of trauma. Most of them were traumatized.* (P3)

> *Older people, they were crying … they no longer have places, some of them owned the sites that were flooded … they don't have a place to build a new house or money to rent … others were hurt and still got wounds.* (P5)

> *They lost their belongings and properties. They do not have like enough resources, just like stoves, kettles. Others didn't have any clothes, anything to sleep on.* (P7)

These narratives reflect the huge psychological distress experienced by families who had to endure the loss of their homes. Many were from vulnerable households and were living in informal settlements, near rivers which had become flooded. As such it was no longer possible to return to these areas to rebuild their homes. Many were already from impoverished backgrounds and lacked the resources to rent alternative accommodation. This forced them to seek refuge within the shelters. The floods also caused them to lose their belongings and the fact that they had to endure displacement without clothing or bedding increased their anguish. In addition to these immediate effects of the floods, those affected still had to consider the long-term effects, such as lack of finance to build new homes, displacement and a lack of access to immediate healthcare. In addition to the psychological trauma, several flood-affected survivors were also injured and could not access healthcare. Moreover, despite individuals being housed in the shelter, they were still faced with hardship as many resources were not immediately available in the shelter. w

Other studies also found that people experience severe trauma due to loss of their homes and possessions during flooding and consequently develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Liang, 2019). Shelton (2016) argues that community engagement projects, such as the current project, provide multi-disciplinary assistance to communities and organisations on real projects that improve their economic, social and physical environments, as they help meet unmet community needs and establish access and connections to other resources available at the college or university. In the current study, whilst those displaced had their physical needs met, many had endured trauma and required counselling and support to navigate their losses, whilst coming to terms with having to live at the shelter for an extended period. This is discussed further under sub-theme two, which follows.

Sub-theme 2: Difficulties with living in a flood shelter

Students shared the myriad difficulties faced by the displaced:

> *The young people they don't have time to study or do their homework. It was crowded in the hall during the day people are making noise. Even when they are doing their homework they don't have anyone to assist.* (P1)

> *They were promised, they were going to be built houses … every day you can see it when you when you walk in there …. you can just see that they don't want to be there anymore. It is heavy. The emotion there is really heavy.* (P3)

> *They were crowded, they don't have privacy … they do everything in front of everyone … they even eat in front of the crowd. Even when you are taking a bath, someone will just come in the bathroom … so they didn't have any privacy at all.* (P2)

These narratives reflect the difficult living circumstances that those who were displaced had to endure. Both children and adults were deeply affected by the lack of space and privacy, leaving children unable to study and others unable to eat or take a bath. Undeniably this environment was fertile for abuse and sexual harassment. Moreover, the overcrowding made it challenging for those affected to work through the trauma of their losses and their displacement. One participant described the atmosphere as being heavily emotionally charged and the prolonged length of living at the shelter caused great disappointment as they had been promised new homes.

Their experiences cohere with reports from the UNHCR (2024), which indicates that flooding events destroy homes, affect clean water sources, and disrupt essential services such as healthcare provision. Moreover, other researchers have noted that those displaced endure mental health distress and present with feelings of helplessness about their future (Roslim et al., 2021; Davies, 2023).

The theme that follows, focuses on the support offered to displaced families, by the students.

Theme 3: Support offered by students

Sub-theme 1: Developmental support

Students engaged in several developmental activities, with the children at the shelter, as follows:

> *The children were missing school … we did try to incorporate educational activities in our daily engagement with the children.* (P3)

> *We would do storytelling, so we'd read them stories both in English and in Zulu, and we would teach them how to write their names and then we did numeracy as well.* (P6)

> *My contribution was more especially to the kids. We were doing activities with them to keep them relaxed and try and make them forget what has happened.* (P7)

> *We play games with the children to make them forget what they were facing.* (P9)

> *Providing them with resources because they did give us quite a lot of stuff. You know the tennis balls, crayons and the story books.* (P10)

Child and youth care students did their best to engage the children in a range of educational and developmental activities during their placement. Their disciplinary background made it easier to implement early childhood educational activities, which

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focused on reading and other developmental tasks. This was positive, especially given that there were those who could not access schools near the shelters. Students were also able to engage the children in therapeutic activities, thereby helping them process the trauma they had endured. This was a critical form of support, particularly in the absence of mental health services and given that children had to flee from their homes due to torrential flood waters. This form of outreach through therapeutic and developmental services reflects the potential for higher education institutions to serve vulnerable communities. Those beset by social ills can benefit tremendously from university collaborations, as disciplinary departments lend their expertise to work on problems and develop solutions to address the complex issues facing communities (Cunningham, 2020).

Sub-theme 2: Spiritual activities

Students also engaged in other spiritual and philanthropic activities with those affected:

> *My family and I decided to donate. We donated food and clothes.* (P1)

> *We were able to form a sort of like a church for them at the community hall.* (P4)

> *They lost hope. So, … we are there to encourage hope in their faith. We used to have a church service behind the bathrooms so then every Sunday there will be a service which will then guide them and encourage them to put hope in God.* (P9)

> *They were very happy with the recent religious addition to the community hall.* (P11)

Some students engaged in philanthropic activities by securing and donating essential items such as food and clothing, whilst other students considered it important to initiate spiritual activities at the shelter. They did this by setting up a church service, so that those affected could receive spiritual support, through prayer and scripture reading. This inevitably helped lift the affected community's spirits, as religious support is known to improve mental health wellness (Koenig & Al Shohaib, 2023). In another study participants who were survivors of a flood event, and who were provisioned with social support, developed a sense of belonging and coped better through such support (Sipon et al., 2015). Initiatives undertaken by the child and youth care students reflect the huge potential for university students not only to engage in humanitarian work, but also fill a void in the absence of spiritual and mental health support. Research undertaken by Rinaldo et al. (2015, p. 120), found that the most powerful stories told by community partners describe the value of engagement in helping their organisations achieve their missions. The students in their study were described as invaluable resources that facilitated "life-changing experience[s]" for community members.

Sub-theme 3: Psychological support

Students also provided psychological support as part of their outreach initiative:

> *We offered bereavement counselling … and giving advice to whatever the mothers asked me.* (P2)

> *I think even though we're not really like qualified or anything like that, but sending us here I think was a very good step in the right direction because we did a whole lot of good for their children.* (P4)

The students were able to offer much-needed psychological support to both children and their families. Counselling was offered to those who had lost loved ones to the floods and through providing mental health support to the children. They shared that although they were not qualified, they were still able to achieve much "good," through their presence at the shelter and through the support they provided participants, thereby reflecting the powerful contribution engagement can make towards underserved communities. Akhir et al. (2021) opine that such support is invaluable in facilitating resilience within the individuals, families and communities that live through disasters. Their study found emotional support to be important to flood victims, as it helped them move on with their lives. Hence the impact of the students within the current study cannot be underscored as they were able to actively use the values of empathy and compassion, which underpin the childcare profession, to offer therapeutic support to families at the shelter.

Sub-theme 4: Physical well-being and nutrition

The third sub-theme reflected how students contributed to the physical well-being of community members. They shared:

> *I was also assisting in the feeding program whereby we will cook … then we went to the hall to feed the victims.* (P1)

> *They don't really have any meals in place. Their mothers are not there half of the time and we had to really step in and make [sure] that they were fed. The mothers go and drink … nearby, wherever they can get alcohol and then they come back drunk.* (P2)

> *They do not have enough food like when they come back from school, they are hungry. The parents did not cook because of the food supplier, it did not supply.* (P2)

Community-engaged service and outreach differs from teaching and research in that the engagement of students and staff in community-based activities is intentionally designed to provide a genuine service to the community (Bhagwan 2020a). In this case, when they became aware of a food shortage at the shelters, students also became actively involved in the provisioning of food and meals to the flood victims. Engaging in this way heightens students' empathy and sensitivity towards issues of poverty and hardship in disadvantaged communities (Jones et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Knowledge and experience derived through engagement

Overall, students thought that they benefitted from being placed at the shelters:

> *What I learnt is that a child and youth care worker is not limited to anything … it's more than going an extra mile with a smile. You can be a teacher today[,] tomorrow [you] can be a nurse … It works in every corner of children.* (P8)

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This demonstrates that students were able to adapt their child care roles at the shelter, moving from a therapeutic role to an educational one, to serve the children at the shelter. Child and youth care work occurs within the life-space of families and communities. Life-space work has been described as

> the conscious use of the everyday opportunities that present themselves in residential work, to engage meaningfully with children and young people about what is happening in their lives. It requires that workers connect immediate behaviour with the overall situations in which they are involved. (Amero et al., 2024)

Another student went on to share:

> *I have worked with different [kinds] of families through this … I was able to interact with different kinds of people; some did not want to talk[,] some they seemed traumatized.* (P1)

More importantly, the engagement initiative exposed the students to different types of families, enabling them to better understand families with diverse dynamics. The opportunity to engage in a real-world context was also enhanced, enabling students to provide child and youth care services to those affected. Had they not become involved in the engagement initiative, then their exposure to working within the context of a natural disaster would have been limited. Engagement therefore has the advantage of preparing students to work within the contextual realities of communities. Engagement presents an opportunity for students to work with disadvantaged individuals and to be exposed to societal problems that they ordinarily would not have encountered. The valuable learning space of the shelter is evidenced in the following account:

> *We were not actually prepared to deal with certain type of stuff. We were all expecting to be around kids, play with kids, assist them in doing their school homework. We were not ready to become counsellors and bring hope to people. We were not ready for that. But it was a valuable learning space.* (P5)

Most child and youth care placements create opportunities for students to work with children. This project, however, expanded the boundaries of such placements and the students' usual experiences. Through direct immersion in a community space, students were able to enhance the practice of their counselling skills. Whilst in traditional childcare placements their opportunity to engage in child and youth care work may have been restricted to play and simple care activities in relation to children at the institution, placement at the shelters enabled them to offer support and counsel flood-affected families.

Through this project, the community was transformed into a "valuable learning space" for students. Community engagement can therefore enhance learning in profound ways, by legitimising community spaces as crucial places where students can acquire real-world knowledge and learn about social issues from community members (Bickford & Wright, 2024).

Theme 5: Role of the university in helping communities

Most of the participants believed that the university has a role to play in society. This is evident in the following contributions:

> *Universities do have a role like everyone else in society.* (P2)

> *I think [it] would be very important that other departments, students and lecturers should go out there and help communities. I think it would be important for the university to just organize something for the people.* (P2)

Following the immersion experience, students supported the need for universities to become engaged with problems confronting society or give back to the community.

> *I think all university students should go and volunteer and do something to assist people who are needy or have problems. It is a good thing for students to be involved, giving back to the community.* (P3)

> *The University … Child and Youth Care Department should participate and engage in helping those people, to bring change … bring hope to them, so they will not feel left out as they felt. To learn more empathy skills.* (P3)

Their experiences within the community led the students to urge other students to become more engaged. They felt that, in terms of disciplinary expertise, child and youth care students were ideally positioned to offer empathy and therapeutic support to those affected by natural disasters or other social problems. These reflections cohere with the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which is intertwined with common human identity, a collective oneness where there is social responsiveness to all and the values of kindness and service (Rajah, 2019). An engaged university has been described as a university that harnesses its intellectual, disciplined-based resources to deal with community issues and concerns and as an institution where community issues and concerns are incorporated as a legitimate part of the scholarly, academic work of all departments, academics and students (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). A fully engaged university therefore serves the community and provides outreach to society by considering its social problems in a way that provides mutual benefit to both university and community through its engagement. This mutually beneficial partnership, as with the current project, enriches and expands "the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity" (Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 170).

Limitations of the study

The study was limited as a small number (11) of students were included in the study. This was because the outreach initiative was restricted to two flood shelters, which also could not accommodate a greater number of students. This limits the generalisability of findings in terms of the impact of engagement within community-based settings and how students themselves would have benefitted from it. Moreover, considering the perspectives of the family-member beneficiaries of the students' interventions would have supported the findings made. Despite this, the study highlighted important

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aspects of community-based learning and engagement. These initial findings highlight the potential to use community-based settings as spaces wherein students can practise their disciplinary skills whilst learning from and about real-world issues, such as the experience of the floods. Whilst the potential for researcher bias exists, this was offset through investigator triangulation, where two researchers were involved and an independent co-coder in the analysis of the data. Reflexivity through the use of a journal throughout the study further helped the researchers to become aware of her own perspectives, values and biases.

Conclusion

This article opened interesting pathways for the consideration of community engagement through outreach and service-learning opportunities. The immersion of a group of students within the context of a fieldwork practicum placement highlighted the potential to tap into community spaces, wherein students can serve and from which they can simultaneously learn. The study exposed students to the lived realities of displaced families, an opportunity which was invaluable in terms of learning of the impact to displaced families, whilst simultaneously strengthening their crisis intervention skills.

Hence whilst traditional fieldwork placements may expose students to important discipline-specific issues at certain community centres, transcending these spaces to consider learning about real-world problems as they emerge can only strengthen the preparedness of students for such local contextual realities. It is therefore crucial that universities start to earnestly value the importance of community engagement and seek to intertwine engagement with teaching and research, through service-learning, outreach and volunteerism.

Ethics statement

The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) (Ethics number: IREC 228/22).

Potential conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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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. 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.

Michelle Jaftha is an experienced higher education practitioner with over a decade in student development, academic advising, and tutor enhancement. She holds a master's in Adult Education and Global Change and is currently pursuing doctoral research in Educational Studies at the University of the Western Cape. Her work focuses on student voice, social justice in teaching and learning, and strengthening institutional practices that enhance student success.

Prof. Kotie Kaiser is an Associate Professor and the Deputy Dean for Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Education at the North-West University in South Africa. Her work focuses on the teaching and learning of English as a second language within South Africa's multilingual context, with a commitment to cultivating passion and a culture of care in the training of future language teachers.

Naythan Kayser is a Coordinator in the Centre for Student Support Services at the University of the Western Cape. A Registered Counsellor (HPCSA) and certified workplace personal development coach, he has more than a decade of experience in holistic student development and sexual and reproductive health in higher education. He led a University Capacity Development–funded GBV research and interventions project at the CSSS and co-leads the institutional implementation of WYSA, a 24/7 AI mental-health chatbot. He is completing postgraduate studies on the uptake and usage of an AI mental-health chatbot at a South African university.

Palesa Mildred Kekana holds a Master of Nursing (Dissertation) and is currently a Clinical Facilitator in the private healthcare sector. Her research interests include lived experiences and participatory methodologies, with a particular focus on higher education. She is committed to evidence-based practice and critically engages with normative and policy-driven frameworks. Her work aims to contribute to transformative, inclusive research that challenges conventional paradigms and fosters critical engagement within academic and professional settings.

Dr Faeza Khan is the Centre Director for the Council for International Educational Exchange (CIEE) in Cape Town and holds a PhD in Social Work. With over 15 years of experience in student affairs and higher education, she has worked at the University of the Western Cape in teaching, postgraduate supervision, research, and student affairs. Her work spans gender-based violence prevention, social justice, and advocacy for gender rights. She previously directed training and research projects on crime prevention and served on NGO boards.

Dr Janet Kruger is a Senior Lecturer and Subject Group Leader for English at North-West University's Vanderbijlpark Campus. With sixteen years' school teaching and eight years' university experience, she focuses on English teacher education in 21st-century South Africa. A 2021 Institutional Teaching Excellence Award recipient, she models effective teaching to prepare future educators to thrive and make a meaningful difference in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world.

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Dr Thierry M. Luescher is the Director of Postgraduate Studies and Researcher Development at the University of Cape Town and Adjunct Professor at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa. His research on higher education and student affairs in Africa,

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Prof. Matete Madiba is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Student Development & Support at the University of the Western Cape and an Associate Professor. Previously Deputy Director: Education Innovation and Director: Student Affairs at the University of Pretoria, she works on higher education transformation, student success, leadership development, and educational technology. She has been a JSAA guest editor, led UP's Girls for Girls project, contributed to Tuning Africa, and collaborates with Maastricht, Deusto, Open University, and New York University.

Dr Henry D. Mason (PhD) is a Social Science Researcher at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in Pretoria, South Africa. He is a registered Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa and holds a C2-rating from the National Research Foundation in South Africa. Henry's research interests focus on studying the role and application of positive psychology and student development theory in relation to student success.

Prof. Mikateko Mathebula holds a PhD in Development Studies and is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Development Support within the SARChI Chair's Higher Education and Human Development Research Programme at the University of the Free State. Using participatory and storytelling methods, including photovoice, her research examines the relationship between processes of higher education and human flourishing, with a focus on youth from low-income households and/or rural communities in South Africa.

Prof. Teboho Moja is Clinical Professor of Higher Education at New York University, USA. She is also a visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, South Africa, and an Extraordinary Professor at the Institute of Post School Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Prof. Moja is a recipient of the Lifetime Achiever Award of the National Research Foundation of South Africa. She is JSAA's Editor-in-chief.

Morney Conrad Mostert is a Lecturer at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) with 28 years' experience, where he focuses on resilience in education for engineering students. His research primarily explores the impact of resilience on student persistence, using the socio-ecological model of resilience (Ungar, 2008) as a theoretical framework. This research is particularly relevant in the South African context, where socio-economic and cultural factors significantly influence student outcomes in higher education. He holds a BTech degree from Tshwane University of Technology and a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) from the University of Cape Town (UCT), where he developed a deep interest in understanding the dynamics that contribute to student success in engineering programs.

Dr Justice Ngonidzashe Muchineripi holds a PhD in Business Management. He is currently lecturing at the University of Fort Hare. His research interests include entrepreneurship, township economy and strategic management. He has co-authored several journal articles published in peer-reviewed journals. He has also served as a researcher in the Eastern Cape Department of Education, where he was part of the project team in the implementation of the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative.

Prof. Subethra Pather is an Associate Professor and Learning and Teaching Specialist in the Deputy Vice Chancellor's office at the University of the Western Cape. Prof. Pather manages institutional academic support initiatives, such as mentoring, tutoring, and academic advising, to promote student access, retention, and success. Her recent projects include designing for social justice partnerships in the Global South and meaningful mentoring relationships between student and Staff.

Dr Angela Pike-Bowles is a Lecturer at the University of Fort Hare, specialising in strategic management with a focused research interest in the capabilities and sustainability of family businesses in developing economies. Her work seeks to uncover the strategies and philosophies that enable family firms to achieve enduring performance and long-term generational success. With six years of academic experience, Dr Pike-Bowles has taught a wide range of business modules.

Prof. Maryna Reyneke is an Extraordinary Professor in the Faculty of Education at North- West University, South Africa. A double Institutional Teaching Excellence Award recipient, she leads research and training in multilingual pedagogies and English across the curriculum. Her research focuses on assessment, self-directed learning, and multilingualism, with numerous national and international publications and presentations.

Prof. Dr Birgit Schreiber, PhD, has served in senior leadership positions in sub-Saharan Africa and Europe higher education with a focus, among others, on leadership, student success, DEI and gender. Birgit's PhD is in Psychology, and she has worked with a range of national and transnational bodies, notably Universities South Africa (USAf), SARUA, DAAD and ERASMUS. She also teaches, does research and supervision, and engages in program design and policy development. She is appointed as Extraordinary Professor at her Alma Mater, UWC, in Cape Town. Birgit has over 90 publications, including books and monographs, on various themes around social justice, student affairs, student engagement and higher education leadership, gender and the SDGs. She was the founding editor and is part 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 is a Column Editor for the *Journal of College and Character* (JCC). She serves as President of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS), after being the Africa Chair and Vice President. She has received numerous awards, most

recently the Noam Chomsky Award for international research and the NASPA and ACPA Award for international practice. She is a member of the Africa Centre at the Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg, Germany, Research Associate at Pretoria University, and she is Germany Country Director for the STAR Scholars Network and sits on various boards (SANRC at the University of Johannesburg, CASHEF at the University of Pretoria, South Africa).

Dr Jennifer Sheokarah is an English Lecturer in the School of Language Education at North-West University, Vanderbijlpark. Her research focuses on humanising pedagogy, second language learning, and innovative teaching strategies that enhance engagement and confidence. Drawing on action research and classroom practice, her work explores gamification, outdoor learning, and creative, anxiety-reducing approaches to English teaching. She is passionate about fostering comfortable spaces that leverage joy in language learning among both learners and pre-service teachers.

Dr Renée Smit is a Senior Scholar in the department of Electrical Engineering at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and a former Director of the Centre for Research in Engineering Education (CREE). Her research interest lies at the intersection of professional education in engineering, the nature of engineering knowledge and the applied philosophy of engineering. The research has implications for educating engineers, but also for collaborative work between practitioners in science and engineering.

Prof. Juliet Townes holds a PhD in Industrial Psychology, with professional certifications in psychological assessments, training, and moderation, including registration as an Independent Psychometrist. These qualifications provide a robust platform for work in psychological resilience, employee well-being, leadership development, and human capital management. As a policy-engaged academic, her work on selection, leadership, and resilience is shaping workforce and education reform. She is a transdisciplinary thinker, integrating industrial psychology, business management, leadership, HRM, and resilience.

Dr Deirdre van Jaarsveldt obtained a Master of Social Science (Psychiatric Nursing) and a PhD (Higher Education Studies) from the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa and is currently a Senior Lecturer at the School of Nursing, UFS. Guided by a transformative paradigm, her research interest is in diversity and inclusivity in higher education.

Thank you to our reviewers and editors

The JSAA Editorial Executive wishes to thank the peer reviewers and editors of Volume 13 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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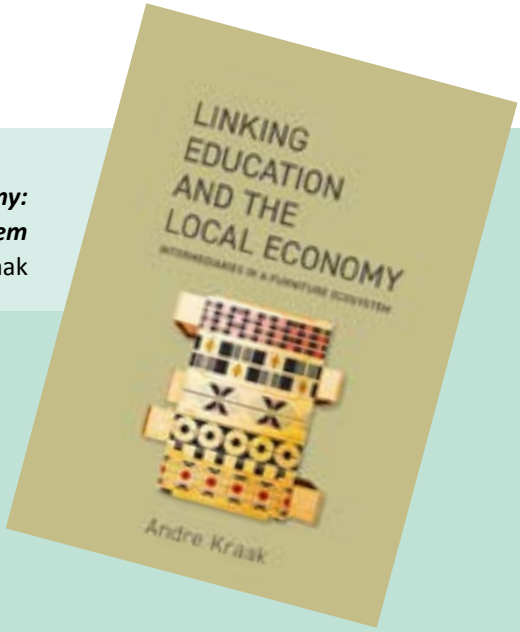

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The JSAA typically has themed issues. However, submissions that fall within the general scope and focus of the Journal can be made at any time and may be published irrespective of the overall theme of the Journal. Particularly encouraged are open-theme 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.
- **Reflective practice articles** (reflective practitioner accounts) on professional campus practice are peer reviewed. They are screened and reviewed according to the same criteria as research articles, albeit with a different emphasis. They do not need to include extensive consideration of recent literature and theory but focus on in-depth description and learnings. They must comply with standard academic convention and scholarly practice. Typical length: 2,500 - 5,000 words. Abstract: 150-200 words plus about five keywords.
- **Book reviews** should be between 800 - 1,000 words. Competent reviews of key student affairs books are published at the discretion of the Editorial Executive.
- **Letters to the editors, comments and critique** of no more than 2,500 words, are also welcome and published at the discretion of the editors.

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

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

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

1. The ethical requirements of social research have been considered and fully complied with.
2. The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the Editor).
3. The submission file is in MS Word, OpenOffice, or RTF document file format.
4. The text is double-spaced; uses a 12-point font; employs italics rather than underlining (except with URL addresses); and all illustrations, figures and tables are placed within the text at the appropriate points, rather than at the end.
5. The text adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements outlined on the Journal's website.
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The JSAA publishes research articles (peer-reviewed); high-quality reflective practitioner accounts (peer-reviewed); dialogues/interviews (non-reviewed); and book reviews (non-reviewed). The Journal is committed to assisting emerging scholars and professionals in developing promising manuscripts to the point of publication.

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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

Book reviews

☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

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

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