



Sharing practices to co-construct the profession of academic advising



Guest editors
Gugu Wendy Khanye
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Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Sharing practices to co-construct the profession of academic advising

Gugu Wendy Khanye¹ & François Strydom²

Over the past two decades, the South African higher education landscape has been in conversation about academic advising and its role in student success. The practice has evolved, moving from questions of enrolment, credit load management, and participation of students to deeper reflections on student engagement, retention, progression and time to degree. Across various universities, despite significant investment in student success initiatives, many students continue to face structural, academic, financial, and psychosocial barriers that shape their trajectories through higher education (De Klerk & Dison, 2022). It is within this complex terrain that academic advising has emerged as a transformative practice, bridging institutional aspirations for equity and excellence with the lived realities of students and their success.

Academic advising is increasingly recognised as a critical '*golden thread*' of student success (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Beyond assisting students with course choices or degree planning, advising has been delivered to serve as a developmental, data-centred practice that connects the academic, personal, and professional dimensions of the student journey. Within the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), a collaborative grant was obtained to advance academic advising across the sector. Seven years of evidence illustrates that the intentional implementation of academic advising has resulted in the cultivation of agency, reflection, and belonging, offering students structured opportunities to navigate their educational journeys with purpose and confidence.

The evolution of academic advising in South Africa has furthermore been notably shaped by Academic Advising Professional Development (the AAPD), a short learning programme providing foundational training for academic advisors. Through its collaborative and cross-institutional approach, the AAPD has built capacity, nurtured communities of practice, and established a shared language for advising in both practice and scholarly field. It has helped to position advising as a *profession in the making*, grounded in theory, informed by evidence, and sustained through reflective practice (De Klerk et al., 2024).

However, this progress also calls for a deeper commitment to the contextualisation of theories and practices. Whereas international models have provided valuable foundations, much of their framing arises from contexts that differ from South Africa's historical and socio-political realities. Therefore, contextualising advising is not merely an academic exercise; rather, it is a social justice imperative to ensure that the practice resonates with the lived experiences of South African students.

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Emerging research across various institutions has pointed to several high-impact advising approaches that enhance student success in the local context. *Intentional one-on-one advising*, has been shown to improve retention and performance by fostering accountability and targeted support (Emekako & Van der Westhuizen, 2021). *Holistic, ethic-of-care student advising frameworks* – grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness contribute to students’ sense of belonging and engagement (De Klerk, 2022). A third approach pinpoints *data-informed and proactive advising*, which allows institutions to identify students at risk and intervene before academic failure occurs, thereby strengthening overall institutional responsiveness (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; Khumalo et al., 2023).

To secure its future as a professionalised practice, it is evident that academic advising must be institutionally recognised and formally embedded within the structures to have a meaningful and sustainable impact. Consequently, this requires clear definitions of advisor roles, professional competencies, and ethical standards (De Klerk et al., 2024). It also calls for the inclusion of advice on institutional staffing, workload, and reward frameworks, ensuring that it is not treated as an add-on responsibility but as an essential component of the student success ecosystem.

Academic advising in South Africa stands at a promising yet pivotal moment. It has demonstrated its value in shaping student experiences, building inclusive learning environments, and contributing to institutional transformation. The task ahead is to consolidate and better coordinate this momentum to ensure that advising is recognised, theorised, and professionalised as a cornerstone of an equitable and future-fit higher education system.

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EDITORIAL

Co-constructing academic advising and shaping a framework for student affairs in South Africa

Birgit Schreiber,¹ Teboho Moja² & Thierry M. Luescher³

Welcome to volume 14, issue 1 of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. This issue entitled 'Sharing Practices to Co-construct the Profession of Academic Advising' is guest-edited by Gugu Khanye and François Strydom from the University of the Free State, South Africa. The collection of articles brings together research, reflective practice and institutional experience that significantly advance our understanding of academic advising in the South African higher education context and also, and perhaps most importantly, begins to shape a national framework for academic advising and student affairs in South African higher education.

Academic advising has increasingly become recognised as central to student success, yet it remains unevenly theorised, conceptualised, organised and practised across South African higher education institutions. The articles in this issue demonstrate that advising is a relational, developmental and educational practice that helps students interpret the university, make informed choices, develop agency and navigate the multiple academic, personal and institutional factors that shape their educational journeys.

The emphasis on sharing practices and co-constructing the profession is therefore particularly valuable. A profession is shaped through institutional initiatives and develops when practitioners and scholars make their knowledge visible, name their practices, test their assumptions, articulate shared standards and learn from one another. This guest-edited issue offers precisely such a space. It brings practical knowledge into dialogue with theory and research, while recognising that academic advising must be shaped by the realities of South African students and institutions.

Academic advising occupies a crucial position between the academic project of the university and the broader work of supporting students. Advisors frequently work at the points where students encounter uncertainty, transition, complexity or difficulty. They help students understand academic expectations, interpret feedback, reconsider unsuccessful

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choices, identify opportunities and connect with appropriate support. They may also be among the first institutional practitioners to recognise when a student's academic difficulty is connected to financial pressure, mental-health concerns, family responsibilities, language, belonging, accommodation or other circumstances.

Academic advising is a key aspect of student affairs, which provides a purposeful point of connection within what can otherwise be a fragmented institutional environment and alienating experience for students. Student affairs enables students to move from receiving disconnected pieces of information towards making meaning of their educational experiences.

This is not only significant in South Africa but across the continent. Our national higher education systems in Africa serve exceptionally diverse student populations (and indeed societies), including many students who are the first in their families to attend university. Students enter higher education through unequal schooling systems and with unequal access to social, cultural, financial and technological resources. They encounter institutions with different histories, missions, structures and capacities.

Academic advising can help make the implicit more explicit. It can help students learn how the institution works without positioning them as 'deficient' because they do not already possess this knowledge. At its best, advising does not merely direct students through institutional procedures. It helps them develop the capacity to ask questions, evaluate alternatives, make informed decisions and become increasingly confident participants in their own education.

Towards a South African framework for student affairs

One of the most important contributions of this guest-edited issue is the impetus it provides towards developing a South African framework for student affairs. Such a framework is increasingly necessary if approaches to student and institutional success are to develop as a coherent and recognised professional field.

At present, institutions may use student affairs to describe substantially different roles and activities. Some institutions have developed comprehensive student affairs models, while others rely on fragmented or informal arrangements. The location, mandate, training and professional recognition of student affairs practitioners also differ widely.

A South African framework should not prescribe one rigid organisational model for every university. However, diversity without a shared conceptual foundation can lead to inconsistency, role confusion and uneven quality. It can also make the work of student affairs less visible and limit opportunities for professional development and career progression.

A national framework could articulate the purposes, principles and ethical foundations of student affairs while allowing these to be implemented in contextually appropriate ways. It could clarify the relationship between student engagement, teaching and learning, student development, counselling, career development and administrative support. It could identify the knowledge, capabilities and dispositions required for effective practice. It could also establish expectations regarding training, supervision, reflective practice, evidence use, student participation and institutional responsibility.

Importantly, a South African framework should not simply import models developed elsewhere. International scholarship provides valuable resources, but student affairs in Africa must respond to our own educational histories, institutional arrangements and social realities. It must address historical and current inequality, multilingualism, transformation, belonging, student mobility, financial vulnerability and the continuing consequences of our histories. It should recognise relationality, community and interdependence, alongside individual choice and agency. It must also draw on the considerable expertise that already exists among South African practitioners.

The development of such a framework should itself embody the co-constructive approach promoted by this guest-edited issue. Student affairs professionals, academic staff, institutional researchers, students, university leaders and professional associations all have knowledge that should contribute to this process. Student experiences provide essential evidence about what makes student affairs accessible, credible, respectful and educationally meaningful.

What the collection of articles in this issue provides is a substantial starting point. It offers language, concepts, evidence, competency considerations and examples of practice through which the field can continue to define itself.

This issue offers a starting point for a framework for student affairs and demonstrates how a field can move towards professional coherence by sharing practices, generating evidence, developing competencies and making its educational contribution visible. This co-constructive process is required for student affairs more broadly across Africa.

The next step for student affairs, not only in South Africa, but across Africa, is to continue the conversation across institutions and professional communities, to deepen the evidence base, and to co-construct frameworks that are sufficiently clear to guide practice and sufficiently flexible to respond to the diversity of South African higher education.

Peer reviews as academic citizenship

Our Journal, like all journals, relies on the critical work of peer reviewers. Peer review is one of the most important forms of academic citizenship. It is often invisible, unpaid and insufficiently recognised, yet disciplines, scholarship and publications depend on it. Reviewers help safeguard the quality, credibility and integrity of scholarly work by testing arguments, identifying weaknesses, questioning assumptions and assisting authors to strengthen their contributions. At its best, reviewing is a gatekeeping exercise, a collegial and developmental practice through which knowledge is refined and scholarship is advanced. It is also a shared responsibility. Every author and researcher who benefits from the peer-review system has a duty to contribute to sustaining it by reviewing the work of others. Without scholars who are willing to give their time, expertise and careful attention, journals cannot function, emerging researchers lose opportunities for constructive guidance, and disciplines become less capable of correcting errors, developing new ideas and maintaining rigorous standards. Reviewing is not an optional extra to our student affairs practice, theory, practice and leadership. It is part of the collective efforts through which scholarly communities reproduce, interrogate, strengthen and renew themselves.

In memoriam: JSAA editor, Dr Dominique Ngoy Mwepu (1971–2024)

The JSAA community mourns the passing of Dr Dominique Ngoy Mwepu, who died on 30 September 2024 at the age of 53. Born in Kamina in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dr Mwepu completed his undergraduate and master's education at the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique in the DRC before obtaining a postgraduate diploma in Education and a PhD from the University of Cape Town. His doctoral research examined translation and interpreting as instruments of language planning in South Africa, with particular attention to court interpreting.

Following his doctorate, he held an A. W. Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at UCT and subsequently worked at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the University of the Witwatersrand. He later taught at the University of the District of Columbia and, at the time of his death, was a lecturer in the Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences at the University of Maryland, USA.

Dr Mwepu joined the JSAA Editorial Board in 2022 and served as the Journal's first French-language and translation editor. In this capacity, he supported the transition of JSAA towards becoming more multi-lingual and particularly facilitated the introduction of French titles and abstracts. In this manner, Dominique helped extend the Journal's engagement with francophone Africa. We remember him as a dedicated scholar, editor and colleague and extend our sincere condolences to his family, students, colleagues and friends.

Upcoming changes at JSAA

JSAA is entering an important period of transition as the journal moves its institutional hosting from the University of Pretoria to the University of Cape Town. In the course of August–September 2026, we are expecting JSAA's online presence to be relocated and newly hosted on the UCT Libraries journal platform at <https://journals.uct.ac.za/>. We are excited for this move as much as we are grateful for the past five years of association with the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education.

At the same time, JSAA is currently significantly oversubscribed, with a substantial pipeline of accepted and in-process manuscripts. We have about two years of manuscripts currently in the process of editing. We are therefore using this transition period to put a moratorium on new general submissions for several months while we consolidate the move, manage the existing manuscript backlog responsibly, and protect the quality and timeliness of the editorial process.

During this period, JSAA will continue to accept and publish guest-edited special issues, which remain an important way of advancing focused scholarly conversations and strengthening collaboration across the student affairs community. Thus, manuscript submissions that are specifically in response to calls for papers will continue to be accepted by the corresponding editors of that guest-edited issue. All current and future calls for papers are published on the JSAA website (under current issues, archive, and announcements).

This issue

This guest-edited issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA), volume 14 issue 1, is dedicated to the theme of 'Sharing Practices to Co-construct the Profession of Academic

Advising.’ The guest editorial, authored by Gugu Khanye and Professor François Strydom from the University of the Free State, sets the tone by emphasizing the collaborative efforts and innovative strategies shaping academic advising in Southern Africa.

This issue features a diverse range of added contributions, which are selected from the open submissions of the JSAA. Mthokozisi Mpofo and colleagues investigate international student adjustment and success at the University of Namibia, while Maretha Visser and Eloise Law-van Wyk analyse predictors of student mental health and academic competence. Joy Petersen and Aslaam Fataar provide a morphogenetic analysis of student development during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Tebello Mduduma et al. focus on first-year students’ resilience and well-being as key factors in adapting to higher education. Starford Osabutey examines the impact of homeowner behaviours on academic performance at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. Casey Botha and Janine Senekal present a systematic review of postgraduate retention strategies, and Sandla Nomvete et al. analyse leadership dynamics and the use of ICT during the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests. Finally, Shingairai Chigeza and Angelina Wilson Fadji explore relational experiences and meaning making as pathways to academic adjustment among African international students in South Africa.

Altogether, this issue brings together a rich tapestry of research and reflective practice, showcasing the evolving landscape of academic advising and student support across the continent.

We congratulate Gugu Khanye and François Strydom from the University of the Free State on leading this guest-edited issue so successfully.

Enjoy the read!

Birgit, Teboho and Thierry

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Early success indicators at a South African university: A data-centric approach to understanding and promoting student success behaviours

Izinkomba zokuqala ezikhombisa ukuphumelela kwinyuvesi yaseNingizimu Afrika: Indlela ehambisana nedatha ehambisana nokuqonda nokukhuthaza ukuziphatha okwenza impumelelo yomfundi

Philokuhle Collin Majozi¹ & Kgadi Clarrie Mathabathe²

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the field of analytics for student success has evolved significantly, especially with the emergence of learning analytics as a formal research domain, pioneered by Siemens and colleagues in 2013. However, the use of data to inform decision-making concerning planning, intervention, and teaching and learning practices is not a new concept. Despite this, many institutional strategies to support student success remain siloed and often narrowly focused on specific barriers, rather than adopting a holistic view. This article introduces the concept of ‘early success indicators’ – a framework designed to integrate the diverse elements of institutional support into a cohesive, data-informed model. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasize deficit-oriented terminology such as ‘at-risk indicators’ or ‘early warning systems’, this approach adopts a strengths-based perspective. We ask, “What conditions must be in place for students to reach their full potential?” To answer this, we map key moments across the student lifecycle – from pre-registration through to final assessments – identifying relevant data points and support mechanisms. This work is grounded in the insights of Academic Success Coaches (also known as Faculty Student Advisors), institutional leaders, and data scientists, enabling a multi-stakeholder, interdisciplinary approach to student success. Our findings underscore the importance of institutional collaboration, a culture of data transparency, responsive support systems, and timely, targeted interventions. This conceptual article contributes to the shift from reactive to proactive student success support strategies, aiming to enhance throughput rates and overall student outcomes.

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KEYWORDS

Academic advising, student lifecycle, early success indicators, holistic student support, early warning systems, student success

ISIFINYEZO

Kuleminyaka engamashumi amabili edlule, inkundla yokuhlaziya kwempumelelo yabafundi iye yaguquka kakhulu, ikakhulukazi ngokuvela kohlaziyo lokufunda (learning analytics) njengenkundla yocwaningo esemthethweni, eyaqalwa nguSiemens nozakwabo ngo-2013. Nokho, ukusetshenziswa kolwazi ukweluleka ekuthathweni kwezinqumo mayelana nokuhlela, ukungenelela kanye nezindlela zokufundisa nokufunda akuwona umqondo omusha. Noma kunjalo, amasu amaningi ezikhungo okweseka impumelelo yabafundi asahlukahlukene, avame ukugxila ezinhlakeni ezithile zezithiyo kunokuba amukele aqonde izinhla zonke. Leli phepha lethula umqondo weZinkomba Zokuqala Ezikhombisa Ukuphumelela – uhlaka oluhloselwe ukhlanganisa izingxenye ezahlukeni zokwesekwa abafundi esikhungweni ukuze lube yisu elihlangene eliqhutshwa ngolwazi. Ngokuphambene nezindlela zendabuko ezigcizelela amagama agxile ekuntulekeni afana ‘nezinkomba zobungozi’ noma ‘izinhlelo zokuxwayisa kusenesikhathi’, indlela yethu yamukela umbono ogxile emandleni omfundi. Sibuzwa umbuzo othi, “Yiziphi izimo okufanele zibe khona ukuze abafundi bafinyelele emandleni abo aphelele?” Ukuze siphendule lo mbuzo, sibeka imephu yezikhathi ezisemqoka kuyo yonke impilo yomfundi esasesikhungweni sezemfundo, kusukela ngaphambi kokuba abhalisa kuze kufikele ekuhlolweni kokugcina, sibheka ulwazi ngaye kanye nezindlela ezifanele zokwemeseka. Lesi sifundo sisuselwa ekuqondeni komsebenzi wabaQeqeshi beMpumelelo Yezemfundo abaziwa nangokuthi abeluleki babafundi bomkhakha, abaholi besikhungo, nososayensi bolwazi, ekwenzeni indlela ehlanganisa ababambiqhaza futhi eqa imikhakha emining yolwazi olumayelana nokuphumelela kwabafundi. Imiphumela yethu igcizelela ukubaluleka kokubambisana ngaphakathi esikhungweni, isiko lokusebenzisa ulwazi ngokusobala, izinhlelo zokweseka ezishintsha ngokuphuthuma kanye nokungenelela ngesikhathi okuhlosiwe. Lo mqondo osemusha waleliphepha unikela ekuguqulweni amasu okusekela impumelelo yabafundi ngendlela ehlosiwe hayi evikelayo ngokusekwenzekile, ngenhloso yokwandisa amazinga okuphuthula kanye nemiphumela yabafundi iyonke.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA

Ukwelulekwa kwezemfundo, umjikelezo wokufunda womfundi, izinkomba zokuqala ezikhombisa ukuphumelela, ukwesekwa komfundi okuphelele, izinhlelo zokuxwayisa kusenesikhathi, impumelelo yomfundi

Introduction

In South Africa’s post-apartheid higher education landscape, institutions face the dual imperative of promoting academic excellence while addressing historical inequities. The quest for inclusive student success has become even more urgent in light of

massification, systemic inequalities, and differentiated preparedness (Ogude et al., 2021). Within this context, the need to adopt student-centered, data-informed approaches has grown (Cele, 2021).

Much development and activity in the field of education data mining and learning analytics have largely been on the development of effective early warning/alert systems (Akçapınar et al., 2019). The two concepts of early warning systems and early alert systems have been used to mean the same thing in literature. ‘Early warning systems’ are institution-wide technology-based solutions that use data to detect potential student attrition and notify staff to act preemptively (Patterson et al., 2023). These systems have been used for many different purposes, including mitigating course dropout (Bañeres et al., 2023; Castelo Branco et al., 2022; Guerrero-Roldán et al., 2021); university dropout (Cannistrà et al., 2022; Delogu et al., 2024; Hoyos Osorio & Daza Santacoloma, 2023); increased learner performance (Guerrero-Roldán et al., 2021; Kustitskaya et al., 2022); identification of weaknesses in cognitive skills (Cabezas et al., 2024); nudges (Kay & Bostock, 2023); detecting non-thriving students (Hershkovitz & Ambrose, 2022); development of student subjectivity (Liu, 2024); estimating the probability of graduating (Attewell et al., 2019); and predicting end-of-term performance (Akçapınar et al., 2019). See the summary below in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the types of early warning/alert systems

Unit of analysis	Success metric level	Author
Module/Course dropout	Student	Bañeres et al., 2023; Castelo Branco et al., 2022; Guerrero-Roldán et al., 2021
Dropout	Institution	Cannistrà et al., 2022; Delogu et al., 2024; Hoyos Osorio & Daza Santacoloma, 2023
Improving performance	Student	Guerrero-Roldán et al., 2021; Kustitskaya et al., 2022; Hershkovitz & Ambrose, 2022

As shown in Table 1, the types and purposes of early warning systems vary greatly and each has a specific focus. Even so, analogous to the discussion on student success metrics, these early warning/alert systems have two foci; they are either focusing on (1) student dropout, or (2) dropout or failure in the module. The former is at the institutional-level and the latter at the student-level. Globally, learning analytics have gained traction as a tool to improve student outcomes through early detection of at-risk behaviours. Siemens (2013) and Ferguson (2012) argue that data, when ethically applied, can support timely, tailored interventions. In the South African context, however, scholars such as Boughey and McKenna (2021) caution against overreliance on quantitative data, warning that it can obscure systemic inequalities unless interpreted through a contextual lens.

Recent South African studies emphasize the need for frameworks that address the complexity of the student experience. Wilson-Strydom (2015) uses the capabilities approach to explore access and success as issues of justice and agency. Similarly, the Council on Higher Education (2013) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (2021) highlight persistent disparities by race, gender, and school quintile. These call for

a student development perspective, for example Baxter Magolda (2001), that recognises learning as both cognitive and psychosocial. The following literature review was conducted through Scopus and Web of Science using the key phrases “early warning system” and “education”, as well as “early alert system” and “education”. No meaningful literature was found when the phrases “early success indicator” and “education” were used.

This article introduces the concept of early success indicators (ESI), a proactive framework grounded in the belief that students do not fail in isolation but within ecosystems that can be made more enabling through data-informed strategies such as academic advising. Focusing on a South African research-intensive university, this article proposes a data analytics framework that can be used to identify and map key data points in the student journey to signal academic success or risk behaviour, triggering early intervention through targeted academic advising support. The study is underpinned by Siemens’ Learning Analytics Model (2013) and the Action, Inclusion, Responsiveness, and Reflexivity (AIRR) Framework (Stilgoe et al., 2013). Moreover, this study positions ESIs at the intersection of learning analytics and student development theory, proposing that early engagement, academic behaviour, and social integration are critical in shaping resilient student pathways. Finally, Student Development Theory offers a critical lens through which to understand the holistic growth and progression of university students beyond mere academic achievement. It encompasses cognitive, psychosocial, and identity development, providing insight into how students make meaning of their university experiences and respond to institutional interventions (Young, 2016). Unlike learning analytics, which focuses primarily on behavioural and performance data, Student Development Theory foregrounds the internal processes that shape a student’s capacity to engage, persist, and thrive.

One foundational perspective is Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship, which highlights students’ developmental journey towards becoming internally driven learners capable of critical reflection and personal agency. This theory is especially relevant in South Africa’s diverse higher education landscape, where students often navigate complex transitions marked by social inequality, cultural dissonance, and varying levels of academic preparedness. Complementing this, Sanford’s (1967) Challenge and Support Theory posits that student development occurs most effectively when individuals are simultaneously challenged and supported – principles that align directly with the ethos of ESIs. These indicators do not only serve as tools to flag risk but also as mechanisms to initiate timely support that is attuned to students’ developmental stages and unique contexts.

In the South African context, Wilson-Strydom (2015) has argued for a capabilities-oriented model of student development, which recognises that student success requires nurturing agency, resilience, and belonging. This approach underscores the need for institutions to move beyond instrumental success metrics and attend to the lived realities that shape students’ capacity to succeed. By integrating student development theory with data-centric models such as Siemens’ Learning Analytics Model, this study affirms that understanding and enhancing student success requires a multidimensional framework – one that leverages predictive and prescriptive insights while fostering the personal growth and autonomy of students.

Purpose of the study

This study uses a student-centric approach as a lens to deepen the understanding of how the factors discussed above affect the student lifecycle at key stages in a programme. We advocate for a deeper look at both the critical data points that span the student journey, the challenges that a student faces and the existing institutional support that can be matched or aligned to each phase of the student lifecycle in a degree programme. An in-depth look into the phases of the student lifecycle, that is student behaviours, helps institutions to identify a wide variety of barriers that students may encounter, put measures in place in anticipation, and proactively address these. This article constitutes a mapping of data points along the student lifecycle as an indicator of early success or failure. The mapping is facilitated by revisiting and unpacking existing institutional data and data points as well as student support activities and systems towards conceptualising a framework which can be used to identify the presence or absence of success indicators necessary for progression in a module or programme.

This study contributes to the progressing field of learning analytics – a body of knowledge that seeks to revitalise how the practice of academic advising can proactively leverage data to inform decision-making, and enables agile and proactive planning and support, fostering holistic student access and success. Learning Analytics is defined as “the measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for the purposes of understanding and optimizing learning and the environments in which it occurs” (Siemens, 2013, p. 3).

In conducting this research, we sought to answer the primary research questions:

1. What constitutes indicators that signal success or failure along the student journey?
2. What interventions can be put in place to respond to each indicator to foster success?

We wished to understand data points that signalled success along the student journey from the data that the institution collects and to identify concomitant support that could be triggered by these indicators, ensuring that students receive timely support to improve their academic and developmental outcomes.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on two key theoretical frameworks: Siemens’ Learning Analytics Model (2013) and the AIRR Framework (Stilgoe et al., 2013). Siemens conceptualises learning analytics as a process involving the collection, analysis, and use of student data to optimise learning outcomes. His model emphasizes actionable insights and systemic responsiveness, aligning well with the institution’s aim to identify early success indicators. The AIRR Framework complements Siemen’s model by foregrounding institutional behaviour. It posits that responsible innovation in education requires systems that are action-oriented, inclusive, responsive to stakeholder input, and reflexive in adapting to change. When applied to student success, AIRR demands that institutions not only respond to risk but continuously learn from their data and practices.

The Learning Analytics Model by Siemens (2013), focuses on the process of learning analytics while the Action, Inclusion, Responsiveness, Reflexivity (AIRR) Framework stems from the responsible research and innovation framework, which is defined by Stilgoe et al. (2013, p. 3) as “taking care of the future through collective stewardship of science and innovation at present”. AIRR is the overarching framework at an institutional level, guiding the multi-stakeholder discourse in developing an early success indicator system, whereas learning analytics provide a framework to practically develop and implement an early warning system.

AIRR has four dimensions: (1) anticipation, (2) reflexivity, (3) inclusion, and (4) responsiveness (Stilgoe et al., 2013). This framework was developed from the key questions that scientists have to answer regarding a new innovation at hand, considering the product, the processes involved, and its purpose (Stilgoe et al., 2013). Such questions include: “what other impacts can we anticipate (product), how should standards be drawn up and applied (process), and why are researchers doing it (purpose)” (Stilgoe et al., 2013, p. 3). These questions (and others) seek to elicit any risks pertaining to the (technological) innovation and gauge if processes had any ethical considerations, especially when living subjects (men or animals) were involved (Stilgoe et al., 2013). Table 2 below from Patterson et al. (2023) further shows how AIRR is of importance in developing technological solutions such as the ESI.

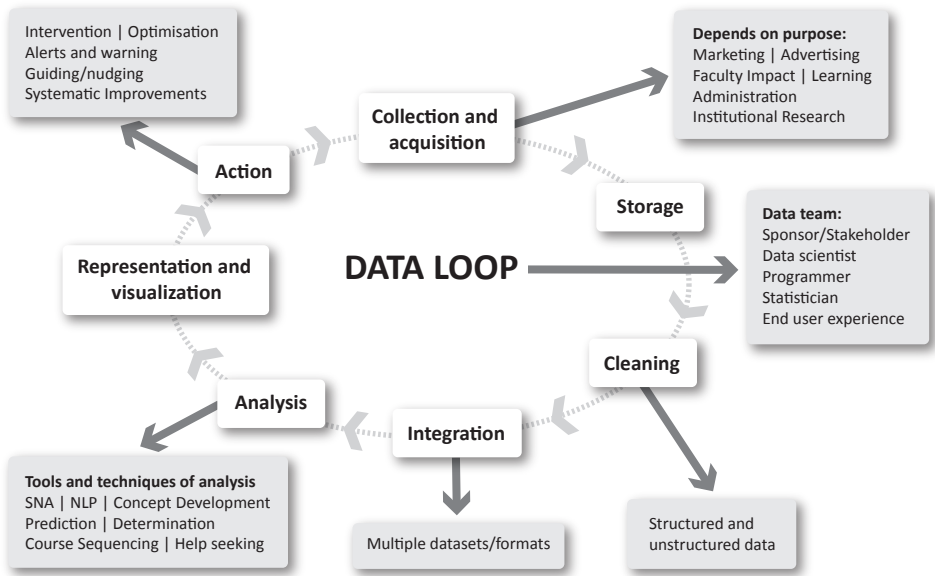
Table 2: AIRR dimensions, definition and guiding questions

Dimension	Definition	Guiding question(s)
Anticipation	Foreseeing consequences to design and implementation decisions.	What could go wrong with implementing this design?
Inclusion	Engaging with all relevant stakeholders. Allowing stakeholders to question innovation design and implementation, as well as group processes.	Who are the relevant stakeholders? How can we find and include those with the least power in this situation?
Responsiveness	Addressing stakeholder concerns and integrating stakeholder ideas into group processes, product design, and implementation.	How can design and implementation best incorporate input from relevant stakeholders? How can design and implementation be improved by anticipating diverse scenarios?
Reflexivity	Positioning one’s social identities and values with the project, and realising that each singular positioning is limited.	How can innovators make visible and transparent the assumptions and values that shape design and implementation?

The development of an holistic early success indicators system cannot happen in isolation. A framework such as AIRR ensures that all impacted stakeholders are considered and all voices are heard (inclusion and responsiveness).

The practical development of an early success system is framed using the learning analytics framework in Figure 1, which is a typical approach to data science and educational data mining in how data collected about the student can be used to develop alerts or interventions. The framework opens up with (a) data collection from various sources and tools, this is then followed by (b) storing it somewhere on a server, (c) then the data cleaning process happens to achieve the desired format, (d) the clean data is then transformed to desired formats or integrated with other sources, (e) the analysis then begins by using appropriate tools and techniques, (f) the outcomes of the analysis are communicated/presented, (g) and this leads to the intended action.

Figure 1. Reconstructed Learning Analytics Framework (adapted from Siemens, 2013)



In this study, Siemen’s model has informed the design of the data infrastructure and identification of student risk indicators, while AIRR has guided the institutional strategy in deploying these insights through support structures and feedback loops. These two frameworks have informed and continue to inform the further development of the early success indicators at our university.

Methods

In developing the first iteration of the early success indicators system, this study was informed by the previous support and institutional interventions as shown in Table 3, which lists the institutional initiatives from 2009-2012 and the literature on early warning/alerts systems. The gap between 2019 to 2024 was filled by data scientists and system developers based on the dashboards and tools that they provided to various stakeholders to support timely interventions (Naidoo & Lemmens, 2015).

Mapping the student academic journey

According to Kilfoil (2021), the university has, over time, achieved maturity in support initiatives provided to students. Table 3 below maps key phases in the student lifecycle, the support provided, and data points associated with each phase. Further support initiatives to close equity gaps have been introduced over time. Some of these include wrap-around support for targeted cohorts of students, specifically students who are funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and the *missing-middle* students. It is easy to map these initiatives in a timeline but, until now, these important interventions have been run randomly, in isolation, not linked to critical moments when students most need them. Analysing data has the potential to highlight the trends and patterns and help academic advisors to make informed decisions in terms of which interventions are necessary to whom and when.

The goal is to map out all activities that are associated with a student and potential barriers at each stage of the student journey and match each stage with the institutional support/intervention. This promotes data-informed interventions, improves collaboration among staff and maximises the impact. Secondary to this, the goal is to map stakeholders who are involved at each point, their activities, resources, technology, and the data they collect. Already, at the writing of this article, the institution had initiated an Institutional Student Success Committee to have all the role players who interface with students and those who support student-facing activities and infrastructure around the table.

Table 3: Student journey critical points, associated interventions/support (2009-2012) and measurable data points

	Critical point (Student lifecycle)	Interventions/Support	Measurable data points (ESI)
Pre-Entry	Application and registration	• Onboard onto pre-orientation module based on provisional acceptance • Early issuing of acceptance letter using National Senior Certificate (NSC) and Independent Examinations Board (IEB) results and National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) • Early identification of at-risk students based on student Admission Point Score (APS)	• Grade 11 marks • NSC & NBT scores • Realisation rate (offer into registration) • Acceptance rates • AP scores
Entry	Orientation (First year)	• Academic Orientation Programme (AOP) • Introduction to Academic Success Coaches (ASCs) • Early survey: University of Pretoria Readiness Survey (UPRS); Subject matter baseline assessments during Orientation	• UPRS results • Orientation attendance rates • outcome of subject matter baseline assessments written during orientation

	Critical point (Student lifecycle)	Interventions/Support	Measurable data points (ESI)
During studies	Academic integration	• Mentorship programme for first years • Tutoring (especially for high-impact modules) • Supplemental instruction models • “Nudging” campaigns (motivational messages)	• Early semester academic performance • Tutor/mentor engagement logs
	Academic engagement and progression	• Tracking academic performance via Learning Management System (click UP/Blackboard Predict) • Data dashboards • Advisor interventions for students at risk	• Module pass rates • Use of learning analytics • Academic advisor learner case management system logs
	Social integration (Engagement in campus life)	• Student societies, sports, residence activities, day houses, faculty houses • Student leadership development • Learning Communities • FLY@UP motivational campaign	• Participation rates in extracurricular activities
	Academic and psychosocial support	• Faculty Student Advisors (FSAs) system • Counselling services • Health and wellbeing support • Disability services and support • Growth mindset training • Student Nutrition and Academic Progress (SNAPP) Programme	• Advising appointments • Counselling session numbers
	Year-to-year progression	• Continuous monitoring and advising • Focus on persistence and retention with timely interventions	• Year-to-year retention rates
	Pre-graduation preparation	• Ready-for-Work programme (online, free for students) • Skills workshops: CV writing, interviews, entrepreneurship	• Completion rates of Ready-for-Work modules
Exit	Graduation	• Final-year monitoring • Graduate tracking	• Graduation rates • Time-to-completion (minimum time plus metrics)
	Post-graduation transition	• Alumni surveys • Employer feedback surveys on graduate readiness	• Employment rates • Further study enrolment rates

In mapping the student journey, it is also important to consider the diversity in the groups of students to develop an effective and inclusive system. The outlook of the university comprises the following three clusters of students: first-time entering, returning and transferring; undergraduate, postgraduate, and non-degree; and local and international. In addition to these clusters, students have nuanced personal skills development needs that

require attention. It is therefore important to anticipate and distinguish between the generic and unique support for students and provide that in a timely manner.

Results and discussion

In a quest for a fresh take on early warning/alert systems that are holistic, we ventured to use the terminology, 'early success indicators (ESI)'. Contrary to the concept, 'early warning systems', which carries a negative connotation analogous to the 'at-risk' concept. Early success indicators take a positive and constructive perspective that is easy to communicate and advocate. This term, 'early success indicator', is not common in education literature, with no results on Web of Science and one result in education on Scopus by (Stout et al., 2021) titled: 'Basic Skills Assessment as an Early Success Indicator in College Math Course' when searched on 28 April 2025, using 'early success indicator'. Even so, the wealth of literature on early warning/alert systems provides insights on previous global strategies towards ensuring the success of an institution and that of the student.

Consistent early intervention through co-curricular support activities (e.g. mentorship, academic tutoring) correlates with higher progression rates. Siemens' Learning Analytics Model (2013) confirms the value of actionable analytics, that is, students who were flagged in ESI models, benefited from targeted interventions. In terms of the AIRR Framework (Stilgoe et al., 2013), the institution can demonstrate responsiveness by expanding support offerings based on feedback loops. Reflexivity is fostered through iterative programme adjustments. For instance, students who express feeling marginalised due to socio-economic barriers can subsequently be targeted with tailored financial literacy and peer-support interventions. These insights demonstrate that ESIs are not only predictive tools, but also catalysts to cultivate inclusive, developmental learning environments.

Limitations, recommendations and future research

In further developing ESI, it is recommended that consultation in the form of surveys or interviews with all relevant stakeholders should be considered. While the study has laid a solid foundation, future research should incorporate consultations with academic advisors and other stakeholders to capture evolving practices. Additionally, expanding the literature review to include studies on at-risk students, irrespective of specific terminology, could enrich the understanding of effective support systems.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive overview of student success as an evolving concept in higher education institutions, considering both institutional and student-level metrics. The quest to conceptualise a framework of early success indicators and associated support interventions across a student-life journey, underscores the complexity of student success, which is influenced by a confluence of academic, psychosocial, and systemic factors. The research report by the Universities South Africa (USAf) Transformation Strategy Group, titled *Reshaping Universities to Create a Student Centred Higher Education System in South Africa*, underscores the complexity, highlighting a student-centred university or higher education system as a multi-layered, multidimensional context underpinned by the values

of interconnectedness, human dignity and equitable access (USAf, 2021). The report highlights student formation and ultimately student success as influenced by a reciprocal interaction between students and their multidimensional contexts of development.

The authors acknowledge that there have been significant strides by higher education institutions and associated advisory and regulatory bodies to bring student-interest to the fore as a key stakeholder that enables processes to enhance the student experience. These include, for example, a framework for a student-centred higher education system in South Africa by the USAf Transformation Strategy Group (USAf, 2021).

The adoption of ESIs as proactive and positive indicators marks a shift from traditional deficit-based early warning systems, focusing instead on fostering conditions conducive to student achievement. Key conclusions drawn from the study include:

- **Holistic measurement of student success:** Institutions increasingly recognise that student success extends beyond academic outcomes to include factors such as wellbeing, connectedness, and access to resources (USAf, 2021). Metrics at both the institutional and student levels are essential for capturing this multifaceted concept.
- **Role of institutional adaptability:** The capacity of institutions to adapt through digital transformation and inclusive leadership significantly impacts their effectiveness and efficiency in supporting student success. Agile strategies and data-informed decision-making are crucial in meeting the diverse needs of the student body.
- **Importance of early success indicators:** The shift to ESI from traditional early warning systems reflects a more constructive approach, promoting timely, data-driven interventions tailored to various stages of the student lifecycle. This proactive stance facilitates the anticipation of barriers and the deployment of targeted support.
- **Collaborative support frameworks:** The integration of academic, co-curricular, and psychosocial support services is vital. Effective student success strategies require coordinated efforts across diverse institutional stakeholders, emphasizing inclusion, responsiveness, and reflexivity as outlined in the AIRR framework.
- **Data utilisation for enhanced decision-making:** Leveraging learning analytics enables institutions to identify trends, predict potential challenges, and implement timely interventions. Data not only supports academic advising and student development but also informs institutional policies and resource allocation.
- **Addressing equity gaps:** A critical dimension of student success involves closing equity gaps related to demographic and socio-economic disparities. Tailored interventions, such as wrap-around support for underrepresented student cohorts, play a significant role in promoting equity in educational outcomes.

This study contributes to a growing recognition of the need for student-centred, data-informed institutional strategies in South African higher education. Early success indicators, when used responsibly and contextually, can enhance anticipatory support and promote inclusive student development. The proposed frameworks resonate with USAf's (2021) call

for reshaping universities into student-centred systems and DHET's (2020) national framework for student success. Ultimately, data must not replace human judgement, but rather amplify our capacity to create equitable, responsive, and empowering student experiences.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on student success, offering insights into how data-driven, inclusive, and proactive strategies can enhance educational outcomes. By fostering environments that anticipate challenges and support diverse student needs, institutions can better fulfil their mission of promoting holistic student development and success.

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Ethics statement

This study did not require ethical clearance, as it relied solely on previously published research literature, national reports, and university publications regarding student success.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests relevant to this research.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The professionalisation of academic advising practices in South Africa: A competency framework for professional academic advisors

Die professionalisering van akademiese adviespraktyke in Suid-Afrika: 'n Bevoegdheidsraamwerk vir professionele akademiese adviseurs

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ABSTRACT

Owing to the high attrition rates faced by South African higher education institutions, academic advising has become a crucial strategy for enhancing student success and retention. Institutions committed to improving student learning, persistence and graduation must ensure that academic advisors receive targeted training and professional development. Such initiatives should focus on building competencies tailored to the South African higher education context and its unique challenges. However, existing literature on advising competencies in South Africa remains limited and some still regard the field as being in the early stages of development. This qualitative study aims to propose a competency framework for academic advisors in South Africa, highlighting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours associated with professional advising from a developmental perspective. The researcher used the six steps outlined by Dalton to draft a competency framework for advisors at the University of the Free State. Dalton's steps included a literature review of existing advising frameworks, a job analysis of advisors in various roles, and a qualitative content analysis of the data. As the primary outcome of this competency modelling process, the article presents a contextually relevant competency framework for academic advisors at a South African institution.

KEYWORDS

Academic advising, competency modelling, industrial psychology, South Africa, professional advisors, professional development, training and development

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OPSOMMING

Weens die hoë uitloeiakoerse wat Suid-Afrikaanse hoëronderwysinstellings ervaar, het akademiese advies 'n kernstrategie geword om student sukses en retensie te bevorder. Instellings wat toegewyd is tot die verbetering van studente leer, volharding en graduering, moet verseker dat akademiese adviseurs geteikende opleiding en professionele ontwikkeling ontvang. Sodanige inisiatiewe behoort te fokus op die ontwikkeling van bevoegdheid wat aangepas is vir die Suid-Afrikaanse hoëronderwyskonteks en sy unieke uitdagings. Nietemin, bly bestaande literatuur oor akademiese advies verwante bevoegdheid in Suid-Afrika beperk, en sommige beskou die veld steeds as in 'n vroeë ontwikkelingsfase. Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie het ten doel om 'n bevoegdheidsraamwerk vir akademiese adviseurs in Suid-Afrika voor te stel, met klem op die kennis, vaardighede, gesindhede en gedrag wat met professionele advies vanuit 'n ontwikkelingsperspektief geassosieer word. Die navorser het die ses stappe wat deur Dalton uiteengesit is vir kompetensiemodellering gebruik om 'n kompetensieraamwerk vir adviseurs aan die Universiteit van die Vrystaat te ontwikkel. Dalton se stappe sluit 'n literatuuroorsig van bestaande akademiese advies raamwerke, 'n werksontleding van adviseurs in verskeie rolle, en 'n kwalitatiewe inhoudsontleding van die data in. As die primêre uitkoms van hierdie kompetensiemodelleringproses, bied die artikel 'n kontekstueel relevante kompetensieraamwerk vir akademiese adviseurs aan 'n Suid-Afrikaanse hoëronderwysinstelling.

SLEUTELWOORDE

Akademiese advies, kompetensiemodellering, kompetensieraamwerk, bedryfsielkunde, Suid-Afrika, professionele adviseurs, professionele ontwikkeling, opleiding en ontwikkeling

Background and introduction

Despite various student support interventions, South Africa continues to face low retention and graduation rates, primarily due to systemic factors such as poor school education, limited resources, and misaligned curricula that leave many first-year students underprepared for university (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; De Klerk, 2021). Additionally, many students are first generation, commute daily, and often feel overwhelmed, disconnected, and lack a sense of belonging (CTL, 2019). These challenges contribute to high dropout rates, which carry significant cost implications for the state, students, and their families (Tswana, 2017).

In response to these challenges, academic advising has been increasingly recognised as a key institutional function for improving student retention and success (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; Strydom & Loots, 2020; De Klerk, 2022). Therefore, higher learning institutions must prioritise providing high-quality academic advising (Emekako & Van der Westhuizen, 2020), as quality advising is also recognised as central to the successful implementation of institutional strategy (Voller, 2013). This emphasizes the growing need for the professionalisation of academic advising in the South African higher education sector.

Various initiatives have been implemented to support the professionalisation of academic advising in South Africa. National efforts have focused on building institutional capacity for academic advising, sharing best practices nationally, training professional and peer advisors, and developing academic advising as a scholarly discipline (ELETSA, n.d.; Siyaphumelela Advising Workstream, 2017). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has played a critical role in reaching these objectives through the collaborative grant. The grant focuses on establishing a structured approach to student development and identifying academic advising as essential to improving student success (Khanye, 2024). The DHET grant was based on the effort of the advising workstream, which formed part of the Siyaphumelela initiative, and has already played a key role in establishing advising structures in South African universities.

Furthermore, the formation of ELETSA, the first academic advising association for South Africa, followed in 2021. ELETSA, which means ‘advising’ in Sesotho, aims to position academic advising as a practice that enhances coordination and effectiveness to ultimately improve student success in South Africa (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021).

The University of the Free State (UFS) further facilitates the development of advising as a profession in South Africa through the Academic Advising Professional Development (AAPD) short learning programme. As of 2018, more than 500 professional advisors have completed the AAPD. This programme is currently the only academic advising training programme in the country, making a significant contribution to the professionalisation of academic advising in South Africa (Schoeman et al., 2021). However, Khanye (2024, p. 20) states that although the potential of academic advising to advance student success has been recognised in South Africa in recent years, the “profession has not been solidified conceptually and professionally in South African policy and practice,” leaving room for further exploration of what the professionalisation of academic advising means.

Aucamp (2022) notes that higher education institutions committed to student learning, persistence, and graduation must provide their academic advisors with structured training and ongoing professional development. In addition, training and development initiatives should focus on developing competencies associated with high-quality advising unique to the South African context. Competencies for professional advising practices can be identified by creating a competency framework for South African advisors. No formal competency framework has been developed for the South African context; national training and development programmes rely heavily on international influences such as the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in the United States. Therefore, the field remains underdeveloped (Khanye, 2024) and recruitment practices may be inconsistent (De Klerk et al., 2024).

NACADA developed a competency model for academic advisors in 2017 to address the lack of clarity regarding the role boundaries and responsibilities of advisors internationally. The NACADA competency model focuses on competencies within the conceptual, informational, and relational components of advising (NACADA, 2017b). These competencies have largely influenced the development of advisor competencies in South Africa. However, South Africa has unique contextual factors that necessitate a competency framework which

includes the professional competencies required to address the South African advising context.

This study aimed to develop a contextualised competency framework for academic advisors at the UFS, serving as a starting point for investigating professional advising competencies responsive to the needs of students in the South African context. Discoveries from this study could help guide advisor selection, recruitment, training and professional development (Aucamp, 2022; De Klerk, 2024). Furthermore, the competency framework could help analyse and improve advising practices, provide deeper insight into institutional expectations of academic advising in various roles to distinguish top and average performers, and help promote scholarship in the field (Aucamp, 2022). Lastly, advisors could use this framework for self-assessment and evaluation to guide the advisors' learning, career development, training, and evaluation (NACADA, 2017c).

South African literature has noted a growing research interest in professional competencies in academic advising. Khanye (2024) notes that the AAPD contextualises core advising competencies to South African advisors. The AAPD focuses on building an understanding of advising and knowledge systems associated with professional advising. Furthermore, it focuses on competencies related to the advisor-student relationship such as rapport-building, record-keeping, referral skills, and ethical decision-making. The AAPD further focuses on the professional development of advisors, emphasizing competencies such as cultural awareness, managing stress and burnout, and establishing a professional scholarly practice in advising.

De Klerk et al. (2024) investigated competencies for advisors. They proposed a model viewing advising competencies across multiple dimensions, including emotional support, socio-economic factors, scholarly activities, skills development, and teaching and learning. Following a phenomenological approach, these authors integrated advising themes and personal experience into the findings of their model. This study includes a literature review of specific competencies related to advising, which forms part of Dalton's competency modelling process. The discussion section of this article elaborates on these competencies.

The researcher views advisor competencies from an organisational psychology perspective. From this viewpoint, competencies are defined as a combination of observable and measurable knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes that enhance employee performance, ultimately resulting in organisational success (University of Nebraska, 2022). Furthermore, the researcher employed a competency modelling approach, utilising a wide range of datasets to develop a competency framework for the UFS. The researcher derived this framework from existing literature and frameworks, as well as a job analysis that shares the employee's viewpoint. In addition, the current competency model of NACADA (2017c), the primary influence on competency development in South African institutions, was also considered in the research process.

Methodology

Research design

This qualitative study was conducted within the framework of the constructivist research paradigm (Patel, 2015). The ontology of this study is based on the notion that no single reality exists about the competencies necessary for academic advisors; instead, reality is created by the individuals who work in academic advising. In this research paradigm, the purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding academic advisors. An inductive research approach was followed, with the competency framework as the end goal.

Research context and participants

The study was conducted at the University of the Free State; it aimed to develop a competency framework tailored to this institutional context. The goal was not to generalise findings to the broader South African context but rather to include the lived experiences of advisors across diverse faculties and roles.

Purposive sampling was used to select 10 participants, including academic advisors and management staff from various departments and roles. Inclusion criteria considered years of advising experience, the proportion of advising responsibilities in the job profile, departmental context, and advising level. This ensured a representative range of perspectives. Data saturation was reached after the ninth interview as no new themes emerged in the tenth interview. Participant profiles were as follows:

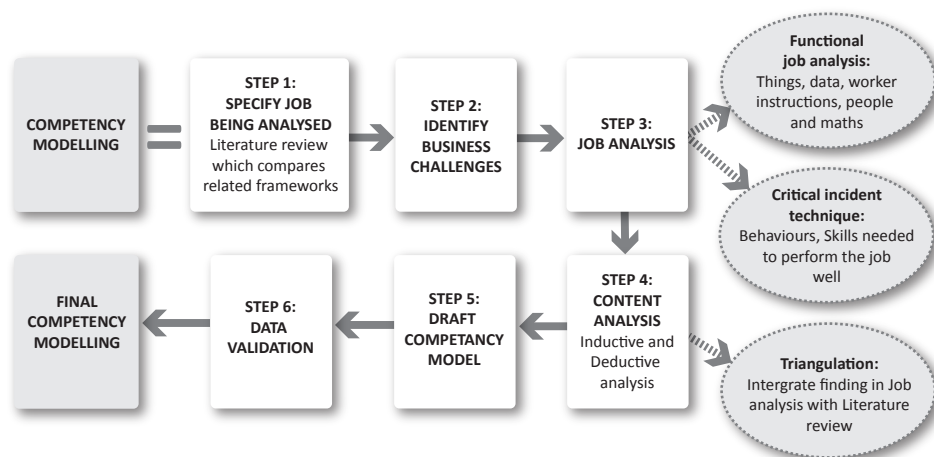
Table 1: Job analysis of participant profiles

Advising role	Advising%	Years advising	Advising level
P1: Faculty manager	80-100%	≥10 years	Managerial
P2: Faculty advisor/marketer	60–80%	≥10 years	Senior advisor
P3: Teaching and learning manager	20-40%	4-5 years	Managerial
P4: Faculty advisor	40-60%	3-4 years	Senior advisor
P5: Advising manager	80-100%	5-8 years	Managerial
P6: Faculty advisor	60-80%	≥10 years	Senior advisor
P7: General advisor (CTL)	80-100%	2-3 years	Senior advisor
P8: General advisor (CTL)	20-40%	Less than a year	Grant coordinator and advisor
P9: Advisor in Access Programme (CTL)	60-80%	5-8 years	Senior advisor
P10: General advisor (CTL)	80-100%	5-8 years	Senior advisor

Data collection methods

The competency framework shared in this study was developed through competency modelling. Drawing from industrial psychology, Campion et al. (2011) state that competency modelling is an important innovation that helps organisations focus on job-related information and employee skills. Figure 1 presents the competency modelling process in the six steps identified by Dalton (1997, as cited in Keller, 2016).

Figure 1. Process of competency modelling



Step 1: Specifying the job being analysed

Step 1 involved a literature review to explore and compare advisor job profiles, existing literature, competency models and frameworks relevant to academic advising. The study examined existing competency frameworks that could be a point of reference in the South African advising space, such as the competency framework of NACADA (NACADA, 2017b), the competency model presented by Educor (a South African Education group) in 2022, and the South African career development framework (DHET, 2016). The latter has relevance because career advising is an essential function of advising (Schoeman, 2021). The three competency frameworks studied increased the validity of the literature review through triangulation.

Step 2: Identifying business challenges

The second step involved researching academic advising trends in South Africa and the evolution of the advising role. This was completed through the literature review. A competency framework for South African academic advisors must include specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed to address student concerns and help students overcome financial and social barriers to success (Branson & Whitelaw, 2023; De Klerk et al., 2024).

Step 3: Job analysis

A job analysis identifies key knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with good job performance in a particular job (academic advising). A functional job analysis investigates tasks, duties, responsibilities, and the knowledge, skills, abilities, experience, and personal characteristics to perform them (Dalton, 1997; Landy & Conte, 2010). Step 3 consisted of a functional job analysis and critical incident interviews with 10 academic advisors at the UFS. The functional job analysis and critical incident techniques comprised a semi-structured interview protocol of 24 questions. Examples of questions included: “What values do you associate with a good academic advisor?” Alternatively, “What type of reasoning does an academic advisor need to be able to do?”. The critical incident technique provides deeper insight into behaviours associated with delivering quality advising versus providing advising that is below the required standards. For example: “What behaviours could you get a reward for in advising?” Or “What kind of behaviours might lead to negative consequences?”.

Step 4: Content analysis

Step 4 involved a qualitative content analysis to compare competencies identified in the literature with those emerging from participants’ lived experiences at the UFS (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This process facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and deeper insights into the competencies essential for professional advising (Creswell, 2014).

Both inductive and deductive approaches were used. Initially, an inductive coding process of the interview transcripts yielded 64 codes. These were then deductively sorted into competency elements – skills, attitudes, behaviours, and values – and further categorised according to five advising components: (1) conceptual, (2) informational, (3) relational, (4) technological, and (5) professional, as defined by NACADA, the AAPD, and institutional guidelines.

Step 5: Drafting a competency model

After completing the content analysis, the researcher triangulated data gathered from the literature review and job analysis. The researcher collected data from advisors in multiple contexts (such as faculty advisors, general advisors, advising managers, and access programme advisors), used various methods (literature study, job analysis, and critical incidents) to gather data, and studied multiple competency models from a variety of perspectives (Fielding & Fielding, 1986, as cited in Lune & Berg, 2017). Dalton (1977, as cited in Keller, 2017) notes that this helped corroborate the findings during a competency modelling process. The researcher drafted a single competency model for the UFS.

Step 6: Validating the competency model

The researcher shared the competency model with academic advisors at the UFS to validate the data and integrated advisor feedback into the model. The validated and finalised model appears in Annexure A.

Main findings

Developing a professional competency framework for academic advisors at the UFS

The main findings of this study present and discuss the researcher's competency framework for the academic advisors at the UFS. Unlike typical frameworks that focus on a limited set of critical competencies for a specific role, this framework is deliberately detailed to support the ongoing training and professional development of academic advisors at the UFS. The competency framework encompasses knowledge systems relevant to professional advising, the skills required for this job, relational competencies, technical abilities, professional competencies related to the practice, and value systems associated with professional academic advising. Annexure A presents the competency framework for UFS advisors.

The competency model was designed to inform professional advisor competencies within the five components of academic advising: conceptual, informational, relational, technological and professional. Each component is briefly described, followed by core competencies identified in the particular component. A narrative description of each component, including main findings, follows.

Discussion of professional competencies

The conceptual knowledge of advising

The conceptual component of advising includes elements related to advising as a construct and practice, as well as theories and models, and outlines how advising forms part of the organisational structure (NACADA, 2017c; UFS, 2018; Khanye, 2024).

Advisors form part of the organisational strategy and should be familiar with the institutional vision, mission, objectives, and operational plans. In addition, universities must establish which institutional advising model best integrates academic advisors into the student support network and higher education system (NACADA, 2017c; McClellan, 2007) and support the organisational strategy. Furthermore, advisors should be familiar with the history and concept of advising, its elements, and its core competencies (NACADA, 2017a; UFS, 2018). Theories, approaches, models, and practices that form the foundation of the advising profession encompass advising. In the South African context, advisors must understand the challenges faced by students, including developmental and financial barriers (McClellan, 2007; UFS, 2018; DHET, 2016; De Klerk et al., 2024), and be familiar with relevant studies and reports, such as data on student engagement and higher education analyses.

Additionally, South African advisors must create equitable and inclusive environments for students from various cultures, languages, genders, races, sexual orientations, ethnicities, physical and mental capacities, and socio-economic backgrounds (NACADA, 2017b; DHET, 2016).

Prominent in this framework, is the UFS advisors' developmental approach to academic advising. Even faculty advisors referred to the advising relationship as "close to coaching" and indicated that advising interactions are about forming a trusting relationship focused on student success.

The informational component

The informational component reflects information that advisors should be aware of, both internal and external to the institution, and information that contextualises their advising role, such as student needs (NACADA, 2017c; UFS, 2018).

First, advisors should be competent in developing and maintaining an institutional support network for students as key role players in promoting student success (McGill et al., 2020). This often requires the competencies in relationship building, negotiation, and marketing skills, as well as networking among advisors.

In addition, academic advisors should be able to identify which key stakeholders will form part of the advising network and support strategic objectives for advising at the institution (DHET, 2016; Educor, 2022; De Klerk et al., 2024).

Other important aspects mentioned in the framework include the rules, regulations, and policies of the university and the faculties in which the advisors operate (NACADA, 2017c; Educor, 2022). These aspects were also confirmed by advisors in the job analysis as crucial; they comprise the informational elements most frequently mentioned during the interviews. Alongside the most important aspects are the admission requirements, curriculum, and knowledge of the field in which the advisor is advising. Academic advisors further identified curriculum and educational planning as the most critical functions of academic advisors at the UFS. Advisors who held various roles in different faculties shared this view. Although faculty advisors only emphasized curriculum planning as a job function, both faculty advisors and advisors in the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) indicated the importance of understanding the curriculum and related academic requirements.

An interesting element which has emerged, is how different sources view being academically qualified for advising. While the literature on advising and advisors generally agrees that advisors should hold an appropriate bachelor's degree, the job analysis identified a social sciences or psychology background as particularly helpful for academic advisors. Interestingly, the advisors mentioned the social sciences 22 times during the job analysis as potentially beneficial for advisors. This argument is rooted in academic advising, which aims to help students gain social and academic capital, connect them to support services, and provide holistic support. Advising, therefore, requires skills such as empathy, active listening, effective questioning, and rapport building, which are developed in these professions.

Moreover, advisors should be knowledgeable about providing career advice. Career advisors should be aware of career-related resources, including career websites, funding opportunities, financial aid, and educational opportunities (DHET, 2016). UFS advisors mentioned knowledge of career advising but did not elaborate during the job analysis. Further exploring how this practice fits into the advising structure may be beneficial. Schoeman (2021) agrees that career advising is not always formalised and consciously integrated into assisting students.

Advisors should understand their students' contexts and unique characteristics, needs, and experiences (NACADA, 2017b). These include physical and mental capacity, as well as

understanding the role that disabilities play in the academic journey of students (DHET, 2016).

During the job analysis, UFS advisors expressed their belief that academic advisors should also know student success skills and be able to transfer them to students. With 70% of South African students being the first in their families to enter university, students require guidance and support in navigating higher education successfully (Universities South Africa (USAF), 2018, as cited in Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Therefore, competence in developing and transferring skills will become an increasingly required competency for advisors in the South African context; this competency framework has been uniquely added to address this need.

Service orientation is another competency relevant to the South African context and the UFS. UFS advisors must possess a strong service orientation to address the everyday challenges faced by UFS students as basic needs are often at the core of advising. Student engagement data can help inform this understanding and encourage strong collaboration with student support units, such as counselling, food schemes, and social work services. One faculty advisor mentioned: *“Whatever they do, they must know that it’s not for [ourselves]; it is giving back to the community and society whatever you have gained from the organisation.”* This comment reflects the spirit of *ubuntu*, which means ‘humanity to others’ and true to South Africa.

Relational component

The relational component includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to plan and conduct advising sessions effectively, build and maintain trusting relationships with advisees, and act ethically (NACADA, 2017b; UFS, 2018). The competency mentioned most during the interviews was problem-solving, with 39 references. Advisors alluded to how important it is for advisors to *“be able to assist students with finding solutions to their problems”* and *“adapting and dealing with problems themselves”*. A manager in advising stressed this by commenting, *“Advisors are literally solving problem after problem and trying to reason with the student.”* The National Framework for Career Development also refers to this skill (DHET, 2016). Furthermore, advisors need to be able to plan and conduct practical advising sessions. This includes scheduling and planning sessions. It also includes applying advising models (NACADA, 2017c; Educor, 2022), record-keeping, and managing data during advising interactions.

Aside from planning, including an advising philosophy in the competency framework remains debatable, although the findings showed agreement on its importance. Although NACADA (2017b) identifies this competency as a relational element, the UFS (2018) has included it in its professional advising component.

Notably, a significant portion of advising involves providing information and communicating with students and university stakeholders. Therefore, the Career Development Framework (DHET, 2016) indicates that advisors should be aware of ethical issues related to telephonic, email, and chatroom communication, as well as advice, guidance, information sharing, and matters concerning career information for individuals and groups. Regarding this, communication skills encompassing both written and oral,

were mentioned 28 times by the UFS advisors. Advisors often communicate with various stakeholders, including students, parents, departmental staff, and external stakeholders. One advising manager referred to this skill as being “critical” to academic advising. Additionally, delivering bad news is a specific aspect of advising that requires advanced communication skills (Hammond, 2017).

Another measurable attribute linked to dealing with sensitive information is assertiveness, which was also mentioned by faculty and many general academic advisors. One faculty manager commented: “*Sometimes you have to be firm, but not rude,*” while another indicated that you need to be “*firm in whatever decision [you] take.*” These comments suggest that advisors need to communicate in an authoritative yet sensitive manner (Aucamp, 2022).

Building trusting relationships is a key component of the foundation for advising interactions in line with the developmental approach (Masengeni, 2019). A manager emphasized that “*critical skills should be used to build relationships.*” Notably, the literature emphasizes specific listening, questioning, summarising, rapport-building, and referral skills. However, advisors highlighted the importance of attitudes such as patience, tolerance, empathy, caring for students, a willingness to go the extra mile, and unconditional positive outlook. Therefore, academic advisors’ attitudes and values are regarded as essential to individuals in the advising profession.

The competency frameworks studied highlighted essential values, such as trustworthiness, respect, teamwork and collaboration, assertiveness, compassion, and empathy. The job analysis highlighted the importance of work ethic, patience, and tolerance. Some values (such as trustworthiness and respect) can be related to ethical principles in any helping profession. This might indicate the importance of the ethical principles of teaching advisors and how to apply them in their advising. The literature alludes to the extent of moral codes and the conduct of academic advisors. This aspect is discussed under the professional advising component in this framework, as ethics form part of professional practice.

Technological component

The technological advising component includes the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to advise students effectively using the technological tools available (McClellan, 2007; UFS, 2018). The results did not deliver as many elements in the technological component as in the first three mentioned. However, data management and analytics are becoming increasingly crucial as proactive and intrusive advising approaches become more prevalent. Thus, technology is foregrounded in advising to help address academic challenges during the massification in South African institutions of higher learning. To implement these approaches, academic advisors will need both an understanding of how university systems and data management work and a technological aptitude to implement proactive, intrusive interventions (McClellan, 2007).

Nevertheless, the studied frameworks identified that advisors must be innovative and clearly understand informal and formal institutional systems. Advisors agreed and added that basic computer literacy is needed to manage these systems effectively. Interestingly, innovation is mentioned as an essential value at the UFS (2016) and advisors who want to

develop in line with the latest advising trends will need to display this value in their everyday work. As South African higher education institutions increasingly adopt proactive and data-driven advising models, the technological component will become central to effective advising practices.

The professional component

The professional advising component refers to the competencies that allow advisors to maintain excellence in their advising practice and help them specialise and grow in their profession (UFS, 2018).

Two professional competencies identified by advisors that are not currently addressed in any existing advising framework, include research and project management skills. One advising manager emphasized: *“[w]ith the developments of the field, research and scholarly work [are] also critical within this field.”* With advising being situated in an institution of higher learning and as a scholarly practice still evolving in South Africa, it makes sense that these skills are also needed for academic advisors in the South African context. In addition, advising is also a data-driven practice and with proactive-intrusive advising approaches becoming more prominent, advisors will follow a research-based approach to advising initiatives.

Furthermore, academic advisors must follow an evidence-based approach to manage projects that promote student success. This is where basic project management skills are required. One advisor stated that the advising role involves *“implementing, monitoring and evaluating advising projects and initiatives,”* and that it is about *“developing, managing and evaluating projects to assist students in succeeding.”*

Additionally, the professionalism of academic advisors stands out as a notable competency. The data referred to professionalism in comments such as *“you need to keep your professional distance”*; *“you should have self-respect”*, and *“you need to honour your appointment with your student.”* In addition, understanding professional scope, ethical standards, and professional behaviours is typically associated with professional careers.

Competencies associated with advising leadership

Leadership was mentioned once as a necessary skill for advising. Therefore, it is essential to identify whether this competency applies to all academic advisors or only to advisors in leadership positions. An advising manager indicated that an element of leadership is needed for all advisors, as an advisor *“[is] always at the head of everything.”* In addition to leadership, specific codes identified in the data can also be associated with managerial positions in advising. Competencies linked to advising managers may include reasoning skills, conflict management, strategic thinking, and strategic planning. Future studies should clarify the distinctions between leadership competencies required of all advisors and those specific to managerial roles.

Abilities related to academic advising competencies

An interesting addition to this framework was the abilities associated with good advising. Through inductive data analysis, it became apparent that some of the codes identified by

advisors were not only associated with skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours as viewed as competencies in this study, but they also form part of specific abilities such as emotional intelligence, language ability, and reasoning ability. Psychometric tests can measure abilities and the identification of abilities related to a particular position can help recruit, select, and place individuals who display a high job fit. The abilities identified in this study are discussed below.

Emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the capacity to perceive, understand, regulate, and manage one's own emotions, as well as to recognise and respond appropriately to the feelings of others (Goleman, 1995). In academic advising, EI supports the development of empathetic relationships, enhances communication, and enables advisors to respond effectively to students' emotional and developmental needs.

The literature review, frameworks, and interviews in this study emphasized the importance of advisors displaying empathy and caring for students. Additionally, the results have shown that advisors must establish rapport, manage relationships with students, parents, and colleagues, build a student support network, and communicate effectively in both written and oral formats. Maintaining relationships and understanding others is an essential element of EI. Advisors further identified elements of personal competence such as self-awareness, self-control, initiative, and optimism as crucial competencies for effective advising. In addition, social competencies, such as awareness of others, empathy, service orientation, conflict management, teamwork, and collaboration, were also identified in the results as crucial for advising. Manz (2020) suggests that very little research has been conducted on EI and academic advising; however, EI is essential for building relationships that form the foundation of good advising, and best practices in advising require a significant aptitude for emotional intelligence (Haley, 2016).

Language ability. There is consensus among sources that academic advisors should possess good communication skills and communicate effectively in both verbal and non-verbal forms (DHET, 2016; Haley, 2016; Keller, 2016). Language ability in education is often defined as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Linde, 2015). The study results addressed most of these aspects, including multilingualism, as critical for academic advisors. In-basket tests that assess proficiency in language can aid in advisor recruitment and selection, as well as inform professional development plans.

Reasoning ability. With problem-solving identified and highlighted as the most critical skill for advising and conflict management, it seems that reasoning ability is another key ability for academic advisors. A deeper investigation into the prevalence of these three abilities in South African advisors could help unfold how psychometric tests related to these abilities can enhance the recruitment and selection of academic advisors in the South African milieu.

The comprehensive competency framework presented in Annexure A and discussed in this article captures a broad spectrum of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and abilities essential for professional academic advising at the UFS. The overlap of competencies across components underscores the interconnected nature of advising practice. Further research is recommended to refine these competencies and explore their applicability in broader South African contexts.

Concluding remarks

Academic advising is a rapidly evolving and emerging professional field in South Africa. Recent national initiatives to establish advising networks and promote professionalisation have highlighted the need to identify the core competencies required for effective advising practice. These initiatives focus on strengthening institutional capacity by recruiting, training, and developing professional academic advisors equipped to respond to the unique challenges of the South African higher education context.

This study contributes to these national efforts by proposing a contextually grounded competency framework for academic advisors at the UFS (see Annexure A). The framework reflects a broad and developmental understanding of the competencies required for professional academic advising, including knowledge, skills, values, and behaviours, which could be relevant to advising in other local higher education settings with adaptations to their specific contexts.

While this framework is based on research conducted at the University of the Free State, it offers a valuable reference point for other institutions seeking to formalise or enhance their advising practices. As a starting point, it can inform future efforts related to advisor recruitment, selection (De Klerk et al., 2024), and professional development (Aucamp, 2022).

The study acknowledges its limitations in scope and transferability. Nonetheless, it encourages the development of additional institution-based studies to support the creation of a national competency framework. Such a framework would help professionalise academic advising across the sector and contribute to more standardised, developmental and effective advising practices in South African higher education.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of the Free State. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, with identifying details removed. All data were stored securely on a password-protected device.

Potential conflict of interests

The author has no conflict of interests to disclose.

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ANNEXURE A

Competency framework for academic advisors at the UFS

CONCEPTUAL COMPONENT

The conceptual component of advising includes elements related to advising as a construct and practice, as well as theories and models related to the practice. Further, it outlines how advising forms part of the organisational structure.

Competencies associated with the conceptual component:

AA concept: the history and role of academic advising; advising as a concept (definition, elements, core values of advising); student learning outcomes.

Advising strategy: institutional vision, mission and strategy; institutional definition for advising; institutional advising vision, mission, and strategy; institutional advising models; institutional student support network.

Theoretical framework: theories related to advising, approaches, and models; theoretical frameworks associated with advising practices.

Higher education context: knowledge of higher education; advising curriculum; student context and challenges; student special needs; higher education experience, experience working with students.

INFORMATIONAL COMPONENT

The informational component of advising outlines the information crucial for advising both internal and external to the organisation. It further includes information about the student context and needs.

Competencies associated with the informational component:

Information internal to the institution

Institutional strategy: operational plans and objectives for the institution; vision, mission, values, the culture of the institution; the identification of key institutional stakeholders; key stakeholder-networks; formal and informal systems of the institution.

Academic requirements and options: (admission requirements, application procedures, access and probation programmes, curriculum, programmes, degree choices, progression, credit load, re-admission, and exclusion); policies, rules, procedures, and regulations; information regarding transfers and degree changes; information and processes related to student registration.

Institutional context: campus structures; governance structures; associations; organisation and campus life; environmental factors; institutional advising cycle; student engagement data.

Information external to the institution

Laws and governance: legal acts relevant to advising (i.e. constitution, white paper; legal guidelines for academic advising practice, privacy regulations, confidentiality, social justice, human rights, employment legislation, education, and training).

Information on advising practice: career development information (career-related information, financial aid, postgraduate information, post-school opportunities, writing centres, national certificates, rewrite centre schedules, labour market information, skills in high demand, salary scales, national qualifications framework, career pathing information, learnerships, internships, volunteer opportunities, trends, and occupational shifts); curriculum and educational planning; academic monitoring of students.

Formal training: relevant academic qualification (bachelor's degree, social sciences, higher education); tertiary qualification; training in a helping profession such as psychology or social work; AAPD.

Information that provides context to the advising role of the UFS academic advisors

Student population context: study success and support; student population theory; gaps and challenges in student learning; student characteristics, needs, and experiences; information on inclusivity (gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, physical and mental capacity); disability support.

Student background and challenges: students' socio-economic background; understanding cultural awareness; student background; theories that inform understanding of the student population; student needs in terms of skills development.

Student success skills: successful skills for university; knowledge of transferring success skills (i.e. time management, financial management, coping with stress, content learning; study skills; examination preparation).

RELATIONAL COMPONENT

The relational component includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to plan and conduct advising sessions effectively, build and maintain trusting relationships with advisees and act ethically.

Competencies associated with the relational component:

Planning and conducting advising sessions: planning advising sessions and interventions; administrative and planning skills; record-keeping; report-writing.

Relational skills: relationships with internal and external stakeholders; communication and information sharing; problem-solving; active listening; questioning and summarising; displaying cultural awareness; conflict management; interpersonal skills; networking; teaching and facilitation; presentation and facilitation; rapport building; referral skills.

Personal attributes: compassion, empathy, confidentiality; assertiveness; developing students; unconditional positive regard; teamwork and collaboration; perception of student moods, attitudes, and behaviours; cultural awareness; caring for students; innovation.

Advisor values: quality of service; trustworthiness; commitment to institution and employees; encouraging natural trust and open communication; community of practice;

collaboration; service orientation, patience, and tolerance; relatedness; optimism; inclusivity.

Advising practice: developing advising philosophy; career advising (application of career advising models, educational and career planning, goal setting); coaching (developmental advising approach); skills development to achieve success (time-management, financial management, coping with stress, dealing with content, learning, study skills, exam preparation).

Ethical standards: ethical issues regarding telephonic, email, and chatroom communication, advice, guidance, and information sharing, sharing of career information with groups and individuals; scope of practice; conflict of interest.

TECHNOLOGICAL COMPONENT

The technological advising component includes skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to advise students effectively using the available technological tools.

Competencies associated with the technological component:

Advising systems: to develop new and improved processes, methods, systems, solutions, procedures, and services. To achieve this, advisors should be familiar with both formal and informal systems (e.g. PeopleSoft, Blackboard, HEDA).

Technical abilities: computer literacy, data analytics, student tracking; caseload management; data management; and innovation.

PROFESSIONAL COMPONENT

The professional component of advising refers to the competencies that allow advisors to maintain excellence in advising, specialise in advising, and grow professionally.

Competencies associated with the professional component:

Professional skills: advanced problem-solving skills; research skills; conflict management; persuasion; reporting skills; strategic thinking and planning; leadership skills; ethical decision-making; project management; formal advising training; resilience; stress management and self-care.

Professional knowledge: advising, training, and development; knowledge of the field; understanding the boundaries of the scope of practice; ethical code of conduct; continuous learning; decision-making theories and models.

Professional attributes and values: self-awareness; self-regulation; awareness of others; resilience; professionalism; quality of service; excellence; and a strong work ethic.

Abilities: reasoning ability (analytical skills); emotional intelligence; language ability; critical thinking.

Managerial skills for advising: reasoning skills; conflict management; strategic thinking; planning; leadership skills; assessment and evaluation; as well as project management.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing advising pedagogy through self-study: An innovative approach to professional growth

Kuvandudza dzidziso yekurayira vadzidzi vemayunivhesiti
kuburikidza nekuzviwongorora pabasa: Zhiratsva yekukudza
unyanzvi bwomurayiri

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explored the potential of self-study methodology in facilitating academic advisor professional growth. Despite its extensive use in teacher education, to our knowledge, self-study is yet to be applied to academic advising. An academic advisor documented her advising experiences over a twelve-year period. Guided by the tenets of self-study, the academic advisor in collaboration with a critical friend, critically examined her experiences. The self-study methodology created space for intentional and systematic examination of the advisor's practice, a process that has led to the emergence of innovations in her practice. These innovations included deeper engagement with students' curricular structures, their sociocultural contexts, and individual learning habits. The advisor's practice evolved from a generic, one-size-fits-all model to a more contextualised and relational pedagogy grounded in pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). This study highlights how intentional reflection on disorienting dilemmas and practitioner knowledge enabled the academic advisor to personalise support and foster student agency. It further illustrates the value of relationality in advising, where learning is co-constructed rather than prescribed. Ultimately, this research confirms the transformative potential of self-study in academic advisor professional development.

KEYWORDS

Academic advising innovations, advising pedagogy, professional growth, self-study

PFUPISO YETSVAKURUDZO

Mutsvakurudzo iyi, takawongorora mikana iripo mukusimudzira kukura kwehunyanzvi hwemurayiri wevadzidzi vamayunivhesiti (academic advisor) kungagoneswa nekushandisa

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nzira yekuzviwongorora pabasa (selfstudy). Kunyangwe nzira iyi ichizivikanwa uye ichishandiswa zvakananya mudzidzo yevadzidzisi (teacher education), sekuziva kwedu, haisati yashandiswa zvakaipamaitiro okurayira vadzidzivemayunivhesiti. Mutsvakurudzo ino, murayiri mumwe chete wakanyora nhorowondo yezviitiko zvekurayira vadzidzi veyunivesiti kwaakayitamukati memakore gumi nemaviri. Achishanda pamwe chete nasahwira unokurudzira kuwongorora kwakadzama (critical friend), sezvinotarisirwa kana munhu achiwongorora mashandiro ake, murayiri uyu wakawongorora zviitiko izvi. Kuzviwongorora kwemurayiri uyu kwakapa mukana wekutarisisa marayiri aayiita vadzidzi vake nenzira ine chinangwa uye yakarongeka. Izvi zvakanbudisa mawonero nemayitiro matsva mukuraira kwake. Mayitiro matsva awa ayisanganisira kuwedzera kuda kuhwisira marongerwo edzidzo dzevadzidzi, magariro netsika dzavo (sociocultural contexts), pamwe chete nezvira dzokudzidza kumwe noumwe wavo. Nokuda kwemawonero matsva awa, kurayira kwake kwakashanduka kubva pakupa vadzidzi rayiro yakafanana, kuenda kurayiro inofanirana nemudzidzi umwe noumwe, uye inovaka vukama pakati pomurayiri nomudzidzi. Kurayira kutsa uku kwayitsigirwa neruzivo rwemadzidzisirwo ezvidzidzo runonzi pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Tsvakurudzo iyi inoratidza kuti kuwongorora zvakanadza zviyitiko zvaayisanganana nazvo mukuita basa zuva nezuva nenzira yakarongeka kwakanabatsira murayiri uyu kugadzirira rayiro yaanopa vadzidzi uye kusimbisa kuzvimirira kwavo mukudzidza. Zvakare, tsvakurudzo iyi inoratidza kukosha kwekurayira kunotanga nokuvaka vukama pakati pemurayiri nemudzidzi, uye kunobuda mukutaurirana kwavo vari vaviri, kwete kurayira kunogobva kumurairi. Pakupedzisira, tsvakurudzo iyi inobudisa simba rokushandura nokusimudzira unyanzvi hwemurayiri riri mukuzviwongorora pabasa.

MANZWI MAKURU

Vandudzo yekurayirwa kwevadzidzi vemayunivhesiti, dzidziso yekurayira, kukura kwehunyanzvi hwekurayira, kuzviwongorora pabasa (selfstudy)

Introduction

This article reports on a self-study in which I, Constance, reflect on my twelve-year journey as an academic development practitioner for undergraduate students. In keeping with the self-study methodology, I use the first-person singular (I) to relate my experiences and, Eunice, (second author) is a critical friend. Together, we highlight the innovations that came up through collective critical reflections (Jacoby, 2024; Mezirow, 2009) on my day-to-day encounters with students during learning skills development sessions. I was first appointed as a Learning Skills Lecturer in 2013. My role involved teaching learning skills through both class-based sessions, small group, and individual consultations. In 2014, I was re-appointed with a new title of At-Risk Coordinator. The new appointment was part of the university's plan to establish and develop teaching and learning centres that would track and support first year students, specifically, those who would have been identified as at academic risk. Further, in 2018, the title of At-Risk Coordinator was changed to Academic Advisor, which is the term found in the literature to refer to student academic development practitioners

(e.g. De Klerk, 2021; Moosa, 2021). As can be seen, my role underwent three title changes in five years. However, in all the three roles, I provided the same student academic development service which has now run a course of twelve years.

Larson et al. (2018) define academic advising as applying “knowledge of the field to empower students and campus and community members to successfully navigate academic interactions related to higher education” (Larson et al., 2018, p. 86). Academic advisors help students navigate their curriculum and the requirements of their institutions. In the words of Wei (2022, p. 53), academic advisors help students “understand the meaning and value of education, the logic of the curriculum and their intellectual identities.”

Both local (e.g. De Klerk, 2021; Moodley & Singh, 2015; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021) and international literature (e.g. Drake, 2011; McGill, 2021), suggest that academic advising plays a critical role in student retention, satisfaction, and success. Even in South Africa, academic advising is not just another university function, but a social justice imperative (Moosa, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). This is because successful completion by students, especially by those from low socio-economic backgrounds, is not just individual success but a success of the collective that changes the socio-economic circumstances and prospects of families and communities (Kilfoil, 2021). This is more so for health science students from rural communities, as successful completion by these students, from a social responsibility perspective, has the potential to add to the much-needed rural-based healthcare workforce (Mapukata, 2022).

As indicated earlier, the literature shows that the important role played by academic advising in improving the success chances of higher education students is already known both in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. What needs further exploration, is how academic advisors can track their own growth and development given their third-space positions (Whitchurch, 2015), which may not yet be in the regular professional growth opportunities and frameworks for universities. In this article, we explore the value of the self-study methodology as an approach to track an academic advisor’s professional growth, with a view to develop transformative academic advising practices. While self-study is widely used and promoted, and its value in education and teacher education is well known (see Samaras, 2011; Nyamupangedengu, 2024), to our knowledge, this method of inquiry is yet to be used in academic advising in South Africa. Our study, therefore, adds to the emerging South African literature on academic advising and will specifically contribute towards context-based advising approaches. The questions that guided this study are:

1. What is the potential of self-study methodology in facilitating academic advisor professional growth?
2. What innovations were brought about by critical reflections on my academic advising practices?

The methodology of self-study

Self-study is a study of the self by the self (Samaras, 2011). It is a form of practitioner research in which the researcher is also the subject of investigation; it involves the practitioner’s personal stories drawn from their own experiences often stemming from the challenges, frustrations, and dilemmas encountered in their respective fields

(Nyamupangedengu, 2024). In this study, Constance was the practitioner who reflected on her academic advising practices. She was the researcher and the participant, and Eunice was her critical friend as indicated earlier. This mutual critical friendship began as far back as 2012 when both of us were doctoral students and has continued to the present day (see Nyamupangedengu & Khupe, 2021). Initially, it was focused on Eunice's practice (as a self-study scholar). Then Constance also joined into the habit of journaling her experiences and holding ad hoc conversations about her academic advising experiences (including fears, doubts, dilemmas, dissatisfactions, puzzles and excitements, learnings and successes).

This practice was initially not intended for research, but to develop her professional practice. It was only after a few publications based on Eunice's practice (see Nyamupangedengu & Khupe, 2018, 2021, 2022, 2024) that Constance suggested applying the self-study methodology to her practice of academic advising; her many journal entries and reflections became the foundational data for this article. The study adhered to the ethical standards of self-study by critically reflecting on Constance's academic advising with a critical friend and interacting with the relevant literature (LaBoskey, 2004). According to LaBoskey (2004, p. 821), the interactive process "guards against the inevitable limitations of individual interpretation so affected by personal history." In addition, Constance's narratives provided exemplars of her academic advising practices. These exemplars are presented as exhibits to allow members of the academic advising and research community to judge the trustworthiness and validity of the observations and interpretations for themselves (LaBoskey, 2004).

In self-study, a critical friend is someone who can listen to a researcher's account of practice and critique the researcher's thinking and practices behind that account. Samaras (2011) describes critical friends as trusted peers who play a vital role in mediating, challenging, and supporting the development of new insights. Inviting colleagues to act as critical friends and engage in reflective dialogue about one's practice is central to the self-study methodology and ethical considerations as indicated above. This collaborative engagement not only broadens the scope of individual reflection but also mitigates personal bias and enriches professional growth through shared perspectives (Nyamupangedengu, 2024). Critical friendship in self-study requires extended time investment, which in our case was enabled by a relationship that extended beyond the limits of our professional lives. What began as a professional relationship became a social relationship, and that also created and sustained the dimension of mutual trust.

Another tenet of the self-study approach is that it draws from other methodologies to gain broader perspectives. In this study, therefore, we drew from narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Chand, 2024) and reflective practice. Narrative is a mode of inquiry that involves an intentional reflective process, allowing individuals to tell the story of their experiences through reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Constance developed narratives composed of memories, experiences, knowledge, and reflections of her 12-year journey of academic advising. Through narrative, she actively constructed what Johnson and Golombek (2002) referred to as life stories. Below we describe the steps that we took to generate the narratives.

Generation of narratives

Generation of narratives involved reading Constance's journal entries and reflecting on them. We read through 23 journal entries and categorised them according to their content. We identified four broad categories, namely: (1) the necessity of teaching students how to learn, (2) novice practice, (3) planning a new course of action, and (4) what's in a name? Guided by these journal entry categories, Constance wrote the narratives. In addition to these categories, our reflections illuminated the subtle presence of components of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), a construct that was introduced by Shulman (1986) to describe domains of teacher professional knowledge (Shulman, 1987). The domains are content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of students, knowledge of context, knowledge of the curriculum, and knowledge of assessment (Rollnick et al., 2008; Carlson et al., 2019). Rollnick et al. (2008) and Carlson et al. (2019) explain these domains in detail.

Data analysis

Data for this study were examined through narrative analysis, a qualitative method that focuses on the individual as a unit of analysis (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). We read through Constance's narratives, exploring how she made meaning of her experiences rather than merely focusing on the description of the text. We wanted to understand and reflect on the meanings conveyed by the content of her narratives in the context of Constance's sociocultural and historical background. During the critical reflections, we would document insights and lessons learnt based on the meanings conveyed in the content. The idea was to track aspects of Constance's professional development that were enhanced by the tenets of the self-study methodology. We present these narratives below. While the narratives may sound informal, they are to be read as the participant's reflection on her experiences.

Narrative 1: Do university students need to be taught how to learn?

I started as a Learning Skills Lecturer in 2013. At the time of this appointment, I boasted twenty-four years of high school teaching and teacher education. Similar to my previous experiences in teacher education, I did not receive any training specific to this new role. However, unlike in teacher education where I had a professional learning community (Brodie, 2016), at that time, my faculty was the only one that supported students in this way. Therefore, I did not have a community through which to benchmark my practice, or more realistically, to share my ignorance, challenges, and fears. I had no background in health sciences. An added dilemma was that I was not even entirely convinced that university students needed to be *taught* how to learn (which I thought at that time was my role – teaching students to learn) when they had already reached university level. Besides, health sciences students are generally known to be the 'smart' ones; so, I assumed they had to be able to manage on their own. However, since I needed a job and I had gotten one, I resolved to – as it were – dance to its tune. Therefore, to plan my sessions, I searched the World Wide Web for ideas about the learning skills that undergraduate students would potentially require. I was surprised by the results of my

online searches. Some universities had whole web pages dedicated to student support, covering aspects such as study skills, time management, preparation for examinations, and other life skills. I even ended up stumbling upon books on the subject.

Insights: Initially, Constance had no knowledge of content, hence the search for content on the World Wide Web. In addition, her knowledge of the students was based on assumptions.

Lessons learnt: Drawing from this narrative, a learning skills practitioner needs to have the content and student knowledge domains of PCK. The learning skills practitioner's 'community' does not necessarily need to be only physical beings. We can engage with a scholarly community through literature and other online resources.

Narrative 2: Novice practice

My responsibilities involved serving students enrolled in seven degree programmes whose minimum completion times ranged between three and six years. As would be expected, the curricula differed by degree programme and year of study. However, I gave much the same advice to all students who came to me. Apart from those students who presented with psychosocial challenges and whom I referred for therapy, most students indicated that they had difficulties managing their workloads: days were long, there was too much content to learn and too many tasks to do. Many reported rushing through assignments, hardly ever feeling ready for tests and examinations, and being tempted to memorise stuff. I assumed that my students did not know how to study effectively and that they did not use time wisely.

Therefore, my interventions focused on addressing these ills by giving 'how-to' guides on organising study time and studying efficiently. Not once did it occur to me that just being in different degrees or years of study resulted in differences in the micro-contexts, in how students' days were structured, and in the curricula demands placed on them. Moreover, the students came from different schooling and socio-economic backgrounds, all of which could affect how they learn. While some students had the courage to point out what did not apply to them, others just sat through it all, probably out of politeness. And there were also those students who ticked all the right boxes but still felt overwhelmed by their workloads. At that point, not only did I begin to properly appreciate the large number of students who required help, but also my own lack of depth to assist them.

Facing my inadequacy was one thing; admitting it was humbling. I faced the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2009) of either presuming the pride ascribed to me by appointment as a Learning Skills Lecturer, or symbolically falling on my sword, to allow for the transformation of my practice for the benefit of my students. This professional hard place motivated me to seek help. I shared my dilemmas with Eunice, whose work is based on self-study methodology. She reminded me of the importance of what I had already known from my teaching days: that it was not only content knowledge that was important. Knowing my students and their context was just as important in informing the ways of my advising. She reminded me how one size does not fit all. This and ensuing conversations with Eunice triggered a more conscious awareness of what was missing in my practice. I was motivated to explore and try out new approaches; I then started drawing on my knowledge and experience in teacher education.

Insights: This narrative shows that Constance lacked knowledge of students' curriculum and their micro-contexts, as well as pedagogical knowledge. The narrative also shows that Constance began to critically reflect on her practice, a process that revealed shortcomings. Her reaching out to Eunice points to the 'safe space' that critical friendship in self-study creates.

Lessons learnt: This narrative shows how more domains of teacher professional knowledge are critical in informing learning skills practitioners' practice. Learning skills development cannot be facilitated apart from pedagogical content knowledge. The self-study methodology is critical in enhancing individual as well as collective critical reflection and professional learning within a community.

Narrative 3: Planning a new course of action

After being challenged from the discussions with my critical friend, I began to prioritise learning about my students and their different curricula.

(a) Learning about the students' curricula

Following conversations with Eunice, I realised that the opportunities for learning were already present in the faculty, since I was a member of various curriculum committees. I just needed to be more intentional. I therefore leveraged my committee membership to make more collaborative connections with colleagues who taught and/or coordinated different courses. I requested course documents to learn about how the courses were organised, what information was available for students; what the expectations of students were, and what support was available within the teaching departments.

I got a better idea of the curriculum structures for the different degree programmes and for different years of study. I began to appreciate the varying teaching calendars, assessment schedules, as well as clinical requirements from the range of stakeholders who contributed to the total requirements for students. Some first-year classes had courses offered by three other faculties. Students had to adjust to the different ways in which the courses were organised, taught and assessed. I began to look for and tried to make sense of the timetables for different classes to have a sense of the structure of their school days. Most classes had full timetables with hardly any breathers. The collaboration with different teaching colleagues was educative. Apart from having a better understanding of students' workloads, I was now better positioned to understand students' learning-skill strengths and needs. I became informed enough to ensure that I was able to point students to relevant resources and to keep them accountable for their own role in learning.

Insights: In this narrative, we see Constance's intentional quest to learn about and use her knowledge of students, their context, curriculum and assessment in her practice – all of which are PCK domains. In addition, we see her intentionally interacting with colleagues in teaching departments who feed into her role in teaching learning skills.

Lessons learnt: As an Academic Advisor, Constance occupies a strategic position in connecting students to different facets of their curriculum (Darling, 2015; Moosa, 2021; Whitchurch, 2015), thereby actively contributing to their engagement. The academic advisor role requires knowledge of the various PCK domains and, as Tinto (2014) advises, student success cannot be left to chance.

(b) Learning about students – Breaking the ice

Although I could broadly get a sense of who my students were from their biographical data, I felt that the data would not be an adequate basis for understanding how they learnt and the extent of the help that they might need. Understanding who my students were within the teaching and learning space required a bit more strategy than just understanding their curricula. I therefore decided to use the one-on-one sessions to better understand my students' strengths and needs. Below are some of the strategies that I used. These strategies have become part of my repertoire over the years.

I began using the greetings more intentionally to connect with the students rather than simply as a polite gesture. I addressed them by name, in both emails and face-to-face encounters. I even began asking the meanings of their names, what language they spoke at home and outside class. My intention was to have each session be as conversational as possible. The small talk often invited a smile, or even a comment (later) from the student on how comfortable they felt in the session.

Insights: From this narrative, we see Constance applying her growing consciousness of the importance of knowledge of students. The foundational work of initiating conversations through greetings and personalising the session helped her not only to understand the sociocultural dimensions of students but also created a relaxed advising environment for them.

Lesson learnt: We are social, relational beings. Learning skills development should not be a technical exercise but a doubly relational one which connects the students to their sociocultural selves and to the university.

(c) Digging deeper

Only after understanding the student's sociocultural context would I find out what had brought them to me. I would listen to their account and seek any necessary clarifications. I would then follow up on their responses with more probing questions that encouraged students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their behavioural habits (learning, social, health) and what they could do better or differently (see Ndofirepi & Khupe, 2022). By using probing questions and follow-up prompts in my conversations with the students, I realised that I was facilitating students' self-reflection (Ndofirepi & Khupe, 2022). In many cases, I noticed that the students would realise that learning was not just a result of what teachers do, but also how the students themselves prepared for and responded to different learning opportunities.

Through this facilitated self-reflection, students often realised that what they initially described as the challenge they were facing, actually was a symptom of something else (Ndofirepi & Khupe, 2022). For example, feeling overwhelmed by their academic workload could be caused by bad sleeping habits. Unless the sleeping habits were addressed, no amount of study tips would solve the problem. This process helped me to understand students individually in terms of how they perceived their own challenges and how they approached their learning. I was now able to facilitate personalised learning skills development. For both me and the students, the sessions ended up not being about

giving and receiving advice but about illuminating the real causes that hid behind the usual ‘time management’ or ‘study skills’ problems.

Insights: In this narrative, the learning skills sessions transformed from being prescriptive to being a space in which to facilitate reflection.

Lessons learnt: When students understand the underlying causes of their manifesting challenges, they are more likely to be better able to address them effectively. Students can be encouraged to share their study habits during the learning skills session by using probing questions and follow-up prompts. This process creates a space for them to discover strengths in their behavioural habits and areas that require improvement. In this way, students develop action plans. When action plans are informed by the identified strengths and weaknesses, students develop a greater sense of ownership and are more likely to implement those plans and monitor their own progress.

Narrative 4: Learning about my role: What’s in a name?

(a) Learning skills lecturer

At a time when I had no content knowledge for my Learning Skills Lecturer role, I used the title itself to craft phrases for searching for appropriate content, for example “learning skills”, “learning skills for university students”, and “learning skills for higher education”. The results that I got from the search engines were therefore directly linked to my perception of the position in which I was appointed. Additionally, I understood being a “lecturer” to mean that I was more knowledgeable than my students. My perception of that title influenced both the *what* and the *how* of my teaching.

(b) At-risk coordinator

This position was created in line with the University’s aim to strengthen first-year support and retention. My new responsibilities involved the use of the university’s early warning system to track students with identified risk factors and to require their participation in appropriate interventions. From the onset, I resented this title. I did not like the labelling and deficit perspective that it implied. “At risk” is a common description in student success literature and is often defined in terms of low socio-economic characteristics and academic un(der)preparedness; therefore, it leads to low achievement and low persistence (see Bulger & Watson, 2006; Wahl & Falik, 2023). I could not help interpreting the terminology of “early warning systems” (which are only accessible to staff and not to students) to be symbolic of early warnings about natural disasters such as tropical cyclones, where the students represent the cyclone potentially threatening the university community.

(c) Academic advisor

When my university officially adopted the term academic advisor, I was very happy. It could have been the desperate desire to escape from the title of ‘At-risk Coordinator’. Without giving any thought to it, I decided that this was a great title and I readily embraced the change. However, in recent months, and because of my continued reflections, I have experienced a disorienting thought about whether the new title aligns with my practice at all. This title of Academic Advisor, which we adopted from the Global North, does not seem

to fully align with my developing understanding of my role, which is that of *facilitating* rather than *advising*.

Insight: This narrative shows the job titles that Constance had in her twelve years of advising influenced the interpretation of what she was supposed to do until she became fully immersed in reflective practice facilitated through self-study.

Lessons learnt: We should not take job titles at face value. Context matters; therefore, reflective practice through self-study should inform our roles and responsibilities within the job titles.

Learnings for practitioners

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of self-study methodology in advancing academic advising practice. Through sustained critical reflection and collaboration with a critical friend (Samaras, 2011; Nyamupangedengu, 2024), Constance shifted from a generalised, deficit-based approach to a more contextualised, personalised, relational, and student-centred model of academic advising. Eunice's knowledge and use of PCK (Rollnick et al., 2008) during conversations with Constance provided a language and framework that guided the understanding of Constance's professional development from the time that she immersed herself in self-study. For example, in her narratives, Constance started to refer to the importance of knowing students, context, content, curriculum, and pedagogical strategies. Therefore, we contend that PCK can be a useful framework within which to develop academic advising.

Drawing on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Chand, 2024) and reflective practice (Fontaine & Wolfe, 2024), the study revealed how innovations in practice have emerged, not from formal training but from critically engaging with disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 2009), practitioner knowledge (Rollnick et al., 2008), and scholarly resources as professional learning communities.

Eunice witnessed key shifts in Constance's practice, including (but not limited to): recognising the diversity of students' curricular and sociocultural contexts; embedding pedagogical content knowledge into advising; and using one-on-one sessions to facilitate student self-reflection rather than simply delivering advice. These innovations illustrate the potential for professional growth that occurs when practitioners come together in collaborative critical reflection (Lubbe & Botha, 2020). However, such a collaborative critical reflection requires a willingness to be professionally vulnerable as practitioners acknowledge and allow for the interrogation of their knowledge gaps and assumptions, first by their critical friend and then followed by the professional community at large (Cuenca, 2020).

Additionally, the study highlights how job title conventions subtly shape practice and identity. In this study, the titles *Learning Skills Lecturer*, *At-risk Coordinator*, and *Academic Advisor* each carried implicit pedagogical assumptions that influenced Constance's engagement with students and institutional stakeholders. As Hamilton et al. (2025) argue, academic naming practices have pedagogical significance and can signal how institutions view students and how practitioners conceptualise their roles.

In sum, self-study served as a generative methodology to enhance advising pedagogy, aligning it with students' realities and repositioning academic advising as a relational, reflexive, and transformative practice.

Ethics statement

The authors confirm that university ethics requirements were met in the writing of this article.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Advancing the profession of academic advising for impactful practice Ubungcweti bokwelulekwa kwezemfundo ngendlela enomthelela ohlabahlosile

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ABSTRACT

The Academic Advising Professional Development (AAPD) short learning programme is the only intervention that currently contributes to the professionalisation of academic advising in South Africa. To effectively and efficiently support student growth, development, and success, academic advisors need to develop a set of professional skills, knowledge, and behaviours. Only in combining continuous formal and informal professional training, development, and learning opportunities can students and institutions attain success. The AAPD is a contextualised formal training; it has borrowed from international literature and practice to assist academic advisors in acquiring the prerequisite knowledge and skills to develop intentional and responsive academic advising programmes, while refining their own advising values and philosophies. This article builds on and contributes to both international and national work in the field of academic advising as a practice and a profession. Additionally, it draws from Habley's (1995) and McClellan's (2007) conceptualisations of academic advising, which identify five core components that contribute to the professionalisation of advising. The application of these conceptual frameworks to map the content of the AAPD against key findings, has shown that while the AAPD provides a comprehensive introduction to the components of academic advising contextualised for the South African higher education landscape, early career participants still have a disjuncture in their understanding of the components. Therefore, the results of the study demonstrate that the AAPD framework does not only create opportunities to strengthen the existing components, but also reinforces additional components such as career advising, to advance the academic advising profession and practice within the South African context.

KEYWORDS

Academic advising, South Africa, professional development, practice, training

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ISIFINYEZO

Indlela Esezingeni Yokululeka Kwimfundo Ephakeme, i-AAPD, okuwuhlelo lokufunda oluyisikhashana esincane yilona kuphela uhlelokuxalulusa isinginga olukhona, olunegalelo ekusetshenzisweni kochwepheshe beziluleko zezemfundo ephakeme eNingizimu Afrika. Ukweseka ngempumelelo nangenjolozela egcwele ukukhula kwabafundi, ukuthuthuka, kanye nempumelelo, abeluleki bezemfundo badinga ukuthuthukisa isethi yamakhono ochwepheshe, ulwazi, kanye nokuziphatha. Kungaba ngendlela yenhlanganisela yokuqeqeshwa okuqhubekayo okusemthethweni nokungakahleleki, ukuthuthukiswa, namathuba okufunda lapho abafundi nezikhungo zithola impumelelo. I-AAPD iwukuqeqeshwa okusemthethweni okunezimo ezithathelwa ezincwadini zamazwe ngamazwe kanye nezindlela zokusebenza ukuze abeluleki bezemfundo bafunde futhi bathole ulwazi namakhono okuthuthukisa izinhlelo zokweluleka zezemfundo ezihlose futhi nokusiza bona abeluleki ukuthi bacwengisise izindingonqangi zabo zokweluleka nobuyoninco bolwazi. Leli phepha lakhela phezu futhi lihlela neqhaza elingabanjwa kumsebenzi wamazwe ngamazwe kanye kazwelonke emkhakheni wokweluleka kwezemfundo njengomkhuba nomsebenzi. Liphinde ligxile ekucatshangelweni kokwelulekwa kwezemfundo okuvela ku-Habley kanye noMcClellan, okuhlonza izingxenye ezinhlanu ezibalulekile ezifaka isandla ekwenzeni ukweluleka kube nobungcweti. Ngokusebenzisa lezi zinhlelo zomqondo ukuze kudwetshwe okuqukethwe yi-AAPD kuqhathanise nemiphumela esemqoka, kukhombisa ukuthi nakuba i-AAPD inikeza isingeniso esibanzi ezingxenyeni zokwelulekwa kwezemfundo eziqondiswe esimweni semfundo ephakeme yaseNingizimu Afrika, abahlanganyeli bemisebenzi yokuqala basenokuphazamiseka ekuqondeni kwabo lezi zingxenye. Lokhu kukhombisa ukuthi uhlaka olusetshenziswa ku-AAPD luyathembisa ukuqhubekisela phambili umkhuba nomsebenzi, nethuba lokuqinisa izingxenye ezikhona ngaphezu kwezinye, njengokweluleka ngemisebenzi, esebenza endaweni yaseNingizimu Afrika.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA

Ukweluleka kwezemfundo, iNingizimu Afrika, ukuthuthukiswa ngokwezinga eliphakeme, ukuzijwayeza, ukuqeqeshwa

Introduction

The growth of academic advising as a profession in South African higher education is leading to many academic administrative staff joining the profession from other student support and development entities (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). The creation of a common professional identity that can help academic advisors take control of their careers and design a path to personal and professional fulfilment has been identified as a necessary step for personal and professional growth in the field (Justyna, 2016). Ongoing advancements linked to the development of a knowledge base for academic advising, inform both its practice and scholarly identity independent of other fields and professions (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008, p. 44); these efforts have largely been exclusive to the international community. South African higher education practitioners have adopted and adapted academic advising best

practices for over a decade; however, these were very limited within the domain of advancing their professionalisation. While the work of advisors differs from institution to institution, a definite path for professional advancement is proving to be essential for the South African landscape.

Globally, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), an association serving the international academic advising community, drives the professionalisation of the practice as its coordinating body. Informed by the Core Competencies of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2017), and in response to establishing and strengthening the identity of academic advising professionally in South Africa, significant strides have been made in formalising the profession through the development and implementation of the Academic Advising Professional Development (AAPD) short learning programme offered by the UFS. The AAPD contextualises the core competencies of NACADA for the South African landscape in an effort to upskill practitioners as professionals.

In view of the above background, this article aims to reflectively consider whether, and if so, how the AAPD contributes to the profession as a community of practice and to the actual student support practice of academic advising in South Africa.

Academic advising as practice and profession

Academic advising is a student-success practice that provides students with an opportunity to connect and explore their personal academic journey alongside their future life aspirations (Drake, 2011). The global evolution of academic advising traces its existence back to 1877, when the primary focus of advising was to offer students counselling on academic curricula and academic decision-making (Cook, 2009; Rudolph, 1962). The evolution of the university systems and course offerings introduced diversification, which required universities to employ staff whose primary responsibility was to provide academic guidance to students, thereby giving birth to academic advising.

In what Troxel et al. (2021) describe as growth in the discipline and profession, they assert that because the advancements have resulted in the existence of a professional community with identifiable competencies, academic advising is indeed a profession. As the practice of academic advising has been growing in parallel with the demand for structured, evidence-based support, the need for structured professional training, development, and identity is also emerging. Whereas advisors see their work as highly relational and developmental, other student support practitioners and university administrators often believe the work of advisors to be prescriptive and limited (Menke et al., 2020). The effects of these perceptions are broadly explored in recent advising literature as a significant issue for the professionalisation of advising (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Cate & Miller, 2015; Larson et al., 2018; McGill, 2017, 2019; White, 2020).

There is a growing need for academic advisors to support student success within the higher education sector nationally and internationally; however, academic advising currently lacks a consistent occupational career pathway (McGill, 2019). The inconsistency in role definitions and the lack of a universal advising structure complicate structural factors to implement progressive career pathways for primary role advisors (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Larson et al., 2018; McGill, 2019). In response to these challenges, the AAPD was

developed to professionalise academic advising in South Africa, also borrowing from the theory of communities of practice (Roberts, 2006) to define and shape advisor training and professional development.

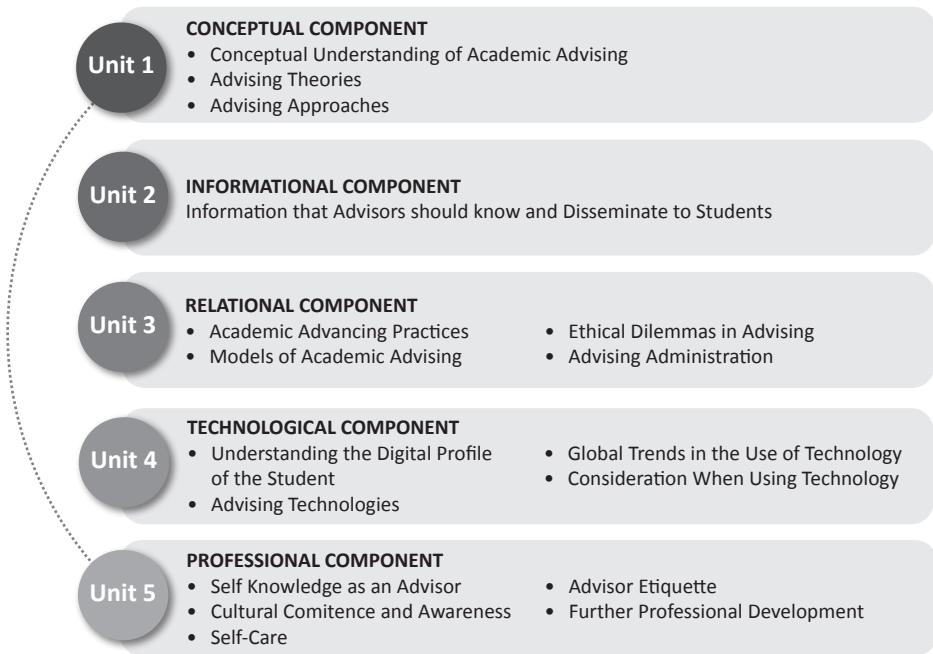
Academic advisor professional development in South Africa

Within the South African context, little is known about professional advisors as academic advising has existed for less than fifteen years. Although academic advising was not part of the higher education policy development in 1997 when the Higher Education Act no. 101 (Republic of South Africa, 1997, p. 2) was drafted, research and practice in several higher education streams, focusing on student success since then, has warranted its existence and integration into our learning and teaching practices. The desire to establish a structured approach to student development has led to the identification of academic advising as a critical pillar within student support provision that offers integrated support in an effort to improve student success (DHET, 2018). While Strydom and Loots (2020) describe academic advising as a high-impact practice as informed by student engagement frameworks in the South African context, little research has been able to prove this practice. De Klerk (2021), however, has found complementing evidence that describes how academic advising is a proven high-impact practice; there is supporting evidence describing how it may aid a decrease in student dropout and inversely increase student retention and success.

Despite the fact that there has been minimal conceptual description and policy guidance as to what student (academic) advising means, the practice has been rapidly developing in South African public higher education institutions in response to the ever-growing need for student support. The most prominent effort to develop contextualised professional academic advisors has been through the development of the AAPD in 2018. Placing great emphasis on the need for qualified staff to carry out the role of academic advisors, Levin et al. (2010) articulate the need for qualified, competent, and caring staff to take on this role. Extending and borrowing from the NACADA core competency model (2017), the AAPD is the first of its kind produced for South African higher education in an effort to formally define the practice of academic advising as a profession.

Figure 1 describes the overview of the five components adapted from the Habley (1995) and McClellan (2007) frameworks that inform the AAPD. Adapted from the Core Competencies Model of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2017), the AAPD distinguishes the information, knowledge concepts, skills, and technology associated with academic advising. The AAPD units are arranged in accordance with the Informational, Conceptual, Relational, Technological, and Personal (ICRTP) framework, which introduces academic advisors professionally to the practice through the training and assessment of these components, which contribute to the advancement of the practice and student success. It further extends and is mapped against the typology of Communities of Practice (CoP), which is a traditional CoP. The CoP affords both experienced student support practitioners and new academic advisors the opportunity to learn and create moments that move them towards full participation in the practice of academic advising (Arthur, 2016).

Figure 1. An overview of the five components (units) comprised in the AAPD



Expanding on the units of the framework, the informational component forms the substance of academic advising; it refers to what formal and informal information academic advisors should know. NACADA (2017) adds that advisors within the informational component should understand the characteristics, needs, and experiences of the majority and the emerging student population.

The conceptual component includes the ideas and theories that advisors need to understand in order to provide responsive support (King, 2000; Menke et al., 2020). Keeling (2014), in describing the conceptual component in the practice of academic advising, emphasizes the notion that advisors who consider themselves as thought leaders and leading professionals when applying this component, work collaboratively in ensuring that students are supported to persist through to graduation.

The relational component refers to how advisors engage with advisees to build a sense of belonging. It includes the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, and abilities associated with good advising. As many would underestimate the power of a relationship, academic advisors advocate its significance in relation to student success. Menke et al. (2020) found in a study that advisors value interpersonal skills, multicultural competence, and an understanding of students and student success mostly as part of their advising roles. This exemplifies how advisors understand and relate to students. In an early description of the relational component in academic advising, Habley (1987) described it as what academic advisors do.

As a fairly new component to the academic advising competencies framework, the technological component refers to the embracing and leveraging of technology in the facilitation of academic advising. With technological advancements in the higher education sector, the effective use of technology is becoming a necessity. According to McClellan (2007), it has become essential for advising professionals to understand the significant role of technology in academic advising as a practice to deliver student support information in an advising session. Although the COVID-19 pandemic might have accelerated the use of technology in academic advising, the technological component requires further strategic development and advancement. Addressing this component will help alleviate the pressures on other components of advising, such as the informational and conceptual aspects.

In the personal (professional) component, academic advisors need to be self-aware as well as have sound self-knowledge in order to be efficient and effective academic advisors for students. Borrowing from what Higginson (2000) terms ‘advisor self-knowledge’, this component is underscored by how the advisor understands their role, knowledge, skills, and competencies to fulfil the requirements of the practice. McGill (2019) suggests and confirms that three key characteristics to professionalise academic advising have emerged from the literature and become critical over the years: (1) scholarship, (2) professional community, and (3) professional development programmes.

The components of the ICRTF framework have been the critical lever driving the advancements of the academic advising practice and profession globally. Research has shown that, using the integration of these components and their application, advisors are able to achieve what academic advising is intended to achieve – student retention as a by-product and academic success (NACADA, 2017). To better understand how the AAPD has contributed to the development of academic advising in the South African context, this study reflects on each advising component and how AAPD-trained advisors have used this to inform their practice.

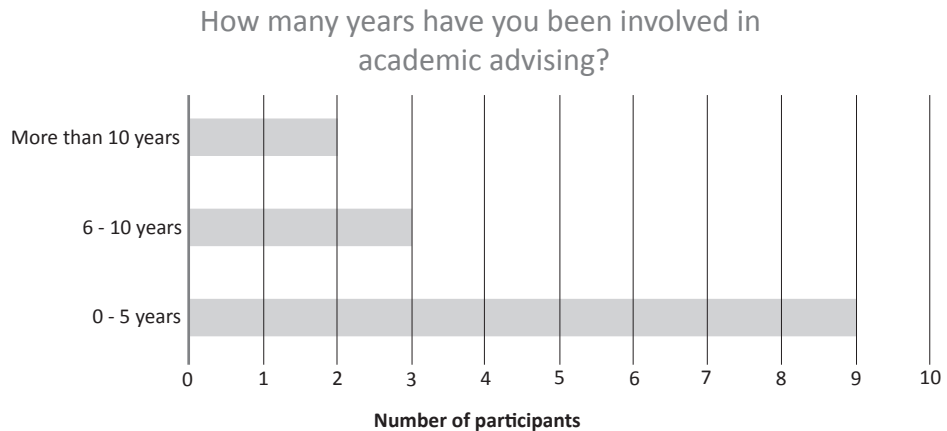
Methodology

A non-probability sample was selected for this study, specifically a purposive sample, as AAPD participants were invited to complete a qualitative survey during the period from 2018 to 2021. These participants reflected on the demands of their professional practice with the core aim of exploring to what extent the AAPD had been supportive of their practice. A total of 153 participants were invited to participate in the study. Questback software was used to design and distribute the survey link. Because the AAPD is offered across the South African higher education sector to 26 universities, the participants were also representative of different institutions. The ICRTF framework as adapted from Habley (1995) and McClellan (2007) was used as the theoretical framework for the study. Thematic analyses by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adopted to allow for easy identification under each component of the significant factors contributing to a deepened reflection and understanding of the state of the practice and profession linked to academic advising.

Results and discussion

The results are from 19 participants, of whom 14 opted to proceed and complete the survey. Although the response rate was quite low (9%), the purpose of the qualitative survey was not to generalise findings, but to gain an overall understanding of how the AAPD is fulfilling its purpose to advance the professional development of its participants. Therefore, the interpretation of the data will take this into account. The 26 South African universities are represented by the following six higher education institutions: the University of the Free State (UFS), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Nelson Mandela University (NMU), the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Pretoria (UP) and Durban University of Technology (DUT); the sample indicates how young the profession and practice is in South Africa. Many of the participants in this survey are considered early-career advisors, with the majority having five years or less exposure and involvement in academic advising. Figure 2 shows the distribution in the number of years that the participants have been involved in academic advising. Linked to this, the participants had limited exposure to other professional associations and groupings, with only five participants holding professional membership of either NACADA or the South African Academic Advising Association (ELETSA).

Figure 2. Years respondents have been involved in academic advising



It is interesting to note that while academic advising dates back to slightly more than a decade in South Africa, five (36%) of the respondents had been involved in academic advising for more than six years (6-10 years and more than 10 years). The majority, nine (64%) of the respondents, were still in the early years of academic advising, with their experience in the profession being five years or less.

Participants were asked to describe their roles as academic advisors. While the roles described by participants differ, most reflect the informational and relational aspects of academic advising with varying emphasis on each aspect. For example, one participant noted that their role as an advisor is mainly about providing individual consultations and workshops to support students in developing their skills and helping them cope: *“Individual consultations and workshops on general academic support; goal setting & motivation;*

adjustment to university life; time management skills; basic study methods skills; test/exam preparation; stress management and; career exploration.”

Others described their informational roles as intertwined with establishing a trusting and supportive relationship with students. For example:

I often engage with students regarding their academic progress, personal challenges, hopes and aspirations.

I assist students to navigate the [university] terrain as far as the registration of correct modules/curriculum is concerned . . . I assist students in monitoring their academic progress as per the applicable rules . . . AA allows me to assess student needs and to refer them to much-needed services available to them at the [university] . . .

My academic advising role in my institution is to provide a supportive role to faculties (specifically the teaching and learning department) and students. Ensuring that I equip my students with academic success strategies that they require to become successful in their academic journey and make it to graduation.

My role consists of offering time management skills to students, looking at their academic journey and making sure that they are on the right path in terms of academia, how they are able to handle the pressures of their academic journey and how they are coping as students and as human beings outside of work.

Only one participant mentioned the conceptual aspect of academic advising as being part of their role, and combined it with the informational aspect of advising:

My role as an academic advisor is to give academic support through academic guidance strategies. It is important to note that, academic support is embedded within a human being's holistic being. Thus, in addition to being an academic advisor, it is also my role to detect whether the academic issues are indeed the problem or challenges. If not, it is my duty as well to know where to further refer the student to get additional support either psychologically or socially.

Only one participant mentioned the technology aspect of advising as being part of their role as an advisor, albeit as just a tool or a platform to engage with students:

I assist students with individual academic advising sessions online/face to face on various topics such as institutional rules, time management, stress management, lifestyle, study strategies, and career decisions. I also teach and academic advising is not my only role.

One participant indicated that “[a]cademic advising is still a project in our institution, I do not have a role yet.”

Nine of the fourteen respondents indicated that their institutions had a formal definition of academic advising at an institutional/faculty and or departmental level. Two indicated that they had a definition in one or more departments and three indicated that they did not have a definition of academic advising either at institutional, faculty, and/or departmental level.

A summative assessment of the overall state of academic advising, according to the responses, is that academic advising is still an evolving profession in South Africa with

varying degrees of advancement among institutions. The responses confirm that institutions are largely committed to the practice as there are formal definitions; however, support for the profession lacks steady growth as role clarifications are not yet as concrete. Findings further draw us closer to what the literature describes as characteristics of a community of practice (CoP). The reflections of participants in this study confirm that the AAPD provides a shared domain of interests that supports agile methods and strategies. There is a commitment in the AAPD to learning and sharing while developing participants' reflective experiences. The practice of academic advising encompasses sustained interactions stemming from the AAPD and beyond into other scholarly environments (Wenger, 2006). To gain a more in-depth and detailed understanding of how the AAPD has contributed to participants' professional identities and development as well as the manner in which they practise academic advising, the discussion of participants' responses is arranged in accordance with the IC RTP framework that forms the conceptual basis for the AAPD. The participants responded to the following sample question: *Which theories inform your academic advising practice and describe how they inform your work as an advisor?* An analysis of specific themes is included under the components of the IC RTP framework to provide the relevant data.

Informational

While the roles are varied among the respondents, unpacking the types of information disseminated, the responses, as illustrated in Figure 3, show that respondents disseminate student support services information, goal setting, study strategies, time management, career information, academic information, academic progression, and curriculum information on a daily basis. Similarly, the same types of information are also disseminated on a weekly basis. It is worth noting that practical information such as goal setting (seven), study strategies (nine), and time management (eight) are the top three types of information disseminated daily by respondents, thus signalling what students' needs are. Interestingly, an almost similar trend is observed between academic information and career information. Information is disseminated daily, weekly, and monthly, showing a link between these two types of information.

Further analysis of the respondents' data also indicates that 'other' information is disseminated as part of their function as academic advisors. Elaborated, this 'other' includes module related information, writing place (writing centre) activities, and any other key messages related to their curriculum or teaching and learning activities; appeals processes, NSFAS propensity requests, and referral for service rendering by other student support stakeholders. In their descriptions of what the 'other' information entails, respondents indicate:

Key important dates in the academic calendar that students should be aware of.

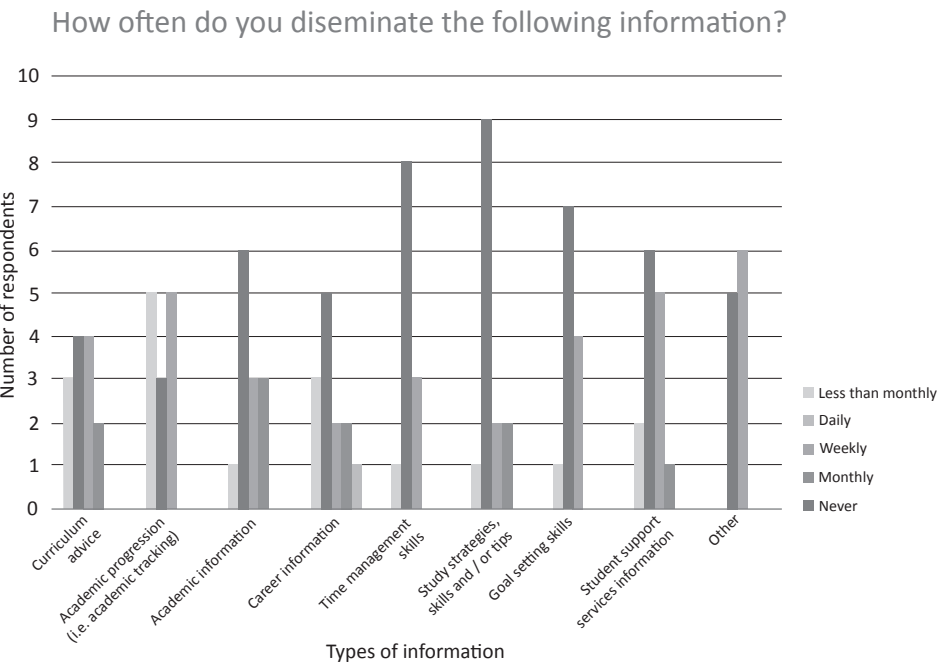
Psychosocial issues that affect [sic] students' academic success.

Dealing with academic stress, living a balanced lifestyle for long-term success, dealing with career indecision, university policies, e.g. pregnant students.

General rules and specific faculty rules they may not be aware of (related to progression and assessments), application and registration information.

Thes data confirm the importance of the informational component in academic advising practice and how broad it can be. It underscores that advisors need to stay informed from an internal (institutional), external (sectoral), and student-needs perspective in order to be responsive to students’ needs.

Figure 3. Distribution of the information disseminated by academic advisors



The informational components provide the core of academic advising as a practice. It is made up of the knowledge that academic advisors ought to acquire to be able to guide students throughout their university journeys. In their responses, participants describe the informational component of the academic advising practice and profession. The overall responses indicate that there is still a fragmented availability of information disseminated in the advising practice. As in the case of students not knowing and understanding what information to request and seek from academic advising. The respondents have a similar understanding.

Most responses suggest that advisors focus on internal environmental information and meeting student needs when providing information. The following responses are supportive of this:

Providing a student with adequate information enables them to make good decisions.

Being able to convey relevant information that supports students' success and decision-making.

Know (and/or know where to find) and be able to impart knowledge, explain processes, policies, etc.

Institutional knowledge advisors must know to guide students.

Resourceful—giving students something tangible to go and implement.

Being able to provide students with information related to the institutional ecology and support networks.

There are, however, some vague responses suggesting that a more in-depth understanding of the informational component is required such as, *"Collecting and disseminating information; being up to date with information."*; and *"Very important to keep up to date with correct information, so that the information we give to students, is accurate and up to date."*

Overall, the qualitative responses demonstrate two broad themes: (i) those with an understanding and (ii) those with a limited understanding of the informational component. This is significant because the informational component is important for the organisation and facilitation of academic advising as a practice and a profession.

Conceptual

Reflecting through a conceptual lens on the description of academic advising in practice, respondents used varying descriptors that illustrated and suggested only a partial understanding of the conceptual component in relation to practice. Showing a clear and aligned understanding, three respondents described the conceptual component, which is the conceptual framework and basis, as follows:

Conceptual and contextual framework informing practice.

Concepts advisors must understand to effectively advise students.

Being able to explain in basic terms what rules/regulations, etc. mean in relation to a student's studies.

Other descriptions used by respondents to explain the conceptual component suggest that for these participants, there is still a basic understanding of the conceptual component:

Understanding what academic advising entails.

Understand how academic advising fits in [sic] my institution as well as in [sic] the higher education environment.

Although the responses and prominent themes reflect that most of the respondents are still in the early stages of understanding and unpacking the context and concepts of academic advising, the AAPD has provided a learning opportunity which extends into crafting meaning-making. According to the literature, a thorough understanding of the conceptual component means that advisors understand, value, and have the skills to act upon the concepts affecting students' needs and success through an advising lens.

Relational

In an analysis of participants' responses regarding their understanding and interpretation of the relational component and how it is understood in their profession and practice, two themes have emerged: (i) interpersonal skills and (ii) practicality. Ten of the fourteen responses support participants' understanding of the relational component as being linked to interpersonal skills (Menke et al., 2020). The following are example of such responses:

Understanding the interrelatedness of people, processes, success, failure etc.

[. . .] requires a connection between more than 1 person.

Building strong supportive relationships with students.

Very important to establish good relations with students. To get them to trust you and open up to you.

[. . .] being able to interact with students on a [sic] individual or group platform to help them see they are not alone in their academic journey.

Relating to students, stakeholders, and other support structures.

The above supports Heikkila and McGill's (2015) proposal that the relational component in a developmental approach is underscored by the advisor-advisee relationship. Demonstrating an opportunity for future focus on enhancing the understanding of the relational component both in practice and profession, it is worthwhile to explore and strengthen the skills of rapport building, communication, problem-solving, and effective questioning.

Technology

Two participants reflected on learning technology and how, in their practice, this category enables them to disseminate and make information available, and fosters relationships with students. As one of these comments illustrates: *"Accessibility, the information that you need or that you came for into the office is also accessible at your fingertips as a student, just strengthen your relationship with your LMS-BB (Blackboard) Collaborate."*

While some responses were generic and overarching and not very explicit, others reflected specifically on engagement technology. The responses address the issue and suggest that engagement technology enables the practice and allows professionals to cast a wider net in offering support and resources to students, as the following three comments show: *"Being able to reach out to more students via emails/social media platforms, etc."; "The use of equipment used, having access to reaching students."; and "Being able to reach out to a wider audience of students. Sharing resources."*

In the generic responses, it is clear that participants appreciate the overall role of technology in their practice and profession. One of the participants' reflections mentions and conveys an appreciation of how the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled better use of technology in their advising practice: *"Plays a very important part in advising today. Especially during the Covid epidemic [sic]."*

Personal (professional)

Highlighting the significance of the personal component in promoting advisor efficiency and effectiveness, McGill (2019) summarises that the personal component in advancing the advising profession and practice should, on the part of the advisor, include self-reflection of one's practice, beliefs, and further growth and development. Two of the participants' responses capture this and describe the personal component as follows: *"How this relates to my personal and professional development and competencies—and how this will influence how [. . .] engage in my workspace with staff and students."*; and *"Assisting students with guidance in terms of being healthy on a personal level in order to be successful in their studies. Everything is interconnected."*

Most participants identified parts of the personal component that resonated with them in describing what it means in their profession and practice: *"Constantly reflect on my advising philosophy. Take care of myself. It will not be possible to pour to students from an empty cup."*; *"Development and care."*; and *"Competence and cultural awareness."*

In summary, the participants' reflections from the thematic analysis draw a clear and comprehensive measure of the extent to which the AAPD has enabled them to advance their practice and establish a professional identity through a traditional Community of Practice (CoP). Figure 4 illustrates that, to a greater extent, the AAPD afforded the respondents a formalised developmental opportunity. For most respondents, the AAPD clarified and helped them understand the role of being an academic advisor and the formulation of a growth mindset, speaking to the willingness to learn and grow as a professional. To a lesser extent, the AAPD did not afford respondents space to practice self-care or strengthen their cultural awareness; this suggests that these components are difficult to measure and will require deeper investigation. Since all institutions represented in this study have an institutional definition of academic advising, this is promising for the advancement of the profession and practice, as the definition is an essential building block for implementation. The AAPD has further enabled an overall mindshift and learning opportunities on how to integrate the self into the advisor role. The data suggest that the AAPD needs strengthen and improve the areas of self-care, cultural awareness, and opportunities for implementation.

Figure 4. The extent to which the AAPD has supported components of the profession and practice



An analysis of the participants’ responses suggests that the AAPD does provide the foundational knowledge base of professional development and prepares advisors for practice. While the majority of the participants are early-career academic advisors, many benefited as the SLP created more in-depth exposure and engagement with the theories and concepts underpinning academic advising. The following participant’s reflection describes how the AAPD influenced and informed their practice as an early-career academic advisor:

I participated in the AAPD the same year that I started with academic advising. It provided me with a lot of insight in terms of theory and practice. I enjoyed to learn that it can be a structured process backed up by theory. Additionally, looking at academic advising in terms of cycles that speak to the student needs at certain points of the year was very insightful and helped me to frame my thoughts on ways to assist students.

Other participants indicated that for them, participation in AAPD, to a great extent, helped them understand academic advising in a more practical way, thus enabling more informed and structured practice.

I have benefited from the programme. Going through formal academic advising training, understanding that there are processes and practices that exist in the field of academic advising has been beneficial in instilling confidence in myself and improving my advising processes. A major benefit is knowing through the AAPD programme that the processes I employed as an academic advisor were good processes.

I was able to implement and coordinate academic advising in my institution.

Participation in the programme gave me the starting and thinking tools, to develop my own coaching style that assists me in becoming a successful academic coach.

I am now able to reach and impact more students. As I was once a student, and worked with students I know the importance of sharing my journey with students. Hosting weekly

webinar sessions with students and being apart [sic] of their realities has helped me come up with initiatives that allow us the staff [to] know the realities of our students.

It provided a foundation of knowledge to help better understand the role of academic advising, which has helped me feel more grounded as a [sic] advisor. This foundation also helped me structure strategies/ideas to help improve how effective advisors can be within our faculty.

Three participants alluded that, more than contributing to their professional development, the AAPD created extended awareness and reflective space for them. One participant indicated that in addition to the AAPD being reflective, it further aided them to be more intentional in their practice. This translated into positive implementation institutionally.

It increased my awareness in terms of the existence of AA as a profession as well as the efforts made to coin and categorize it as such. Being in a venue full of AAs from various institutions made me realise that AA is not a UFS-only practice. I observed that there are differences in how AA service rendering is done across the various institutions and how AA practices in some institutions are advanced. I appreciated the thorough and relevant material provided and presented to us during the training workshop, it indicated that the practice is informed by the latest research. This allowed me to reflect on my service rendering, relevance, and impact thereof.

The programme gave me in-depth awareness of advising [as] a professional practice and the areas of development one needs to engage with in order to be responsive to their students and to create a programme that has impact.

Since completing the AAPD, I am constantly reflecting on the competencies I possess to do my "job" well. In relation to all the 5 components of advising, I am ensuring that I reflect on whether my conceptual understanding of Advising [sic] a year ago for instance is still the same as currently. If it has changed then how has it changed and what does it mean now. The AAPD has helped me become more intentional about being curious about developments in the advising space as well as being a part of communities that foster that growth and curiosity, [I especially became] engaged in the programme in my first six months of being an advisor.

Many of the participants' responses confirm the valuable contributions of the AAPD to their professional development and practice. Consequently, the use of the IC RTP framework to advance the professionalisation and practice of academic advising in responding to student needs, has proven to have a positive impact. From an informational perspective, it is evident that advisors disseminate an array of information and the AAPD creates greater understanding and contextualisation. In the case of the conceptual component, it introduces participants to theories and approaches to academic advising; however, there is an identified gap in that none of the theories used in the practice are directly applicable to academic advising, but are rather borrowed from other professions and bodies of literature, such as psychology.

Another gap, which is explicitly flagged, is that there are no local theories, models, and approaches related to student support and success introduced or discussed in the

AAPD. A participant articulated this by suggesting, *“include a clear model which has been combined and adapted from local psychology and education to speak to academic advising specifically.”*

Implications and recommendations

Findings from the survey responses indicate that the IC RTP framework offers valuable insights into the perceptions and practices of academic advisors in South Africa. While some respondents have extensive experience, most are still in the early stages of their careers. Institutions represented by participants in this study are also in the early- to mid-developmental phase of the profession, with data leaning toward a description of the practice, which is a combination of developmental and intrusive approaches. Roles described by participants primarily focus on providing informational and relational support to students, highlighting the multifaceted nature of academic advising. However, there are varying levels of understanding and implementation of the informational, conceptual, relational, technological, and personal components of academic advising as proposed by Habley (1995) and McClellan (2007).

Regarding the informational component, participants demonstrated a fragmented understanding, with some acknowledging the importance of providing relevant information to students. In contrast, others need a more in-depth grasp of this aspect. The conceptual component, emphasizing understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of advising, is still in the early stages of development among respondents. However, the AAPD programme facilitates learning and meaning-making opportunities in this area. The relational component, crucial for building rapport and supporting students effectively, is widely recognised by participants, with interpersonal skills being highlighted as essential for successful advising.

Technology integration in advising emerges as an area for further development, with participants acknowledging its significance, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The personal (professional) component, often overlooked but essential for effective academic advising, is highlighted by participants as integral to their professional growth and competence.

Conclusion

As proposed by participants, there remains a need for further extensions to advance both the profession and practice in academic advising, especially in the context of South African higher education. While there is a move towards the identity formation of academic advisors professionally, there needs to be more critical and theoretical underpinnings that inform the organisation of professionals in practice. The identification of the AAPD as a lever affording the development of a traditional CoP is not sufficient; a better identity definition needs to be investigated and proposed as an extension of the baseline established through the AAPD.

Overall, the study demonstrates and underscores the positive evolution and advancement of academic advising in South Africa, with the AAPD programme serving as a valuable platform for professional development and enhancing advisor competencies.

For those not directly involved in the day-to-day operations of academic advising and senior leadership, the AAPD helps formulate a better understanding of the practice but offers very little about how to lead advisors. Unlike those in early career transitions into practice and others transferring from other entities in higher education, the AAPD provides fundamental and comprehensive exposure to understand, acquire the skills, and have a blueprint for the operationalisation of practice.

There is a need for further studies and professional development opportunities in the form of webinars, conferences, and training to continue building on the AAPD. This will enable further advancement efforts to strengthen the understanding and implementation of academic advising across all five components, as proposed by McClellan (2007), and to ensure adequate support for student success.

From the findings, it is furthermore more evident that the AAPD can be considered the initial base for a community of practice. However, there is still a gap for the AAPD to earn a distinct classification as a CoP that aligns to a broader professional development framework, which refines the identification of academic advising as a profession and the AAPD as a formalised professional development programme.

Ethics statement

The authors subscribed to the highest levels of ethics during this research study. The Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State (UFS) granted approval for the study to be conducted (ethical clearance number: UFS-HSD2022/0907/22).

Potential conflict of interests

The authors declare that no competing interests from this study.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Embedding equity-centred, proactive academic advising in first-year orientation: A case study of the College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Uhlelo oluhambisa phambili ukulingana ngesikhathi kwelulekwa ngezifundo abafundi abenza unyaka wokuqala: Ucwangosimo lweKolishi leZoluntu, eNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natali

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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to university presents significant challenges, particularly for students from historically marginalised communities and under-resourced schools, heightening risks of attrition and delayed progression. This affirms the value of integrated, intentional, equity-focused proactive early support, which the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) Policy promotes. This study examines first-year students' experiences of equity-focused academic advising within orientation at the College of Humanities (CHUM), which enrolls up to 60% of first-year students from quintile one to three schools. The article contributes to scholarship in two ways. First, through a case-study approach, it demonstrates how proactive academic advising promotes social justice. Second, it draws on two complementary frameworks – Nancy Fraser's social justice framework assesses whether interventions address recognition, representation, and redistribution. Alf Lizzio's Five Senses of Student Success frames students' experiences across the domains of successful transition (capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness, and academic culture). Data were collected from the student feedback survey, with 531 of the approximately 1,000 first-year students who participated in the intervention in 2025 responding. Findings indicate students' enhanced sense of capability, resourcefulness, connectedness, purpose, and engagement with academic culture. Challenges with digital literacy, connectivity, and timing of data rollout contributed to low participation, highlighting barriers to achieving participatory parity. Implications for academic advising practice and approaches are discussed, and areas for further research are proposed.

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KEYWORDS

Academic advising, equity, first-year orientation, just practices, student experience

ISIFINYEZO

Ushintsho lokusuka esikoleni samabanga aphakeme uya enyuvesi luza nezinselelo eziningi kakhulu ikakhulukazi kubafundi abasuka emiphakathini ehlwempu kanye nasezikoleni ezintula izinsizakusebenza. Lokhu kuphazamisa inqubekela phambili yomfundi. Lokhu kufakazela ukubaluleka kohlelo oluhlosiwe nolusheshayo lokwesekwa kwabafundi kusanesikhathi. Nokuyinto ekhuthazwa inqubomgomo yeNyuvesi yaKwaZulu- Natali ngaphansi kohlelo olubizwa ngokuthi yi-*Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS)*. Lolu cwaningo lucubungula ulwazi lwabafundi abenza unyaka wokuqala mayelana nokwelulekwa ngokwezemfundo okugxile osukwini lokwamukelwa kwabenza unyaka wokuqala enyuvesi, ngaphansi kweKolishi leZoluntu. Nebhalisa inani labafundi abangafika ku-60% abenza unyaka wokuqala abasuka ezikoleni ezithathwa njengezikole ezintulayo. Lolu cwaningo luqhutshwe ngezindlela ezimbili. Indlela yokuqala indlela yocwaningonto. Le ndlela ikhombisa ukuthi ukwelulekwa kwezemfundo ukuthuthukisa kanjani ubulungiswa bezenhlalakahle. Indlela yesibili isebenzisa izinhloko ezimbili ezihambisanayo. Nokuwuhlaka lukaNancy Fraser lwezobulungiswa bezenhlalakahle noluhlola ukuthi ingabe ukungenelela kusanesikhathi kuyazizazulula yini izinkinga. Ngokuka-Alf Lizzio izinzwa ezinhlanu zempumulelo yomfundi zifaka ulwazi lomfundi kuzona zonke izizinda zoshintsho oluyimpumelelo nokufaka phakathi indlela yokwenza komfundi, ukuxhumana, inhloso, ubuhlakani kanye nenqubo yasenyuvesi. Imininingo yaqoqwa kwizimpendulo zesaveyi yabafundi. Kwaphendula abafundi abangama-531 kubafundi abayi-1000 abenza unyaka wokuqala ababamba iqhaza locwaningo ngonyaka wezi-2025. Okutholakele ocwaningweni kuveza ukuthi izinzwa zabafundi zithuthukisiwe nokufaka phakathi ukwenza kwabo, ubuhlakani, ukuxhumana, izinhloso kanye nokuzibandakanya nenqubo yokwenza enyuvesi. Izingqinamba zezobuchwepheshe, ubuxhixi bezokuxhumana kanye nesikhathi sokunikwa kwedatha kubafundi kube nomthelela omkhulu ekubambeni iqhaza okuphansi kubafundi. Lokhu kugqamisa izinselelo zokuhlanganyela ocwaningweni ngokulinganayo. Kulolu cwaningo kuxoxwe ngemiphumela kanye nezindlela zokwelulekwa ngokwezemfundo. Kuphinde kwahlongozwa nolunye ucwaningo olungenziwa ngomuso.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA

Ukwelulekwa ngokwezemfundo, ukulingana, ukwamukelwa kwabenza unyaka wokuqala enyuvesi, inqubo yasenyuvesi, ulwazi lwabafundi

Introduction

Students' transition from high school into university is widely recognised as one of the most critical and challenging periods in their academic journey. First-year students face heightened risks of attrition and delayed progression, with the first semester often determining success and retention. These challenges are particularly acute in South Africa, where structural inequalities intersect with issues such as under-preparedness,

undecidedness, first-generation status, and socio-economic disadvantage. For students from under-resourced schools and historically marginalised communities, navigating course selection, degree choices, and unfamiliar institutional processes and systems often compounds feelings of exclusion and inadequacy. This stresses the need for integrated, intentional, socially just equity-focused support that promotes early engagement with first-year students.

This study aims to examine first-year students' experiences and perceptions of the equity-centred, proactive academic advising initiative embedded within orientation. A quantitatively designed student feedback survey enabled first-year students to rate their experiences and perceptions of and engagement with the interventions. The findings provided a basis for reflecting on students' engagement and experiences in these interventions, both in terms of the domains of successful transition and the implications for social justice and equity. This article is structured in three main sections. First, it reviews the literature on orientation and academic advising as mechanisms of transition, retention, and student success, establishing the theoretical and conceptual foundation for the study. Second, it presents the context and setting of the case study and the methods. Third, the results and findings are followed by a concluding discussion on the implications for practice.

Literature review and conceptual frameworks

High attrition, dropout, and low throughput rates during the first year of study, particularly in the first semester, remain persistent challenges in higher education globally (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Barefoot, 2000). Although reasons vary across contexts and geographies, there is a broad consensus that multiple, intersecting factors contribute to these patterns. These include a mismatch between students' identities and university sociocultural norms, misaligned expectations and goals, first-generation status, familial habitus, and academic under-preparedness (Naudé & Breshears, 2024; Motsabi et al., 2020; Council on Higher Education, 2023). These circumstances, and their limited social and cultural capital, impact students' ability to navigate university life successfully. Students' academic vulnerability (Miller & Harrell, 2017, p. 85) places them at heightened risk of attrition and delayed progression (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

In South Africa, post-apartheid reforms have justly prioritised equity of access and widening participation of historically disadvantaged communities (Department of Education, 2001, 1997). The highly diverse first-year student cohort often confronts overlapping challenges such as under-preparedness, undecidedness, socio-economic inequality, and first-generation status. African students, in particular, constitute the majority of first-generation students from low-income households. National data show trends in progression, throughput, and retention are problematic among African, Coloured, and Indian students, as well as male students (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020).

As Tinto (2014) observes, students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, struggle to conceptualise academic pathways, select appropriate courses, or articulate career goals – sometimes concealing their uncertainty due to the pressure to choose a field. Access alone is insufficient – without systematic and intentional support structures, students have to navigate unfamiliar institutional terrains independently. Timely and

contextualised academic and social support during students' admission, transition, and acclimation is critical (Tinto, 2017). The early first-year experience is recognised as critical to students' academic success across their student journeys (Wilson et al., 2016). Patterns of disengagement, such as limited participation in orientation, moderate online involvement, and low-class attendance do occur during the first few weeks of the semester. The first week and semester of university are crucial, though transition is a sustained process throughout the entire first-year rather than a single event (Moosa & Langford, 2021; Kift et al., 2010).

Muraskin (1997) identifies key features of effective student support: a structured and well-designed first-year experience, academic support, proactive advising, deliberate engagement strategies, and dedicated staff with strong institutional ties. Gardner (2001, as cited in Miller & Harrell, 2017) similarly emphasizes the integration of various interventions such as orientation, first-year seminars, learning communities, service-learning, academic support services, health education, and peer mentoring. The idea of proactively including academic advising sessions during orientation to guide students to make informed choices about courses and major selection is well documented (Fox & Martin, 2017; Greenfield et al., 2013). The early and proactive engagement with students through academic advising normalises help-seeking practices and connects first-year students to a knowledgeable academic advisor. In contexts with students from under-resourced schools and historically marginalised communities responsive, timely, integrated, and effective student support exemplifies socially just equity-centred practices.

Just and equity-centred academic advising and orientation practices

This article conceptualises student support interventions such as orientation and academic advising as just practices. Finn and Jacobson's (2003) Just Practice Framework enables an understanding of first-year student support through a justice-oriented lens. It centres on five interwoven dimensions – (1) meaning, (2) context, (3) power, (4) history, and (5) possibility – which invite critical reflection on how people's experiences are understood and acted upon. Within the higher education context, this framework prompts us to examine the socio-historical and political conditions underpinning first-year students' challenges, such as under-preparedness or undecidedness. It also encourages interrogating the power relations and knowledge hierarchies that shape institutional responses. Notably, the framework enables us to conceptualise why academic advising and orientation are pivotal socially just, equity-centred student support practices within South African higher education post 1994.

Orientation programmes, first-year seminars, and academic advising are crucial just practices that enhance academic and social integration and readiness, especially during the first year of study (Keup & Young, 2021; Schmidt & Graziano, 2016; Kuh, 2008). Intentional just practices that facilitate early engagement with first-year students are particularly transformative for historically marginalised students from low-income households, and first-generation families (Finley & McNair, 2013). As such, they reflect a university's commitment to social justice and equity by advancing "just social arrangements and just ways of relating and access" (Hölscher & Bozalek, 2020, p. 4). When implemented with care,

these practices foster belonging, integration, meaningful participation and engagement in university life.

Orientation, typically conducted before the academic year begins, assists students' transition to university. Anderson and Williams (2000, cited in Wilson et al., 2016) describe this early phase and period as a 'window of maximal risk' for students with limited academic and cultural capital, who often feel like outsiders. Purposefully designed orientation programmes reduce this risk by building students' sense of capability and resourcefulness – key domains for a successful student transition (Lizzio, 2006). Orientation also helps students navigate university structures and form social connections (Jacobs, 2010, cited in Greenfield et al., 2013).

Farrell et al. (2020) highlight two key components relevant to orientation programmes: academic readiness and social readiness. Academic readiness includes clear expectations regarding workload, responsibilities, and support. Social readiness promotes belonging and encourages engagement with peers, senior students, and staff. Peer mentorship further supports connectedness. A well-structured, intentional orientation programme introduces students to essential academic skills, resources, and expectations, which reinforce the key domains of successful transition and, academic and social readiness.

When integrated into orientation, academic advising enhances this just practice by supporting students' successful transition. Timely, structured, and compassionate academic advising can significantly improve student retention and success (Grafe et al., 2025; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; Fox & Martin, 2017). Kuhn et al. (2006, p. 24) describe advisors as the "institutionalised front line" of support. Delivered by faculty, professional staff, peer mentors, and support personnel, advising often involves identifying student needs and referring them to appropriate services (Troxel et al., 2021). Strong cross-institutional collaboration, and strong leadership and coordination are among the factors that will facilitate the effectiveness of integrated, intentional support.

NACADA, The Global Community for Academic Advising, defines advising as an intentional teaching practice that includes curriculum (content), pedagogy (delivery), and student learning outcomes (Damminger & Rakes, 2017). It encompasses curriculum planning, mentoring, orientation, and performance monitoring (De Klerk, 2022; Robbins, 2012). Whether in person or online, individually or in groups, academic advising is key to advancing equity and inclusion in higher education.

Similarly in South Africa, ELETSA (Academic Advising South Africa) positions advising as an intentional, relational, and equity-focused practice that supports students academically, personally, and professionally. Rooted in transformation, ubuntu, and reflective practice, ELETSA frames advising as a humanising and just approach (ELETSA, 2023). Ubuntu, a philosophy of empathy and community, complements Fraser's social justice lens by affirming lived experiences and interdependence (Museka & Madondo, 2012).

Advising approaches include prescriptive, developmental, proactive, appreciative, and strengths-based models (Drak et al., 2013). This study focuses on prescriptive and proactive models, particularly relevant during orientation and registration (Robbins, 2012). These models are effective for underprepared or undecided students who may not seek help or know about available services (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995, as cited in Elliott, 2020). Varney

(2013) explains that proactive advising equips students with essential information, enhancing their confidence and direction before they realise they need it. Prescriptive advising provides clear guidance, especially useful during course selection and registration. These models and approaches align with Fraser's social justice framework, enabling advisors to recognise and respond to structural barriers with practical support.

Rust and Willey (2024) draw a comparison between decentralised and centralised proactive academic advising models, arguing that a centralised model consolidates advising into one unit and this correlates positively with coordination and advising effectiveness. In integrating support and seeking to strengthen cross-institutional collaboration with a range of key actors and stakeholders who deliver academic advising, centralised models of advising, in terms of locus of control and accountability, are preferred. The authors provide this definition for proactive advising, which takes into account a range of key observations from their study:

Proactive advising is an advisor-initiated, institutionally empowered approach that includes coordinated, collaborative, personalised, and intentional outreach strategies and practices designed to anticipate potential barriers to students' learning goals, to provide timely interventions based in the students' strengths and identities, to make meaningful engagement between advisors and students a standard student experience, and to achieve the institution's student success goals. (Rust & Willey, 2024, p. 101)

These core ideas on practices and approaches also emphasize that academic advising must be institutionally contextualised. It should align with each university's mission, institutional approach, pedagogical approach, academic advising staffing, and student demographics (Emekako & van der Westhuizen, 2021; Campbell & McWilliams, 2016). South Africa's diverse and unequal higher education landscape calls for differentiated, equity-centred approaches that respond to students' academic, social, and cultural positionalities.

Conceptual frameworks

This study draws on two complementary frameworks: Lizzio's Five Senses of Student Success (2006) and Fraser's social justice (Hölscher & Bozalek, 2020). Together, they provide conceptual lenses for understanding how psychosocial dimensions of student experience and transition intersect with structural and systemic transformation to shape student support interventions and practices. Whereas Fraser highlights the redress of systemic and structural inequities embedded in higher education, Lizzio provides a practice-oriented guide for designing interventions that enhance students' successful transition and their academic and social readiness.

Fraser's social justice framework comprises three interrelated dimensions. First, redistribution concerns the equitable allocation of resources and opportunities; second, recognition involves respecting and valuing diverse cultural and social identities; and third, representation ensures meaningful participation and engagement in academic and social life (Hölscher & Bozalek, 2020; Vincent, 2019). Applied to higher education, the framework illuminates how institutional structures and practices can either reproduce or disrupt and address inequality and inequity. Khan (2022), for example, employed Fraser's concepts

of maldistribution and misrecognition to examine whether institutional arrangements at the University of the Western Cape during COVID-19 enabled equitable access to online academic and psychosocial support. While affirmative strategies such as student support interventions addressed immediate needs, the study also underscored the importance of transformative approaches that acknowledge students' varied positionalities and contexts. The use of student feedback surveys demonstrated how students' experiences, voices and agency are integral to identifying student needs and gaps in the intervention and for achieving participatory parity.

Lizzio's (2006) Five Senses of Student Success framework complements Fraser's framework by outlining the key domains of successful student transition into higher education. The five domains – capability (academic skills and responsibilities), connectedness (peer and staff relationships), purpose (personal and career alignment), resourcefulness (ability to navigate challenges and access support), and academic culture (familiarity with institutional norms and expectations) – offer a holistic guide for first-year support. Research highlights the importance of the early weeks of university in shaping student engagement and persistence. Building on this, Wilson et al. (2016) applied the Five Senses framework to design a commencing student survey that identified students' needs and concerns. The authors (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 1024) explain that the five senses provide an operational description of the first-year student's academic, personal and social transition process and provides a focused guide for the university in its designing of practical interventions to facilitate student transition and success. This study highlights the value of developing theoretically informed surveys that direct the design and development of contextually relevant, responsive, and practical interventions to support first-year students.

The following section presents the case study of the UKZN's College of Humanities (CHUM) support intervention and details on the student feedback survey.

Method

Organisational context

UKZN is a multi-campus university with four academic colleges across five campuses in eThekweni and uMshunduzi. CHUM is the largest, enrolling over 17,000 undergraduates, including more than 4,500 first-years. Around 50-60% of these students come from historically disadvantaged socio-economic contexts, often from quintile one to three schools, and with first-generation status. Many are funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and reside in university residence. The majority are African, with a relatively equal distribution between urban and rural areas and a higher proportion of female students. This profile shapes CHUM's integrated, equity-centred, proactive, and just approach to first-year advising and orientation.

Grounded in the institution's transformation agenda and commitment to participatory parity, CHUM's student support approach is framed by the Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) Policy (UKZN, 2023a). This framework emphasizes structured, responsive, integrated, and targeted quality student support interventions to promote student transition, retention, and success. UKZN is currently developing an academic advising framework.

The AMS Policy, notably, outlines a three-tiered student support model. Category One covers core academic activities (lectures, tutorials, practicals); Category Three covers psychosocial and wellness services; and Category Two – central to this case study – focuses on early and sustained additional academic interventions such as tutoring, mentoring, advising, and other prescribed support for all students but in particular students at risk. Category Two support interventions are coordinated by and devolved to the College Deans of Teaching and Learning. Within the College the centralised model predominates key support interventions such as orientation and academic advising, which are coordinated by the College Deans of Teaching and Learning. CHUM employs senior postgraduate students as Academic Development Officers (ADOs), coordinators, peer mentors, and tutors who reflect the diversity of the student body in race, language, nationality, gender, and qualification.

Context and setting of the study

CHUM delivers a college-based online orientation programme beginning the weekend after the University-wide online Parents' Day. Since COVID-19, orientation and registration have been conducted online at UKZN, with students gaining campus access only after successfully completing their registration. At CHUM, the online orientation and academic advising spans two weeks at the beginning of February, given the large number of first-year students we enrol. The online orientation and academic advising programme are delivered daily across three campuses (Edgewood, Pietermaritzburg, and Howard College) where our students register. The AMS staff oversee and present the orientation programme, while the ADOs focus on the academic advising component, and both components are supported by professional and academic staff.

The CHUM orientation programme has two components. The first component, the orientation, follows a structured curriculum aligned with the institutional culture, and CHUM's diverse degrees and its students' academic and social readiness needs. Its six aims are to: (1) formally welcome students, (2) provide an institutional and college overview, (3) support online registration, (4) introduce support services, (5) present the UKZN mandatory year-long First-Year Experience Programme (FYEP), and (6) offer curriculum and academic advising. This transitional intervention creates an enabling pedagogical space that affirms acclimation, integration, representation, and belonging. The orientation design is aligned to Lizzio's five domains, for example: connectedness is fostered through senior peer mentor support and coordination of these key interventions, and interactive dialogue; resourcefulness is strengthened by introducing university systems and support structures; purpose is cultivated through curriculum and career advising; and academic culture is reinforced by familiarising students with institutional values and policies.

Following the orientation component of the session, ADOs will lead the online group academic advising consultation session. The group discussions and engagements are organised by degree programmes. While English is the main medium, multilingualism is supported to promote inclusion and engagement. To ensure consistency and quality, ADOs receive training each semester. Training, led by the CHUM Dean of Teaching and Learning and College Academic Affairs staff, equips ADOs to provide accurate guidance, identify

students in distress, and make appropriate referrals. The training includes referral protocols for students in distress, degree structures, progression rules, curriculum planning, and compliance with institutional policies. After the session, ADOs are also available to provide individual consultations in person or via email, Zoom, or MS Teams. Their work operationalises equity-centred academic advising, ensuring that first-year support is not a once-off intervention, but a sustained, socially just, equity-centred practice informed by care, ubuntu, and participatory parity.

At the end of each orientation and academic advising session, first-year students were informed about the student feedback survey's purpose and invited to participate voluntarily, with confidentiality and anonymity assured. Students received a QR code and URL to complete the survey, and the orientation coordinator/administrator also emailed the survey link to all first-year students who completed the orientation attendance register. The survey, hosted on an anonymised Microsoft Form, enables first-year students to rate their experiences and perceptions of the orientation and advising programme.

Materials and study sample

The South African Council on Higher Education's *Good Practice Guide on Student Engagement* (2023) defines student voice as the expression of student perspectives on matters affecting their education. Student voice and experience are increasingly embedded in higher education quality assurance processes (Strydom & Loots, 2020; Shah & Nair, 2009; Lizzio et al., 2007). Students are requested to assess various aspects of their university experience and institutional practices through feedback surveys. This includes students' perceptions of institutional support interventions and services, and their engagement with these (Choi et al., 2024). Using student feedback to assess students' experiences and perceptions exemplifies Fraser's principle of representation – positioning students as active contributors with agentic potential.

Additionally, UKZN's (2023b), Goal 2 of the *Strategic Plan 2023–2032*, 'Excellent Student Experience,' explicitly links the quality of support services and interventions that students receive to their participation, and engagement in these. The student feedback surveys undertaken in CHUM during the orientation programme are, in response to the University Capacity Development Programme's (UCDP's) monitoring and evaluation requirements, compliance driven. At UKZN, Project 2 of the UCDP is called, *Academic Monitoring Support* (UKZN, 2025). This covers the Category Two range of integrated support interventions offered within the AMS programmes located in the Offices of the Deans of Teaching and Learning.

This article reports on data from the online student feedback survey administered by CHUM at the end of each daily orientation and academic advising session in 2025. The quantitative items were developed so first-year students could systematically assess or rate their experience and engagement with the orientation and academic advising programme. The questionnaire included closed-ended items, Likert scales, and open-ended questions (Yorke, 2009). All Likert scale items were rated on a five-point scale, for example, ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (neither agree nor disagree) (3), agree (4), to strongly agree (5). The two open-ended questions asked first-year students to provide

any comments on “. . . how the overall orientation programme could be improved?” and “. . . how the facilitation of the advising session can be improved?” The short qualitative responses were thematically coded.

In 2025, 531 of approximately 1,000 first-year students responded to the survey. This represents just over half of the students who participated in the orientation and academic advising programme. CHUM, however, enrolls over 4,500 first-year students annually. UKZN has affirmative strategies to encourage participation such as data allocation and assigning a First-Year Experience (FYE) mentor to first-year students. During the early first weeks of onboarding, registration and orientation, each student who accepts an offer is assigned one-month of data and an FYE mentor. The FYE mentor communicates with the first-year student primarily via WhatsApp to share schedules, registration guidance, and links to online events, including doing referrals such as providing the ADOs' contact and consultation details. This peer mentoring model humanises the transition process during the 'window of maximal risk.'

Despite these, barriers, such as the timing of data roll out and limited access to or ownership of devices and mobile numbers, prohibit participation and engagement during these early interventions. These challenges disproportionately affect students from under-resourced and historically marginalised contexts. Further affirmative strategies such as the UKZN's mandatory year-long First-Year Experience Programme (FYEP) mitigate this. The assigned FYE mentor continues to work with the student across the semester to support them in completing the four units of the FYEP. The four units are also grounded in Fraser and Lizzio's frameworks. Unit One of the FYEP, which is completed in the first half of the semester, covers elements of the orientation programme in-depth. Unit One, titled "Transition, Adjustment, and Integration to University", includes the following topics: Introduction to UKZN; digital literacy training; The College Handbook; transition and adjustment; UKZN resources for students; Gender-based violence; being a student at UKZN, and policies, procedures and rules.

Results and discussion

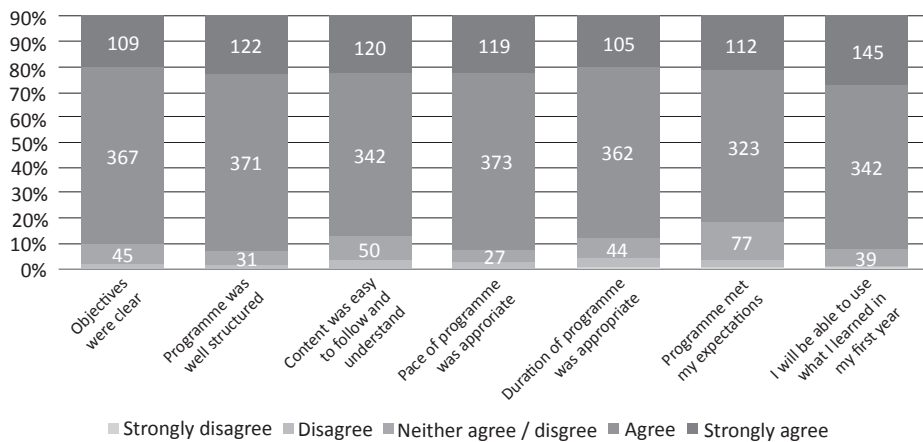
This section presents two broad themes: rating of overall satisfaction with the orientation programme and with the academic advising session.

Overall satisfaction with the orientation programme

First-year students expressed positive views of the intervention. The orientation programme was rated at 4.19 out of 5. The high score indicates a generally positive student experience.

Survey responses show in Figure 1 that students overwhelmingly agreed that the structured, intentional design of the orientation programme met their expectations and equipped them with relevant knowledge. The programme's structure and pacing were also positively received, with 70% (n = 373) agreeing and 22% (n = 119) strongly agreeing that the pace was appropriate. Students felt that they would be able to use what they learned in the programme. These results highlight the value of a well-organised and responsive orientation process and programme.

Figure 1. Rating the following aspects of the orientation programme



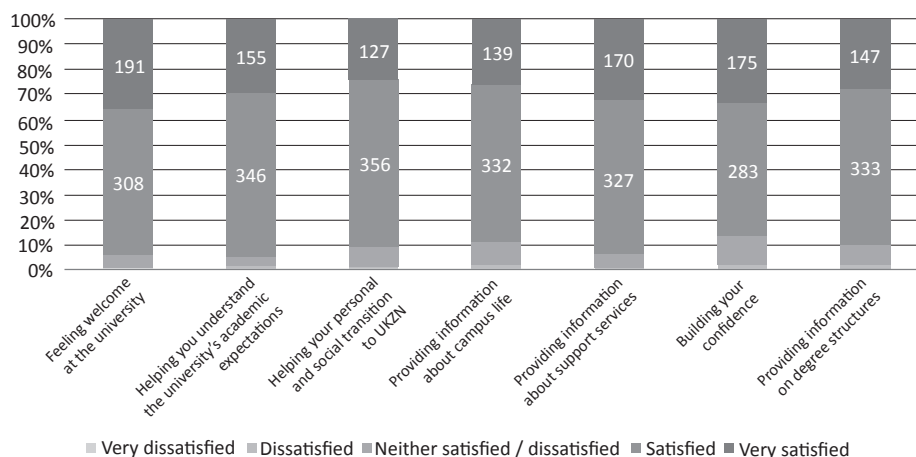
Viewed through Lizzio's Five Senses of Student Success, the orientation programme supported several key domains of successful transition.

Student responses indicated a strong sense of capability: 65% (n = 346) were satisfied and 29% (n = 155) very satisfied that the programme helped them understand university expectations. Regarding confidence building, 53% (n = 283) were satisfied and 33% (n = 175) very satisfied that the programme enhanced their academic confidence and readiness. Moreover, 67% (n = 356) were satisfied and 24% (n = 127) very satisfied that the orientation helped them transition from high school to university. These responses suggest that the content covered in the programme played a key role in helping students develop a sense of self-efficacy and academic readiness.

The programme also supported students' resourcefulness by clearly presenting institutional support services, university procedures, and help-seeking strategies. This was reinforced by the group and individual advising sessions, which introduced students to key systems and clarified degree structures.

As shown in Figure 2, students reported high satisfaction with the information on student support services and campus life, demonstrating that the orientation successfully demystified university operations and encouraged early engagement. The structure of the programme – its integrated delivery across advising, registration, support services, and online learning – helped to build a foundational sense of academic culture. The inclusion of peer mentors, accessible online formats, and guided academic advising reflects an intentional effort to make institutional practices legible and navigable for students entering a complex university environment.

Figure 2. Rating satisfaction with the following aspects of the orientation programme



Responses to an open-ended question about potential improvements revealed that 77% ($n = 412$) of students had no suggestions for improvement. Among those who did provide comments on how to improve, feedback focused on issues related to Wi-Fi access, data availability, and the overall accessibility of the online format ($n = 10$). One student noted, *"They must first provide data to all students since some were facing challenges in joining the meetings,"* another commented, *"Try and minimise the time spent at the program since some of us don't have Wi-Fi or sufficient data."* While technology is a valuable tool, participation and meaningful engagement can be hampered by accessibility, availability and affordability issues, particularly for students from disadvantaged and resource-poor settings.

These comments underscore Fraser's principle of redistribution (maldistribution and misrecognition), drawing attention to persistent digital inequities that affect participation in online learning environments. Despite UKZN's affirmative strategies to support students through mobile data allocation and roll out, structural challenges – such as students registering with the contact details of guardians or relatives, and not owning a device also limited access to essential communication – disproportionately affect students from under-resourced contexts. As noted in the previous section, the timing of the data roll out did not always coincide with when the student needed it to access the online orientation and academic advising session, and registration. Insufficient personal data also impacted on the amount of time a first-year student might have been able to stay online.

A small number of students ($n = 13$) reported challenges with digital literacy and using platforms like Zoom. Comments such as *"People should mute themselves when authorised people are speaking"* and *"Follow basic rules like writing questions in the comments section"* reflected frustration with others' lack of online etiquette and familiarity with digital platforms. While the orientation programme includes an introduction to online etiquette, students unfamiliar with the devices or engaging on Zoom for the first time struggled to navigate the platform. These responses highlight the importance of scaffolding digital learning to support varied prior exposure and competence levels. Digital

and information literacy are addressed in Unit 1 of the mandatory FYEP, but additional support may be required at the outset. The FYE mentors were provided with short WhatsApp messages guiding students on how to access Zoom, but lack of familiarity will impact how a student can participate and engage online.

Language proficiency emerged as another barrier. Seven students commented on the complexity of the language used in presentations, requesting simpler explanations: *"It needs to be more simple"* and *"Please use simplicity on packages so that one can understand."* These comments highlight Fraser's recognition dimension, emphasizing the need to affirm cultural and linguistic diversity. The predominance of English as the medium of instruction may marginalise students who are more proficient in other languages. While real-time translation is logistically challenging, initiatives like bilingual training for orientation coordinators and academic advisors within the AMS programme represent a movement towards inclusive practices.

Overall satisfaction with the academic advising session

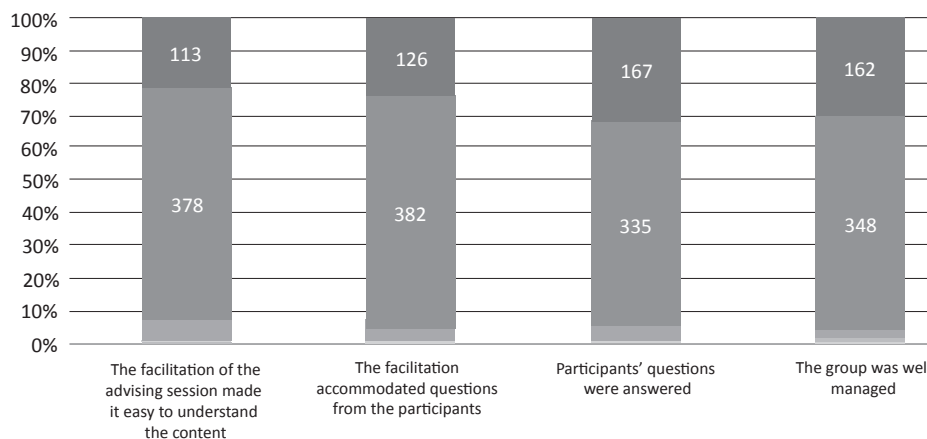
The academic advising component also received high ratings, averaging 4.18 out of 5. Qualitative feedback affirmed this impression, with comments such as, *"The advising session was great and really helpful and does not need to be improved,"* and *"The session was well managed; no improvements needed."*

Most students – 31% (n = 167) strongly agreed and 63% (n = 335) agreed – that their questions were adequately addressed. These data indicate that students felt supported and confident in group sessions. First-year students' ability to ask questions and for these to be answered exemplifies Fraser's principle of representation – positioning students as active contributors through their engagement.

Although the sessions focused on general information about degree structures, majors, and modules, they contributed meaningfully to a sense of purpose, as articulated in Lizzio's framework. As seen in Figure 3, 62% (n = 333) were satisfied and 28% (n = 147) strongly satisfied with the information provided on degree structures, suggesting that early advising helps foster a coherent academic identity. The findings suggest that the proactive, prescriptive approaches to academic advising did enhance students' sense of purpose (personal and career alignment) through addressing their undecidedness by providing information to support decisions on degree choices, majors, and subject selection.

Based on the question on ways to improve the academic advising, some students (n = 15) requested more discipline-specific information. Comments such as *"Just have more visual examples"* and *"Have references to module assistance"* suggest that first-year students need more applied and contextualised curriculum advice. These responses point to the value of involving academic staff, postgraduate mentors, or discipline tutors in future iterations of the orientation programme to support more granular and field-specific advising. This shows that the collaboration and engagement with academic and disciplinary staff during the orientation week needs to be strengthened.

Figure 3. Rating the facilitation of the academic advising



From a social justice perspective, this feedback also engages with Fraser’s concept of representation – the extent to which students can influence institutional practices. While the advising sessions were largely well received, this feedback shows that opportunities for dialogue and responsiveness to student needs must be deepened. Incorporating student feedback as an iterative, dialogic process is key to creating just and participatory institutional cultures.

Building on these findings, the following conclusion synthesizes the implications for practice in higher education.

Conclusion

This study examined first-year students’ experiences and perceptions of the College’s proactive, equity-centred orientation and academic advising programme. Drawing on Lizzio’s student success framework, the findings demonstrate that students received the intentional, structured, and focused design of the programme well. They reported an enhanced sense of capability, resourcefulness, connectedness, purpose, and engagement with academic culture. The positive reception of academic advising suggests that proactive and prescriptive early interventions supported students in clarifying their academic goals by providing timely guidance on degree choices and subject selection, thereby enabling them to conceptualise academic pathways. At the same time, the study highlighted persistent structural barriers to achieving participatory parity within the intervention.

The findings point to several key implications for academic advising practices that are transferable to similar programmes and institutions. First-year students benefit from proactive and prescriptive academic advising embedded in structured orientation activities during the opening weeks of the semester. Such approaches normalise help-seeking and foster trust and rapport between students and advisors. Effective advising in this transitional phase also requires strong collaboration between advisors, teaching staff, and student support units to ensure coherence and consistency. Importantly, valuing student voice must extend beyond compliance or routine quality assurance. When carefully designed, feedback

mechanisms contribute not only to programme improvement but also to students' sense of belonging, agency, and representation. The development of student feedback tools should therefore be theoretically and conceptually grounded to inform the design of responsive, contextually relevant, and transition-sensitive interventions. Frameworks such as Lizzio's Five Senses of Success do not only provide a valuable lens for interpreting student experiences, but also for assessing the academic advising, orientation and FYEP curriculum, and for designing student feedback surveys for academic advising and orientation. This suggests the wide applicability of such a lens for strengthening academic advising and other support interventions across higher education institutions.

Further research is needed to deepen theoretical, conceptual, and practical understandings of diverse models and approaches to academic advising in the early stages of student transition in South Africa. Such work could also strengthen the evidence base and contribute to the development of best practices for advancing student success across varied higher education contexts.

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Ethics statement

The University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) research and ethics committee (REC) granted ethical clearance for the study. Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the Registrar of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Potential conflict of interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Retrospective analysis of selection tools in the School of Therapeutic Sciences at a leading South African university

Ukuhlaziywa kwesikhathi esedlule kwamathuluzi okukhetha eSikoleni Sezesayensi Zokwelapha enyuvesi ehamba phambili eNingizimu Afrika

Sfiso Emmanuel Mabizela¹

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ABSTRACT

The Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand uses the National Senior Certificate (NSC) and the National Benchmark Test (NBT) to select and place students for academic programmes. The NBT assesses students' skills in three domains: (1) mathematics, (2) academic literacy, and (3) quantitative literacy. While selection tests are often criticised for restricting access to education, they help assess preparedness and identify students in need of support. This study examined the predictive value of NBT domains and four NSC subjects on first-year performance among Pharmacy, Occupational Therapy, and Physiotherapy students (2012-2018). The NBT domains and the four NSC subjects accounted for 15% and 12% of the variance in first-year academic performance. Hierarchical regression showed that these variables explained 28% of the variance $R^2 = 0.278$, $F(7, 922) = 50.638$, $p < 0.001$. ANOVA revealed significant performance differences based on NBT domains, emphasizing their role in identifying students at risk. These findings highlight the NBT's value in guiding academic interventions and supporting students with lower preparedness levels to improve their success.

KEYWORDS

Admission tests, health sciences, NSC, NBT, predictive validity

ISIFINYEZO

Umkhakha wezifundo zezempilo eNyuvesi yaseWitwatersrand usebenzisa isitifiketi sebanga leshumi nambili kanye ne-National Benchmark Test (NBT) ukukhetha nokubeka afundi ezinhlelweni zezemfundo. I-NBT ihlola amakhono abafundi emikhakheni emithathu: i-NBT Mathematics, i-Academic Literacy kanye ne-Quantitative Literacy. Nakuba izivivinyo zokukhetha abafundi zivame ukugxekwa ngokuthi zingase zinciphise amathuba okungena emfundweni ephakeme, ziyasiza ekuhloleni ukuzilungiselela kwabafundi nasekuhlonzeni abafundi abadinga ukwesekwa. Lolu cwaningo lwahlola amandla okubikezela

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emikhakha ye-NBT kanye nezifundo ezine ze-NSC ekusebenzeni kwabafundi onyakeni wokuqala ezifundweni ze-Pharmacy, Occupational Therapy, kanye ne-Physiotherapy phakathi kuka-2012 no-2018. Imikhakha ye-NBT kanye nezifundo ezine ze-NSC zachaza u-15% no-12% wokwehluka ekusebenzeni kwabafundi onyakeni wokuqala. Ukuhlela kwesigaba (hierarchical regression) kwabonisa ukuthi lezi zinguquko zachaza u-28% wokwehluka, $R^2 = 0.278$, $F(7, 922) = 50.638$, $p < 0.001$. I-ANOVA yaveza umehluko obalulekile ekusebenzeni kwabafundi ngokusekelwe emikhakheni ye-NBT, igcizelela indima yayo ekuhlonzeni abafundi abasengcupheni yokungaphumeleli. Lemiphumela igqamisa izinga lokubaluleka kwe-NBT ekuqondiseni izinhlelo zokungenelela nalapho kwesekwa abafundi abanamazinga aphansi okulungela imfundo ephakeme ukuze bathuthukise impumelelo yabo.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA

Ukuhlolwa kokungena, isayensi yezempilo, NSC, i-NBT, ubuqiniso bokubikezela

Introduction

The National Benchmark Test (NBT) was initiated in 2015 at the request of Higher Education South Africa (HESA), now Universities South Africa (USAf), to develop a criterion-referenced test to assess the academic readiness of students (Frith & Prince, 2018). The NBT has three domains, (1) academic literacy (NBT AL), (2) quantitative literacy (NBT QL), and (3) mathematics (NBT MA). The NBT AL examines prospective students' language and reasoning abilities, which are crucial for successful engagement with the language demands of higher education (Mabizela & George, 2020; Prince, 2017). The NBT QL examines students' readiness for quantitative-related academic tasks in mathematics and statistics (Mabizela & George, 2020; Prince, 2017). The NBT MA assesses the understanding of mathematical concepts from the school mathematics curriculum, disciplines such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry, and is written by students planning to study for programmes that involve mathematics (Frith & Prince, 2018). The NBT results are categorised according to three performance levels: proficient, intermediate and basic. Because most prospective students' results position them at the intermediate level in all NBT domains, the band was split into intermediate upper (IU) and intermediate lower (IL) to illustrate the level of support the students will require (Frith & Prince, 2018). The students admitted with proficiency results are unlikely to encounter academic problems. Students who achieve intermediate upper results may require additional support, while those who achieve intermediate lower results should be enrolled in an extended degree programme. The students with basic levels may struggle to cope in the absence of long-term assistance, especially for degree purposes.

There are always many new applicants for health sciences programmes; however, very few spaces are available (Van der Merwe et al., 2015). While policies mandate that access be expanded to include students from previously excluded schools (mostly before 1994) and from lower quintile schools (Mzangwa, 2019), a high proportion of admitted students have attended quintile five schools (Mabizela & George, 2020; Orton et al., 2020). Eight years ago, five South African health science faculties employed the NBT and the NSC to

select and place students in the health sciences programmes (Van der Merwe et al., 2015); other faculties are still using NSC and interviews to select students (Orton et al., 2020). The NBT is a criterion-referenced assessment, which could be described as a test designed to illustrate students' competency levels in clearly defined domains that demand mastery (Bond, 1996; Foxcroft & Roodt, 2009). The NSC is a norm-referenced evaluation designed to categorise and rank learner-performance from top to bottom. At the time the study was conducted, both the National Benchmark Test (NBT) and National Senior Certificate (NSC) results were used to determine applicants' eligibility, with each contributing 50% to the composite index (CI). Although the study focused on three health sciences programmes, this admission policy was applied across all nine programmes in the Faculty of Health Sciences. The admission policy has since been revised. Five subjects are utilised to select and rank pupils using a composite index of NSC subjects and NBT domains. Level five is a requirement for English, mathematics, and life or physical sciences, the best two subjects and varying results in the NBT domains (Mabizela & George, 2020). The students' selection is based on four admission categories where 40% of places are reserved for top-performing students, and 20% of the remaining 60% are reserved for top rural students, top quintile one, and top black and coloured students.

The three health sciences programmes (Bachelor of Pharmacy, Bachelor of Occupational Therapy, and Bachelor of Physiotherapy) share some courses but also include programme-specific ones. All students take Introduction to Medical Sciences (18 NQF credits). Pharmacy students must complete CHEM1048A0 (36 NQF credits), while Occupational Therapy (OT) and Physiotherapy students take CHEM1029A and CHEM1028A (18 NQF credits each). Students in all three programmes must complete physics, but Pharmacy and OT students take PHYS1008A, while Physiotherapy students take PHYS1009 (all 18 NQF credits). Additional shared courses include first aid and computer literacy. Programme-specific courses include Pharmacy courses such as pharmaceutical practice and health systems sciences, while OT students take fundamentals of occupational science and Occupational Therapy. Physiotherapy students take Introduction to Physiotherapy (36 NQF credits). Both OT and Physiotherapy students also take courses such as basic principles of group and individual psychology, introduction to psychology, and human behavioural sciences (all 18 NQF credits). The courses are all designed to equip students with the foundational knowledge required for their respective fields, with some courses carrying different NQF credits across the programmes.

The Office of Student Success (OSS) offers health science students a wide range of support. First, a tutoring programme is available to all students, irrespective of the year of study. Further, students who need support are identified early through needs and class identification. OSS also offers personalised learning strategies, peer-tutoring initiatives for challenging subjects, targeted support for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and counselling and mental health resources (Mabizela & George, 2020). The concerns are that the NBT results are not used to identify students who need assistance, even though they provide insight into their levels of preparation for higher education. These services are tailored to meet the educational needs of students as many

enter university with entry-level skills, which may not be considered adequate for higher education demands (Smit, 2012).

Aim of the study

Understanding the predictive capacity of the admission tests and identifying the most significant predictors of first-year success, institutions can tailor academic support programmes, refine selection criteria, and ensure that students are adequately prepared for the academic demands of higher education. The aim of this study was to retrospectively understand the influence of the criterion- and norm-referenced selection tests among students who have successfully passed the first year of study. The first objective was to determine the extent of variability accounted for by the three NBT domains, while controlling for four NSC subjects, and the second objective was to identify significant predictors associated with passing the first year of study. The final objective was to determine whether significant differences in first-year academic performance exist for students admitted with different NBT proficiency levels.

Literature review

The patterns of privilege, especially social class and socio-economic status, have been singled out as significant predictors of participation in higher education (Mzangwa, 2019; Orton et al., 2020; Smit, 2012). The unequal standards of education that plague the South African basic education system may be understood by the school quintile system, which ranks schools based on the unemployment rate and literacy of the community where the school is located (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019; Van Dyk & White, 2019). The school quintile ranges from one to five, with quintile one schools being the poorest and quintile five the most affluent (Venkat & Spaul, 2015). As a result, the school quintile system has largely reproduced educational disparities even though the intention was to do the opposite (Mabizela & George, 2020). According to existing literature, the lower quintile schools (1–3) produce learners who are not adequately prepared for higher education programmes (Walton et al., 2016). Venkat and Spaul (2015) posit that teachers with high content knowledge (Mathematics) are concentrated in quintile five schools. Quintile four and five schools produce the largest body of students in higher education, students who meet admission requirements and graduate (Walton et al., 2016).

There is adequate evidence for higher education institutions to contemplate an additional selection test for the NSC in choosing students for higher education programmes. The National Senior Certificate (NSC) was found to account for 24% of the variance in academic success in a radiography study programme (Kridiotis et al., 2016). The academic performance of first-year UNISA students was found to have a variance of only 26.7% attributable to the NSC (Visser & Van Zyl, 2013). By Cohen's (1988) convention, the effect sizes of the R^2 coefficients mentioned above range from large to medium (Allen et al., 2014). When used together, NSC results and NBT domains accounted for 45% of the variance in the academic success of first-year medical students (Mabizela & George, 2020). Similar results were observed in the Physiotherapy programmes, where the NSC and NBT explained 41% of the variance for students who passed the first year of study (Mabizela et al., 2020).

These results demonstrate the compatibility of the two selection tests in explaining students' academic success, rather than relying on the NSC alone. More recently, there have been concerns about the appointment and competency of the NSC examiners. The author argues that the limitations of the existing examination process necessitate an additional assessment criterion to help the institution better understand the abilities and preparedness of prospective students. (Van Wyk et al., 2020).

According to Anderton et al. (2016), the results of admission tests have a significant impact on the academic trajectory of students. Meagher et al. (2006) conducted a study to examine the predictive validity of the Pharmacy College Admission Test. The results of the study indicated that the test was a reliable predictor of academic success in the completion of the Pharmacy programme. Furthermore, a study comprising three cohorts was conducted to gain a deeper comprehension of the determinants of academic success in the field of health sciences. The study revealed that students who had accomplished an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) in human biology, chemistry, and physics demonstrated higher average scores compared to their peers (Anderton et al., 2016). Whereas Anderton et al. (2016) found no correlation between socio-economic factors and academic performance, the quality of education and school quintiles remain significant threats to students' academic outcomes, particularly in low- to middle-income nations. The sources cited in the text are Kim et al. (2019) and Van Dyk and White (2019).

Low student retention and throughput rates are arguably a universal concern (Crosling et al., 2009). However, the disparities in access to quality education at a basic level influence students' readiness for higher education in South Africa (Agherdien et al., 2018; Hobden & Hobden, 2015; Walton et al., 2016). The curriculum structure, financial issues, adjusting to campus life, and studying in a second language often deter smooth academic progress (Bojuwoye, 2002; Manik, 2015; Smit, 2012). As a result, poor academic performance and low throughput rates are still defining features of higher education in South Africa (Ayuk & Koma, 2019; Manik, 2015).

Methodology

Sample

The School of Therapeutic Sciences offers four programmes: (1) Bachelor of Nursing, (2) Bachelor of Physiotherapy, (3) Bachelor of Pharmacy, and (4) Bachelor of Occupational Therapy. Only the last three programmes were selected because the admission requirements results are the same. The study's population comprised 1,581 students who were newly registered between the years 2012 and 2018.

Research design

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to explore the variance explained by the three NBT domains and four NSC subjects. Hierarchical regression is a statistical method that examines the linear relationship between a continuous dependent variable and two or more independent variables (Mabizela, 2025). The hierarchical multiple regression allowed the NBT and the NSC to be entered into two separate blocks to compare the *R*² coefficients for

each set of variables and identify statistically significant variables predicting success in the first-year of study. The analysis included 930 students who successfully completed their first year. The reasons for exclusion are explained below.

A total of 651 cases were excluded: 260 due to failure or discontinuation, 247 for missing NSC subjects, 12 for missing NBT results, and 132 for violating regression assumptions normality, outliers, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity (Allen et al., 2014; Ghorbani, 2019; Osborne & Waters, 2002; Williams et al., 2013). The p -value of the ANOVA F statistics was used to confirm the model fit before interpreting and reporting the results (Allen et al., 2014). The R^2 , which shows the accurate proportion of the variation explained by the NBT and the NSC, was reported. The study reported unstandardised (B) and standardised (β) coefficients with significance levels to identify key predictors of first-year academic success (Allen et al., 2014). Lastly, the effect size of the model was reported based on Cohen's convention (Cohen, 1988).

The study employed ANOVA to assess the means and identify any significant statistical disparities in the academic achievement of first-year students who were admitted based on their NBT domains. These domains comprised proficient, intermediate upper, intermediate lower, and basic levels. Fewer students had basic levels for NBT AL and QL, so the intermediate lower and basic level cases were merged. The data were subjected to assumptions testing for the ANOVA analysis and $n = 1,377$ of the total sample was analysed. The NBT domains were categorised according to the performance levels used as independent grouping variables, while the first-year progression outcome was entered as a continuous dependent variable. Gabriel's procedure was utilised because NBT results varied across domains, and it has a statistically significant advantage when group sizes are unequal (Allen et al., 2014). The ANOVA test for variability between and within groups, Gabriel's post-hoc results using $p = 0.005$, and the effect size are all reported.

Results

The results show that 41% ($n = 642$) were African students and 30% ($n = 481$) were white students. More female students, 78% ($n = 1,232$), were admitted compared to 22% male students ($n = 349$). Also, 80% (1,265) of the students were from urban origin. See the sample description in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Description of the sample

Variables		N	%
Programme of study	Bachelor of Occupational Therapy	454	29%
	Bachelor of Physiology	460	29%
	Bachelor of Pharmacy	667	42%
Race	African	642	41%
	White	481	30%
	Coloured	83	5%
	Indian	369	23%
	Chinese	6	0%

Variables		N	%
Gender	Male	349	22%
	Female	1,232	78%
Place of origin	Rural	250	16%
	Urban	1,265	80%
	Unknown	66	4%
School quintile	School quintile 1	52	3%
	School quintile 2	86	5%
	School quintile 3	128	8%
	School quintile 4	130	8%
	School quintile 5	1,165	74%
	Unknown	20	1%

Descriptive statistic

The results show that students performed better in NSC subjects than in NBTs. First-year results averaged 64.99% (SD = 7.02). NSC mathematics (76.34%) and life sciences (80.22%) had the highest means, while NBT mathematics was lower (54.58%, SD = 13.62). Academic literacy (68.26%) and quantitative literacy (60.86%) were moderate. The differences suggest that NSC scores reflect curriculum-based knowledge, while NBTs assess broader cognitive skills. These trends suggest strong NSC performance relative to the more varied outcomes in NBT domains, highlighting potential differences in preparedness for higher education.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of variables used in the hierarchical multiple regression

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
First-year results	64.99	7.015	930
NBT Mathematics	54.58	13.615	930
NBT Academic literacy	68.26	10.167	930
NBT Quantitative literacy	60.86	11.720	930
NSC English	76.27	6.560	930
NSC Maths	76.34	8.706	930
NSC Life sciences	80.22	6.553	930
NSC Physical sciences	73.68	9.914	930

The results indicate that the NBT domains alone explained 15% of the variance in first-year performance, $R^2 = 0.154$, $F(3, 926) = 56.061$, $p < 0.000$, with NBT mathematics and NBT academic literacy being significant predictors. When NSC English, mathematics, physical sciences, and life sciences were added, they explained an additional 12% of the variance, $R^2 = 0.124$, $F(4, 922) = 39.566$, $p < 0.000$. The final model, combining both NBT and NSC variables, accounted for 28% of the variance $R^2 = 0.278$, $F(7, 922) = 50.638$, $p < 0.000$, highlighting the strong predictive power of NSC mathematics, life sciences, and academic

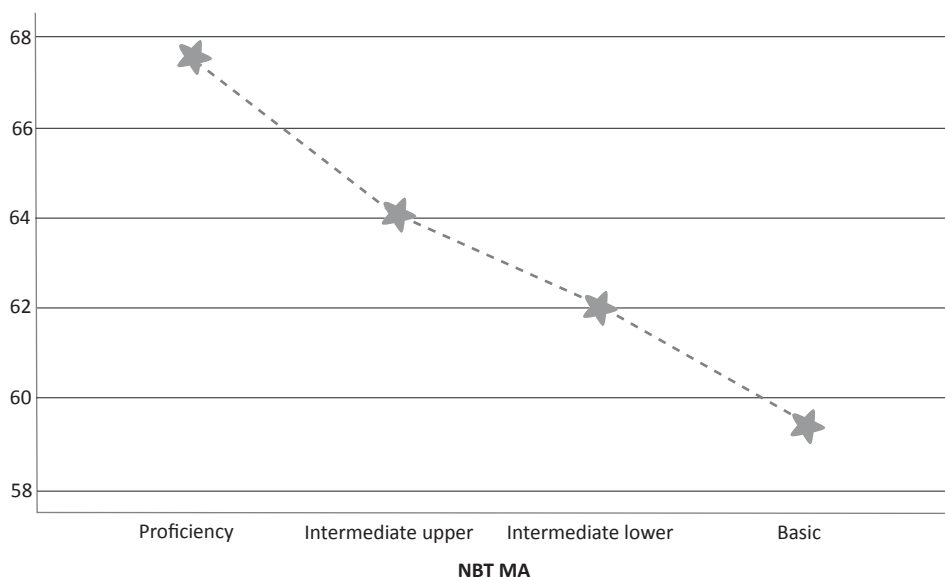
literacy. By Cohen’s (1988) convention, the effect size of this model was large, $f = 0.38$. See Table 3 below.

Table 3: NBT and NSC subject regression coefficients

Model	Independent Variables	B [CI 95%]	Beta	Sig
1	NBT Mathematics	0.099 [0.066, 0.133]	0.192	0.000***
	NBT Academic literacy	0.207 [0.161, 0.253]	0.300	0.000***
	NBT Quantitative literacy	0.009 [-0.034, 0.052]	0.015	0.684
2	NBT Mathematics	0.002 [-0.035, 0.039]	0.003	0.932
	NBT Academic literacy	0.191 [0.144, 0.238]	0.276	0.000***
	NBT Quantitative literacy	0.011 [-0.029, 0.052]	0.019	0.579
	NSC English	0.070 [0.001, 0.140]	0.066	0.047***
	NSC Mathematics	0.142 [0.071, 0.212]	0.176	0.000***
	NSC Life sciences	0.191 [0.110, 0.272]	0.178	0.000***
	NSC Physical sciences	0.058 [-0.002, 0.118]	0.082	0.059

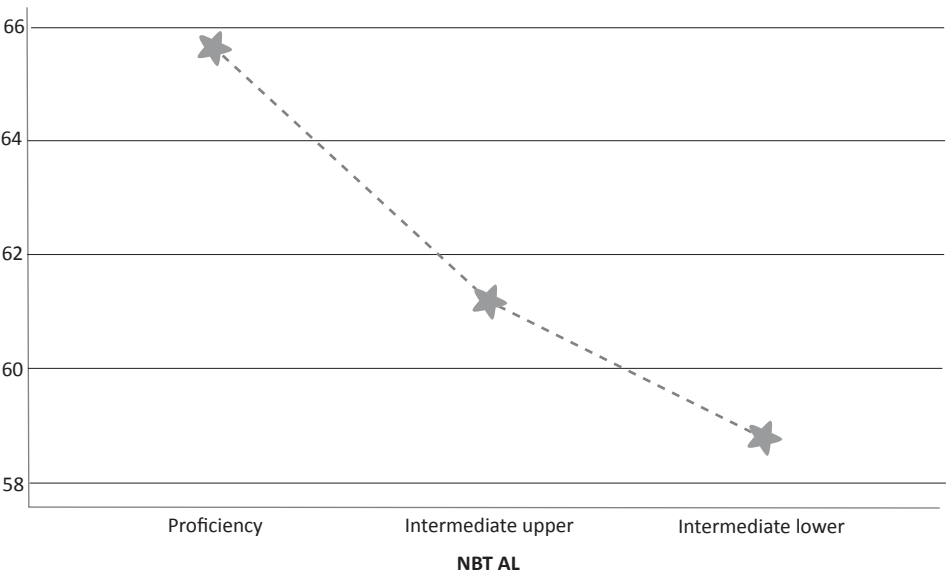
The ANOVA test for NBT mathematics (MA) was statistically significant, indicating that the performance levels influenced the first-year progression outcome, $F(3, 1373) = 36.386$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.074$. Gabriel’s post-hoc procedure showed that students with proficient levels ($M = 67.58$, $SD = 7.98$) had higher academic scores than students with lower performance levels, IU ($M = 64.13$, $SD = 8.05$), mean difference 3.45, $p < 0.000$; IL ($M = 62.08$, $SD = 7.49$), mean difference 5.507, $p < 0.000$, and basic ($M = 59.52$, $SD = 7.53$), mean difference 8.06, $p < 0.007$. See Figure 1 below, showing the mean scores by the NBT proficiency levels.

Figure 1. NBT Mathematics and YOS1-means plot



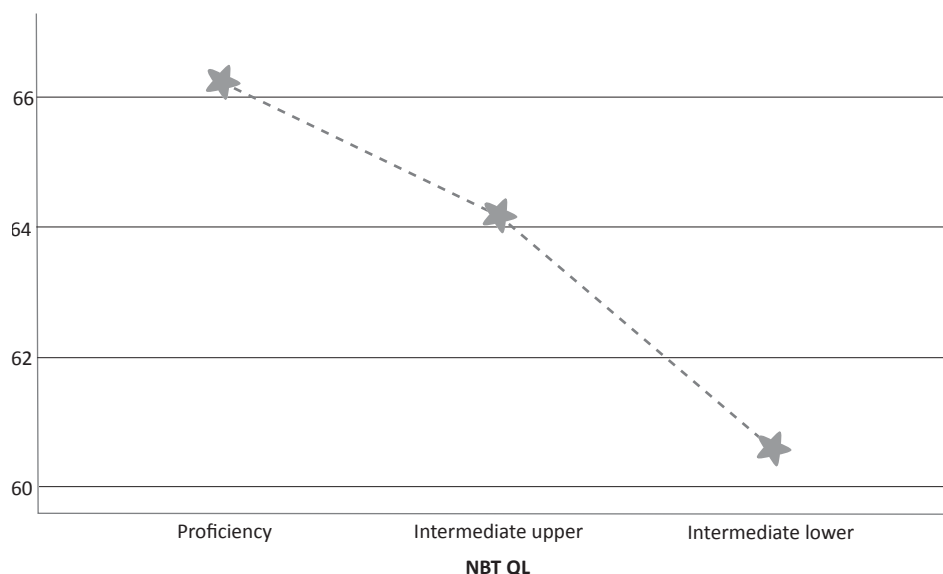
The ANOVA test for NBT AL was statistically significant, indicating that the NBT AL performance levels influenced the first-year grade-point average, $F(2, 1374) = 78.468, p = 0.000, \eta^2 = 0.103$. Gabriel's post-hoc procedure showed that students with proficient levels ($M = 65.64, SD = 7.92$) had higher academic scores than students with IU ($M = 61.15, SD = 7.45$), a mean difference of 4.48, $p < 0.000$, and students with IL ($M = 58.77, SD = 6.72$), with a mean difference 6.871 $p < 0.003$. See Figure 2 below, showing the mean scores by the NBT proficiency levels.

Figure 2. NBT Academic literacy and YOS1-means plot



The ANOVA test for NBT QL was statistically significant, indicating that the NBT QL performance levels influenced the first-year grade-point average, $F(2, 1374) = 53.563, p = 0.000, \eta^2 = 0.062$. Gabriel's post-hoc procedure showed that students with proficient levels ($M = 65.64, SD = 8.05$) had higher academic scores than students with lower performance levels IU ($M = 61.15, SD = 7.88$), with a mean difference of 2.07, $p < 0.000$, and IL ($M = 58.77, SD = 7.45$), with a mean difference of 5.66, $p < 0.000$. See Figure 3 below, showing the mean scores by the NBT proficiency levels.

Figure 3. NBT Quantitative literacy and YOS1-means plot



Discussion

The study found that both the NBT domains and NSC subjects significantly predicted first-year academic success, explaining 15% and 12% of the variance, respectively. In hierarchical regression, NBT academic literacy (AL) and NSC English, mathematics, and life sciences were significant predictors. The model had a large effect size $f = 0.38$. ANOVA results showed significant differences in academic performance based on NBT domain proficiency, with students admitted at higher proficiency levels performing better. These findings highlight the importance of providing support to students with lower entry-level skills in the NBT domains.

The NBT is a criterion-referenced assessment that complements the NSC and accurately predicts success in the first years of study (Wilson-Strydom, 2012). Mabizela and George (2020) found that the NBT and NSC accounted for 26% and 19% of the variation in academic accomplishment among medical students. Furthermore, Rankin et al. (2012) also submit that the NBT and the NSC results are crucial predictors of academic success in first-year economics. These results indicate the value of using the NBT as an additional tool for selecting and placing students (Wadee & Cliff, 2016) against the backdrop that the NSC is linked with limited predictive capacity (Rankin et al., 2012).

As the NBT assesses student ability in three domains related to the higher education curriculum, the results of this study indicate that NBT MA and AL were critical variables for passing the first year. The predictive capacity of the NBT AL for success in the first year has been confirmed in other studies (Mabizela et al., 2020; Wilson-Strydom, 2012), and the NBT MA and QL have been identified as significant predictors in the early years of medical education (Mabizela & Green-Thompson, 2019). The NBT QL was not associated with predicting success in the first year of study and similar results were observed in a study

which assessed the predictive capacity of the AP scores and NBT domains on first-year semester modules (Wilson-Strydom, 2012). The NSC English, mathematics, and life sciences were significant predictors. This study's results strengthen the notion of a complementary relationship between the two assessments in selecting the students (Rankin et al., 2012).

Taking the discussion of the NBTs further, the performance levels of the NBT domains are critical for both students and higher education institutions. On the one hand, the students need to know their entry-level academic skills such as writing, reading, comprehension, and study skills and the available support before beginning their study programmes. On the other hand, the institutions are responsible for providing support to the students in need. The concern is how effectively the institution under study, as well as other universities, are using the NBT to guide their support programmes and how prepared lecturers are to teach students with low entry-level skills. In this study, ANOVA results revealed that statistically significant differences in academic performance exist for all three NBT domains. The students with proficiency levels have higher mean scores than those admitted with lower proficiency levels. There are similar results where the academic performances of students with proficiency levels outweigh those of students with intermediate upper, lower, or basic levels (Mabizela & George, 2020). These results confirm the assumptions of the NBT performance levels and suggest that students admitted with intermediate upper (IU), intermediate lower (IL), and basic proficiency should receive targeted academic support to strengthen their entry-level skills. In practice, this could include extended orientation programmes, foundational or bridging courses, as well as structured tutorial support. Additionally, academic advising, early alert systems to identify at-risk students, and peer-assisted learning initiatives could be implemented to address specific challenges.

Limitations and implications for future studies

The first limitation of this study is that the first-year progression outcome used as a dependent variable is derived from first-year subjects of the three programmes. These programmes share similar subjects, but there are also subjects unique to each programme. Concerns about overlaps of these subjects may influence the students' first-year progression outcome. However, the study has offered perspectives on the links between selection tools and students' academic performance in the first year of study. Also, the number of first-year subjects within these programmes is not the same. Future studies should consider assessing the link between academic performance and the disparities in levels of preparedness arising from the different school quintiles.

Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the importance of the NBT as an additional tool beyond the selection of students. First, the NBT must be used as a guiding tool to follow the academic performance of students admitted with lower performance levels and provide necessary curriculum support to them to increase possibilities for academic success and student retention. Second, the NBT domains should be used to inform the student's language, mathematics, and quantitative academic support needs to promote their

chances of success. Lastly, educators also need assistance to create a supportive and inclusive teaching environment that caters for the needs of underprepared students.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand (No.: M220561). The students' secondary data were obtained from the Business Intelligence Service Unit for research purposes. The permission to conduct research on students was granted by the university Registrar. Informed consent was waived as secondary data analysis was used.

Potential conflict of interests

There are no conflicts of interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating identity and adaptation: International student adjustment and success at the University of Namibia

Ukuhamba endleleni yobuyena nokuzijwayeza: Ukuzinza nokuphumelela kwabafundi bamazwe angaphandle eNyuvesi yaseNamibia

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the cognitive orientation of international students at the University of Namibia main campus in Windhoek, focusing on cultural identity, cultural adaptation and adaptation to university life. Guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory and the conceptual model of international student adjustment, adaptation was explored as three interrelated processes influencing the success of an international student in a foreign country. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 12 international students. The study revealed three main themes: (1) cultural identity, (2) cultural adaptation, and (3) adaptation to university life. Cultural identity was found to carry connotative meanings shaped by geographical influences. Adjustment emerged as a complex process affected by multiple factors, with successful adaptation closely linked to societal support from nationals, institutional structures, and networks with fellow international students. It is recommended that higher education institutions develop tailored programmes and processes responsive to their specific contexts and student populations. Such initiatives should facilitate smoother cultural adaptation and university adjustment while preserving students' cultural identities, as these are critical factors for the academic success of international students.

KEYWORDS

Cognitive orientation, collectivism, cultural adaptation, cultural identity, emotional affect, psychological impact, Namibia

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ISIFINYEZO

Ukushiya isimo esisodwa semfundo uye kwesinye kanye nokuthuthela ezweni elisha ukuze uyofunda sekuyinto eyenzeka kakhulu. Umthelela wezengqondo nemizwa kumfundi wezizwe ohamba kuye kwelinye izwe uletha ubunzima njengoba bengaphazanyiswa yizinto ezinhlobonhlobo njengezifundo kanye nezokuhlalisana, ezingase zithinte ukwakheka kobunjalo bamasiko abo futhi ekugcineni kuthinte nokuphumelela kwabo ezifundweni. Lolu cwaningo luhlale ukulungiseka kwengqondo kubafundi bezizwe endaweni yobumbano eNyuvesi yaseNamibia eWindhoek, kusetshenziswa ithiyori yokufunda kwezenhlalo (Social Learning Theory) ka-Bandura kanye nemodeli yokuqonda ukujwayela nokuzivumelanisa nezimo kubafundi bezizwe. Kulokhu, ukuzivumelanisa nezimo kubhekwa njengezinqubo ezintathu ezihlobene zokuhlola ukujwayela kwabo impilo yasenyuvesi, ukuhlola ukuqonda kwabo ngobunjalo bamasiko, ukuzivumelanisa namasiko, nokuthi lokhu kuthinta kanjani ukuphumelela kwabo njengabafundi. Kusetshenziswe indlela yocwaningo lohlahliyo lohlobo ukuze kuhlolwe ukuqonda kwabafundi bezizwe ezindaweni zobumbano kusetshenziswa indlela yemibuzo. Ulwazi lwaqoqwa kubafundi bezizwe abayi-12 kwathi ukuhlaziywa kwayo kwenziwa ngethematic analysis, lapho kwahlonishwa khona izihloko abalulekile ezindabeni zabahlanganyeli. Imiphumela iveze izihloko ezingamakhulu amathathu: ubunjalo bamasiko, ukuzivumelanisa namasiko, nokujwayela impilo yasenyuvesi. Imiphumela iveze ukuthi umqondo wobunjalo bamasiko unencazelo ejulile ethonywa yindawo umuntu aphuma kuyo. Ngaphezu kwalokho, imiphumela ikhombise ukuthi ukujwayela kuyinqubo eyinkimbinkimbi ethonywa yizinto eziningi, futhi ukuzivumelanisa ngempumelelo kuhlobene kakhulu nosizo lomphakathi oluvela kubantu bomdabu, ukusekelwa yisikhungo, kanye nosizo oluvela kwabanye abafundi bezizwe. Ngokusekelwe kule miphumela, ucwaningo lutuse ukuthi izikhungo zemfundo ephakeme kufanele zibe nezinqubo nezinhlelo ezenziwe ngokukhethekile kuye ngezikhungo zabo nabafundi, ezizogxila ekwenzeni lula ukuzivumelanisa namasiko nokujwayela inyuvesi, kuyilapho kugcinwa ubunjalo bamasiko njengezinto ezibalulekile ukuze abafundi bezizwe baphumelele ezifundweni zabo.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA

Ukubheka nokuqonda kwengqondo, ubunye/ukubambisana komphakathi, ukuzijwayeza kwamasiko, ubunjalo besiko, isimo semizwa, umthelela wezengqondo, iNamibia

Introduction

The psychological impact of student migration resonates both subjectively and objectively, particularly for international students in African contexts. Subjectively, student migration entails international students crossing borders with the intent of completing an entire degree or qualification outside their country of origin (Weber & Van Mol, 2023); while from an objective perspective, student migration is an intrinsic part of broader processes of development and social transformation associated with processes of modernisation and industrialisation driven by various macro-, meso- and micro-level factors (De Haas et al., 2020). International student mobility has increased sharply over the past two decades, rising

from 2.2 million in 2001 to more than 6 million in 2021, and effectively tripling within 20 years (Unesco, 2023; Chellaraj, 2019). Relocating to a new academic environment poses challenges, as international students are often affected by academic and social factors that influence the construction of their cultural identities (Roy & Al Harthy, 2022). Mahmood and Galloway Burke (2018) shared that many international students, especially in the United States, experience acculturation challenges that shape their overall academic and social experiences.

With this increase in mobility, cultural adaptation has become increasingly significant as students navigate new academic, social, and cultural landscapes. Existing studies have tended to focus on daily fluctuations in cultural identity salience, neglecting the underlying developmental processes (Meca et al., 2021). Students entering university life, whether from Western or African backgrounds, bring diverse cultural heritages that can enrich intercultural awareness (Girmay, 2017); however, those from collectivist cultures, such as Asia, often face acculturative stress when navigating contrasting norms and values (Ma et al., 2020). Collectivism itself shapes students' beliefs about higher education and their roles within it (Carson, 2009), yet also creates tension when confronted by dominant, non-collectivistic cultural perspectives. As Adegbola et al. (2018) observe, international students frequently struggle with identity negotiation in contexts where they face contrasting cultures from various environments.

Against this backdrop, the present study explored the cognitive orientation of international students in a collectivist setting at the University of Namibia, focusing on cultural identity, cultural adaptation, and adaptation to university life as key dimensions influencing academic success. This article is structured as follows. First, an overview of the literature and the theoretical frameworks is provided. Then, the aim and guiding research question are presented. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach and the findings from the qualitative study. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and proposed avenues for further research.

Literature review

This review of the literature considers three broad areas. First, the conceptual foundations of international student adaptation are considered. Then, the dynamics of integration in multicultural contexts are considered. The section concludes with considering the conceptual framework of the study.

Conceptual foundations of international student adaptation

International student adaptation is shaped by interdependent constructs that situate identity within sociocultural, cognitive, and affective domains. First, cultural identity, anchored in race, ethnicity, and geography, delineates both communal distinctiveness and individual self-construal (Unger, 2011; Karjalainen, 2020). Cultural identity also operates across macro levels of national or regional belonging and micro levels of psychological orientation, encompassing attitudes, cognitions, and emotions toward specific groups (Yan, 2018).

Cultural adaptation refers to the internal changes necessary to function effectively in unfamiliar cultural settings, encompassing behavioural adjustment, the acquisition of new knowledge, and the development of intercultural competence (Czajkowska, 2017; Kim, 2012; Cui, 2023). Within collectivist societies, adaptation is further influenced by values such as interdependence, social harmony, and communal responsibility (Cheng et al., 2020). Emotional affect and psychological impact capture the motivational and dispositional consequences of these processes, extending from acute affective responses to broader patterns of social and psychological functioning (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2014; Schnall et al., 2010; de Oliveira et al., 2013).

Adaptation to university life demands recalibration to advanced pedagogical methods and more complex social structures. It requires balancing independence, responsibility, and decision-making while navigating less structured environments (Gonta & Bulgac, 2019; Nasr & Faid, 2020). This process, defined as the dynamic alignment between student and educational environment, integrates both interpersonal and institutional dimensions (Shamionov et al., 2020). Cognitive orientation exerts a decisive influence on adaptation: while Peer et al. (2015) emphasize its instrumental role in mediating self–environment relations, Kreitler et al. (2012) conceptualise it as a meaning system composed of beliefs, goals, and norms that shape cognition and behaviour. The latter definition is adopted in this study to foreground cognition as an active determinant of adaptation trajectories.

Dynamics of integration in multicultural contexts

The transition into African multicultural universities amplifies the interaction between cultural identity, cognition, and adaptation, producing hybridised forms of belonging and integration. Immersion is neither a passive assimilation nor a unilateral cultural absorption. Instead, drawing on Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, international students construct hybrid cultural spaces that blend elements of their home and host traditions (Cena et al., 2021; Bhandari et al., 2018). This hybridity fosters placemaking and deeper immersion (Covarrubias et al., 2015) while simultaneously confronting students with discourses of otherness that perpetuate boundaries between “us” and “them” (Roy & Al Harthy, 2022). Immersion is therefore best conceptualised as a reciprocal negotiation in which cultural identity is both destabilised and reconstituted.

Adaptation is critically shaped by motivational expectations and the value attached to successful adjustment. Zhou and Curle (2026), applying the Expectancy-Value Model, demonstrate that both expectation of success and perceived value drive academic, sociocultural, and psychological outcomes. In African collectivist settings, Social Support Theory (Cobb, 1976) and Acculturation Stress Theory (Berry, 2006) underscore the buffering role of supportive peer networks in mitigating stress and facilitating wellbeing (Oduwaye et al., 2023; Leahy-Warren, 2014). Failure to integrate into these networks, by contrast, exacerbates marginality and identity confusion (Ren & Jiang, 2021). Yet, the literature remains underdeveloped regarding the role of language barriers and cultural dissonance, particularly for students from individualistic societies adapting within strongly collectivist contexts.

Social integration represents the culmination of adaptation processes and is predicated on the formation of belonging and social identity. Hybrid cultural identities enhance belonging, which is recognised as a critical psychological need in higher education (Allen et al., 2021). Social Identity Theory posits that integration occurs when students align with university groups that affirm and stabilise self-identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg, 2018). Multicultural Personality Theory further suggests that traits such as openness and emotional stability support effective functioning in diverse environments (Ramirez, 1998; Oduwaye et al., 2023). Thus, integration is both affective and behavioural, securing students' embeddedness within the social fabric of the university.

Conceptual framework of the study

The theoretical conceptualisation of this study is informed by the work of Schartner and Young (2020), who situate international students within the broader category of temporary migrants who intend to return to their home country after completing a specific purpose abroad, such as academic study, diplomatic service, or humanitarian work (Sussman, 2002; Ward et al., 2001). Recognising the multifaceted nature of cross-cultural transitions, Zhou et al. (2008) argue for an integrative model to address the distinct yet interconnected domains of adjustment and adaptation. Schartner and Young (2020) provide a crucial distinction between these two constructs. First, adjustment is conceptualised as the longitudinal process of change over time. In contrast, adaptation refers to the measurable outcomes in key areas, namely the psychological, sociocultural, and academic domains.

This distinction builds upon established frameworks. Psychological adjustment pertains to the affective response and emotional wellbeing in a new environment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Anderson et al., 2002), while sociocultural adjustment concerns the behavioural competence in managing everyday life and social interactions within the host culture (Black et al., 1991; Ward et al., 2001). Schartner and Young's (2020) model synthesizes these ideas, viewing adjustment as the process (involving cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and learning) and adaptation as its outcome.

It is against this conceptual backdrop that the integrated framework of Social Learning Theory and Schartner and Young's (2020) model was deemed appropriate for this study. This combination offers a robust lens for understanding how multiple dimensions of identity influence international students' perceptions of cultural belonging and their adjustment to university life.

However, while Social Learning Theory powerfully emphasizes the role of modelling and observational learning (Bandura, 1977), its application has limitations. The theory has been critiqued as a loosely organised framework that does not fully account for the role of innate cognitive processes and stable personality traits in information processing and behaviour (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012; Zeidner, 2008; Corr & Matthews, 2020). This uncertainty regarding the foundational elements of personality raises questions about the effectiveness of modelling complex psychological issues using the theory alone, thereby justifying its integration with a more specific model of student adaptation.

Aim and research question

The study being reported on qualitatively explored the cognitive orientation of international students at the University of Namibia's main campus in Windhoek, a multicultural environment. Drawing on Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Schartner and Young's (2020) conceptual model of international student adjustment, the research examined students' adaptation to university life.

The following research question guided the study:

How do the cultural identity dynamics and cognitive orientations of international students shape their cultural immersion, adaptation to university life, and social integration within African multicultural university environments?

The research methodology that guided the qualitative study is unpacked in the next section.

Research methodology

This study was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that social reality is subjectively constructed through cultural and historical contexts (Ryan, 2018). To align with this philosophy, a qualitative phenomenological design was employed to explore the lived experiences and cognitive orientations of international students within collectivist environments (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach prioritises the participants' subjective meanings as the primary source of knowledge.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who were information-rich regarding the phenomenon of interest (Boddy, 2016). The final sample consisted of 12 international undergraduate students from the University of Namibia main campus. The sample size was consistent with established qualitative recommendations to achieve data saturation rather than statistical generalisability (Guest et al., 2006).

Recruitment of participants commenced after obtaining formal approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee and institutional permission from the International Office. A call for participation was disseminated, and interested students were screened against predefined inclusion criteria. To uphold the highest ethical standards, informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity was guaranteed using pseudonyms, and all data were stripped of personally identifiable information. The principle of non-maleficence was rigorously upheld by prioritising participant wellbeing throughout the research process.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, chosen for their capacity to generate rich, detailed accounts while ensuring key thematic areas were consistently explored (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). An interview guide, developed from an extensive literature review, provided a flexible framework to enhance the robustness and cultural sensitivity of the instrument. A pilot study was conducted with three students, allowing for the refinement of question clarity and prompts. Each formal interview lasted 30-40 minutes, was audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. In accordance with phenomenological principles, the researcher practised bracketing

(epoché), which involved the conscious setting aside of pre-existing assumptions and biases during data collection and the initial phases of analysis to ensure that interpretations were derived as faithfully as possible from the participants' own accounts.

The data were subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun et al. (2019). This involved an iterative process of (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Inductive coding was used in this study. Inductive coding prioritises the data, enabling researchers to discover themes and patterns directly from the data by immersing themselves in it to cultivate a rich understanding of the subject matter. The analysis was informed by a contextualist paradigm (Braun et al., 2019), which seeks to understand participants' lived experiences (an essentialist element) while acknowledging how these accounts are shaped by broader social discourses (a constructionist element). A reflexive journal was maintained to critically engage with the researcher's interpretive influence throughout the analytical process.

The trustworthiness of the findings was established by addressing the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Credibility was enhanced through theoretical triangulation (interpreting data through multiple conceptual lenses) and the pilot study (Stahl & King, 2020). Dependability and confirmability were achieved through a comprehensive audit trail that meticulously documented all data collection and analytical decisions, ensuring the process was logical, traceable, and transparent. Transferability was facilitated through thick, contextual description and reflexive auditing, providing sufficient detail for readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings (Rice & Ezzy, 2006).

Additionally, intercoder agreement checks, member validation, peer debriefing and audit trails were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Intercoder agreement checks were administered by comparing the coding of the same data by different coders within the research team to ensure consistency and reliability. For member checking, data were returned to selected participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their experiences. The researchers achieved peer debriefing by engaging with colleagues and experts to review their interpretations and the methodology used in the study, while audit trails were created by providing a detailed, transparent record of the research process.

Qualitative findings

Three key themes were identified in the study: (1) identity and culture, (2) adaptation and language barriers in a foreign country and (3) adaptation and cultural integration in a foreign country. Identity and culture emerged as social constructs shaped by collective belonging, evolving through experiences while balancing personal and external influences, and rooted in history and tradition.

Adaptation in a foreign country was described as a gradual and transformative process influenced by prior exposure, social support, and environmental factors. Language barriers posed significant challenges to social and academic integration, creating exclusion and difficulties in communication, particularly with Afrikaans.

Cultural integration required individuals to navigate social norms, expressions, and lifestyle changes, with some embracing local customs, while others struggled with exclusion. Overall, adaptation was seen as a journey of resilience and self-growth, requiring openness, perseverance, and engagement with new experiences.

The three overarching themes, and relevant sub-themes, are discussed in the sections that follow. This section is concluded with a discussion on “mapping the themes.”

Theme 1: Identity and culture

Participants were first required to deconstruct the terms ‘identity’ and ‘culture’; from their opinions, they demonstrate how identity and culture are intricately entwined, influencing both individual and societal life. Both are social and collective constructions that influence how people define themselves and how communities foster a sense of unity. They are also malleable and influenced by life events, changing as individuals move through various settings, engage with others, and develop personally. Identity and culture also entail striking a balance between individual characteristics and social influences, necessitating that people balance their perspective of themselves with that of others. Additionally, both have historical roots and have been transmitted via customs, rituals, and communal memory, which guarantees continuity while permitting change.

Identity and culture as collective and social constructs

Both identity and culture are seen as deeply rooted in collective belonging, shaped by social groups, environment, and traditions.

John ties both concepts together: “*Identity is a person’s collective being,*” and “*Culture is a group of people’s way of identifying themselves.*” This suggests that identity is formed within cultural frameworks. Beth similarly connects the two: “*Identity, to me, would be my source—how I view myself,*” while stating that “*Culture more so must do with the people around me and the impact of behaviors and norms instilled in me.*”

The study’s findings reinforce the notion that cultural norms influence personal identity. Central to this process is observational learning, whereby individuals acquire new behaviours by observing others (Ryckman, 2013). International students actively create a “hybrid space” by blending their native cultural backgrounds with the local culture they learn from societal influences (Cena et al., 2021). This act of hybridity is a crucial mechanism for identity creation and is powerful enough to facilitate a sense of placemaking in the new cultural context, thereby enabling deeper immersion (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Bhandari et al., 2018).

Identity and culture as ever-changing and shaped by experiences

Both concepts are viewed as fluid rather than fixed, constantly evolving over time, through experience, and exposure to diverse environments. Kate describes identity as “*not stagnant, something ever-changing with experiences and time.*” Rick similarly describes culture as “*acquired or socialised behaviours that one gets accustomed to growing up or during the course of life.*”

The participants' view of identity and culture as ever-changing and shaped by experiences is supported by the Social Learning Theory (1977) and Ryckman (2013), who agree that individuals acquire new behaviours (culture) by observing others over time.

Identity and culture as a balance of personal and external influences

Many participants expressed that both identity and culture are shaped by a combination of internal self-perception and external societal expectations. Belle describes identity as *"personal traits mixed with environmental factors,"* while defining culture as *"a set of environmental factors that a collective group may believe in or follow."* This suggests an ongoing negotiation between personal identity and cultural expectations, which are shaped by social influences (Bhandari et al., 2018; Roy & Al Harthy, 2022).

Identity and culture as rooted in history and tradition

Some participants emphasized the historical nature of both identity and culture, seeing them as inherited from previous generations. Ash defines culture as *"lineage passed on, mannerisms, rituals, celebrations, events, and clothes,"* highlighting its historical continuity. Jade describes culture as *"characteristic beliefs, norms, and values of a community that unite them."* Claire links identity to cultural continuity, stating, *"Identity is shaped by background, the things that piece the world together."* The assertion of culture being rooted in history and tradition is supported by Unger (2011) and Yan (2018), who advise that cultural identity operates at both macro and micro levels and is traditionally deeply rooted in national and regional affiliations.

Theme 2: Adaptation and language barriers in a foreign country

Participants' experiences illustrate that adaptation is a gradual process influenced by personal background, prior exposure, and local support systems. Some found the transition easier due to past experiences or cultural familiarity, while others struggled with environmental, social, and bureaucratic challenges. However, over time, friendships, familiarity with local customs, and personal growth helped them navigate their new environment, ultimately fostering independence and resilience.

Adaptation as a process of change and growth

Participants described adaptation as a gradual and evolving process that involved both positive transformations and initial challenges.

John noted that his personality had shifted due to the host country's overall structure, quietness, and work-life balance: *"Overall, I have become a lot quieter, more relaxed, and calmer. The lack of noise and the idea of ending work at seven really make things easier."* Belle, who has dual nationality, emphasized that her background had made her more adaptable: *"Being of dual nationality means you need to be quick on your feet when it comes to adapting."*

The participants' assertion that adaptation is a process of change and growth is supported by Schartner and Young (2020), grounding their theory of the study, which conceptualises adaptation as the longitudinal process of change over time. Additionally,

Shamionov et al. (2020, p. 816) define adaptation to university life as “the process and result of student adjustment to the educational environment, including the system of interpersonal relations in education, educational activities, and educational growth”.

Language as a barrier to social and academic integration

Language barriers amplified adaptation difficulties, as participants found themselves excluded in certain conversations and environments. David expressed how language limited his sense of belonging: *“As much as you’d want to fit in, it’s impossible if you don’t speak their language.”*

Ash recalled her frustrations in meetings, where English was supposed to be the medium of communication but wasn’t always used: *“No matter how many times I asked them to speak in English, they didn’t ...”*

Language as a barrier to social and academic integration assertion by participants is supported by Schartner and Young’s (2020) conceptual model of international student adjustment and adaptation theory which guides that adjustment is a longitudinal process of change over time as it could take some time before international students fully learn any language in the host country, however on fully comprehending that language their adaptation process is fast tracked.

Overcoming challenges and finding ways to adapt

Despite these difficulties, participants found ways to navigate language barriers and integrate into the new environment. Richard, Eve, Jane, and Jade acknowledged that while English was widely spoken, differences in accents and contextual language use posed additional challenges. John, Belle, and Rick highlighted the importance of understanding Afrikaans, as it played a major role in social interactions. Belle and Claire demonstrated resilience and gradual progress in adapting to the language: Belle: *“Language barriers have slowed my adaptability, but not to the point where I can’t adapt.”* Claire: *“Still a bit difficult, but slowly learning. As time passes, I will adapt.”*

Environmental and cultural factors shaping adaptation

Beyond language, other environmental and cultural elements influenced how participants adapted to their new surroundings. Rick initially struggled with the climate and different sunrise/sunset times: *“Adjusting to life was tough ... The weather and the sunrise/sunset times were so different.”* Claire found it challenging to make friends due to the language barrier but gradually overcame it: *“It’s not too hard to make friends, but communication-wise, it can be difficult.”*

Adaptation in a foreign country is a multifaceted process influenced by language, cultural differences, environment, and personal resilience. While participants can initially face exclusion due to language barriers, they gradually found ways to navigate communication challenges, form social connections, and adjust to new cultural norms. Adaptation is ultimately a journey of self-growth, requiring openness to change, perseverance, and the willingness to engage with new experiences.

Theme 3: Adaptation and cultural integration in a foreign country

Adapting to a foreign country is a complex process that involves both personal transformation and cultural integration. Individuals must navigate language barriers, social norms, environmental differences, and lifestyle changes, all while striving to maintain their identity. Cultural integration extends beyond adaptation, requiring individuals to adopt local customs, foster relationships, and establish a sense of belonging within their new environment.

Language as a barrier to cultural integration

Language was a significant challenge for many participants, making communication, cultural expression, and social integration difficult. David highlighted how language creates exclusion in social settings: *"It's impossible for you to fit in if you don't speak their language."* Ash felt alienated when local languages were used in formal settings: *"No matter how many times I asked them to speak in English, they didn't. They expect me to learn their language."*

Adjusting to cultural norms and expressions

Cultural differences in communication styles, social norms, and traditions required adaptation. Beth noted the reserved and submissive communication style of Namibians: *"They have a humble, submissive way of communicating, and my assertiveness can feel overpowering."* Eve admired the warmth and friendliness of Namibians despite hardships: *"They still have this kindness in them despite everything."*

Social exclusion and the role of Afrikaans

Afrikaans was noted as a common language that influenced social inclusion. Belle felt isolated in group settings when Afrikaans was spoken: *"I was the only non-Afrikaans speaker."* Rick saw Afrikaans as essential for social inclusion: *"There's some exclusion if you don't know Afrikaans – it's a common mode of communication here."*

The Afrikaans language is widely used as a medium of communication in many Namibian social and formal settings; thus, the language could prove to be a barrier to international students quickly adapting to the local environment if they do not fully understand the language. While participants could feel initially excluded due to language barriers, they gradually find ways to navigate communication challenges as in time they get to learn and understand the language (Schartner & Young, 2020; Shamionov et al., 2020).

Environmental and lifestyle adaptation

Participants had to adjust to new environmental and lifestyle factors in Namibia. John found Namibia's quietness and structured lifestyle enjoyable: *"I have become quieter, more relaxed. The structured work-life balance makes things easier."* Rick struggled with weather differences and daily routines: *"The new setting, new environment, different sunrise and sunset times—it was tough at first."*

The participants' assertion of the impact of environment and on lifestyle adaptation can be traced from the belief that an individual's functioning is determined by the continuous, reciprocal interaction of three sets of factors: (a) personal factors (e.g.

cognition, emotion), (b) behaviour, and (c) environmental influences (Bandura, 1978; Little, 2018).

Overcoming initial difficulties and finding independence

For many, adaptation was initially challenging but fostered growth and independence. Ash described adaptation as humbling yet empowering: *“Being alone in a foreign country is isolating, but I’ve learned so much. It’s made me more independent.”* Jane found administrative challenges difficult: *“We were lost because no one told us what was happening. But people were kind and tried to help us.”*

Adaptation and cultural integration in a foreign country involve navigating language barriers, social norms, environmental changes, and personal growth. While challenges like exclusion, communication barriers, and administrative struggles exist, the process ultimately fosters independence, cultural awareness, and resilience.

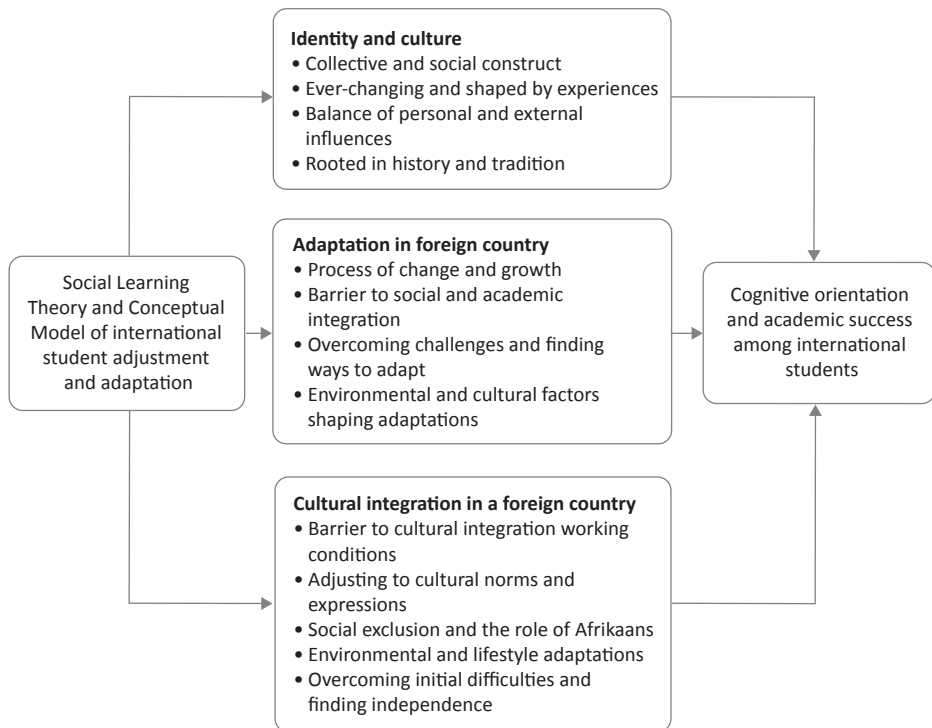
Mapping of themes

Figure 1 below serves as a graphical synthesis of Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Anderson’s Conceptual Model of Adjustment (Anderson et al., 2016) to create a more dynamic, process-oriented understanding of international student adaptation. The findings demonstrate that adaptation is an active process of social learning, where students observe, imitate, and model local behaviours to overcome barriers driven by motivations to avoid social exclusion and achieve belonging. This learning mechanism explains how students navigate the stages of adjustment, with language emerging as the paramount environmental barrier and identity negotiation as a critical cognitive factor. Ultimately, the research provides an integrated framework showing that successful adaptation results from the continuous interaction between personal agency (SLT) and contextual challenges (Conceptual Model), offering a nuanced lens for developing targeted support strategies that address both practical and psychological needs.

Discussion

The study reveals that identity and culture among international students are fundamentally social and collective constructs, shaped through shared environments, traditions, and interpersonal relationships (Ward et al., 2001; Sussman, 2002). Similarly, Schartner and Young (2020) outline that participants consistently link identity to their internal sense of self, while viewing culture as a collective framework that informs and influences that self-perception. Identity and culture are viewed not as fixed but as fluid and evolving over time, through experience, and with exposure to new settings (Zeidner, 2008; Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012). The fluid and evolving nature of identity and culture, emphasized by Kate and Rick, is consistent with Kim’s (2012) view of adaptation as an internal transformation process, where individuals gradually develop new cultural competencies (Czajkowska, 2017; Cui, 2023). The participants’ reflections on identity and cultural adaptation closely align with established theoretical frameworks, notably Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Conceptual Model of International Student Adjustment and Adaptation (Schartner & Young, 2020).

Figure 1. Mapping of themes



International students' experiences illustrate that cultural identity, as articulated by Unger (2011) and Karjalainen (2020) emerges through both a sense of collective belonging and individual psychological processes (Yan, 2018). Participants described identity as shaped by cultural norms but ultimately constructed through personal interpretation. Language barriers, highlighted by David and Ash, illustrate the sociocultural adjustment challenges central to Schartner and Young's (2020) model. In contrast, adaptive strategies such as John's contextual interpretation of Afrikaans exemplify Bandura's (1977) concept of observational learning in cross-cultural settings.

Moreover, the collectivist context of Namibia, as experienced by Eve and Beth, reinforces Oladipupo's (2022) characterisation of African collectivism, where group harmony and interdependence shape the adaptation process. Emotional challenges, such as Ash's feelings of isolation, reflect the emotional affect described by Barrett and Bliss-Moreau (2014), underscoring how environmental changes influence psychological wellbeing (de Oliveira et al., 2013). These findings validate the multidimensional nature of adaptation proposed by Schartner and Young (2020), encompassing psychological, sociocultural, and academic dimensions. However, they also expose the limitations of Social Learning Theory in accounting for intrinsic personality differences in adaptation outcomes (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012).

Experiences of adaptation highlighted the dual influence of personal agency and external societal expectations, where individuals negotiate who they are within the boundaries of cultural norms and histories (Berry, 2006; Corr & Matthews, 2020). While historical traditions and lineage give a foundation for cultural identity (Furnham & Bochner, 1982), as experienced by Ash, adaptation challenges – such as language barriers, climate differences, and unfamiliar social structures – prompt growth and transformation (Schartner & Young, 2016). Language emerged as a key barrier to both social integration and academic success, contributing to feelings of exclusion and difficulty in communication (Oduwaye et al., 2023), as shared by David.

Nevertheless, participants demonstrated resilience, gradually overcoming these challenges through relationship-building, learning local customs, and gaining a deeper understanding of their host environment (Schartner & Shields, 2023). Thus, identity and culture are shown to be dynamic and interdependent, constantly reshaped by individual experiences, collective interactions, and the broader process of cultural integration (Zhou et al., 2008; Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bierwiazczek & Waldzus, 2016).

Ultimately, the participants' narratives reveal the complex interplay of identity negotiation, cultural learning, and environmental factors in the adaptation process, emphasizing the need for institutional support that addresses both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of cross-cultural transitions.

Recommendations

International students are recommended to prepare thoroughly before arriving in host countries. This not only includes researching the culture, history, and university environment, but also ensuring that all necessary documentation is in order. Furthermore, understanding the immigration process and obtaining the required permits is important, thereby avoiding administrative challenges that may hinder one's adjustment. Second, students should approach their experience with an open mind, thereby embracing cultural differences and being willing to adapt to new environments. By cultivating a positive attitude towards learning about the host culture, an individual cannot only create meaningful connections with others but also foster a sense of belonging. Third, it is recommended that international students should view the first year as a period of adjustment rather than one of immediate success. Therefore, ensuring that individuals develop an understanding of the university system and set realistic expectations can lay a strong foundation for social and academic success in subsequent years. Students are also encouraged to seek assistance when needed, but to exercise discernment in choosing trustworthy sources of help. The utilisation of university resources, such as counselling services and mental health programmes, can provide culturally sensitive support and create a safe space for addressing emotional and psychological concerns.

Implications

Universities should provide more explicit guidance on the immigration process, including the obtaining of study permits and document certification. Specifically, the International Students Office could collaborate with local immigration authorities to provide detailed

pre-arrival guidance, including step-by-step instructions on obtaining the correct visa, required documents, deadlines, and potential delays, along with a checklist shared well in advance of students' arrival on campus. To ensure efficient communication, the university could establish dedicated channels, such as a hotline or email address, for direct communication between students and immigration officials. This would allow students to track their visa applications and resolve issues promptly. Additionally, the university could implement a streamlined appointment system for document certification, allowing students to book time slots in advance and avoid long lines.

To further reduce delays, the university could negotiate with local authorities to prioritise student visa processing during peak enrolment periods, thereby ensuring faster turnaround times. Beyond the first month of school, ongoing guidance should be provided, and an emergency support system could be established for students facing urgent visa issues, ensuring timely resolution with local authorities. A feedback system should be established to enable students to report delays or issues, thereby allowing the university to address inefficiencies promptly. Moreover, regular reminders about deadlines could also help students stay on track.

Lastly, an online platform could be developed to allow students to track document submission and certification processes in real time, where they can not only upload documents for pre-approval but also book appointments, thereby further improving efficiency and reducing wait times. Universities should enhance their administrative processes to ensure timely and effective communication with international students. This includes promptly responding to inquiries, providing clear instructions for registration, and offering proactive support for selecting modules. An easy to find international student service desk could also streamline these processes and create a more welcoming environment.

Universities should expand their support for cultural and social integration. Initiatives such as international student meetups, language exchange programmes, and cultural workshops can help bridge cultural gaps and foster connections between local and international students. These efforts would also address challenges related to language barriers and feelings of exclusion.

Limitations

Whilst this article emphasized the benefits of modelling and observational learning, several limitations should also be noted. First, the lack of constructive alignment between observational learning and societal personality traits, as it is inconclusive to assume that all individuals will carry out imitation in the mind of the observer.

Furthermore, the study was conducted at a specific university campus in Windhoek, Namibia and focused solely on undergraduate students. Therefore, this focus restricts the transferability of the qualitative findings to other contexts. However, single-site, small-sample designs can significantly impact the generalisability of research findings due to sampling ignorability, variability and bias, statistical analysis and the type of research questions administered to participants.

The findings point to the importance of further research to investigate re-entry adjustments for international students upon returning to their home country. This encompasses the exploration of how their experiences in Namibia and the personal changes they underwent during their stay influence their reintegration into their home cultures. Therefore, such inquiries facilitate an understanding of the long-term implications of cultural adaptation processes.

Finally, the study did not influence the psychological domain. Consequently, there was insufficient evidence to construe the implications of demographic characteristics on the participants' adaptation processes. It was beyond the scope of this study to address the social and cultural theoretical implications of cognitive development, positing the influence of culture-specific tools, private speech, and the zone of proximal development on international students (Rahmatirad, 2020). Following all this, there is a need to apply the findings of this study in other contexts. Implications for applying the findings in other contexts are crucial for ensuring that research findings can be utilised effectively in different circumstances.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the cognitive orientation of international students at the University of Namibia's main campus in Windhoek, a multicultural environment. Following a qualitative exploration, the study showcased three main themes: (1) cultural identity, (2) cultural adaptation, and (3) adaptation to university life. The findings revealed that the perceived notion of cultural identity harboured connotative implications, which were influenced by geographical influences. Furthermore, the findings indicated that adjustment is a complex process influenced by multiple factors, and successful adaptation was closely related to societal assistance, from nationals, institutional support, and help from other international students.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that institutions of higher learning develop tailored processes and programmes responsive to their specific contexts and student populations. Such initiatives should prioritise facilitating cultural adaptation and adjustment to university life while simultaneously affirming the importance of maintaining one's cultural identity. These factors are critical for enabling international students to thrive academically and socially. In conclusion, the study highlights that the psychological impact of student migration extends beyond an individual struggle to become a shared institutional responsibility, one that involves cultivating environments that foster identity, adaptation, and a sense of belonging.

Ethics statement

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Namibia Research and Ethics Committee (Human), reference number 2023-RECH-0120-244.

Potential conflict of interests

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

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Predictors of student mental health and academic competence Viashiria vya afya ya akili ya wanafunzi na umahiri wa kitaaluma

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ABSTRACT

Promoting tertiary students' academic success and mental health is increasingly recognised as a critical issue in education. In an effort to develop strategies to promote student success and mental health, an existing dataset was re-analysed to identify predictors of student academic competence and mental health, using the Biopsychosocial Model as a theoretical framework. Cross-sectional data collected from university students (n = 3,239) via an online survey during the COVID-19 pandemic were used. Structural equation modelling used various domains of wellness (physical, emotional, social, spiritual, financial, environmental, intellectual) as well as hope, coping and satisfaction with institutional support to predict mental health and academic competence (as proxy for academic success). Hope, coping and academic competence were the main direct predictors of mental health as well as several domains of wellness (intellectual, spiritual, emotional) through coping as mediator. Intellectual wellness, coping and satisfaction with institutional support were the most important predictors of academic competence. Tertiary institutions can use these findings to plan appropriate resources and services to promote and sustain students' mental health and academic functioning.

KEYWORDS

Mental health, academic competence, tertiary students, student support services, structural equation modelling

MUHTASARI

Kukuza mafanikio ya kitaaluma na afya ya akili ya wanafunzi wa elimu ya juu kunaendelea kutambuliwa kama suala muhimu katika sekta ya elimu. Katika jitihada za kuandaa mikakati ya kukuza mafanikio ya wanafunzi na afya yao ya akili, seti ya takwimu iliyokuwepo ilichambuliwa upya ili kubaini viashiria vya umahiri wa kitaaluma na afya ya akili ya wanafunzi, kwa kutumia modeli ya kibaioisaijokamii kama mfumo wa nadharia.

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Takwimu za sehemu mtambuka zilizokusanywa kutoka kwa wanafunzi wa chuo kikuu (n=3,239) kupitia utafiti wa mtandaoni wakati wa janga la COVID-19 zilitumika. Uundaji wa milinganyo ya upimaji ulitumia maeneo mbalimbali ya ustawi (kimwili, kihisia, kijamii, kiroho, kifedha, kimazingira na kiakili) pamoja na matumaini, mbinu za kukabiliana na hali, na kuridhika na msaada wa taasisi iii kutabiri afya ya akili na umahiri wa kitaaluma (kama kiashirio mbadala cha mafanikio ya kitaaluma). Matumaini, uwezo wa kukabiliana, na umahiri wa kitaaluma vilikuwa viashiria vikuu vya moja kwa moja vya afya ya akili, pamoja na maeneo kadhaa ya ustawi (kiakili, kiroho na kihisia) kupitia uwezo wa kukabiliana kama kiungo cha upatanishi. Ustawi wa kiakili, uwezo wa kukabiliana, na kuridhika na msaada wa taasisi vilikuwa viashirio muhimu zaidi vya umahiri wa kitaaluma. Taasisi za elimu ya juu zinaweza kutumia matokeo haya kupanga rasilimali na huduma zinazofaa iii kukuza na kudumisha afya ya akili ya wanafunzi pamoja na utendaji wao wa kitaaluma.

MANENO MUHIMU

Afya ya akili, umahiri wa kitaaluma, wanafunzi- wa elimu ya juu, huduma za msaada kwa wanafunzi, uundaji-wa milinganyo ya upimaji

Introduction

Promoting tertiary students' academic success and mental health (MH) is increasingly recognised as a critical issue in higher education. High dropout, reduced pass and low graduation rates have been reported (Marwala & Mpedi, 2022; Mbuva et al., 2021). In 2021, only 44% students completed their degrees in the minimum time (Mbuva et al., 2021). Additionally, literature increasingly highlights students' mental health challenges, which influence their success. A multi-country survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) which sampled 13,984 first-year students from 19 institutions in eight countries reported rising rates of psychological distress. A third of the students screened positive for at least one common DSM-IV disorder – anxiety, depression, or substance use (35.3% lifetime, 31.4% past 12 months) (Auerbach et al., 2018). This paints a disturbing picture of mental health in higher education. International and local studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed how various aspects of student wellbeing were negatively affected (Bain et al., 2023; Cao et al., 2020; Genç & Arslan, 2021; Moosa & Bekker, 2022; Sifunda et al., 2024). In a large study including 6,810 students from various South African universities, one-third of participants reported mild to severe distress during the pandemic. Younger students, females and those with high levels of COVID-risk perception reported higher rates of distress (Sifunda et al., 2024). Based on data from a longitudinal study of South African students initiated in 2015, Bantjes et al. (2023) argue that the increase in mental health issues during the pandemic was part of a pattern of steadily increasing mental disorders among students. The authors regard the pandemic as just one more stressor affecting students amidst ongoing adversity (such as poverty, unemployment, gender-based violence, student financing) and campus disruptions in recent years (Bantjes et al., 2023).

The high rates of academic challenges and mental disorders among students emphasized in recent research (Bantjes et al., 2023; Mbuviha et al., 2021) highlight the importance of campus-based support to promote student wellbeing because wellness factors affect academic success (Bantjes et al., 2023; Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Goodall et al., 2018). Bantjes et al. (2020a) show that providing effective treatment to first-year students with major depressive and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorders could yield a 23% proportional reduction in the prevalence of academic failure. This highlights the importance of mental health to promoting academic success. However, new development and support strategies should be developed because the research of Bantjes and colleagues (2020b) reports very low mental healthcare utilisation. They found that among first-year university students in South Africa, 18% of a sample of 1,402 students and 29% of those reporting mental health challenges in the past 12 months utilised student support services. Students thus do not adequately benefit from the mental health and support services currently available at tertiary institutions.

To support the development of appropriate services to optimally benefit students in higher education, this study aimed to identify variables that predict mental health and academic success of current South African students. In this article, we report on a re-analysis of quantitative data from a large sample of students collected through an online survey during the COVID-19 pandemic (Law-van Wyk et al., 2025; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021), to determine how different domains of subjective wellness contribute to students' mental health and academic competence (AC; as a proxy of academic success). The results can be used to suggest ways to promote student wellness and academic success. Although the data were collected during the pandemic, the results can also be relevant in non-crisis times.

Theoretical background

This research uses the Biopsychosocial Model (BPS) of health (Engel, 1977) and its recent developments, as theoretical framework. The model is built on the principle that health/outcome behaviour depends on dynamic interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors. All three components are in dynamic interaction, with each having the capacity to influence and transform the other. In line with this, the WHO (1995) defines wellness as a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellness, not merely the absence of disease. By renaming the model the 'sociopsychobio' model of health, Haslam et al. (2021) emphasize the influence of social components (i.e. social identity) on the psychological and biological components of people's lives.

In a recent development of the model, Sulmasy (2002) proposes an extension of the model by adding a spiritual component to form the biopsychosocial-spiritual model. This means that health/outcome behaviour involves the interdependent interaction of physical, mental, social and spiritual components, contributing to holistic health or wellbeing. In keeping with systems interaction (Hanson, 2013), more dimensions of health and wellbeing can be added to provide a more comprehensive understanding of human functioning and wellbeing.

The Eight Dimensions of Wellness (EDW) Model (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015) is such an extension of the BPS model. The EDW model identifies eight core interconnected

dimensions of human existence: (1) environment, (2) occupational, (3) financial, (4) social, (5) emotional, (6) physical, (7) intellectual, and (8) spiritual. The overlapping circles (Figure 1) illustrate the multidirectional interplay between the dimensions, where imbalances in one or a combination of dimensions, may cause a sense of non-fulfilment or mental health problems. For example, academic stress can result in emotional stress, which can lead to physical symptoms and less social interaction.

Figure 1. Eight dimensions of wellness



The eight dimensions of wellness are briefly defined below.

Emotional wellness is conceptualised in terms of three concepts in this research: (i) emotional wellness (EW), (ii) mental health and (iii) hope. Emotional wellness and mental health are differentiated based on Westerhof and Keyes's (2010) Two-Continua Model, where mental health and mental illness are not conceptualised as opposites, but as coexisting on separate continua, creating different states of subjective wellness. In this research, **emotional wellness** describes the presence or absence of emotional difficulties on the mental illness continuum, while **mental health** refers to the continuum between flourishing and languishing (i.e. between functioning well and experiencing subjective feelings of incompleteness, emptiness, or stagnation). The core components of MH include psychological wellbeing (purpose in life, self-realisation) and social wellbeing (being of social value) (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). This links to the WHO's (2022) definition of mental health as a state of wellbeing that enables people to cope with stress, realise their abilities, learn well, work well, and contribute to their community. **Hope** is defined as the capacity to develop pathways to

desired goals and motivate oneself through agency to use those pathways (Snyder, 2002). It is a goal-oriented dimension indicating a positive expectation toward future outcomes (Krafft et al., 2019). The fact that hope and optimism are linked to various indicators of health and wellbeing has been thoroughly documented (Krafft et al., 2019).

Academic competence (AC) is operationalised by drawing from the concepts of academic enablers (DiPerna, 2006), academic self-concept, self-efficacy and self-regulated learning (Ferla et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 2002), and psychological capital, which is a set of positive psychological resources including self-efficacy, optimism and resilience (Ortega-Maldonado & Salanova, 2018). In this research, academic competence is defined as a student's ability to manage academic work by demonstrating high self-efficacy and self-regulating behaviour towards learning, motivation, level of engagement and productivity, managing distractions and remaining committed to goal-directed behaviour. Students' perceived academic competence was assessed as a proxy for academic performance, as it was not possible to link anonymous respondents to their academic records.

Physical wellness includes maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including physical activity, a healthy diet, weight management, adequate sleep, and healthcare consultations to maintain physical health (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015). These practices promote physical health and also impact people's mental and emotional health.

Spiritual wellness involves meaning, purpose and a sense of balance and peace (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015). For many people, it involves religious activities.

Intellectual wellness involves lifelong learning, curiosity, the application and sharing of knowledge (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015). In this research, intellectual wellness was conceptualised as confidence in cognitive abilities, such as attention, information processing, learning and memory, decision-making, reasoning, critical thinking, and exploring new or different points of view.

Environmental wellness involves being in safe, healthy, and stimulating physical and social environments that support wellness (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015). In this research, environmental wellness is represented by two factors, that is (i) personal freedom and (ii) safety and security (see Table 1).

Financial wellness encompasses having sufficient resources to meet one's needs and control over one's finances (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015). It relates to managing money wisely, living within one's means, and preparing for emergencies, while recognising that everyone's financial situation differs.

Social wellness involves a sense of connectedness and belonging, as well as building effective, supportive social networks with friends, family, and the community, developing meaningful relationships and creating safe and inclusive spaces (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015).

In this research two variables that could act as mediating factors between dimensions of wellness and mental health and academic competence were added: (i) coping as a personal variable, and (ii) satisfaction with institutional support (SIS) as a contextual variable. These variables can be seen as *navigating* points that explain the process through which variables are related.

Coping is defined as “... cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific internal or external demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). The way in which people perceive or appraise stressful situations often determines how they choose to respond in order to cope with the stress of the situation. Through effective coping, students can manage difficult situations and stressors in their academic work and relationships.

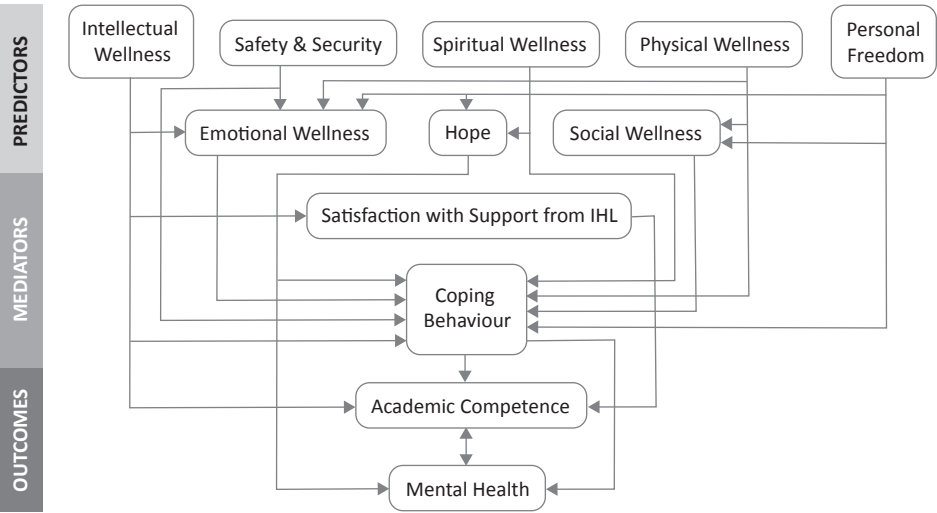
Institutional support describes university support services and resources available to students, such as study material, communication technology, guidance from lecturers, counselling services, and student leisure activities that could contribute to the wellbeing and academic success of students. During the pandemic, the university also provided free internet access, computers on loan, regular communication and online tutoring and support. These resources could contribute to student success.

The research hypotheses and objectives

This research aimed to determine (a) the impact of wellness dimensions (physical, social, emotional, hope, spiritual, intellectual, environmental) on students’ mental health and perceived academic competence; and (b) the mediating effects of coping and satisfaction with institutional support (SIS) on the relationship between wellness dimensions and outcomes in mental health and academic competence.

We hypothesized that most of the wellness domains would contribute to coping as a mediating factor affecting mental health and academic competence. Additionally, we hypothesized that mental health would be significantly affected by hope and academic competence and that satisfaction with institutional support and intellectual wellness would predict academic competence. The hypothesized interactions are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Hypothesized model: Exogenous and mediatory variables’ predictive value on endogenous variables



Specifically, we hypothesized that mental health would be influenced by physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellness, as well as hope. Intellectual wellness and a sense of academic competence is needed to have the confidence to succeed. Safety and security is needed to create an environment conducive to mental health.

To succeed academically, students need some level of overall wellness (Maharaj, 2018). Their physical needs (i.e. nutrition, sleep, health) must be met, they need to feel safe, secure, and have adequate accommodation to attend to academic work. They need a sense of individual autonomy (personal freedom), while also belonging to a community, with healthy relationships, especially with their lecturers and peers, whilst being supported within the larger educational environment. Emotional wellbeing and mental health are essential as students in emotional distress may not be able to function optimally on social and cognitive levels. A sense of intellectual wellness is also essential for academic success and feelings of competence within the educational context.

Research methods

Sampling

A cross-sectional study was conducted by sending an online survey link to all registered students ($n = 48,571$) of a large residential university during the COVID-19 pandemic in July 2020. The 5,074 respondents constituted a 10.4% response rate. After controlling for missing values, 3,239 questionnaires were included in the analysis. This was a self-selected volunteering sample.

Data collection instruments

The Eight Dimensions of Wellness Model (Swarbrick & Yudof, 2015) was used to develop questions to assess the dimensions of wellness as outlined above. A three-point Likert-type scale (almost never, occasionally, nearly every day) was used as the response format. Responses were coded so that higher scores reflected better wellness. Examples of the items per scale are provided in Table 1.

The Brief COPE questionnaire (Carver, 1997) informed coping items which reflected problem-focused, adaptive and non-adaptive emotion-focused coping. The 14 items were answered on a 3-point scale (not at all, sometimes, always). Items were scored so that a high score reflected constructive coping.

Three existing scales were included to comprehensively explore students' emotional wellness and mental health. The Patient Health Questionnaire for Depression and Anxiety (PHQ-4; Kroenke et al., 2009) was used to assess subjective experiences of depression and anxiety as part of the emotional wellness scale (mental illness continuum). It consists of two depression items (PHQ-2) and two anxiety items (GAD-2), which are shortened versions of the PHQ-9 and GAD-7, respectively. The two-item scales have been found to explain 84% of the variance of the extended versions. Both scales have good internal reliability (>0.80) and construct and clinical validity, and have been widely used in research as ultra-brief screening tools (Kroenke et al., 2009).

The Perceived Hope Scale (PHS; Krafft et al., 2019) assesses hope as a positive expectation about the future. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including good validity and internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha 0.87–0.89).

The 14-item Mental Health Continuum (MHC-SF) (Keyes & Lopez, 2002), used to assess mental health, contains three items that assess emotional wellbeing, six that assess Ryff’s dimensions of psychological wellbeing and five items that measure Keyes’ dimensions of social wellbeing (being of value to society). Responses were recorded on a 4-point scale (a reduced scale). A high score indicated flourishing, and a low score, languishing (Keyes & Lopez, 2002). This scale has been widely used worldwide and demonstrates good internal consistency (>0.80) and validity in the South African context (Keyes et al., 2008).

Students’ satisfaction with institutional support (SIS) was assessed with one question, rated on a sliding scale (1–100).

Factored scales and reliability

After analysing the suitability of the data for factor analysis, the 78 survey items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using robust diagonally weighted least squares (RDWLS) and weighted varimax. All items of the dimensions of wellness questionnaire were forced to load on nine wellness factors and oblique rotation provided the best-defined factor structure with strong loadings. Nine factors with eigenvalues greater than one were identified and labelled according to a dimension of wellness. A factor loading cut-off score of 0.4 was used and any loading with a value less than 0.4 was discarded. Survey items with cross-loadings were retained on factors that made theoretical sense (Table 1).

Eight dimensions of wellness matched well with seven of the nine factors, and were labelled accordingly. Environmental wellness did not correspond to any factor, although aspects of environmental wellness were reflected in two factors: (1) personal freedom and (2) safety and security, which together explained 20.25% of the variance. This was thought to be conceptually sound as the pandemic and the lockdown fundamentally altered people’s environments through restrictions to freedom and also impacted their sense of safety and security. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. The factored scales, reliability and examples of items are presented in Table 1.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the three existing scales used to explore students’ emotional and mental health: PHQ-4, mental health continuum, and perceived hope. The reliability of these scales for this data is reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of scales used

Scale	Eigenvalues	N =	Cronbach’s alpha	Examples of items
Personal freedom (<i>Environmental wellness</i>)	18.156	5	0.749	My freedom is restricted; I have limited activity options.
Safety and security (<i>Environmental wellness</i>)	2.091	5	0.613	I feel vulnerable and not in control of what happens.

Scale	Eigenvalues	N =	Cronbach's alpha	Examples of items
Emotional wellness (including PHQ-4)	4.683	13 (4)	0.900 (0.84)	I am feeling down, depressed and hopeless; I am feeling uncertain, uneasy, stressed; I think of hurting myself.
Spiritual wellness	3.627	3	0.822	I rely on my religion and fellow believers; I understand the purpose of my life.
Academic competence	2.996	12	0.900	I have difficulty engaging in self-study; I manage my work despite distractions.
Intellectual wellness	2.618	6	0.894	I concentrate well; I easily process new information; I am good at critical thinking.
Social wellness	1.513	5	0.752	I feel cut off, isolated, lonely; I feel connected to loved ones.
Physical wellness	1.622	3	0.824	I feel healthy and alive; I exercise regularly.
Financial wellness	1.513	6	0.718	I have no financial concerns; I do not have money for food.
Coping		14	0.781	I find meaning in the situation; I maintain a routine to remain productive.
Mental health continuum		14	0.91	I have something to contribute to society; I am satisfied with my life.
Perceived hope		8	0.89	Even in difficult times, I remain hopeful; my hopes are usually fulfilled.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was performed, using SPSS Statistics version 26, after confirming that the constructed scales accurately measured the dimensions of wellness (through EFA and CFA). Mean scores for all scales were calculated and standardised for comparison. An inter-correlational matrix showed that all correlations were below 0.80 (highest was 0.65), indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was performed, using the Jamovi software version 2.6.17. SEM is a second-generation multivariate technique that combines exploratory factor analysis and path analysis (Khairi et al., 2021; Schreiber et al., 2006), which allows researchers to simultaneously test and estimate latent, exogenous, and endogenous variables, including indicator variables (Khairi et al., 2021). A SEM was estimated using the Maximum Likelihood Robust (MLR) method with the NLMINB optimisation algorithm. A total of 3,239 observations and 60 free parameters were included in the analysis. Robust Huber-White standard errors were applied, and the Yuan-Bentler T2* scaled test statistic was used to account for non-normality. To improve the model, modification indices were used, which suggested the addition of the following relationships: *Hope* → *Coping*, *Emotional Wellness* → *Hope*, *Mental Health* → *Hope*, *Academic Competence* → *Intellectual Wellness*, *Social Wellness* → *Mental Health*, and *Emotional Wellness* → *Intellectual Wellness*.

The model yielded the following fit indices: SRMR = 0.035; RMSEA = 0.068; CFI = 0.970; and TLI = 0.943. These values fall within the recommended thresholds, indicating that the revised model provides a good fit to the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). P-values of < .05 are considered statistically significant. The standardised β indicates the weight of the effect, that is whether the effect is small ($\beta = 0.10$), moderate ($\beta = 0.30$), or large ($\beta = 0.50$), with the positive or negative signs indicating the direction of the relationship.

Ethics

Research approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria (HUM019/0420). Respondents consented and completed the survey voluntarily and anonymously.

Results

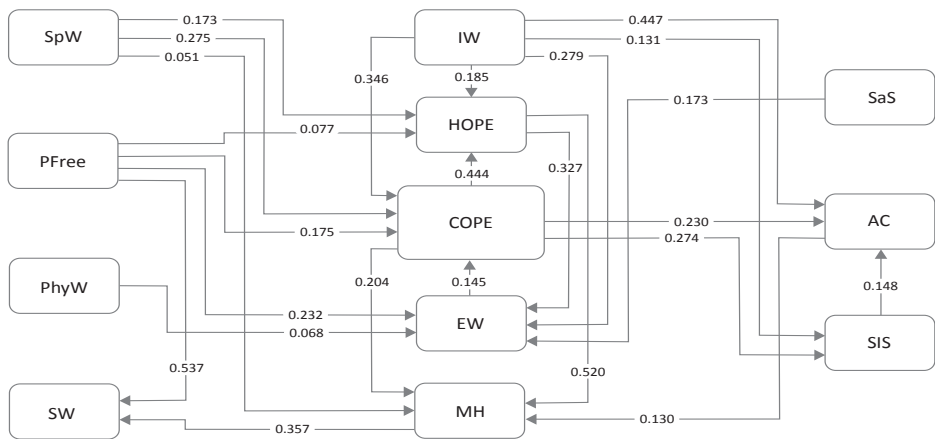
Respondent characteristics

The respondents from all academic faculties included 83.3% undergraduate students and 67.1% female students, with 59.2% aged between 18 and 21 years.

Identifying predictors of mental health and academic competence

In this research, SEM was used for exploratory purposes to identify variables that contribute to student mental health and academic competence. Variables believed to influence (mediate) the relationships included coping and satisfaction with institutional support. The hypothesized model is shown in Figure 2, while the tested model is graphically presented in Figure 3 and summarised in Tables 2 and 3.

Figure 3. Tested model showing the predictive value of exogenous variables on endogenous variables



Legend: MH - mental health; AC - academic competence; Cope - coping; SIS - satisfaction with institutional support; SW - social wellness; EW - emotional wellness; Hope - hopefulness; SpW - spiritual wellness; PhyW - Physical wellness; PF - personal freedom; SaS - safety and security; IW - intellectual wellness

Table 2: Parameter estimates (only significant)

Dependent	Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	β	z	p
Social wellness	Personal freedom	0.521	0.012	0.498 – 0.545	0.537	43.27	<.001
Emotional wellness	Physical wellness	0.050	0.010	0.031 – 0.069	0.068	5.22	<.001
Emotional wellness	Personal freedom	0.228	0.014	0.201 – 0.255	0.232	16.53	<.001
Emotional wellness	Safety and security	0.149	0.017	0.117 – 0.182	0.119	9.03	<.001
Hope	Personal freedom	0.081	0.015	0.050 – 0.111	0.077	5.22	<.001
Hope	Intellectual wellness	0.160	0.014	0.133 – 0.188	0.185	11.40	<.001
Hope	Spiritual wellness	0.145	0.012	0.122 – 0.169	0.173	12.11	<.001
Mental health	Coping	0.282	0.026	0.231 – 0.334	0.204	10.78	<.001
Mental health	Academic competence	0.119	0.013	0.093 – 0.144	0.130	9.01	<.001
Mental health	Spiritual wellness	0.039	0.010	0.020 – 0.058	0.051	4.10	<.001
Coping	Personal freedom	0.121	0.014	0.094 – 0.148	0.175	8.77	<.001
Coping	Intellectual wellness	0.198	0.010	0.178 -0.218	0.346	19.38	<.001
Coping	Spiritual wellness	0.153	0.008	0.138 – 0.168	0.275	19.70	<.001
Coping	Emotional wellness	0.102	0.015	0.073 – 0.131	0.145	6.86	<.001
Support from institution	Intellectual wellness	0.123	0.020	0.084 – 0.161	0.131	6.26	<.001
Academic competence	Coping	0.449	0.025	0.400 – 0.498	0.296	18.06	<.001
Support from institution	Coping	0.448	0.033	0.384 – 0.513	0.274	13.59	<.001
Academic competence	Support from institution	0.138	0.013	0.112 – 0.165	0.149	10.25	<.001
Hope	Coping	0.670	0.027	0.616 – 0.724	0.444	24.37	<.001
Emotional wellness	Hope	0.308	0.015	0.278 – 0.338	0.327	19.91	<.001
Mental health	Hope	0.480	0.015	0.451 – 0.508	0.521	32.98	<.001
Academic competence	Intellectual wellness	0.389	0.014	0.362 – 0.416	0.447	28.41	<.001
Social wellness	Mental health	0.362	0.016	0.330 – 0.393	0.357	22.76	<.001

Dependent	Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	β	z	p
Emotional wellness	Intellectual wellness	0.227	0.013	0.202 – 0.251	0.279	17.99	<.001

Mental health was strongly predicted by hope ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$), with additional contributions from coping ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .001$), academic competence ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < .001$) and spiritual wellness ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < .001$ small effect). Higher mental health in turn predicted better social wellness ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$).

Academic competence was primarily predicted by intellectual wellness ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$), followed by coping ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < .001$) and satisfaction with institutional support ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < .001$). Coping also predicted satisfaction with institutional support, which suggests a direct and mediated influence on academic competence ($\beta = 0.041$, $p < .001$) (Table 3), though with a small effect size.

As a mediating variable, coping was predicted by intellectual ($\beta = 0.35$), spiritual ($\beta = 0.28$) and emotional wellness ($\beta = 0.14$) and personal freedom ($\beta = 0.18$). Coping on the other side, predicted hope ($\beta = 0.44$), alongside intellectual ($\beta = 0.19$) and spiritual wellness ($\beta = 0.17$), and hope predicted emotional wellness ($\beta = 0.33$). Other variables predicting emotional wellness were intellectual wellness ($\beta = 0.28$), personal freedom ($\beta = 0.23$), and low values from safety and security ($\beta = 0.12$) and physical wellness ($\beta = 0.06$). Higher personal freedom predicted social wellness with a large effect ($\beta = 0.53$), emotional wellness with a moderate effect ($\beta = 0.23$), and coping with a small effect ($\beta = 0.18$).

Coping and SIS as mediators: Various exogenous constructs were mediated by coping to predict mental health, mainly with small effect (Table 3). Within the defined parameters, the most significant indirect effect indicated that intellectual wellness predicted coping, which in turn was associated with academic competence ($\beta = 0.102$) and predicted mental health ($\beta = 0.070$) with small effect. Other small predictors of coping were spiritual ($\beta = 0.056$) and emotional wellness ($\beta = 0.029$), and personal freedom ($\beta = 0.036$). Spiritual ($\beta = 0.081$) and emotional wellness ($\beta = 0.043$) and personal freedom ($\beta = 0.052$) contributed to academic competence with small effect through coping. Coping’s positive impact on academic competence was also mediated by satisfaction with institutional support ($\beta = 0.041$). A summary of the indirect effects on mental health and academic competence via coping and satisfaction with support is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Indirect effects via coping and support from the institution

Indirect pathway	Estimate	SE	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	β	z	p
Personal freedom → Coping → Mental health	0.034	0.005	0.023 – 0.045	0.036	6.28	<.001
Intellectual wellness → Coping → Mental health	0.056	0.006	0.044 – 0.068	0.070	9.30	<.001

Indirect pathway	Estimate	SE	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	β	z	p
Spiritual wellness → Coping → Mental health	0.043	0.005	0.034 – 0.052	0.056	9.42	<.001
Emotional wellness → Coping → Mental health	0.029	0.006	0.018 – 0.040	0.029	5.19	<.001
Personal freedom → Coping → Academic competence	0.054	0.007	0.041 – 0.068	0.052	7.74	<.001
Intellectual wellness → Coping → Academic competence	0.089	0.006	0.077 – 0.102	0.102	13.90	<.001
Spiritual wellness → Coping → Academic competence	0.069	0.005	0.058 – 0.079	0.081	13.16	<.001
Emotional wellness → Coping → Academic competence	0.046	0.007	0.032 – 0.060	0.043	6.31	<.001
Coping → Support from institution → Academic competence	0.062	0.007	0.047 – 0.077	0.041	8.32	<.001

Discussion

In the proposed model for analysis, the wellness domains, alongside hope, served as predictors. Coping and satisfaction with institutional support were expected to act as mediators. The endogenous variables considered were mental health and academic competence (as a proxy for academic success).

The SEM analysis showed that students' mental health was significantly impacted by their level of hope and positive coping, as well as academic competence and spiritual wellness (small influence). These findings align with our hypotheses. The importance of hope as a predictor of mental health has been supported by research (Krafft et al., 2019; Venning et al., 2011), as it fosters resilience in the face of various challenges. Similarly, effective coping has been shown to improve students' mental health (Esmaeilimotlagh et al., 2018), while unhealthy coping was found to be related to mental illness in university students (Stallman et al., 2020).

As expected, our data showed that academic competence directly impacted students' mental health (though with small effect). This is supported by the research of Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) that found when students lack confidence in their academic abilities, they may experience negative emotions, leading to mental detachment. Students struggling academically thus need appropriate academic and psychosocial support to deal with the negative emotional consequences. In contrast, some other studies found no direct link between academic performance and mental health, though stress factors correlated with performance (Mohamad et al., 2018).

An interesting relationship between mental health and social wellness was identified. The model showed a unidirectional association from mental health to social wellness (with moderate effect), indicating that students with better mental health reported greater social

wellness, whereas the reverse path (social → mental health) was not supported. This refines the common assumption that social activity drives mental health; rather, our data suggest that mentally healthier students are more likely to seek and sustain social interactions, elaborating on evidence that social relationships safeguard student wellbeing (Eloff, 2021). The context of the pandemic could have influenced this finding. Social connection was highly restricted which negatively influenced social wellness, as almost half of the students felt isolated and lonely (Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021).

Academic competence refers to having adequate academic skills and enablers, such as intrinsic motivation, effective study techniques, and engagement (DiPerna, 2006). In the model, academic competence was mainly predicted by intellectual wellness, followed by coping and satisfaction with institutional support. This confirms our hypothesized model and is supported by the literature (Kakada et al., 2019; Law-van Wyk et al., 2025; McNaughton-Cassil et al., 2021). The results suggested that students who are confident in their cognitive abilities, use effective coping strategies, and utilise available support resources tend to feel more competent in their academics. Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) confirmed that motivated students tend to engage more in their academics, and metacognitive engagement is a predictor of academic success, as it enables them to plan, monitor, and self-regulate their learning.

Interestingly, our analysis revealed that mental health did not exhibit predictive power over academic competence, contrary to our hypothesis and the existing literature, which states that students' wellness affects academic success (Bantjes et al., 2023; Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Van Zyl et al., 2012). During the pandemic (when the data were collected), student mental health was generally low (Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021) and they reported having difficulty adjusting to online learning (Law-van Wyk et al., 2025). This may be the reason that coping was a more prominent predictor of academic competence than mental health.

In this model, a few important variables that predict mental health and academic competence were identified.

Coping. Coping moderated the relationship between most variables (except between social wellness and mental health and academic competence). Coping functioned both as a direct pathway to academic competence and mental health and also served as a mediator, enhancing intellectual wellness and satisfaction with institutional support, thereby contributing to academic competence (though with small effect size). This highlights the importance of effective coping for students' wellness.

A finding that was not predicted in the original model was the significant influence of coping on hope, suggesting that students who were able to cope had more positive future expectations. In turn, hope was the most significant predictor of mental health.

The results also showed that students' sense of personal freedom and intellectual, spiritual, and emotional wellness (being free from emotional distress) contributed to better coping. As such, students in this research who employed active and adaptive coping strategies (such as acceptance, positive reappraisal, spirituality, and social support) reported higher scores on mental health and academic competence. Research by Janse van Rensburg (2023) also found that students' resilience and adaptability were improved by using positive

coping strategies. Unfortunately, descriptive statistics in our research showed that almost one-third of students did *not* implement adaptive coping skills, but used maladaptive strategies such as disengagement, avoidant coping and substance use to cope with life stresses and academic pressures during the pandemic (Law-van Wyk et al., 2025). These maladaptive coping strategies thus negatively influenced students' mental health and academic competence.

Satisfaction with institutional support (SIS) was predicted by coping and intellectual wellness, which in turn predicted academic competence. Students' satisfaction with institutional support, such as access to communication technology and guidance from lecturers, increased students' self-perceived academic competence, aligning with findings from Eloff et al. (2021) and Wilson Fadji and Eloff (2024). Various academic and personal support services helped students manage their coursework effectively, especially during the pandemic. Understanding the types of support students need is thus crucial.

Hope. Our research showed that hopeful students reported higher levels of mental health and emotional wellness, although there were no direct or indirect relationships between mental health and emotional wellness – this aligns with the Two-Continua Model (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Individuals with a hopeful outlook may be better equipped to remain emotionally healthy, navigate challenges and employ effective coping strategies (Snyder, 2002; Venning et al., 2011). In this research, coping, intellectual and spiritual wellness contributed most to hope. To develop students' hope may be a strategy to improve their wellness.

Intellectual wellness was a predictor of several key variables. It was the most prominent direct predictor of academic competence. It was also a strong predictor of coping, emotional wellness and hopefulness, therefore also contributing to mental health. Students' confidence in their cognitive abilities helped them accept academic challenges, enhance learning, and contributed to independent learning (Phan, 2010). Freedom from emotional distress could also promote optimal cognitive functioning, and intellectual wellness could serve as a buffer against emotional distress.

This research highlighted the interactional nature of the dimensions of wellness and showed how the pandemic influenced many aspects of mental health and academic competence. Intellectual wellness, coping, hope, and support from the institution were identified as important factors in promoting mental health and academic competence of students.

Strengths and limitations

This article presents a re-analysis of an existing large database with data collected on a large number of variables during the COVID-pandemic. The advantage of using SEM in a dataset with many interrelated variables is that relationships between all variables are explored to identify directional paths which have the greatest effect on the outcome variables mental health and academic competence.

We acknowledge the significant conceptual overlap between key concepts like mental health and hope (0.63) and hope and coping (0.65) that impacted the validity of the

findings. In an intercorrelational matrix we found some high correlations, but fortunately, it did not threaten the validity of the SEM analysis.

Since a volunteering sample of students was used, the generalisability of the findings could be affected due to a degree of self-selection bias. Self-reported data could create response bias, as participants' subjective perspectives may not fully present objective and testable realities. For example, students' *perceived* academic competence was assessed as it was not possible to access their actual academic performance through anonymous research. Additionally, the unique contextual factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the unique experiences of students during this period have clearly influenced the generalisability of findings.

Implications of the research

This research highlighted predictors of mental health and academic competence among tertiary students, which stakeholders in tertiary education can use to improve students' academic success and mental health. A climate can be created to stimulate students' intellectual wellness, hope, positive coping and mental health, and strengthen institutional support. Although most higher education institutions have implemented counselling services, these services are often understaffed and under-resourced and frequently only utilised by students when they are in crisis (Bantjes et al., 2020b). This article argues for a proactive and integrated approach to student support and development. More can be done to build students' coping skills, hope and intellectual wellness, and to improve institutional support available to students to promote their wellness and academic performance.

Promoting mental health

A proactive approach involves mental health awareness and capacity building to cultivate hope, resilience and adaptive coping strategies. Awareness campaigns, including life-skills training or social-emotional learning (SEL) as accredited courses, can serve as proactive approaches to promoting students' mental health. Specifically, students need to develop adaptive coping strategies, emotional intelligence, stress management and self-care skills. A further consideration is to personalise interventions based on a health-focused mobile application to assess students' emotional wellbeing. Subsequently, students can be required to complete a personalised credit-bearing online mental health module. Such proactive initiatives could promote students' wellness (Turner & Gonzalez, 2024) and enable early identification of at-risk students. These interventions to address students' real-life challenges should be developed in collaboration with students.

Strengthening intellectual wellbeing and academic skills

Cognitive development programmes should be integrated into academic curricula to enhance students' cognitive skills and self-regulatory learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Insights from the transdisciplinary field of neuroeducation (Jolles & Jolles, 2021) could be used to enhance students' intrinsic motivation, attention, memory, executive functioning and academic independence. Students could be sensitised to specific threats to brain health, such as substance use, lack of sleep and untreated mental health difficulties, enabling them to take responsibility for their intellectual wellness and academic competence. If not

managed effectively, generative artificial intelligence has the potential to negatively impact students' learning, intellectual development and wellbeing, as well as their academic competence, particularly when cognitive processes such as critical thinking are not developed but outsourced to large language models. Further research can be done to identify factors that promote or erode students' academic competence, such as the effect of digital media on students' attention span and cognitive engagement (Pranathi & Jacobs, 2025). Furthermore, student success could be enhanced through early evidence-based identification of students' support needs and by providing academic and psychosocial resources through programmes such as the STARS Mentorship Programme (2025) that identifies students at risk and matches them with mentoring and skill-building opportunities to improve their adjustment and academic success.

Development of institutional support

The diverse needs of students require a comprehensive, needs-based approach to institutional support. Lecturers should be sensitive to the specific needs of students and support them accordingly. Dependable IT support services and training in online learning management systems would benefit students with using technology. Higher education institutions should also aim to alleviate mild to severe threats that affect financially insecure students, particularly those at risk of housing and food insecurity (Coetzee et al., 2024). Further research into the specific types of institutional support students need is necessary to develop targeted, responsive interventions to promote student wellness and academic success.

Conclusion

This study provided insight into predictors of students' mental health and academic competence. Although the data were collected during the COVID-pandemic, the research contributed to knowledge about the functioning and needs of the student population. These findings have practical implications for how institutions of higher education, lecturing staff and students can collaborate to promote student wellbeing and academic success.

Ethics statement

Research approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria (HUM019/0420).

Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From primary agents to corporate actors: A morphogenetic analysis of student becoming through a university residential education and support programme during the COVID-19 pandemic

Van primêre agente tot korporatiewe akteurs: 'n Morfogenetiese analise van studentewording deur middel van 'n universiteits residensiële onderwys- en ondersteuningsprogram tydens die COVID-19-pandemie

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the educational becoming of first-generation students was catalysed through their participation in a residential education and support programme (RESP) at Stellenbosch University during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Margaret Archer's morphogenetic theory, the article traces students' transformation from primary agents to corporate actors, mapping their evolving identities through structural conditioning, sociocultural interaction, and agentic elaboration. Based on a longitudinal ethnographic case study of six students who remained in residence during lockdown, the research examines how the RESP, rooted in dialogical engagement, care ethics, and humanising pedagogy, functioned as a generative space for collective reflexivity, relational learning, and the activation of student agency. The findings demonstrate that the RESP enabled students to reconfigure their sense of self, assume leadership roles, and reshape institutional spaces from the margins. This study contributes to scholarship on intentional residential education practices, student subjectivity, pedagogies of care, and higher education transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. It offers insights into how inclusive and relational educational practices can foster student agency and social transformation, particularly for the historically marginalised within higher education.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, residential education and support programme (RESP), morphogenesis, agency, epistemic virtues

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OPSOMMING

Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe die opvoedkundige wording van eerstegenerasiestudente aangehits en ge-aktiveer is deur hul deelname aan 'n Residensiële Onderwys- en Ondersteuningsprogram (RESP) aan die Universiteit Stellenbosch tydens die COVID-19-pandemie. Die studie gebruik Margaret Archer se morfogenetiese teorie om die studente se ontwikkelende identiteite van primêre agente na korporatiewe akteurs, en volg hul transformasie deur die fases van strukturele kondisionering, sosio-kulturele interaksie en agentiese uitbreiding. Die etnografiese gevallestudie van ses studente wat tydens die inperking in die koshuis gebly het, ondersoek hoe die RESP, gefunksioneer het as 'n generatiewe ruimte vir kollektiewe refleksiwiteit, relasionele leer en die aktivering van studente-agentskap. Die RESP – gegrond in dialogiese betrokkenheid, 'n etiek van praktiese sorg en humaniserende pedagogie – se invloed word oor 'n aantal jaar gemeet. Die bevindinge toon dat die RESP studente in staat gestel het om hul gevoel van self te herkonfigureer, leierskapsrolle aan te neem en institusionele ruimtes vanuit die kantlyn te hervorm. Hierdie studie dra by tot die navorsing oor doelbewuste residensiële onderwyspraktyke, studentesubjektiviteit, pedagogieë van sorg en hoër onderwystransformasie in post-apartheid Suid-Afrika. Dit bied insigte in hoe inklusiewe en relasionele onderwyspraktyke studenteagentskap en sosiale transformasie kan bevorder, veral vir diegene wat histories gemarginaliseer is binne hoër onderwys.

SLEUTELWOORDE

COVID-19-pandemie, residensiële onderwys- en ondersteuningsprogram (ROOP), morfogenese, agentskap, epistemiese deugde

Introduction

Higher education is, at its core, an ontological project, one that seeks to impart knowledge and to transform the very being of students by shaping their identities, values, and ways of engaging with the world (Freire, 1978, quoted in Barnett, 2007). It reconfigures how learners come to understand themselves, enabling them to critically locate their existence within broader social, cultural, and ethical contexts, and to act meaningfully within them. Our study explored how this transformation unfolds and whether specific pedagogical approaches can engender and leverage such educational change. In this article, we examine the transformative journeys of a group of first-generation students (FGSs) who participated and co-created the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP) developed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While higher education holds considerable transformative promise, this potential is not equitably realised by all student populations. Stellenbosch University, as a historically white, Afrikaner higher education institution, continues to carry the cultural residue of its apartheid-era identity. Despite post-apartheid transformation efforts, the university's institutional culture and structures still subtly privilege middle-class, traditionally Afrikaner-positioned students, shaping norms, values, and modes of belonging in ways

that often marginalise first-generation black students (Fataar, 2018, 2019). These students encounter spaces where their social and cultural capital is undervalued, constraining their full participation in the academic and social life of the institution. Within this university context, and forming the focus of this article, the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP) emerged as a vital intervention, actively unsettling these inherited institutional hierarchies and affirming the diverse cultural wealth students bring to the university (Yosso, 2005).

The RESP was a series of intentionally and informally structured conversational encounters and relational engagements amongst the students who remained in residence from the commencement of the national lockdown. Initially conceived to address the sentient and emotional wellbeing of students and alleviate the acute anxiety and panic the pandemic induced, the RESP evolved into a framework of peer support and personal development that embraces a caring ethos, mutual recognition, and a shared humanity. In a previous article, we discussed how the students who participated in the RESP experienced a sense of recognition and reverence for who they were and how they traversed their aspirational journeys (Petersen & Fataar, 2025).

This article examines the lived experiences of six students who participated in the RESP, aiming to demonstrate how the RESP and the unique conditions of the COVID-19 moment served as a catalyst for the students' agentic development. Drawing on Margaret Archer's (1995) theory of morphogenesis, the study traces how students transitioned from being primary agents, often passive recipients of structural conditions, to corporate actors, capable of changing structures through their collective agency and critical engagement. Moreover, the study outlines the modes of reflexivity that the students applied as they moved through the stages of morphogenesis to reconfigure their identities. The findings suggest that students' agentic capacities were not static but activated and intensified their participation in the RESP through collective care, learning, and action.

The central argument is that programmes like the RESP, that are grounded in ethical care practices and humanising pedagogies, can cultivate students' agency and activate collective action to change and transform outdated, rigid and exclusionary systems. In supportive settings and through dialogical engagements students can reimagine their identities, refine their critical consciousness, and assert their place in broader social and academic spheres.

This article forms part of a longitudinal ethnographic case study that traces the educational trajectories of a purposively selected group of students. It follows their experiences from their initial engagement with the learning and living environment at Stellenbosch University prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, through their participation in the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP) during the pandemic, and into the subsequent three years. Drawing on qualitative interview and focus group data, the study presents a narrative analysis of the participants' educational pathways and processes of epistemic becoming.

Contextualising the RESP within the pandemic landscape

The COVID-19 pandemic – Overview of the impact on global and local higher education institutions

On 1 April 2020, Unesco reported that 80 countries were in lockdown, affecting 3.4 billion people, which is 43% of the global population. School and university closures disrupted learning for 1.5 billion students, or 89.4% of learners across 185 countries. According to an IAU global survey, by April 2020, 60% of universities were fully closed, 30% partially closed, and 10% operated under containment measures. While many European institutions adopted blended and online learning, only 29% of African HEIs transitioned online despite the continent recording fewer COVID-19 cases, largely due to limited internet and digital access (Marinoni et al., 2020).

The pandemic highlighted stark inequalities among South African higher education institutions (HEIs). The nationwide university closures left little time to adapt to online learning. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) noted that the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTLA) varied widely due to unequal access to digital devices, tech support, and connectivity. At Nelson Mandela University, 35% of students lacked access to a computer or smartphone (Fraser-Moleketi, 2020). Beyond the digital divide, some HEIs lacked the social and institutional capabilities to navigate the crisis, with limited support outside of government, which was focused on COVID-19 mitigation. Van Schalkwyk (2021) found that HEIs with inclusive, context-sensitive leadership were more resilient and adaptive.

A student survey in April 2020 revealed that university closures led to heightened food insecurity, stress, and lack of digital access (Sowetan, 2021). Many students struggled without the infrastructure provided by universities. The university residences had become students' homes and, in many instances, their refuge from the ills of their communities (Czerniewicz et al., 2020, p. 957).

Stellenbosch University responded swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic by establishing an Institutional Committee for Business Continuity (ICBC), which ensured a coordinated and adaptive institutional strategy. The ICBC played a pivotal operational role in facilitating the transition to online learning, including the prompt distribution of loaned digital devices to students to support equitable access to education.

From a relational aspect, SU's response reflected a unified and compassionate approach, grounded in care ethics (Tronto, 1993), with a focus on sustaining the wellbeing of its academic community. Notably, the university made provision for students unable to return home, offering continued residence with adherence to health protocols.

The Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP)

The focus of this study is on a single university residence where, we argue, a form of deep and caring teaching and learning unfolded. As a response to the physical, emotional, and intellectual needs brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and within the context of acute anxiety, unprecedented uncertainty, and supercomplexity (Barnett, 2007), nine female students, together with a residence educator, co-constructed the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP). Although the initial impetus for the RESP was to address

immediate concerns and threats caused by the pandemic, the programme gradually evolved into a series of intentionally structured dialogical engagements. These encounters resemble what Waghid (2023, p. 110) terms “deliberative engagements,” where generative dialogue and thoughtful exchange emerge from conditions of uncertainty and doubt. The RESP productively used the volatility of the pandemic moment and re-organised the isolated residence space to make place for cultivating the students’ full humanity, which is understood as socially situated, historically aware, critically reflective, and transformative individuals (Freire, 1972, 1984).

Petersen and Fataar (2025) argued that the constitution of the RESP was grounded in relationality and trust that was built through mutual vulnerability, disclosure, and respect. The programme’s curricular and pedagogical arrangements were dialogically driven, integrating students’ lived realities, cultural knowledges, and identities into their educational experiences through structured discussions, debates, and critical reflection. The RESP espoused a humane and caring pedagogical methodology that reinforced their dignity and ignited the students’ agency. Its pedagogical stance affirmed and validated students’ interests, experiences, and emotions, and localised the curriculum to reflect their social realities (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). In this regard, the RESP modelled inclusive and equitable learning spaces that aligned with Freire’s (1970) call for solidarity, mutual respect, and the co-construction of knowledge.

Furthermore, the RESP espoused the vision of Cammarota and Romero (2006), suggesting that teachers and students share their lived perspectives and urging teachers to express confidence in their students’ intellectual capacities and a develop a genuine concern for their overall wellbeing. The RESP incorporated Noddings’ (1995) ideals for caring teaching by modelling good practices and values, and affirming students’ experiences in dialogue with them. Additionally, the RESP functioned on the ethical values of care as proposed by Tronto (1993), including practising an attentiveness to the needs of others, addressing it responsibly and with competence, and eliciting a responsiveness from the recipients of care.

As such, the RESP represents a mode of education that was deeply relational, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded. It responded to students’ immediate needs and contributed to their longer-term development as critically conscious, empowered individuals committed to building a more just and caring society. Through intentional, ethical care practices and humanising pedagogies, the RESP cultivated meaningful and enduring engagements with knowledge, identity, and social change (Petersen & Fataar, 2025). The students disclosed their acquisition of qualities and dispositions the programme imbued in them, including a newfound willingness to engage, a sense of belief in themselves (confidence), and an awareness of others’ pain and suffering (compassion). The article examines how the RESP shaped the students’ identity formation and the development of their agency.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Margaret Archer’s Social Realist Theory of morphogenesis (1995, 2007b) to explore the students’ processes of agentic development and educational

becoming. Archer's framework provides a compelling lens to understand how structural, cultural, and agential dimensions interact over time to produce either transformation or stasis. When the actions of institutional structures and agents align, the system tends to reproduce itself in stable patterns, a condition Archer terms morphostasis. However, when misalignment or tension occurs between agents and institutional structures and the cultural context, the potential for transformation arises, what she defines as morphogenesis.

Morphogenesis unfolds as a stratified, cyclical process that moves through three key phases: (1) conditioning, (2) interaction, and (3) elaboration. Initially, social structures condition the environment into which social agents are born or placed. These conditions shape but do not determine, how agents respond to them. Agents can think, reflect, and act on their circumstances. When this reflexive engagement leads to change, it results in a transformation of the structure, the agent, or both, and the cycle begins anew from this reconfigured point.

Archer's concept of analytical dualism underpins this theoretical architecture by allowing for the analytical separation of structure, culture, and agency while maintaining an understanding of their interaction over time. Her notion of agency is also layered and dynamic. She conceptualises human agency as comprising three emergent forms: (i) the primary agent, (ii) the social agent, and (iii) the social actor. Primary agents are individuals shaped by the social conditions into which they are born, such as family, class, or cultural background, over which they have little control. While interacting within their environments and acquiring capacities, they transition into intentionally behaving as social agents. Through engagement, they may become social actors who reflect on their positioning and take purposive action. When groups of social actors begin to organise themselves in pursuit of shared goals and seek to influence institutional structures, they become corporate actors, in other words, collective actors capable of producing structural change.

A key mechanism in this process of becoming is reflexivity. Archer defines reflexivity as the internal conversation through which agents engage in self-assessment and plan their actions about social contexts. She identifies three primary modes of reflexivity: (a) communicative, (b) autonomous, and (c) meta-reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity involves thinking that is shaped and validated through dialogue with others. Autonomous reflexivity is characterised by self-directed deliberation focused on achieving personal goals and plans. Meta-reflexivity, the most complex mode, involves critical reflection not only on one's circumstances but also on the very processes of one's thinking and decision-making, often questioning structural norms and ethical commitments.

This article draws on Archer's framework to examine how students who participated in the RESP moved from being passive recipients of structural constraints – primary agents – to becoming active, reflexive corporate actors. By tracing their reflexive engagements and identity shifts, we reveal how their agency was progressively activated and consolidated in response to the structural and cultural affordances of the programme and the pandemic moment.

Methodology

This research is situated within a longitudinal ethnographic case study that followed the educational journeys of six students over three years, spanning the period immediately preceding and extending beyond the national COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. The research site was a university residence where the first author, Joy, lived and worked as the head of residence and co-developer of the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP). Her embedded presence in the space allowed for deep observation and sustained engagement with the students over nine months during the lockdown.

The exceptional circumstances brought on by the pandemic, which radically altered the social and educational landscape, required a methodology capable of capturing the complexity and relationality of this moment. A case study approach was adopted to provide a detailed, context-sensitive account of the unique educational setting that emerged (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The case study created a bounded system defined by time, place, and social boundaries, enabling the researchers to focus on the distinct dynamics that unfolded during this period.

In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, data were gathered through two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant and one collective focus group discussion. These engagements were conducted online and spanned two years following the initial lockdown.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using Maxwell's (2013) framework of categorisation bins. The first, the organisational bin, helped us chronologically track students' experiences across three key phases: their lives at university before the pandemic, their engagement during the RESP, and their navigation of academic life post-pandemic. The second phase of analysis, the theoretical bin, applied Archer's morphogenetic theory to organise the data and make a conceptual interpretation of it. Drawing on Archer's phases of conditioning, interaction, and elaboration, we mapped the students' developmental trajectories, which allowed us to focus on how they moved from primary agents to corporate actors. Their unfolding agency was understood and layered and non-linear, responding to the evolving relational conditions of their environment.

To preserve the contextual richness of students' lived experiences, we chose to present the data in the form of narrative analysis. Drawing on Maxwell's (2013) recommendation to use narrative as a "connecting strategy" and Polkinghorne's (1995) emphasis on storytelling in qualitative inquiry, this approach allowed us to integrate the students' reflections, events, and actions into a coherent account of their identity formation and reflexive development. The narrative method enabled us to illustrate their internal conversations and sense-making practices throughout the morphogenetic cycle.

Positionality, researcher reflexivity and ethics

The first author, Joy, occupied a complex and layered positionality in this research. As residence head and co-developer of the RESP, she was immersed in the students' day-to-day behaviour and relational interactions. She was exposed to their unfolding emotions, experiences and shifting social roles. Her role as a woman of colour who shared certain cultural and social resonances with the students further anchored her relational proximity. Her formal institutional role and relatively recent appointment introduced elements of

distance from them. During the research, she came to see herself as a “transient insider” (Roberts, 2018), moving fluidly between insider and outsider perspectives.

This carried both analytical advantages and ethical challenges. Joy’s immersion in the space enabled rich insights while exposing her to potential role conflict and emotional strain. Dual-role research contexts can generate tension between professional responsibilities and ethical imperatives (Adler & Adler, 1987). Joy was acutely aware of the institutional constraints and systemic inequities that the students were navigating, and she often struggled with how to respond to these challenges.

Joy and Aslam, her co-author and doctoral supervisor, were in ongoing conversation throughout the research journey about Joy’s researcher positionality. Aslam provided conceptual oversight, methodological guidance, and a necessary critical distance from the immediacy of the field. This supervisory relationship functioned as an intellectual check, ensuring that the analysis remained rigorous, honest, and grounded.

Joy also consulted regularly with a research partner and periodically stepped back from the data to create reflective distance. These pauses were crucial in preventing over-identification with participants and managing the emotional burden that emerged from engaging so intimately with their stories. Following Davies (2012), Joy practised ‘turning back on herself,’ using moments of self-reflection to evaluate her emotional responses, ethical commitments, and interpretive assumptions. This iterative reflexivity helped her remain accountable to both the students and the scholarly integrity of the research.

The study received full ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee at Stellenbosch University. The participants gave us informed consent and we implemented measures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

Agentic morphogenesis at work

Identities are not static; they evolve over time as they engage with social structures and cultures, which, at times, reinforce (morphostasis) them and other times reshape (morphogenesis) them (Archer, 2007b). The pandemic, a moment of rupture that disrupted the normative flow of university life and created both constraints and possibilities for agentic response, and RESP served as major conditioning structures. This section discusses how the RESP and its pedagogical approach contributed to changes in the participants’ agentic evolution and their post-COVID educational becoming. To fully appreciate the transformations engendered in the students during and after the pandemic programme, we start with a brief synopsis of their personal identities and their lived encounters with the structure and culture at the university, before the pandemic. We then move to a discussion of their pandemic experiences through the RESP and conclude with the participants’ accounts of reshaping their educational lives three years after the pandemic.

The analysis is presented in a format that ties each theme directly to the phases of morphogenesis and the movement across Archer’s identity strata, from primary agent to social agent to corporate actor. We include participants’ reflexive encounters at each stage.

Students' pre-pandemic being

Barnett (2007, p. 27) describes the being of the student as the way in which the student exists in the world, or more specifically, their pedagogical being – that is, the manner in which they stand in relation to their educational setting. At Stellenbosch University, first-generation students of colour occupy a distinct and complex positionality within an institution historically shaped by its Afrikaner apartheid legacy. While the university is actively engaged in processes of transformation, seeking to dismantle exclusionary structures and reconstitute itself as a more inclusive and representative higher education institution, it remains a site marked by its past. Consequently, the educational being of the student emerges at the intersection of a university in flux and their navigation of legitimacy within it.

A recent study conducted on first-generation students entering Stellenbosch University illuminated the students' *being* as aspirant, culturally and ethnically rich, and multi-linguistic (Petersen, 2023). The study revealed the students possessed a deeply embedded 'will to learn' (Barnett, 2007), a disposition cultivated and nurtured by their families and significant others, particularly, their mothers' encouragement and teachers' dedication (Petersen, 2023; Norodien-Fataar, 2016). The students' pedagogical being is also shaped by the broader economic, political, and geographical landscape they come from, their natal contexts (Archer, 2007b). The students were variously positioned. Most of them are from rural township areas, where they lived in low-cost housing, and only one parent in the household was employed. Two students attended Model C, fee-paying schools, and the rest were enrolled in the public schools in their neighborhoods. The international student was from a financially stable middle-class family and attended a private girls' Catholic school in Zimbabwe.

The students revealed a kaleidoscope of experiences with the SU landscape before the pandemic. Upon entry, all the students agreed that admission to the prestigious Stellenbosch University was a major accomplishment. However, for those who did not secure residence accommodation before making the trip to the picturesque Stellenbosch, it was a massive cause of anxiety and apprehension. Upon arrival at SU, they were provided with a place to sleep in the university's backpackers accommodation and received residence placement within two to three days of arriving at SU. The swift coordination between the residence placements offices and the student support platforms of the Student Representative Council (SRC) and the South African Student Congress (SASCO) was instrumental in addressing these students' needs.

For some participants, the newcomers' orientation programme at the university residence was warm and welcoming, for others it was overwhelming. Students were filled with excitement and cheer with all the fanfare during the welcoming week, and delighted when their peers called them by their names. As a participant said, *"When my mentor called me by my name, I knew I found my place."* Others complained about the heat, the lack of freedom to move around the campus, the rigid and packed programme the student leadership followed, and the lack of agency they had over 'what they wanted and could do' during the Welcoming period.

By the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the participants had at least experienced residence life for more than a year. In many residences, students share a room in their

first year, and the experience can be hit or a miss. Priyanka described her wealthy, white Afrikaner roommate as warm and wise. She shared how she was deeply moved by the care and comfort her roommate afforded her when she shared an intimate experience that caused her great distress. For the other participants, sharing a room with someone they did not know was a minor issue, they did their best under the circumstances. However, Thando shared how she sought the residence head's assistance to mediate matters between herself and her roommate.

Participants described the structure and culture of the residence as hierarchical and exclusionary, functioning on old traditions that left them disconnected and disengaged. It would seem, they said, that the preferred social language was Afrikaans. They agreed that although efforts were made to make social events more inclusive, the lack of consultation with, and representation of people of colour in matters pertaining to residence life, was concerning.

In the lecture hall, participants disclosed similar dissonant experiences with the structure and culture. Zanele experienced her lecturers as authoritative, distant, and unapproachable. She understood early on that she could not rely on assistance from them and had to apply herself to figuring things out. For Tumelo, the engineering faculty's operational regulations were unyielding and inconsiderate. She explained how she was placed in an Afrikaans tutorial group and felt powerless to switch to the English class. Tumelo was academically excluded after failing to obtain the 65% prescribed pass the faculty enforces with the first-year extended degree programme. With the assistance of peers and the science faculty coordinator, she was able to resume her studies in earth science.

The participants' pedagogical being upon entry into the university and before the COVID-19 pandemic can be described as brittle and fragile (Barnett, 2007, p. 29). They contended with a myriad of challenges in both the living and learning environment over which they had little or no control. Their primary identity, which is mostly inherited from their family, class, and culture and shaped by their social locations and personal histories, was experienced as deficient. Their linguistic, familial, aspirational, and resistant cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) were incongruent with the culture and class of the traditional SU student.

Applying Archer's lenses, it is evident that the primary agent (student) identity upon entry and during their commencement year had not yet been activated for transformative engagement. Although the participants experienced the structure and culture of the learning and living environments as confining and constricting, as primary agents, they were inclined to accept and adapt to the university system. This illustrates how, during the inception phase of morphogenesis, the 'structural conditioning' phase, primary agency is limited to accepting existing conditions rather than transforming them.

Developing corporate agency

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated widespread anxiety and uncertainty across the globe. As nations mobilised to implement containment measures, the South African government announced a 15-day national lockdown, mandating the closure of all non-essential services, including schools and higher education institutions. In response,

Stellenbosch University (SU) initiated a swift and comprehensive campus closure, instructing students to vacate university residences. For students who faced financial constraints and were unable to return home independently, the university provided monetary assistance and transport allowances to facilitate their departure.

Within three days, the vast majority of students had vacated the residences. However, a group of students resisted the institutional directive and government mandate, choosing to remain in residence despite escalating pressure. Nine of these students remained in the residence with Joy as their residence head. Their motivations for remaining were diverse but predominantly linked to socio-economic hardship. Most students cited unstable internet connectivity or inadequate living conditions in their home environments. One student, Priyanka, was unable to secure a flight to Zimbabwe on such short notice and expressed concern about infrastructural challenges at home, including frequent electricity outages. Her desire to continue her academic work uninterrupted, particularly to graduate by the end of the year, further influenced her decision.

Despite initial resistance, the university's executive management acknowledged the legitimacy of these concerns. Two days before the commencement of the lockdown, SU revised its position and permitted students with compelling circumstances to remain in residence. Institutional support was mobilised to ensure the welfare of these students, including the provision of meals, reliable internet access, and computer facilities. According to the *Daily Maverick*, a total of 749 students were accommodated across the Stellenbosch campus during the national lockdown (Shoba, 2020).

This phase captures the beginning of 'sociocultural interaction' and the movement from primary agents to social agents. As a social agent, the student reflects on and responds to the call to go home in a defiant way. Whereas before students accepted their interactions with the structure, and were unresponsive to the constraints and tensions, this time the students stood up against, and spoke back to the structure in solidarity.

The students' choice to stay in residence during the pandemic points to an emerging sense of collective agency. By drawing on their shared aspirations, social networks, and informal support systems, they started seeing themselves as a group with common concerns, forming supportive relationships and identifying ways to help one another. Their emerging social identity was shaped by this shared response to the challenges of the pandemic, marking the early stages of their development of corporate agency.

Exercising collective reflexivity – The RESP

Archer (2007b) argues that agents are not passive in the face of structural forces. They think, evaluate, and act on their goals in light of their social contexts. According to Archer, this process of reflexivity or rumination is the mediating force between their social contexts and personal projects. Reflexivity is the internal conversation that individuals engage in to deliberate on their circumstances, make decisions, and take action. Collective reflexivity (Archer, 2007b) takes the agent's internal conversation outwards, where in community, they reflect, debate and interrogate issues and concerns.

Having exercised their corporate agency to remain in the residence as a group, the participants agreed to follow the pandemic protocols and opened themselves to accepting

the care that was offered. Their receptivity to the initiative of the residential educator (Joy) to share mealtimes and other opportunities to build and sustain community resulted in them co-creating the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP). The RESP was a series of intentional and informal conversational encounters that provided students with the opportunity to connect and build personal relationships with each other by sharing their histories, experiences, and aspirations. Although it was initiated in response to the challenges of isolation, anxiety, and despair the pandemic brought forth, it grew organically into a forum for debate, dialogue, and critical reflection on pressing societal issues and the broader human experience.

The RESP blended structured and spontaneous learning that harnessed the students' creative and critical thinking. As an interlocutor, Joy built a platform of trust and equality, encouraging open dialogue. She facilitated discussions with empathy and sensitivity to participants' socio-economic and historical contexts, aiming to empower their engagement and critical thinking (Petersen & Fataar, 2025).

Precious, one of the students, described the conversational encounters and engagements as rooted in *"love, intention, and consideration."* She said being part of these discussions made her think about people's circumstances more deeply, rather than judging them. She found herself reacting more compassionately and reflecting on her own shortcomings instead of just blaming others. Priyanka shared how her thought processes were provoked in subtle ways, and she noticed how her behaviour changed even in the ways she consumed social media. For Zanele, the RESP focused on people's authenticity and humanness, which allowed her to see the humaneness in others. People did not seem so *"unapproachable or distant"* any longer. Zanele was especially inspired by her peers' interaction and lively engagement and expressed how this motivated her to participate and contribute to the dialogical discussions. Thando felt like the RESP was preparing her for *"something bigger"* in that the deliberative engagements were uplifting and effectively disturbed her previous experiences of *"not feeling seen and heard"*. She explained that throughout the interactions, an intentional and thoughtful removal of negative thoughts and expectations was replaced with a greater clarity of her purpose.

In Archer's framing of morphogenesis, the RESP was a continuation of the *"socio-cultural interaction"* phase between the structure and agent on the meso-level. While this phase started with the structure and agent in conflict with each other, the unified actions of the agent against the structure resulted in a change in the form of the structure and the agent, which Archer refers to as the *"double morphogenesis of agency"* (Archer, 1995, p. 247). The structure relents to accommodate the agent, as can be observed by the institutional adoption of a caring approach that addresses the immediate needs of the students responsibly and competently. And the agent is transformed by the enabling platform the RESP presents for collective reflexivity. As such, the RESP provided *"social stability and integration by evading constraints and endorsing the students' natal contexts by actively forging a dense micro-world"* and in the process it *"re-constituted their contextual continuity and projected it forward in time"* (Archer, 2007b, p. 43). The safe and supportive net the RESP offered allowed the students to take ownership of their social

world, and reveals the emergence of coordinated corporate agency (i.e. a group capable of shaping structural outcomes).

Becoming corporate actors – Leadership and change

The collective reflexivity fostered by the RESP created a supportive structure and culture during the pandemic, nurturing the participants' confidence and self-belief, sparking a willingness to engage, connect, and reciprocate care. This was evident in the way all the participants operationalised their corporate agency in the various leadership opportunities they took on.

Precious pursued a range of leadership positions in the residential space after the pandemic. She was elected as a member of the House Committee, leading a community of 262 females, and thereafter became the Cluster Convenor, leading five different communities. Precious' main purpose and intention in these roles were to continue critical engagements and place the focus on women's empowerment. She shared how she organised an educational talk on the politics and aesthetics of hair. Precious explained that for much of her years of growing up and later living in the residence, she felt compelled to conform to others' expectations of how to care for and wear her hair. This was a liberatory initiative, and she experienced the curiosity and fascination of her peers' response as hugely gratifying.

Sophie applied for the leadership portfolio of project manager of the mental wellness committee in the residence. She explained how the pandemic motivated her to make mental health a daily priority by creating an interactive way of promoting healthy mindsets. Her committee's response to the suggestions she made for a rejuvenated approach to normalising mental health issues and the feedback she received from the community indicated that they were making a "*tremendous difference*" in their peers' lives, and this was very rewarding.

After Priyanka obtained her first degree, she forged a leadership path in the senior living spaces of the university. Towards the end of her studies for her honours in science, she was elected as the Chairperson of the senior residence. For the duration of her master's studies, she was involved in the university's flagship capstone project, Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) where she occupied a place in the leadership house. Priyanka was instrumental in assisting the project manager of the programme to re-create the stature and significance of the programme to its former glory after its declining popularity following the 2015-2016 Fees Must Fall uprisings.

Zanele and Thando took up leadership roles as members of their faculty committees. Both described how they set out to model and reciprocate the care practices they experienced during the pandemic, in their respective roles. Tumelo became a wellness mentor in the residence. She described welcoming newcomers and helping them to transition and adjust under her guidance as one of the most fulfilling experiences she's had at university.

The students' participation in the co-curricular practices of the university signalled their transformation from disengaged and disconnected to engaged, connected agents of change. This marked the structural elaboration phase of morphogenesis, during which they were not merely adapting but actively reshaping the educational environment itself. Notably, the students disclosed a spectrum of qualities and dispositions they have acquired and

strengthened, including their sense of self-belief, compassion, thoughtfulness, curiosity about others and their own histories, a willingness to listen deeply and attentively, and a will to engage.

Autonomous and meta-reflexivity – Facilitating, leading, becoming

According to Archer, the apex of agentic evolution is the synthesis of personal identity and social identity (Case, 2015, p. 850). The process is mediated by the agent's internal conversation or reflexivity. All the participants relayed intense moments of introspection during their alone time, either after a conversational encounter or when they felt homesick.

Sophie explained how she experienced the solitude as “*surprisingly productive*”, especially since “*I knew I was safe, supported and felt genuinely cared for.*” She further elaborated on her process of reflexivity:

Coming to university, for me, was not just about learning and getting a degree; it was also a respite from the negative environment I came from. Speaking openly about my family struggles and bonding with the others helped me to settle in.

As I found my rhythm, I sat with myself, and you know, wrote down in a book who I wanted to be, what I wanted to achieve in the next few years, and the person I wanted to be. I wrote down the partner I wanted to have one day. I had this book of all the things I want in all aspects: friendship, love, family, career, house, everything! So I think that also helped me realise what I actually wanted from what I thought I wanted before COVID.

The pandemic taught me how to bond with the people who were around me and learn from them. They were kind of like an example of what I would experience out there. I now value people and relationships. I was taught to work hard and make sacrifices, but I now see that academic life and relationships are interconnected.

After graduating cum laude in both her undergrad and honours degrees, Sophie enrolled at UCT for her masters' degree. Although she received funding at both universities, she decided on UCT “*to challenge herself and be in an uncomfortable space that will force her to learn and grow*”. Sophie demonstrated what Archer refers to as autonomous reflexivity, where the agent strategically plans and executes her upward mobility. She steered her own “contextual discontinuity” (Archer, 2007b) with Stellenbosch University as she constructed a new and coherent life narrative that oriented her choices.

Similarly, Priyanka shared how the COVID encounter set in motion her leadership trajectory a year later and catapulted her personal growth and development. However, this came at a cost. She explained,

I have realised that my parents and I don't share the same values and morals. They have little regard for people who do not share their culture and class. I find it difficult to have an intellectual conversation with them without feeling that I have to play small or be quiet to show my respect. My academic achievements and leadership accomplishments is overshadowed by my association with a decent, respectable partner, who is not a Hindi Indian. And I'm Ok with that.

Priyanka is currently a PhD candidate in the science faculty. She expressed her personal transformation has been a process that gained impetus during the pandemic when she realised, she must “invest in herself” and do the “inner work”. She compared herself to her sister that studied at another university in the Eastern Cape, who (in her opinion) has remained the same, although she has studied and travelled. She says,

At SU I have learned to participate and make substantive contributions to an intellectual conversation in a confident and ethical way. I have worked towards becoming a well-rounded individual, acquiring the SU graduate attributes. I have learned to constantly question things – to always know that you don’t know everything and you can always learn something from someone. I have learned to actually engage. These skills are bigger than my degrees and I know I can take it wherever I go!

Priyanka demonstrated an advanced mode of reflexivity, which Archer terms being meta-reflexive. She has critically interrogated her value systems, questioned the structural norms, and worked towards ethically informed, purposeful change. By doing the “inner work”, Priyanka has rendered herself immune to external constraints and enablements.

This section captures how participants like Sophie and Priyanka evolved from adaptive responses to proactive agents of change, using the pandemic as a crucible for personal and social redefinition. Sophie’s strategic redirection of her life trajectory exemplifies Archer’s autonomous reflexivity, while Priyanka’s critical engagement with her inherited value systems and her pursuit of intellectual integrity exemplify meta-reflexivity. These stories underscore the role of personal agency, ethical reflection, and purposeful life planning in shaping identities that resist external constraints and embrace authentic growth.

Conclusion

This article has illuminated the participants’ agentic evolution and the role of the RESP in activating and nurturing their processes of educational becoming. Most significantly, it illustrated how intentional and relational pedagogical approaches in the residential living and learning communities can catalyse the authentic becoming of students and, in doing so, leverage student success for particularly first-generation students (Barnett, 2007, p. 51).

Drawing on Archer’s morphogenetic theory, it shows how the RESP created a space where students could shift from primary agents constrained by inherited structures and cultural norms to corporate actors capable of reshaping their educational trajectories and institutional spaces. A key part of this shift was the students’ movement towards corporate agency, which is a collective capacity to act intentionally and strategically to challenge and reshape their educational and social environments. The RESP fostered this shift by introducing dialogical engagement and embedding care ethics and humanising pedagogy into its structure, enabling students to develop resilient, socially engaged identities and a sense of ownership over their futures.

The research revealed how students encountered the pandemic’s challenges through collective and personal reflexivity while reimagining their aspirations and values. Their narratives illustrate how shared struggle was transformed into opportunities for purposeful life planning and ethical growth, which allowed them to recognise their ability to influence

their trajectories and also broader institutional contexts. They imbued their social agency with thoughtfulness, compassion, and a readiness for social interaction.

The RESP gave the students crucial support during a crisis and went on to capacitate them to move from passive adaptation to proactive engagement, developing leadership skills, ethical reflexivity, and a commitment to inclusive transformation. The RESP's pedagogical approaches highlight how a care-oriented programme is able to engender critical agency, offering valuable insights for higher education transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Ethics statement

The authors received ethical clearance from the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee Ethical clearance number: REC: SBE-2022-23591.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Successful adaptation to higher education: The role of resilience and wellbeing in first-year students' experiences

Katlego ya go tlwaelana le thuto ya godimo: Seabe sa boitshokelo le boitekanelo mo maitemogelong a baithuti ba ngwaga wa ntlha mo thutong ya godimo

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ABSTRACT

The first year of university marks a period of rapid and often challenging adjustments for young and developing individuals as they adapt to student life. Although this phase has proven to yield positive experiences for some students, resulting in personal and professional growth, it is also closely associated with the emergence and escalation of mental health issues, often as a consequence of difficulties experienced when individuals are transitioning into a dynamic new environment. Drawing from an interpretive description research design, the study aimed to obtain students' qualitative description of resilience and wellbeing and its contribution to their psychosocial adaptation at a South African university. Three semi-structured, virtual focus group discussions (VFGDs) were conducted with 12 first-year student participants. The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Two core themes were identified: (1) character strengths and personality; and (2) sense of belonging. These themes and their six sub-themes involved internal and external resources that contributed to students' resilience and wellbeing and, ultimately, aided in their successful adaptation to university. The study's findings present valuable insights for developing new policies and interventions geared towards enhancing the wellbeing of university students during the transition process.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, resilience, wellbeing, student adaptation, qualitative

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TSHOBOKANYO

Ngwaga wa ntlha wa yunibesiti o tshwaya paka ya diphetogo tse di potlakileng le tse gantsi di gwetlhang mo bašwang le mo bathong ba ba tlhabologang fa ba tlwaelana le botshelo jwa baithuti. Le fa kgato eno e itshupile e neelana ka maitemogelo a a siameng mo baithuting ba bangwe, e e lebisang kwa kgo long ya botho le ya seporofešenale, gape e amana thata le go tlhagelela le go oketsega ga mathata a boitekanelo jwa tlhaloganyo, gantsi ka ntlha ya dikgwetlho tse batho ba lebanang le tsone fa batho ba fudugela mo tikologong e ntšhwa e e fetogang. Go tšwa mo morerong wa patlisiso wa tlhaloso, thutopatlisiso e ne e ikemiseditse go bona tlhaloso ya maemo a baithuti ka ga boikanyego le botsogo jwa maikutlo le molemo wa yone mo go ikamaganyeng le maemo a maikutlo le tlhokego ya bona mo yunibesithing ya Aforika Borwa. Dipuisano di le tharo tsa setlhopho sa go tsepamisa mogopolo (VFGDs) di ne tsa tshwarwa le batsayakarolo ba baithuti ba ngwaga wa ntlha ba le 12. Tshedimosetso e ne ya sekasekwa ka go dirisa tlhatlhobo ya dikakanyo ka go simolola mo tlase (inductive thematic analysis). Dintlha tse pedi tsa konokono di ne tsa tlhalosiwa: (1) maatla a semelo; (2) boikutlo jwa go nna le seabe mo botshelong jwa gago. Ditlhogo tseno le ditlhogo tsa tsone di le thataro di ne di akaretsa metswedi ya ka fa gare le ya kwa ntle e e neng ya thusa baithuti go itlhwaelana le boitekanelo mme kwa bofelong ba ba thusitse go tlwaelana le yunibesiti. Diphitlhelelo tsa thutopatlisiso eno di neelana ka tshedimosetso e e botlhokwa mo go tlhabololeng dipholisi tse dintšhwa le ditsereganyo tse di ikaeletseng go tokafatsa boitekanelo jwa baithuti ba yunibesiti ka nako ya phetogo.

MAFOKO A BOTLHOKWA

Thuto ya Maemo a a kwa Godimo, boitsetsepelo, boitekanelo, go tlwaelana ga baithuti, patlisiso ya boleng

Introduction and literature overview

Internationally, first year university students are known to be particularly susceptible to adaptation challenges (Brett et al., 2022; Hernandez-Torrano et al., 2020). The first-year student cohort in South Africa is no exception (Dlamini et al., 2020; Van Breda, 2018). A global increase in severe student mental health difficulties which can be attributed to challenges associated with the transition into university has been well-documented (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Levin et al., 2017; Sivertsen et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2006). Flatt (2013, p. 1) goes so far as to characterise this trend as a “mental health crisis” in higher education. Students in institutions of higher learning are increasingly being diagnosed with severe mental disorders, such as acute depression and debilitating anxiety (Duffy et al., 2020; Worst & Thompson, 2024).

The developmental stage that students find themselves in when negotiating this transition process plays an important role in the mental health challenges many of them experience when entering the university context. Arnett (2000, p. 469) terms this developmental stage, which typically occurs between ages 18 and 25 years, as “emerging adulthood” (Patel et al., 2009). The onset of numerous mental health disorders typically

occurs during this developmental phase, aligning well with the average age of students entering higher education (Kessler et al., 2005). Emerging adulthood is, therefore, a critical developmental period because of its association with the start of various psychological difficulties (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). Several challenges that students typically face during this period have been offered as explanations for the observed increases in the occurrence of mental health concerns. These include academic pressures (Pedrelli et al., 2015), changes in living conditions (e.g. separation from families), financial matters, and more personal issues such as having to learn how to interact and develop relationships with others whilst developing an increased responsibility towards, and understanding of, oneself (Romm et al., 2020). The transition to the university environment is accompanied by various expectations. These expectations encompass not only anticipations regarding university life but also academic performance, originating from both the students themselves and their surrounding communities (Campbell et al., 2022). Amongst other factors, these expectations are often so demanding and pressure-driven that they undermine student well-being (Douwes et al., 2023; Poots & Cassidy, 2020).

Crede and Niehorster (2012, p. 132) associate this transitional period with the ability to navigate a new social environment, develop an orientation towards the institution of which they are now a part, become productive members of the university community, adapt to new roles and responsibilities (e.g. managing own finances), manage the separation from friends, and engage in the process of making career decisions.

Owing to the prevalence of psychological disorders experienced by young people attending university, which is mainly attributed to adaptation difficulties (Levin et al., 2017; Pedrelli et al., 2015), there has been a call for service providers (including health professionals, educators, and policymakers) to explore various ways to equip students and ensure a successful adaptation process during university entry (Seligman et al., 2009). Students' ability to successfully adapt in higher learning institutions has become a concern and focal point for different service providers and key role players in the university community (Goodman, 2017). Although the student mental health crisis has been recognised for years (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Martin, 2010; Lastoria, 2005), unfortunately, the student population continues to be subjected to long waiting lists for care, with many students not receiving mental health services that would effectively support successful navigation of this new and demanding environment (Campbell et al., 2022; Goodman, 2017; Levin et al., 2017).

Despite the numerous challenges associated with transitioning to adulthood and university, some of the literature attests to young people's ability to overcome psychosocial risks through maintaining wellbeing and cultivating resilience (Barnova & Tamasova, 2018; Lee et al., 2012; Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2020; Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2021; Ungar, 2008). In light of this, the concept of protective factors has been attracting attention (Sarker & Fletcher, 2014; Theron et al., 2022; Vanderbilt-Adrianne & Shaw, 2008). Protective factors can be conceptualised as "buffers" that mitigate the impact of adversity (Vanderbilt-Adrianne & Shaw, 2008, p. 2). This can involve resources or processes that help individuals cope better with difficulties that they face in their everyday lives (Sarker & Fletcher, 2014). Wellbeing has been recognised as a protective

factor for university students (Esteban-Gonzalo et al., 2020; Sabina & Banyard, 2015). Possibly due to the mental health crisis prevalent in universities (Evans et al., 2018), the past decade has seen a rapid growth in interest regarding wellbeing amongst university students (Hernandez-Torrano et al., 2020). Student wellbeing in higher education refers to a sustainable state marked by a positive mood, attitude, and resilience despite the mentioned pressures (Douwes et al., 2023). This state is nurtured by sociocultural factors such as diverse individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, and support mechanisms (Kiuru et al., 2019). Both internal and external resources play a role in fostering these factors, potentially contributing to a student's success at university (McKay et al., 2021; Noble et al., 2008).

In addition to wellbeing, resilience has also emerged as an important protective factor, involving individuals' internal abilities and external resources, which are accessed to help them recover from significant challenges (Masten et al., 2021; Walsh, 2003). The principal interest in resilience research is in understanding the ability that some people have to adapt positively through difficulties while others cannot (Afifi, 2018; Walsh, 2003). Within student contexts, resilience has not only been found important for successfully transitioning into university but also for navigating university life and then transitioning from university into the world of work (Bates & Miles-Johnson, 2010). Its potential role in facilitating a positive and successful transition into university has been found crucial for students to stay the course in higher education and achieve successful outcomes (Parker et al., 2017). In contrast, a decrease in protective factors risks compromising an individual's resilience, making the transition even more challenging (Bates & Miles-Johnson, 2010). Woolf et al. (2019) opine that, in recognition of the significance of resilience in aiding students to navigate the challenges inherent in adapting to their new academic and cultural environment, the cultivation of resilience in undergraduate students necessitates deliberate and thoughtful strategies.

It is important to note the reciprocal relationship that exists between wellbeing and resilience in various contexts. Wellbeing can be both a consequence of resilience and a precursor to resilience, just as resilience can be both a consequence and precursor to wellbeing (Klainin-Yobas et al., 2021; Konaszewski et al., 2021; Mak et al., 2011). This has indeed been confirmed in a preceding quantitative study (Phase 1) conducted at the same South African institution, which laid the foundation for the current qualitative exploration. Where it was found that resilience and well-being have strong associations across subscale scores for personal resilience (PR) and relational resilience (RR) as measured by the Adult Resilience Measure-R (ARM-R), and across the emotional (EWB), psychological (PWB) and social wellbeing (SWB) subscales of the Mental Health Continuum Short-Form (MHC-SF). Specifically, both PR and RR showed significant and reciprocal associations with the EWB, SWB and PWB of students. On the other hand, SWB showed a significant association with both PR and RR, while PWB showed a moderate association with the PR subscale. Although previous studies have accumulated critical knowledge on student wellbeing and resilience (see Kassymova et al., 2023; McKay et al., 2021; Rayani et al., 2024), research focusing on the association between resilience and wellbeing during the transition into university remains scarce, particularly in the South African context. Exploring wellbeing and resilience

in first-year students, not only as distinct constructs but also in terms of their possible interconnection, could help support a successful transition process as students enrol in South African universities. Studying students' experiences and perceptions of these concepts could ultimately contribute to a positive student experience.

In light of the above, the present study aimed to qualitatively explore and describe participants' experiences regarding wellbeing, resilience, and their contribution to the psychosocial adaptation of first-year students at a South African university.

Methodology

Approach and design

This study represents Phase 2 of a PhD study and builds upon the results from phase 1 of a preceding study which quantitatively determined the levels of resilience and wellbeing of first-year students from different demographic groups upon their arrival at a South African university, as well as the associations between these variables. The present study used a qualitative research approach (Teherani et al., 2015) to understand students' descriptions of resilience and wellbeing, and their contribution to first-year students' psychosocial adaptation at a South African university. The study drew from an interpretive description research design (Burdine et al., 2020). This design allows for an understanding of "complex experiences and interactions, through a discovery of recurring patterns and shared realities" (Burdine et al., 2020, p. 336) that have the potential to "inform practice and identify strategies that can protect against health-related issues" (Burdine et al., 2020, p. 337). The design allowed the researcher to comprehend complex student experiences and interactions by uncovering recurring patterns and shared realities related to student wellbeing and resilience, and their contributions to their psychosocial adaptation. The purpose of this design was to gather data that could eventually be used to guide practices and strategies to address students' psychosocial challenges, with the hope of ultimately promoting students' successful adaptation.

Data collection and sample

Data were collected through semi-structured, virtual focus group discussions (VFGDs) between June 2022 and June 2023. The results from the preceding quantitative study informed the development of a number of introductory questions and these included: *Thinking back to your experience as a first-year student when you arrived at _____, what was it like? What challenges did you experience as you entered the university? What success stories can you share about your entry into the new environment? What is well-being to you? What positively and negatively contributed to your well-being? What is resilience to you? What positively and negatively contributed to your resilience? How do you think well-being relates to resilience? How do you think resilience relates to well-being?* The discussions aimed to elicit reflective observations of students' experiences regarding their resilience and well-being, as well as the role these concepts played in their psychosocial adaptation processes. The VFGDs were held online via Zoom and Microsoft Teams video calls, this was necessary due to COVID-19 restrictions. The online platform

made participation easier for students from different locations. In the quantitative study a non-probability, convenience (availability) sampling approach was employed. Recruitment through various student committees and email invitations resulted in a total of 369 participants. However, for the current qualitative study a purposive sampling approach was followed, and a random representative subsample was then drawn from the 369 participants in consultation with the Statistical Consultation Services (SCS), and these selected individuals were invited to take part in the VFGDs.

A number of VFGDs were scheduled to involve more participants, but COVID-19 restrictions, connectivity issues, and academic commitments prevented some sessions from taking place. Ultimately, three focus groups were successfully conducted, with a total of 12 participants (seven females and five males), and these discussions generated rich and valuable insights. The sessions were facilitated by the primary researcher, a lecturer and counselling psychologist with prior experience at a student counselling and development unit at the same South African university. This background allowed for a deep understanding of the context and its challenges, enabling effective follow-up questions and a productive interview process. The facilitator followed a standard interview protocol and was supported by a research team (research promotor and an assistant research promotor). To minimise bias, each VFGD was followed by an information session in which the research team shared notes and discussed preliminary interpretations. This collaborative approach helped ensure that multiple perspectives were considered, enhancing objectivity and reducing the risk of subjective interpretation.

Data analysis

The qualitative data accumulated from VFGDs were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. An inductive data analysis approach was followed, and themes were identified using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. The approach consisted of six steps: (1) familiarisation with data. This was done through the process of transcribing qualitative data verbatim and reading and re-reading transcripts until the researcher had a thorough understanding of the content and its meaning; (2) identifying aspects within the data that aligned with the research question and creating codes according to their importance; (3) identifying and clustering codes that touched on similar ideas to derive themes within the data; (4) naming themes; (5) defining the themes; and finally, (6) producing the final report. To ensure reliability and validity, co-coding was conducted within the Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES) entity at the Faculty of Health Sciences of the South African university where the data were collected. This process involved independent coding, theme development, and refinement, with regular consultative meetings (between the entity and primary researcher) to ensure rigorous and trustworthy interpretations while minimising the influence of research bias. ATLAS-ti software (Version 23.2.2.7458) was used to organise transcripts and support the verification of the themes already identified, rather than as the primary tool for analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the research project was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the Research Gate Keepers Committee (RGKC) of the South African university at which the study was conducted. The present study followed the guidelines of the *South African Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures* (National Department of Health [NdoH], 2024) and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study. The study was conducted through the Faculty of Health Sciences, making adherence to these health research ethics standards particularly relevant to ensure the protection and wellbeing of all participants. All the participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Furthermore, as the student population is considered a vulnerable population, a registered psychologist was available for students who required mental health support during, or after their participation in the interviews.

Findings and discussion

Participants' responses to the semi-structured VFGD questions mentioned above provided qualitative descriptions of resilience and wellbeing, and how they contributed to the participants' ability to adapt to the university context. At the beginning of the VFGDs, participants' descriptions of what wellbeing and resilience involved showed a high degree of overlap.

General descriptions of resilience and wellbeing

Most students involved in the VFGDs saw resilience from two different perspectives. Two quotes, in particular, capture the essence of these descriptions. One participant referred to resilience as a person's ability to: "*... adapt to like small things like cooking for yourself, not being told when to wake up, not being told to go to school, not being told to even do homework or whatever*", emphasizing the ability to take responsibility. Another referred to it as: "*... being strong and also like keep on going no matter how bad you did in that previous test or how bad your feeling or what happened to you the previous day. It's about being strong and remember who you are.*" This second description centres on finding a sense of identity through perseverance, where individuals develop a lasting understanding of themselves through sustained resilience, especially in the face of challenges.

These descriptions contribute to personal growth in unique ways and strongly correspond with descriptions found in the literature, which identify the ability to take responsibility and develop a sense of identity during difficult times as fundamental qualities of resilience (Breakwell, 2021; Wong, 2019). Throughout the conversations with participants, it was clear that students understood the phenomenon of resilience during the admission period as pushing through limits, standing up, trying again (i.e. persevering in goal pursuit), and maintaining momentum without giving up.

Participants also seemed to share similar views on wellbeing. Most student participants seemed to understand wellbeing as an ability to balance between various facets that potentially contribute to a positive university life experience. One participant's contribution, in particular, echoed the views of many others, describing wellbeing as: "*... taking care of yourself mentally and physically and um, just being in the right state of mind and just like*

it's the balance of taking care of ourselves and all those aspects and just like improving your outlook on life and etcetera." A number of the participants focused on a sense of balance in their descriptions of wellbeing, which strongly aligns with those found in the literature (Hill, 2004; McMillan & Hillman, 2004; Rowe et al., 2004; Sawyer, 2004; Wright & Cropanzano, 2004), specifically as it applies within the student population (Olasupo et al., 2017; Punia & Malaviya, 2015; Salehi et al., 2017). An example of such literature is a study by Douwes et al. (2023), which examined students' perspectives on wellbeing in higher education. This study defines well-being as a multifaceted construct rooted in the fulfilment of certain basic needs. Similarly, Keyes (1998), who has extensively researched wellbeing, describes it as encompassing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions and the balance between them.

According to De Oliveira Durso et al. (2021), a resilient student exposed to significant stress in the academic space should be able to access protective mechanisms, internal and external to them. Effective strategies or programmes aimed at ensuring successful transition and wellbeing in higher education should, therefore, be able to help students identify and utilise protective factors, both internal and external, during this significantly stressful time. Further analysis of participants' shared experiences revealed a number of factors, again both internal and external, which facilitated the resilience and wellbeing of students and their successful adaptation during the start of the academic year.

Specific factors associated with resilience and wellbeing

Whilst the university experience posed significant challenges for the student participants, it appears that these difficulties also functioned as a catalyst for personal growth for most of the participants. Students appeared to use several specific and unique characteristics and resources (both internal and external to themselves) to overcome challenges as they transitioned into university life. The themes emerging from the conversations were identified as key contributors to wellbeing and resilience, which in turn seemed to have contributed to the successful psychosocial adaptation of the students. Two core themes and six sub-themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the VFGDs (see Table 1).

Table 1: Themes identified

Theme 1	Character strengths and personality traits (internal)
Subthemes	Optimism and a positive mindset Self-care attitude and behaviour Autonomy
Theme 2	Sense of belonging (external)
Subthemes	Social connections and a sense of belonging Institutional / organisational support Embracing diversity

Theme 1: Character strengths and personality (attributes internal to participants)

In their descriptions of resilience and wellbeing, the participants discussed various internal attributes that contributed to their resilience and wellbeing, helping them to successfully adapt to university. A number of participants in the study reported on the importance of having an **optimistic mindset** when they enrolled into university. Amongst others, the following two quotes highlighted this common experience best. One participant stated: *"Ultimately, there are people I surround myself around, and obviously if they have positive energy, I will have the positive energy. Cause it like falls back on me. And just having a positive attitude, positive mindset, because I always like to tell myself, I shouldn't worry about things I cannot fix it is out of my control."* This was echoed by another participant who added: *"You know, you're not motivated to do a lot of things, you know, but I pushed through because, you know, I had hope, I had known it's going to be okay."* The literature attests that having an optimistic mindset is an essential tool to push through challenges and achieve positive outcomes, especially within the student population (Molinero et al., 2018). An optimistic mindset is closely related to a growth mindset, which involves being open to change and viewing life's challenges as opportunities for improvement, motivation and engagement (Kapasi & Pei, 2022). This is opposed to the so-called fixed mindset, which is typically characterised by a focus on performance goals aimed at proving competence, a tendency towards self-defensive behaviour, and, ultimately, a decline in performance over time (Dweck & Molden, 2017). The findings from this study would suggest that adopting an optimistic (growth-oriented) mindset can serve as a protective barrier against the adverse life events experienced by students as they arrive on campus.

Another internal attribute that played a significant role in the participants' psychosocial adaptation was that of maintaining a **self-care attitude and behaviour**. When students were asked to share their success stories about transitioning into the new university environment at the start of the year, they often described a willingness to make use of opportunities to engage in non-academic activities to support their self-care, strengthen their resilience, and enhance their overall wellbeing. One participant highlighted sport as an important factor, stating: *"So, I'm currently playing chess for the _____. Since from high school chess is the one that boosted my confidence, my self-esteem."* Another participant added: *"I think my hobby, because I like to eat food. So, every time I go out, I would go out and eat food, come back less stressed, as I say."* Participants confirmed that their willing engagement in extracurricular activities that enhance their wellbeing naturally contributed to their self-esteem, self-confidence, and resilience. These elements appear to be vital components of self-care. A previous study linked improvement in student self-esteem, resilience, mental health, and psychological self-care to access to external resources, such as opportunities to build supportive relationships with friends and families while at university (Auttama et al., 2021). This suggests that both the willingness to engage in these activities (an internal factor referred to as a "self-care attitude and behaviour") and the availability of such opportunities (an external factor) play crucial roles in fostering student wellbeing. These findings suggest

that self-care education and the provision of related opportunities can be essential components in helping students manage stressors during the orientation period, potentially contributing to successful psychosocial adaptation.

Closely related to the previous attribute, a majority of participants reported that a sense of **autonomy** greatly contributed to their wellbeing and resilience. This sense of autonomy empowered them to take control of their lives, make their own decisions, and successfully adapt to university life. Two quotes in particular highlight this perspective: “... *managing to speak out about the things that were making me to have problem. So, I managed to speak out. By speaking out, that’s when my wellbeing became strong.*” Another went on to say, “*So when it comes to this side of university, no one is going to think for you. No one is going to think for you or to come after you that you must do your schoolwork and stuff. So, this side you have to think for your own self for your own future. That’s where you have to stand up on your own.*” Autonomy is a key part of self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and is an essential component for the development of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy has direct applicability in educational settings, leading to positive outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2020). According to Ryan and Deci (2017), students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated when they feel empowered to make decisions that align with their goals and interests. During the VFGDs, it emerged that in the same environment that has been proven to be challenging to adjust to, students were motivated to push towards their goals and interests as long as they had a sense of autonomy. In line with this, Evans and Boucher (2015, p. 87) opine that throughout a variety of “academic outcomes and student populations, positive impacts have been seen when student autonomy is promoted through meaningful and personally relevant choice”. Recognising the potential benefit of creating opportunities for and instilling a sense of autonomous decision-making during the process of transitioning to higher education could support and promote optimal student adaptation in their first year of study.

Theme 2: Sense of belonging (resources external to participants)

In their descriptions of wellbeing and resilience and their potential role in the participants’ adaptation to university life, the participants touched on a number of external factors. Forming **social connections and a sense of belonging** represents a recurring theme. The following two quotes highlight a common expression of connection and belonging amongst first-year students: “... *it was like this heart-warming experience, knowing that even though these people are not related to me in a biological sense, they love me, and they will always be here for me*”. Another mentions a connection with a residence caregiver: “*I’m not always open with her as we have very differing opinions about religion and stuff like that. But at least I know that if I have something great to tell, she will be excited with me and she’ll be, I don’t know. She’ll be ululating around me when I tell her.*” These students appear to value experiences that foster a sense of inclusion and acceptance within the university environment. This finding aligns with the literature showing that students in higher education who feel a stronger sense of social connection and a sense of belonging typically demonstrate higher motivation, greater academic self-confidence, increased academic engagement and better achievement (Pedler et al., 2022).

This has also been found to contribute to sustained well-being, resilience and successful adaptation of students at the university (Douwes et al., 2023; Enochs & Roland, 2006; ul Hasan & Channa, 2021; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013).

Students also identified **institutional and organisational support** as a crucial factor contributing to their wellbeing and resilience during their first months of university life. For most students, being well-oriented, aware, and prepared for their environment was key. The following quotes underline this sentiment shared by participants. One participant, who initially questioned the meaning and purpose of certain tasks assigned to her which caused her considerable discomfort, expressed that the support she eventually received from the residential committee enhanced her understanding of these tasks, making it easier for her to get involved in residential activities. She remarked: *"I didn't understand why must we do telephone duty and what not but now that I understand it, it's much easier because usually when you don't understand what you're doing, why you are doing it, you always find a reason to complain about it. Like why must I sit telephone duty? But once you understand why you are sitting in and what it means to the residence you become more involved."* Another participant, who seemed to have benefited from guidance during the admission period, conveyed: *"I'd say like the R & O period is very beneficial. I, I would tell everyone to attend it, to participate in it because it helps you settle into university quicker. Firstly, obviously your first year, you may be coming from a different province, you do not know anything. But during R & O there are people, the house committee telling your parents this is what, this is where, this is what it makes you know like what stuff out on campus where everything is."* Most students found lack of familiarity with the new environment to be a stumbling block. However, it appears that gradually gaining knowledge and understanding of the institution and its processes contributes to student adaptation, and institutional support offered in this regard was beneficial to students. Elliot and Shin (2002) and Kakada et al. (2019) also find that positive institutional support contributes to students being satisfied with their university experience. Owusu et al. (2014) support this and emphasize the crucial role played by the institution and its orientation programmes in addressing transitional issues experienced by a typically diverse group of students.

Lastly, another key factor that students discussed as a contributor to their wellbeing and resilience and, ultimately, their adaptation process was **embracing diversity**. The following quote reflects this experience for most students: *"what I can say is that I ended up understanding that we have different cultures in this place, and we do things differently. So, I had to tell myself that I will only concentrate on what I know and then learn what I don't know."* Another student conveyed: *"This small town that I came from was ..., well, violently racist, sexist and homophobic and I was always different cause I did not subscribe to racist behaviour or, Um, gender stereotypes and stuff like that. So, coming to _____, coming to university and seeing that. Wow, I'm not the weird one. [Laughing] I am not the [inaudible: 00:12:30] that does not believe in racism. What? So, [Laughing] [I: Hmm] It was eye opening in a manner that I never fit in, I never fit in when I was younger. But here, on the campus, there's at least two or three places where you walk by and find people that who are like you."* It is clear that students found it challenging but also welcoming to be in an environment very different from what they were used to.

Gradually adapting to and learning to accept different cultures, languages, and sexual orientations made the experience easier. Mampane (2019) agrees with this and highlights how crucial the ability to embrace diversity is to integrate into university life, especially for previously disadvantaged and minority groups in South Africa. This seems to be especially important in the South African context because of the racial and cultural diversity and the potential conflicts arising from the diversity which negatively impact education at all levels, particularly higher education (Mampane, 2019). According to Vandeyar and Mohale (2016), managing diversity has become one of the most significant challenges for higher education institutions. These authors state that the difficulty lies in fostering institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate differences and diversity. Although it is highlighted as a challenging task in higher education institutions, the finding emphasizes that embracing students' unique and diverse lived experiences is an essential component for successfully transitioning at the start of the year. Considering this can potentially inspire ideas for creating opportunities for meaningful interactions in the new environment.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to qualitatively explore and describe students' experiences of resilience and wellbeing, and how they contribute to the psychosocial adaptation of first-year students at a South African university. The students' understanding of wellbeing and resilience was, to a large degree, aligned with definitions of these concepts as found in existing literature, and also alluded to a strong association between these concepts. In addition to this, the findings also shed light on several factors that could protect the resilience and wellbeing of students in higher education. These potential protective or buffer factors, both internal and external to the individual, could assist the student in transitioning to university life and, in so doing, help address the mental health crisis experienced by students in higher education. Both studies indicate that internal and external resources contribute directly or indirectly to students' successful transition at the beginning of their first year of university. Universities would, therefore, do well to encourage *optimistic and positive mindsets, self-care attitudes and behaviours, autonomy, social connections, a sense of belonging and embracing diversity*, while *offering institutional/organisational support programmes* aimed at improving students' adaptation.

Limitations and recommendations

The 12 participants who took part in the study were selected through a statistically randomised sampling of participants that formed part of a preceding quantitative study. The challenges experienced in gaining access to a sample large enough to represent the university population were a key limitation of the study. Although this sample was intended to be representative and potentially include more participants, the recruitment process posed challenges mainly due to potential student participants' reluctance to participate. The campus council office assisted as independent facilitators. The student participants often had other responsibilities and academic activities that ran concurrently with data collection which led to poor attendance at the various VFGDs that were presented. The

findings may, therefore, not represent the experiences of the broader South African university community. Further, the study was conducted in English, and the ability to read and speak English formed part of the inclusion criteria. Therefore, participants were able to engage with the study in English. Thus, the other key limitation that arose during the VFGDs, was the research team's choice to describe resilience and wellbeing to the first-year student participants, with the intention of helping participants understand the constructs being explored. The descriptions of resilience and well-being were provided to establish a common understanding of these psychological constructs rather than to accommodate language proficiency. However, this may have influenced some of the responses given by the students. To address this, in cases where participants offered descriptions of resilience and wellbeing similar to those provided at the start of the VFGDs, further probing was conducted to explore their subjective understanding of the constructs. A recommendation in this regard is for future researchers to avoid describing these constructs at the beginning of the interviews; if they have to do so, keep the description as short as possible.

A key recommendation from this study would be for higher education to support the successful transition of first-year students by utilising these findings when developing programmes and procedures for student registration and orientation. These findings can aid the development and implementation of guidelines for such interventions, programmes, policies and practices aimed at providing essential support and promoting the resilience and wellbeing of students upon their arrival at the university.

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Ethics statement

Ethical approval for the research project was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the Research Gate Keepers Committee (RGKC) of the South African university at which the study was conducted.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts with respect to the research authorship, and or publication of this article.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impact of homeowner behaviours on the academic performance of university students: The case of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Impact des comportements des propriétaires sur la performance académique des étudiants universitaires : le cas de l'Université de Cape Coast, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The demand for housing among university students has increased in proportion to the global surge in university enrolment. Students heavily depend on private housing alternatives since university-provided housing facilities cannot accommodate the increasing student population. There is a lack of research on how homeowner behaviours affect the academic outcomes of university students. This case study examines the impacts of homeowner behaviours on the academic performance of students at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana. A single case study was chosen, and four main communities were purposively selected, namely: Kwapro, Amamoma, Apewosika, and Duakor. Focus group discussions were organised in each of the selected communities for data collection. The data were analysed thematically. The study's results showed that the academic performance of students at the University of Cape, Ghana is impacted by the following five homeowner behaviours: (1) regular rent increases; (2) delays in maintenance; (3) room overcrowding; (4) stringent gate locking; and (5) frequent noise making. These behaviours seem to have a psychological impact, cause financial burden, interrupt learning, and decrease study periods. The study recommends collaboration among key stakeholders (UCC Student representatives, homeowners, rent control regulators, and the Office of Student Affairs, UCC) to establish frameworks to provide conducive housing options that centre the wellbeing of university students.

KEYWORDS

Students, student housing, homeowner behaviour, academic performance, urbanization

RÉSUMÉ

La demande de logement chez les étudiants universitaires a augmenté en raison de la hausse mondiale des inscriptions dans les universités. Les étudiants dépendent fortement des solutions de logement privées, car les infrastructures de logement fournies par les

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universités ne peuvent pas accueillir la population étudiante croissante. Il existe un manque de recherches sur la manière dont les comportements des propriétaires influencent les résultats académiques des étudiants universitaires. Cette étude de cas examine les effets des comportements des propriétaires sur la performance académique des étudiants de l'Université de Cape Coast (UCC), au Ghana. Une étude de cas unique a été adoptée, et quatre principales communautés ont été sélectionnées de manière raisonnée : Kwapro, Amamoma, Apewosika et Duakor. Des discussions de groupe ont été organisées dans chacune de ces communautés pour la collecte des données. Les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique. Les résultats de l'étude montrent que cinq comportements des propriétaires — les augmentations régulières de loyer, les retards dans la maintenance, la surpopulation des chambres, le verrouillage strict des portails et les nuisances sonores fréquentes — semblent affecter la performance académique des étudiants de l'Université de Cape Coast, au Ghana. Ces comportements ont des effets psychologiques, entraînent des charges financières, perturbent l'apprentissage et réduisent le temps consacré aux études. L'étude recommande une collaboration entre les principales parties prenantes (les représentants des étudiants de l'UCC, les propriétaires, le service de contrôle des loyers et le Bureau des affaires étudiantes de l'UCC) afin d'établir des cadres visant à offrir des options de logement adéquates centrées sur le bien-être des étudiants universitaires.

MOTS-CLÉS

Étudiants, logement étudiant, comportement des propriétaires, performance académique, urbanisation

Introduction

The global expansion of the higher education sector has led to an increased demand for student accommodation during the academic journey (Rumley et al., 2023). Despite growing concern about student housing conditions, limited research has examined the relationship between students' living conditions and their academic performance (Kornbluh et al., 2024; Halpern, 2014; Franzoi et al., 2023). Academic performance, while not a perfect proxy for learning, remains a critical measure of student success with long-term implications for access to postgraduate education and employment opportunities (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) found that students who lived at home had a significantly lower likelihood of graduating with strong degrees or securing graduate-level employment.

Recent studies (Kornbluh et al., 2024; McCarthy-Vincent, 2022; Mbazor, 2021; Adama et al., 2018) have investigated the impact of housing quality on academic outcomes. Von Simson and Umblijs (2021) reported that students living in overcrowded, noisy, or unstable housing conditions in Norway tend to perform worse on exams. Similar findings have been reported elsewhere, affirming the negative correlation between poor living conditions and educational attainment (Solari & Mare, 2012). Sotomayor et al. (2022) described how the

increasing commodification of housing has forced students to adopt creative strategies to secure affordable and accessible accommodation, underscoring the persistent housing challenges students face in urban environments. Furthermore, Rumbley et al. (2023) emphasized affordability as students' top housing priority, pointing to a mismatch between available options and student needs. The research findings mentioned above collectively illustrate that unconducive housing conditions, whether in terms of quality, cost, or stability, can have negative consequences on the academic performance of university students.

In the context of this study, a homeowner is defined as an individual or entity, rather than a university or college, that provides housing for university students. Therefore, a homeowner's behaviour refers to the actions, attitudes, and interactions of homeowners that affect students' academic performance. In the higher education setting, the behaviours and decisions of homeowners play a significant yet underexplored role in shaping students' academic outcomes. Although some studies have addressed homeowners' environmental preparedness and responses (Gaisie et al., 2022; Mol et al., 2024; Endendijk et al., 2025), few have examined how these behaviours intersect with the academic performance of university students who do not live in university residences.

Ghani et al. (2018) explained that the backdrop of higher education institutions' student housing inadequacies and rising student housing demand has piqued many people's interest in Nigeria's student housing rental market. This is because it has been discovered that the industry of renting out student accommodation is profitable and secure, ensuring long-term profits. Similarly, in Ghana, rising university admissions rates have exacerbated the demand for student housing, outstripping the available supply of on-campus accommodation (Amoah et al., 2025; Attiogbe et al., 2024). As a result, private housing providers have become a key resource for many students (Amoah et al., 2025; Attiogbe et al., 2024). Shakantu and Simpeh (2018) investigated student perceptions of university-provided student housing in Ghana, highlighting both positive and negative views, but omitted analysis of the private rental sector. A past study (Asare-Baafi et al., 2025) explored the factors that influence student happiness in off-campus university living in Ghana. The study's results revealed that the most important indicators of student happiness in off-campus university living were power, access to transportation, and access to water.

Tweneboah-Kodua (2020) explains that the University of Cape Coast has seen a surge in student enrolment recently. As a result, there is a shortage of student housing offered by the university, leading to some students not living in university residence (Adams, 2020). Due to the high demand for student housing, some homeowners have resorted to actions such as increasing hostel fees (Adams, 2020; Marfo et al., 2018) and evicting students, despite existing rental regulations (Adams, 2020). The existing literature thus reveals a gap in understanding how homeowner behaviours affect student academic performance. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to fill this gap by examining the impact of homeowner behaviours on academic outcomes among students at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. This research is timely and significant for several reasons. First, it highlights the need for strategic collaboration between universities and homeowners. Second, it provides evidence to inform university and municipal housing

policies aimed at enhancing student academic performance. Third, the study further contributes to the student housing literature.

Methods

Research design

The researcher chose a case study design to guide the study. The case study design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to focus on one particular university, that is, the University of Cape Coast, and to get a deep understanding of how hostel owners' attitudes, such as rules, rent practices, neglect, and supportive influence, affect the academic outcomes of the resident university students. The procedures used in the study, as well as the number of participants, are described in the section that follows.

Sample size, sampling

To reach data saturation, the researcher first purposively selected the Kwapro community, where a focus group of five members was selected for the data gathering through an interview. After the interview, the researcher analysed the data to identify emerging themes. Second, the researcher purposively selected Amamoma (a different community) for a focus group discussion with five members and interviewed them. The researcher analysed the data afterwards to identify the emerging themes. Here, the researcher found that there were similarities and variations in the responses compared to the previous data (Kwapro). The researcher then purposively selected Apewosika and conducted a focus group discussion with five members. After the interview, the researcher analysed the data and found that similar responses appeared compared to the previous data. Finally, after the researcher purposively selected Duakor for a five-member focus group and analysed the data, there were no new emerging concepts or responses, leading to the confirmation of data saturation. Therefore, 20 participants, involving 12 males and 8 females, were selected for the study. In the next section, the researcher explains the ethical processes that were followed in gathering the data for this study.

Ethics

Prior to its use, the in-depth interview guide was double-checked to make sure the questions were understandable and that they would not cause participants any psychological or other emotional harm. The researcher explained the study's purpose to the participants, that is, to find out about how homeowner behaviours affect the academic performance of students at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, and sought their agreement to participate. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher stored the data on his personal computer. Aside from English, Fante and Twi were languages used to facilitate understanding. Field notes were taken, and interviews were audio recorded. The audio recordings of the interviews in Fante and Twi, which lasted around forty-five minutes each, were then translated into English. The following section explains how the gathered data were analysed.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the participants were transcribed manually and analysed using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis involves data familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2017). The content of the interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then reviewed by the researcher. These generated many themes after multiple readings of the transcripts. The themes were compared with the responses to identify any common patterns, trends, convergence, and divergence. This methodical and analytical process established an explicit structure for describing and understanding participants' lived experiences. The next section presents the results that emerged from the thematic analysis.

Results

Perceived impacts of homeowner behaviours on academic performance

During analysis, five major themes emerged as factors impacting the academic performance of the students, namely (1) frequent rent increases, (2) delay in fixing electrical and other faults, (3) room overcrowding, (4) locking of hostel gates, and (5) noise pollution. Each of these major themes will be elaborated upon and explained, starting with the theme: frequent rent increases.

Frequent rent increases

One of the major challenging homeowner behaviours affecting students' academic performance at the University of Cape Coast is frequent rent increases. Marfo et al. (2018) reported that the rise in accommodation fees for private hostels at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana, was more than 100 per cent (108.8%) during the 2010 and 2018 academic years. This is not different from the University of Cape Coast. Despite the exorbitant accommodation fees that students already pay, they face frequent hostel fee hikes. This puts financial and psychological stress on final-year students. Some of the participants find it difficult to pay such rent costs in full, leaving them to make part payments that homeowners refuse to take most of the time. Participants become stressed and do not settle easily into their academic work. Participants are required to vacate their rooms if they owe their homeowners money. One of the participants shared that:

The major challenge I face in my housing needs is the constant increase in hostel fees. Because many students need accommodation, if you do not pay, other students will pay. Last semester, I decided to make a part payment, but my landlord did not agree. I had to struggle to get the balance, and because of this, I was not attending lectures.
(Participant 5, Geography student)

Another participant echoed this, expressing their concerns.

Every year, I become worried about accommodation because the landlady increases the rent. This always put a financial burden on me because I had to use some of my feeding money to supplement that. This makes me lose focus on my studies. They will threaten to evict you at some point in time. (Participant 2, Population and Health student)

In addition to the above, another participant shared a similar sentiment:

I wish I could live in the university hall throughout because I could obtain good grades. When I started renting in the privately provided accommodation, I observed a drastic change (drop) in my grades, because the high rent costs and frequent yearly increases alone will not let you focus on your studies. (Participant 4, Agriculture student)

The quotes from the participants indicate that dealing with the frequent increase in accommodation costs negatively affected their academic performance. Participants had to spend time gathering money to make a full payment of the rent; by doing so, they skipped lectures and did not settle quickly into their studies. Another critical homeowner behaviour that negatively affects students' academic performance is the delay in fixing electrical and other faults.

Delay in fixing electrical and other faults

Many participants expressed that the homeowners charge high rental fees, yet they are reluctant to fix issues that come up in their facilities (homes). The participants further argue that these delays in fixing electrical faults in students' rooms, sometimes for a few weeks or months (or not at all), make their rooms unsuitable for learning. Participants often had to leave for other learning centres around campus, where they became tired after walking long distances (average, walking 30-40 minutes, depending on their housing facility), particularly during examination weeks. In other instances, a delay in fixing broken pipes leading to water shortages compelled students to leave for other hostels, which affected their lecture attendance and their ability to freshen up after hard days of study. Some of the participants stated that:

Homeowners promise to fix faults in their facilities, yet they don't even fix their rooms, and even if they do, it takes a long time after complaining to them. Sometimes, particularly during exam week, I had to leave the room for other study centres because of lighting issues. (Participant 5, Communication student)

Furthermore, another participant expressed a similar opinion in the following:

We usually have faults such as electrical, water, etc., because of the congestion in the hostel, the landlord takes a long time to fix them after a complaint. The rooms become hot; this affects studies. When there is a broken pipe, it takes some weeks to fix. (Participant 3, Geography student)

The above data show that homeowners' delay in fixing challenges, such as broken pipes, electrical faults, affects students' learning, since they sometimes have to leave their rooms for other study venues. Another themed behaviour is owners overcrowding or offering small rooms.

Overcrowding

Many participants expressed that their rooms were small, yet they were made to share. Some small room sizes contain three to four students. Sometimes with no study tables,

no space to put one's bags, and other things. During the weekends, when students are in their hostels for most of the day, the situation worsens. Most of the participants indicated that the crowding leads to them avoiding being in their rooms, and visiting other friends instead, making them waste hours that could have been used for studying.

One participant explained that:

Our room is too small for the three of us; we don't even have a comfortable place to study. There is no study table, a place to put your things, yet when you complain, they won't mind you. During exams, when everybody wants to study, the room becomes inoperative. (Participant 6, Population and Health student)

This was further echoed by another participant who said:

Rooms that are meant for one person are being used for two or three people, and this makes the room crowded. Sometimes, when you are studying, your roommates may be doing something that may distract you. (Participant 2, Economics student)

It is evident from the above data that homeowners' allocating many students to small rooms creates congestion, which affects participants' preparation for examinations. Locking hostel gates, arguing for safety reasons, further complicates matters.

Locking of hostel gates

Theft incidents in the university community compel homeowners to fix gates in their hostels. Unfortunately, the practice of locking the gates of these hostels as early as 9:30 pm negatively affects participants' studies. Most of the participants indicated that because of the congestion in their hostel rooms, they prefer going to other student centres, such as the library. However, they fear that the locking of their hostel gates before their return, which would require them to stay behind for a long time before they were reopened. They become frustrated and are not positioned well enough for examinations. As Participant 7, a Computer Science student, stated, "*despite the uncondusive nature of the rooms for studies, I am afraid of other study centres because I will come and find the gate locked.*"

This was supported by another participant, who indicated that:

I usually go to the library during examinations, but make sure that I return to my hostel by 8:45 pm; if not, my landlady will lock the gate. Due to this, I do not cover a lot before the exam day. (Participant 11, Financial Accounting student)

The data provide a critical viewpoint on how homeowners' demands for early locking of hostel gates affects the student academic performance. Despite the uncondusive nature of the hostels for studies, the participants had to make sure they made it back to their hostels in good time to avoid being locked out, leading to not being fully prepared for their examinations. Another significant homeowner tendency that affects student academic performance is noise pollution.

Noise pollution

Frequent noise making emerged as one of the homeowner behaviours that affects the academic performance of University of Cape Coast students. Most of the participants hinted that homeowners who live with their families sometimes engage in misunderstandings, quarrels, etc., that end up disturbing students' peace of mind and concentration on their studies. Many participants explained that some homeowners play loud music in their rooms, sometimes they organise funerals, outdoor ceremonies in or around the hostels, which causes a lot of noise pollution, thereby affecting students' studies. One participant stated that:

I am negatively affected by the usual noise-making of my landlord. He plays loud music and sometimes organizes a funeral and ceremonies behind the hostel, which affects focusing on learning, particularly during exam week, since we have to leave our rooms for some time instead of studying. (Participant 18, Home Economics student)

This was further echoed by another participant who shared:

Our room is close to the landlady; sometimes, we have to leave our rooms because of the quarrels the family engages in. When such a misunderstanding occurs at night, it affects our sleep and causes us to be stressed the following day. (Participant 16, Communication student)

The above result showed that homeowner behaviours such as quarreling, playing loud music, etc. causes noise pollution for students, leading to them not focusing on their studies, hence affecting their academic performance.

Discussion

One of the main homeowner behaviours that impacts the University of Cape Coast students' academic performance is the regular increase in rent. Some participants struggle to cover the full cost of rent, so they are forced to make partial payments, which most homeowners often do not accept. Participants experience stress and struggle to focus on their academic work. Participants who fail to pay their rent in full by the middle or end of the semester fear being kicked out of their rooms, which causes them to lose concentration on their studies and lowers their overall grade. This result aligns with Marfo et al.'s (2018) findings, who reported that accommodation fees for private hostels at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana, had risen by more than 100 per cent (108.8%) during the 2010 and 2018 academic years, which affected the students.

Homeowners hesitate to repair damaged plumbing and electrical issues in students' rooms. In Ghana, housing is regulated by institutions such as the National Building Regulation (LI 1630 1996), the Ghana Building Code (GS 1207:2018), and the Rent Control Act, 1986 (PNDC138). For instance, under the National Building Regulation (LI 1630 1996), regulation 2 requires the submission of building plans and details of use in terms of any work connected to the building. Also, the Rent Control Act, 1986 (PNDC138) is responsible for regulating rents for residential premises and other related issues. There seems to be no

frameworks specifically targeting private student hostels, for instance, tenancy, facilities, and services. These institutional gaps reduce accountability, leading to homeowners' reluctance to fix damaged facilities in their hostels, for example, pipes, electrical appliances (Akande et al., 2023).

This study also showed that participants' academic performance is impacted when homeowners overcommit when it comes to accepting tenants, thus creating congested rooms. These homeowners often have modest rooms that may accommodate no more than two persons. They, however, install many beds, three or more, as reported in earlier studies (Igbal et al., 2024; Oke et al., 2017). Due to overcrowding, students are often forced to meet friends and engage in other activities instead of dedicating their extra time to studying in their rooms. This result confirms earlier research (Ime et al., 2022), which found that the University of Calabar female hostel was overcrowded, having a major impact on students' physical and mental health, as well as their academic performance.

Homeowners were found to follow a stringent norm of locking hostel gates early. Participants tended to prefer to learn at other student centres, such as the library, due to the unfavourable conditions of the hostels, including high room temperatures, congestion, and noise pollution. Many also engage in peer group discussions to help them address some of their learning challenges and prepare for their examinations (Qureshi et al., 2023). However, for many participants, spending time outside of their hostels, especially after 9:30 p.m., is often impossible as they have to return quickly to avoid getting locked out which detracts from their ability to collaborate with their study partners, which in turn affects their academic performance (Qureshi et al., 2023).

Noise pollution also emerges as another critical behaviour of homeowners that affects the participants' academic performance. Participants whose rooms are located closer to homeowners' lodgings usually experience various forms of noise, for instance, quarrelling and loud music. Furthermore, sometimes, during weekends, other social events such as funerals and outdoor celebrations organised closer to the hostels contribute to a noisy environment, leading to students' inability to concentrate on their studies. Eventually, to avoid such unfavourable conditions, some participants leave their rooms for other activities, such as visiting friends, going to quieter spaces for studies, or watching movies instead of learning. These findings connect with those of Ali et al. (2023), who reported that persistent noise pollution in hostels had a detrimental effect on students' ability to concentrate and do well academically.

Conclusion

The growing demand for housing among university students has led to a strong reliance on accommodations in private housing. This study looked at how homeowners' behaviours affect students' academic achievement at Ghana's University of Cape Coast. The study found that five primary homeowner behaviours, including regular rent increases, delayed maintenance, creating overcrowding, strict gate locking, and frequent noise production, harm students' academic performance. These behaviours result in financial burden, psychological and emotional imbalances, a lack of study focus, a drop

in grades, and an unsettling study environment, all of which impede students' academic progress at the University of Cape Coast.

Despite the challenges that the University of Cape Coast students face regarding homeowner behaviours like this, homeowners play a vital role in solving the housing deficit for students at the University of Cape Coast and elsewhere. To maintain a sustainable housing market in which all stakeholders may prosper, this study recommends stakeholder engagement to build frameworks for providing suitable housing alternatives that prioritise university students' academic performance.

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Ethics statement

The in-depth interview guide was double-checked to make sure the questions were understandable and that they would not cause participants any psychological or other emotional harm. The researcher explained the study's purpose to the participants, and sought their agreement to participate. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher stored the data on his personal computer. Aside from English, Fante and Twi were languages used to facilitate understanding. Audio recordings in Fante and Twi were translated into English.

Potential conflict of interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postgraduate retention strategies at higher education institutions: A systematic review

Amasu okugcinwa kwabafundi beziq eziphakeme ezikhungweni zemfundo ephakeme: Ukubuyekwezwa okuhlelekile

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate retention is key for ensuring postgraduate success and the capacitation of the higher education sector. Retention is a complex and multifaceted issue, requiring interventions at various levels and stages in the postgraduate lifecycle. A systematic review was conducted to synthesise evidence of postgraduate retention strategies used in higher education institutions internationally. The review followed the PRISMA framework, including identification, screening, eligibility and appraisal, ensuring methodological rigour and transparency of reporting. A total of 1,719 peer-reviewed, published articles were identified, and after screening and appraisal, 32 were included in the synthesis. Various retention and success strategies were reported. The findings identified supervision as a key area of support for retention, noting the importance of supervisor selection, mentorship within the supervisory relationship, and collaborative supervisory approaches in supporting postgraduate success. Various supplementary support initiatives were noted, targeting academic and socio-emotional development, such as academic coaching, writing camps, peer mentorship and counselling. It is recommended that institutions consider implementing multiple interventions, embedded within institutional practices, targeting the needs and stages of the postgraduate lifecycle, to ensure that postgraduate students are well supported. Interventions are also needed for stakeholders providing key support, specifically supervisors, to ensure that the support provided is effective and aligned with best practice evidence.

KEYWORDS

Doctoral education, higher education, mentorship, peer-mentorship, postgraduate studies, postgraduate education and training, postgraduate supervision, retention and throughput, student success, student support services, supervisory relationships, writing support

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ISIFINYEZO

Ukugcinwa kwabafundi beziq eziphakeme kubalulekile ukuze kuqinisekiswa impumelelo yabo kanye nokuthuthukiswa kwemfundo ephakeme. Nokho, lokhu kuyindaba eyinkimbinkimbi edinga izindlela ezahlukene zokweseka abafundi ezigabeni ezihlukahlukene zokufunda kwabo. Lolu cwaningo lwenze ukubuyekwezwa okuhlelekile ukuze kuhlanyanyelwe ulwazi mayelana namasu asetshenziswa emhlabeni jikelele ukugcina abafundi ezikhungweni zemfundo ephakeme. Ucwaningo lulandele indlela ye-PRISMA, okuhlanganisa ukuhlonza, ukuhlunga, ukuhlola ukufaneleka kanye nekhwalithi yezifundo, ukuze kuqinisekiswa ukuthembeka nokucaca kwemiphumela. Kwatholakala izihloko eziyi-1,719 ezibuyekwezwe ontanga, kanti ezingama-32 kuphela ezagcina zifakiwe ocwaningweni. Imiphumela ikhombise ukuthi ukuqondiswa kwabafundi (supervision) kubalulekile kakhulu ekubasizeni bahlale ezifundweni zabo. Lokhu kufaka phakathi ukukhethwa kahle komqondisi, ubudlelwane obuhle phakathi komqondisi nomfundi, kanye nokusebenza ngokubambisana. Kutholakale nezinye izindlela zokweseka abafundi, njengokuqeqeshwa kwezifundo, amakamu okubhala, ukwesekana phakathi kwabafundi, kanye nokwelulekwa ngokwengqondo. Kunconywa ukuthi izikhungo zemfundo ephakeme zisebenzise izindlela eziningi zokweseka abafundi, ezihambisana nezidingo zabo ezigabeni ezahlukene zokufunda. Lokhu kungasiza ekuqinisekiseni ukuthi abafundi bathola ukwesekwa okwanele. Kubalulekile futhi ukweseka labo abahlinzeka ngosizo, ikakhulukazi abaqondisi, ukuze umsebenzi wabo ube nempumelelo futhi uhambisane nezindlela ezinhle ezisekelwe ocwaningweni.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA

Imfundo yobudokotela, imfundo ephakeme, ukwelulekwa, ukwesekana kwabafundi, izifundo zeziqu eziphakeme, ukuqondiswa kwabafundi, ukugcinwa kwabafundi nokuphuthula, impumelelo yabafundi, izinsizakalo zokweseka abafundi, ubudlelwane bomqondisi nomfundi, ukwesekwa kokubhala

Introduction

Postgraduate students are a strategic focus area for higher education institutions (HEIs), as key knowledge producers and for capacitating the higher education (HE) sector, particularly in the African context (AUC, 2015). South Africa is a hub of postgraduate education in Africa (Kahn & Oghenetega, 2021). A substantial number of international students, primarily from sub-Saharan neighbours, are enrolled at South African HEIs (Kahn et al., 2019). Student dropout is a global concern, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Paideya & Bengesai, 2017). Various factors are linked to student retention and success, including funding and financial support (Lindley et al., 2020), the supervisory relationship (Matheka et al., 2024), mentorship (Benzon et al., 2020), institutional support (Lehan et al., 2021), sense of belonging (Collier & Blanchard, 2023), and peer support (Debray et al., 2024). Retention is therefore complex and multifaceted.

Student retention needs to consider the individual student, their supervisor, and the HEI as stakeholders in postgraduate development (Albertyn et al., 2018). The thesis or

dissertation is a key component of postgraduate degrees; thus, the research supervisor has a central role (Senekal et al., 2025). The rapport and trust in a supervisory relationship are pivotal for the postgraduate experience and student success (Belavy et al., 2020; Matheka et al., 2024). Approaches to supervision, which traditionally followed a master-apprenticeship model, are shifting towards collaborative models, such as the cohort model, as these models allow for greater reciprocal support (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2024). The HEI itself supports and develops postgraduate students through various initiatives, including writing retreats and supplementary skills training (Frantz et al., 2021). Beyond the transfer of knowledge, institutional support also facilitates peer networking and socialisation (Senekal et al., 2025). Peer support enhances success and sense of belonging (Matheka et al., 2024). Socialisation during postgraduate studies exposes students to the academic community, preparing them to become academic staff (Aarnikoivu, 2023). Students and graduates attribute their persistence to social and intrapersonal factors, not just cognitive competence (Senekal et al., 2024). Therefore, support from various role-players within the HEI environment is essential for addressing student retention.

Retention is multifaceted, requiring agile strategies based on ongoing learning (Beer & Lawson, 2017). Interventions for postgraduate retention may include various approaches, such as peer-learning, alternative access programmes, curriculum-based interventions, and professional discipline (Paideya & Bengesai, 2017). With many possible interventions, consolidation of empirical evidence of what initiatives have been implemented is needed in order to make feasible recommendations. The study aimed to synthesise international evidence of the strategies used to retain postgraduate students in HEIs.

Methodology

A systematic review was used to answer the question: What strategies are used to retain postgraduate students in HEIs? The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021) was used to guide the study, ensuring methodological rigour and transparent reporting.

Inclusion criteria

The following inclusion criteria were considered:

- Articles published between 2020 and 2024;
- Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods or review methods;
- Postgraduate student populations;
- Interventions or strategies for retention and/or student success;
- International HEI contexts;
- Published in English; and
- Peer-reviewed.

Articles that did not meet all the inclusion criteria were excluded. Articles without full-text access, despite reasonable efforts, were excluded.

Search strategy

The search was conducted via the University of the Western Cape’s online library platform, uKwazi. uKwazi allows for the composite search of all subscribed electronic databases, enhancing the systematic nature of the review. The PICO (Population, Intervention, Context, Outcome) framework was used to develop the research questions, keywords and Boolean phrases for the search (Table 1). Boolean phrases were entered into uKwazi, using “AND” operators between the strings, in a single, composite search of all databases. Filters were applied for publication date (2020-2024) and peer-reviewed status.

Table 1: Search term development

PICO	Keywords	Boolean phrases
Population	Postgraduate	“advanced degree” OR “doctoral degree” OR “doctorate” OR “master’s” OR “master’s degree” OR “PhD” OR “Postgraduate students” OR “graduate student” OR “grad student” OR “Honours”
Intervention	Strategies	“plan” OR “game plan” OR “plan of action” OR “policy” OR “proposed action” OR “programme” OR “procedure” OR “approach” OR “schedule” OR “Intervention” OR “strategies” OR “support” OR “initiative”
Context	HE sectors (internationally)	“Higher education” OR “University”
Outcome	Retention	“retention” OR “throughput” OR “student success” OR “attrition” OR “drop out”

Study selection

The review followed the PRISMA levels of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). Articles identified in the search were extracted to Covidence, an online systematic review platform. Titles and abstracts were evaluated against the inclusion criteria for relevance, and reasons for exclusions were captured. The eligibility of each remaining article was assessed through full-text review for relevance. The remaining articles were evaluated for methodological quality using the Smith, Franciscus and Swartbooi (SFS) critical appraisal tool, Version E (Smith et al., 2015), which is inclusive of various study designs. A minimum threshold score of 60% was set for inclusion, to ensure that only high-quality research was included (Smith et al., 2015). Articles that scored less than 60% were excluded. Each level of screening, eligibility and appraisal was conducted independently by two reviewers, and disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Data extraction and synthesis

Data were extracted from articles selected for inclusion, using a data extraction tool that was self-developed for the review in alignment with the research objectives and inclusion criteria. The data extraction template was piloted on three articles to ensure clarity, accuracy and completeness. The review findings were analysed using thematic synthesis (Gough et al., 2017).

Ethics

Ethics clearance was obtained from the UWC Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) (HS24/6/7). As staff members, the authors had legal access to articles through the UWC Library. The review upheld ethical research practice through adhering to the rigour of the review method and appropriately citing all sources used.

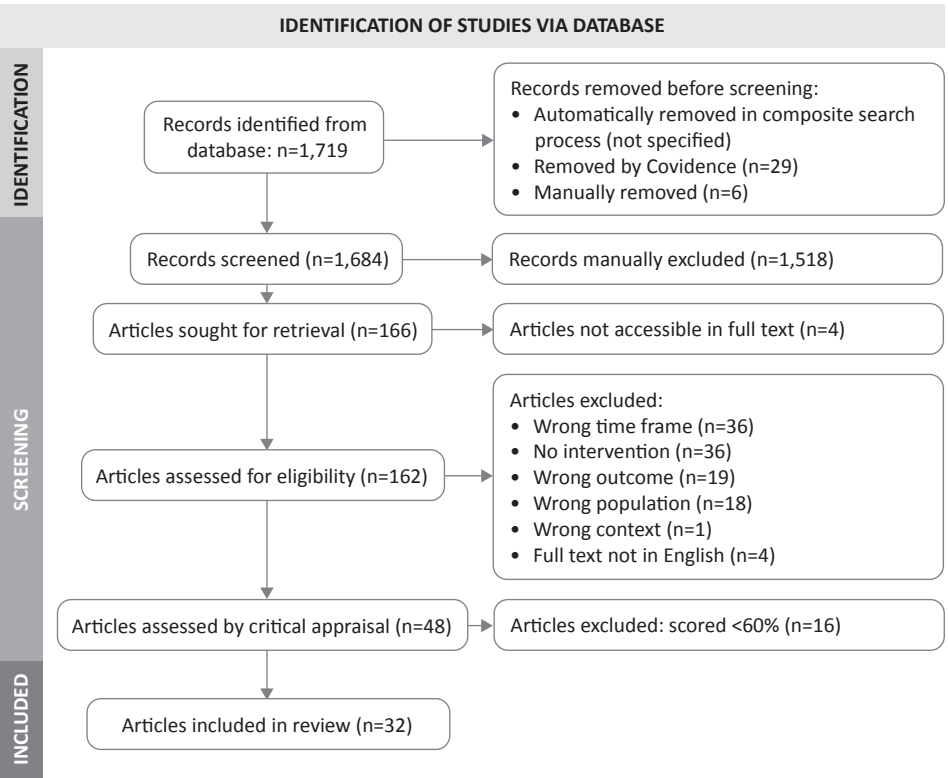
Findings

The process results of the review itself are presented first, followed by an overview of the studies included. Lastly, the synthesis of the interventions and strategies is reported, focusing first on supervision and then supplementary related support and interventions.

Process results

The search yielded 1,719 articles, 35 of which were flagged as duplicates (Figure 1). After removing irrelevant articles, 162 remained for full-text eligibility appraisal. Four articles could not be retrieved in full text, and 114 did not meet the inclusion criteria. The remaining 48 were appraised for methodological quality, and 16 were excluded as they did not meet the 60% threshold. This left 32 articles for synthesis.

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of data collection and screening (Adapted from Page et al., 2021)



Study characteristics

The 32 included studies reflected a range of retention and support strategies across 12 countries and many universities (Table 2). Studies were primarily from countries in the Global North, including USA (n = 12), Australia (n = 4), New Zealand (n = 1), Canada (n = 1) and across Europe (n = 6). Studies from the African context included South Africa (n = 5) and Kenya (n = 1). A single study was from Qatar, and two were review articles. Most studies focused on single HEIs (n = 26), four studies implied multiple institutions, and the remaining two were reviews. Many studies identified specific disciplines where intervention or support took place (n = 17), and others were multidisciplinary (n = 13). The study populations included doctoral students specifically (n = 20), doctoral and master’s students (n = 5), master’s students specifically (n = 2), postgraduate students generally (n = 4), or both under- and postgraduate students (n = 1). Overall, the studies reflected interventions and support strategies for postgraduate retention, from diverse disciplines across international HE systems.

Table 2: Overview of articles

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
Acquaye & Pownall (2021)	UK	Doctorate ¹	Business	TIPS workbook (Time, Image, Plan and Summary)	Activities in a practical staged approach: support development of organisational and project management skills, improved thesis success.
Bedersdorfer & Lohse- Bossenz (2023)	Germany	Doctorate ²	Multiple	Integrated support systems	Professional, emotional, network integration and career planning support, that together support resilience, progression and future success.
Belavy et al. (2020)	Australia	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervisor	Selection of supervisor and obtaining a scholarship: predictors of positive outcomes and future success.
Benzon et al. (2020)	Croatia	Doctorate ¹	Medicine	Supervisors - mentorship	Mentoring in supervision: strong predictor of retention and future success.
Cardwell et al. (2024)	Australia and New Zealand	Doctorate ²	Nursing	Supervision framework	Framework to guide supervisors on how to effectively support students throughout their journey.
Collier & Blanchard (2023)	USA	Master’s and Doctorate ¹	STEM	Supervision - mentorship	Positive mentorship experiences with supervisors and other staff supports progress, wellbeing and sense of belonging.
Debray et al. (2024)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Biological Sciences	Supervision - mentorship, communities of practice (CoPs)	Mentoring in supervision supported wellbeing, sense of belonging and research productivity. Peer-support compensated where this was lacking. CoP as additional space for support.

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
Delaney et al. (2023)	Ireland	Under-graduate and Postgraduate ¹	Multiple	Third-party online learning support platform	Flexible, online academic support: accessible, prompt and unbiased. Asynchronous support preferred for writing feedback.
Diaz-Elsayed et al. (2023)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Engineering; Marine Science	Supervision - mentorship, within CoPs	Transdisciplinary CoPs, with integrated mentorship model, to facilitate a more personalised and responsive supervisory approach.
Emekako et al. (2024)	South Africa	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Academic writing camps	Target academic writing development, not outputs.
Fanshawe & Barton (2023)	Australia	Doctorate ¹	Education	Learning management system	Collaborative tools for students and supervisors to organise, access and store information.
Frantz et al. (2022)	n/a	Postgraduate	n/a	Support for non-cognitive skills and retention	Mentoring and coaching, peer mentoring, CoPs, skills training, programme activities and student support services.
Gallagher & Hamed (2022)	USA	Master's ¹	Occupational Therapy	Peer-mentorship program	Provided academic, professional and social support throughout degree programme.
Handford et al. (2021)	Canada	Postgraduate ¹	Multiple	Graduate writing centre	Positive impact on writing skills, confidence and social support.
Ju et al. (2020)	USA	Doctorate ²	Counselor Education and Supervision	Mentoring, peer mentorship, workshops, and tutoring	Intentional mentoring relationships with faculty, peer mentorship or buddy systems: tailored academic and emotional support for new students; workshops and tutoring to support academic and skills development.
Kent et al. (2020)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Counselor Education and Supervision	Mentoring and peer-mentors	Protective factor: space for processing multiple roles/ identities, academic guidance, empathy. Peer mentors: informal support, reduced isolation, accountability. Need for formalised mentoring programmes.
Lehan et al. (2020)	USA	Postgraduate ¹	Multiple	Academic coaching	Personalised support focusing on building academic skills competence (writing, statistics); resource materials, synchronous and asynchronous coaching.
Lehan et al. (2021)	n/a	Doctorate	n/a	Factors impacting persistence for online students	Integration (supervisory relationship) and institutional factors (support services, curriculum, instruction) are key factors impacting persistence.

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
Lindley et al. (2020)	Australia	Doctorate ¹	Law	Institutional factors that influence completion rates	Supervisory relationship and quality of supervision (clear expectations, pastoral care), formal and informal mentoring relationships; funding and financial support.
Matheka et al. (2024)	Kenya	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervision, peer support	Quality supervision and sense of belonging are directly linked to success. Sense of belonging enhanced by peer support.
Mbati & Mphahlele (2024)	South Africa	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Multimodal open distance e-learning supervision practices	Eight-phase model from pre-registration to research publication. CoP as space to share experiences and strategies related to research.
Mohangi & Olivier (2023)	South Africa	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Educational Psychology	Open distance e-learning counselling services	Career guidance counselling, learning skills and academic support, psychological counselling (email, telephonic, in-person); digital self-help resources.
Murphy (2021)	USA	Postgraduate ¹	Education and Nursing	Online open access mindfulness course	Online self-study course (3 weeks), on mindfulness and personal wellbeing, learning, and culture and community.
Newsome et al. (2023)	Qatar	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Hybrid approach to postgraduate writing support	1-1 consultations (in person, phone, online), online webinars, grad student Blackboard community (resources).
Panayidou & Priest (2020)	UK	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	PhD support groups	In person, closed groups of 90 minutes weekly over 8 weeks. Focused on sharing experiences through open discussion.
Sosibo (2024)	South Africa	Doctorate ¹	Education	Supervision - virtual CoPs	Online cohort (co)supervision, creating virtual CoPs. Reciprocal learning: both supervisor(s) and peers contributed to success.
Stevens & Caskey (2023)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Education	Seminars	Held in first year, on academic writing skills and knowledge of research methods, with low stakes formative assessments.
Tanga et al. (2021)	South Africa	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervision, mentoring, departmental / support services	Supervision (variations in approach with differing impact); departmental/faculty/library support for proposal writing; mentorship for seminar presentations. Challenges: lack of funding and financial support.
Tuma & Dolan (2024)	USA	Doctorate ²	Life Sciences	Supervision - mentorship	Mentoring in supervision through an apprenticeship model.

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
van Rooij et al. (2021)	Netherlands	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervision	Choosing the right supervisor: rapport/fit, and quality of supervisory relationship.
Verostek et al. (2024)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Physics	Research groups	Finding and joining a research group, while challenging, is important for building a sense of belonging and reducing isolation.
Wilkinson (2022)	USA	Master's ¹	Education	Interactive peer-review tool kit as part of structured peer evaluation system	Eight modules complemented by cognitive tools designed to enhance higher-order knowledge and problem-solving skills; fosters confidence, collaborative engagement, and focused learning.

Note. ¹Single institution, ²Multiple institutions

Retention strategies

Various interventions and support strategies aimed at enhancing retention and postgraduate success at HEIs were reported (Table 2). Some articles detailed formalised interventions, while others described embedded strategies related to student success and retention. The areas of support were categorised as supervision related or supplementary support.

Supervision related support

The first category was that of support provided through supervision, and interventions related to supervision. The quality of supervisory relationships was identified as a key factor for supporting postgraduate retention (Lehan et al. 2021; Lindley et al., 2020; Matheka et al., 2024). The impact of the relationship starts with the intentional selection of the right supervisor, in terms of rapport, fit and research alignment (Belavy et al., 2020; van Rooij et al., 2021). Studies focused on the importance of mentorship within the supervisory relationship (n = 5). Positive experiences of mentorship, with supervisors in particular, supported student progress, wellbeing, and sense of belonging (Collier & Blanchard, 2023; Debray et al., 2024), predicting retention and future success (Benzon et al., 2020). The mentorship component took place within traditional apprenticeship supervision models (Tuma & Dolan, 2024), and in collaborative supervisory approaches (Diaz-Elsayed et al., 2023).

Collaborative practices included CoPs (n = 6), with various formats: transdisciplinary CoPs with an integrated mentorship model (Diaz-Elsayed et al., 2023), virtual CoPs (Mbatlali & Mphahlele, 2024; Sosibo, 2024), and more structured research groups (Verostek et al., 2023). Benefits of CoPs included a more personalised approach, space to share experiences, reciprocal learning, reduced isolation and a sense of belonging, that supported improved retention and success. Tools to support effective supervision are noted, including a framework for supervisors on how to effectively support students throughout their postgraduate journeys (Cardwell et al., 2024), collaborative tools for students and supervisors on learning

management systems (Fanshawe & Barton, 2023), and the TIPS tool, which is a practical workbook that students may use, with supervisor oversight, to improve project management and thesis success (Acquaye & Pownall, 2021). As such, support and intervention at the level of the supervisory relationship is important, particularly in the provision of mentorship, and the sense of community fostered through collaborative approaches, that support the retention of postgraduate students.

Supplementary support

Supplementary support, outside of the supervisory relationship, promotes postgraduate retention and success. Approaches to supplementary academic support included institutional support services' initiatives (Frantz et al., 2022; Lehan et al., 2021), such as writing centres (Handford et al., 2021), centres for teaching and learning (Emekako et al., 2024), third party online platforms (Delaney et al., 2023), and departmental initiatives (Stevens & Caskey, 2023). The format of support included individual consultations (Lehan et al., 2020; Newsome et al., 2023), using synchronous and/or asynchronous approaches. The flexibility of online support was beneficial (Delaney et al., 2023; Lehan et al., 2020; Newsome et al., 2023), and asynchronous writing support was preferred in one study (Delaney et al., 2023). Group support was also available through skills training and workshops (Frantz et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2020; Tanga et al., 2021), online webinars (Newsome et al., 2023), in-person seminars (Stevens & Caskey, 2023), and writing camps (Emekako et al., 2024). Learning management systems were also utilised for resource repositories (Lehan et al., 2020; Newsome et al., 2023).

Socio-emotional support initiatives were also evident, as this is crucial for postgraduate student success (Bedersdorfer & Lohse-Bossenz, 2021). Socio-emotional support was provided through institutional support services, such as the Directorate of Counselling and Career Development (Mohangi & Olivier, 2023). An online self-study mindfulness course supported overall wellbeing and learning (Murphy, 2021). Mentorship with other academic staff, outside of the supervisory relationship, was beneficial (Frantz et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2020; Lindley et al., 2020), particularly around shared experiences, for example, motherhood (Kent et al., 2020). Peer-mentorship, whether formal or informal, provides academic and socio-emotional support, enhancing sense of belonging and reducing isolation (Frantz et al., 2022; Gallagher & Hamed, 2022; Ju et al., 2020; Kent et al., 2020; Matheka et al., 2024). However, formalised (peer) mentoring programmes are needed to ensure increased accessibility (Kent et al., 2020). Formalised peer engagements in CoPs enhance reciprocal learning and a sense of belonging, as noted above. In-person support groups focused on shared experiences and were facilitated by staff (Panayidou & Priest, 2020). Another more formalised peer-related intervention was a peer-review tool kit as part of a peer evaluation system (Wilkinson, 2022). This tool supported problem-solving skills, but confidence and collaborative appreciation as well. As such, there are various approaches to supporting postgraduate students' outside of the supervisory relationship, to enhance their academic skills and support socio-emotional wellbeing, towards retention and success.

Discussion

The review study reveals that while formalised interventions exist, many successful practices remain embedded in supervisory relationships and institutional support systems. The findings of the review highlight the role of supervisor support in the postgraduate journey, in alignment with previous research (Albertyn et al., 2018). The approach to supervision is important, and the review findings identify the benefit of collaborative approaches to supervision, in particular, the benefits of CoPs for reciprocal learning and support. The move away from the master-apprentice model towards more collaborative supervisory practice is evident in the literature (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2024). The supervisor's role includes that of academic support, together with the socialisation and development of the student (Aarnikoivu, 2023). The review findings emphasize how the supervisory relationship necessarily includes a mentorship component, which is a key factor in supporting postgraduate student retention. However, it is not the supervisor alone who is responsible for supporting the postgraduate student. Supplementary support for both academic and socio-emotional support is also evidenced in the review findings. Previous studies have identified the interconnected roles of institutional support, peer support and the supervisor in doctoral student development (Senekal et al., 2025), and in postgraduate students more generally (Albertyn et al., 2018). The review findings demonstrate that academic and psychosocial support in various forms and modes is beneficial, typically provided through institutional support services, and that both formalised and informal mentorship and peer mentorship are needed.

Recommendations

The supervisor plays a key role in supporting postgraduate retention; thus, HEIs need to provide sufficient training and support for supervisors. Novice and experienced supervisors need to be trained to engage with pedagogical shifts (i.e. to more collaborative approaches), and the importance of mentorship within the supervisory relationship. Structural shifts within certain HEIs may be needed to support collaborative supervisory approaches. Ongoing investment in support services, such as the library, postgraduate support offices, counselling services and writing centres, is needed to continue providing vital supplementary academic and socio-emotional support. Formalised peer-mentorship and departmental mentorship programmes are needed to foster a sense of belonging and reduce loneliness. Training and writing camps that are focused on skills development, rather than outputs, are needed to overcome skills gaps. Learning management systems can be strategically utilised to provide flexible access to asynchronous services and resources.

As awareness is a significant barrier to the utilisation of support (Senekal et al., 2025), support must be provided at multiple levels. The onus remains on the student to make use of available support. The strategic use of existing institutional support units is recommended in the context of resource construction. HEIs should design support and training initiatives in alignment with their respective postgraduate student needs. HEIs should strategically utilise capacity development grants and/or collaborations with other local and international HEIs, to ensure greater reach and sharing of best practice.

Research on the efficacy of retention strategies within HEIs is recommended, particularly in the Global South, where initiatives may be taking place but not published. Evaluation of support services is needed to demonstrate evidence-based practice and impact. Explorations of pedagogical approaches within supervisory relationships is needed to support improved practice and stakeholder awareness. Comparative studies of interventions across HE contexts would also be beneficial, to explore context-related factors and differing best-practice approaches.

Strengths and limitations

The review considered evidence of postgraduate retention and success strategies, not just formalised interventions. This allowed for the consideration of strategies that are being used within HEIs and embedded in educational practice. By necessity, the review was limited to specific criteria; therefore, relevant strategies and initiatives may have been excluded.

Conclusion

Interventions and support for postgraduate retention need to be responsive to the complex and multifaceted challenge of retention. Supervisors play a pivotal role, guiding postgraduates academically in their research, but also through mentorship and facilitating collaborative engagements. Intervention to strengthen supervisory practice, will in turn support postgraduate retention. Supplementary academic and socio-emotional support should be strategically embedded within departmental and institutional support services. Existing practices and services can be enhanced by aligning with evidence-based practice, to support postgraduate retention. Through strategic investment in postgraduate retention and success, the HE sectors in the South African and broader African context may be strengthened.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance (HS24/6/7) for this work was provided by the UWC's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Potential conflict of interests

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leadership dynamics and the use of ICT in the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests: A comparative analysis of the #WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising movements

Ubume bobunkokheli nokusetyenziswa kwe-ICT kuqhankqalazo lwe-2015 lwe-#FeesMustFall: Uhlalutyo oluthlekisayo lweentshukumo ze-#WitsFeesMustFall kunye ne-#UPrising kwiYunivesithi yasePitoli

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ABSTRACT

The #FeesMustFall movement is often portrayed as having been a singular movement. However, drawing on participant observation, in-depth interviews, online sources and documents, this article undertakes a comparative analysis between two #FeesMustFall formations: #WitsFeesMustFall at the University of the Witwatersrand and #UPrising at the University of Pretoria. It contends that the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests emerged and functioned through multiple campus-specific hashtags that reflected localised institutional concerns. The article reveals similarities and differences within the two movements through two broad perspectives, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and organisational leadership dynamics. Drawing from the Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT), the article reveals the centrality of ICT tools, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, in mobilising material and human resources. Furthermore, through an analysis of leadership dynamics, it illustrates how the movements formed, implemented their mandates, fragmented and ultimately dissolved.

KEYWORDS

Fees must fall, social media, student protests, social movements, resource mobilisation, student leaders, South Africa

ISISHWANKATHELO

Intshukumo ye-#FeesMustFall isoloko iboniswa ngokungathi yayiyintshukumo enye emanyeneyo. Nangona kunjalo, kusetyenziswa uqwalaselo lokuthatha inxaxheba,

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udliwano-ndlebe olunzulu, imithombo ye-intanethi kunye namaxwebhu, eli phepha lenza uhlalutyo oluthelekisayo phakathi kweendlela ezimbini ze-#FeesMustFall: i-#WitsFeesMustFall kwiYunivesithi yaseWitwatersrand kunye ne-#UPrising kwiYunivesithi yasePitoli. Eli nqaku liphikisa ngelithi uqhanqalazo lwe-#FeesMustFall lwe-2015 lwavela, kwaye lwasebenza ngee-hashtag ezininzi ezazinxulumene nee khampasi ezithile, ezazibonakalisa iinkxalabo zamaziko athile. Inqaku libonakalisa ukufana, kunye nokwahluka phakathi kwezi ntshukumo zimbini ngokusebenzisa iibono ezimbini ezibanzi, ukusetyenziswa kweTekhnoloji yolwazi noNxibelelwano (ICT) kunye neendlela zobunkokheli bombutho. Lisekelwe kwi-Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT), eli nqaku libonisa ukubaluleka kwezixhobo ze-ICT, iTwitter, iFacebook kunye neWhatsApp, ekukhuthazeni nasekuhlanganiseni izibonelelo zabantu nezinto eziphathekayo. Ngaphaya koko, ngohlalutyo lweendlela zobunkokheli, libonisa indlela ezi ntshukumo ezasekwa ngayo, ezaphumeza ngayo iminqweno yazo, zahlukana zaza ekugqibeleni zachithakala.

AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO

Ixabiso lemfundo malehle, amakhosi onxibelelwano, uqhanqalazo lwabafundi, iintshukumo zasekuhlaleni, ukuhlanganiswa kwezibonelelo, iinkokheli zabafundi, uMzantsi Afrika

Introduction

In 2015, South Africa's higher education sector was disrupted by student-led protests under various hashtags, culminating in the emergence of the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement. The protests opposed proposed tuition fee increases for the 2016 academic year and were reinforced by broader grievances around transformation, funding, and student accommodation (Naicker, 2016). #FMF became one of the largest student-led political movements in post-apartheid South Africa where students used social media and collective action to pressure the government to halt fee increases and pursue free and decolonised education (Fihlani, 2019; Chinguno et al., 2017).

Since then, various scholars have written on the #FeesMustFall⁴ movement from different vantage points (see Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019; Dlakavu, 2017; Habib, 2019; Kenyon & Madlingozi, 2022; Oxlund, 2016; Raghuram et al., 2020). This article expands on this growing scholarship and provides a unique comparative analysis of two #FeesMustFall movements that unfolded at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and the University of Pretoria (UP), namely, #WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising. It explores how these movements organised, mitigated organisational dynamics relating to leadership, undertook collective action and ultimately how each movement resolved campus specific issues under the national banner of the #FMF. Through this comparison, the article offers insights into the two movements' formations, organisation, their collective actions and internal dynamics as they confronted and dealt with distinct institutional exigencies as well as the proposed tuition fee increases.

4 #FeesMustFall (#FMF)

Literature survey and theoretical framework

Prior to the emergence of the #FeesMustFall, the #WitsFeesMustFall, and the #UPrising, several movements had emerged under different hashtags across South African universities, including #RhodesMustFall at the University of Cape Town (UCT), #DownwithFinancialXenophobia at the University of Pretoria and #OpenStellies at Stellenbosch University (SU) amongst others (Bosch, 2017; Mpatlanyane, 2018; Valela, 2015). However, the #RhodesMustFall movement and subsequent removal of Cecil John Rhodes's statue at UCT signalled the oncoming protests (Oxlund, 2016). Student protests under different hashtags like the #OpenStellies (at Stellenbosch University), #RUOccupying (at Rhodes University), and the #TransformWits (at the University of the Witwatersrand), emerged in response to the #RhodesMustFall in the first and second quarters of 2015 (see Luescher et al., 2017). Students expressed frustration at the slow pace of transformation in terms of teaching staff composition, campus culture, and the colonial nature of the curriculum and its links to the geopolitics of knowledge production. These protests were often characterised by violent skirmishes between students and law enforcement, and damage to public infrastructure (Oxlund, 2016). Social media, especially Twitter (now X), was intensively used to conscientise, and mobilise students to participate.

In the first week of October 2015 then Minister of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Blade Nzimande confirmed that higher education institution tuition would increase by 8.5% (for the year 2016). This perturbed students (Naicker, 2016). The 8.5% increase was the minimum standard, and institutions could adjust the percentage in accordance with their needs (DHET, 2015). There was an outcry in response to this fee increment from the student body nationally. However, the protest action and student movements did not officially begin until 14 October 2015. In the wake of this announcement, reactionary student protests erupted across public universities under different hashtags. Mainstream media reports suggest that the #FeesMustFall was initiated by the #WitsFeesMustFall and spread to other universities unifying other movements (Malabela, 2016 and Mavunga, 2019). These student movements had similar objectives, rhetoric, protest repertoires, and strategies.

Resource mobilisation theory and student movements

In this comparative article, we draw on Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) to provide a conceptual framework for analysing the #WitsFeesMustfall and #UPrising. RMT proposes that social movements pursue their objectives through the strategic deployment of diverse resources and the exploitation of available opportunities for collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Social movement organisations such as #WitsFeesMustfall and #UPrising rely on structure, organisation, establishment of linkages, and support from the broader society to undertake collective action (Buechler, 1993; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Social movements are not solely an outcome of personal discontent, but changes in group organisation, available resources and political opportunities (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This is in response to institutionalised power imbalances coupled with resource inequalities within structures in the society, such as the government, triggering a sense of injustice, thus, the need for collective action (Jenkins, 1983).

The RMT also posits that the success of social movements relies on their ability to secure resources and mobilise affected communities and sympathetic bystanders to stand up for the cause at hand (Jenkins, 1983). The mobilisation and collective action are not spontaneous but rational and goal-oriented, directed by present grievances drawing from available options. Such options can be moral and cultural, and can include the material, human, and social organisation and networks to build solidarity well as shared experiences (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Jenkins, 1983; Spier, 2017). The capacity of leadership to mobilise and coordinate participants and strategically deploy tactics against power holders is crucial (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Consequently, this article draws from RMT to compare #WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising, analysing their formation, mobilisation strategies, and organisational structures to elucidate their operational mechanics and integration within the broader #FeesMustFall movement.

Methodology

This study assumed a qualitative comparative research design. The choice of design was guided by the need to provide an analysis between two #FeesMustFall movements: #WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising (Bryman, 2012; Stake, 2006; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Author 1 and 3 participated in the #UPrising and author 2 in #WitsFeesMustFall.

Sampling and data collection

Written from a participant observation point of view, this article offers an insider account. This is augmented by data collected through fieldnotes captured during the protests, news coverage and social media. The article also draws from 22 semi-structured interviews for which participants were identified through purposive snowball sampling. Student leaders in the two movements were the only participants of interest for the study in question as our interest lay in leadership dynamics in the movements. The interview data formed part of the broader participant observation method used in both case studies to collect the research data. All three authors participated in the movements, where they occupied the positions of student activists and scholars of the movement, simultaneously. Given (2008) shows that the participant observation method is best for studying unstable social phenomena whose meanings are largely unknown at the time of their occurrence.

Positionality and researcher bias

Our involvement as participants in the protests offered vantage experience of the movements. However, writing on the movements in which authors took part creates dilemmas of potential bias, and therefore presents necessary questions around positionality. Our contribution is based on “knowledge production from inside of social movements” to contribute to the discourse on student social movements often dominated by “professional experts” (Choudry, 2018, p. 28). Steps were taken to ensure ethical considerations were accounted for; all participants’ informed consent was attained prior to them being interviewed, and all personal data was anonymised to ensure their privacy.

Findings and discussion: The genesis of #WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising

The formation of #WitsFeesMustFall

At the University of the Witwatersrand, two events led to the formation of #WitsFeesMustFall in addition to the tuition fee increment announced by the DHET Minister. First, the university's then incoming and outgoing Student Representative Council (SRC) presidents were informed of the university council's intention to increase tuition fees by 10.5% at a meeting held on 2 October 2015. Second, the university council had failed to respond meaningfully to the call to insource outsourced workers. The RMT submits that social movements form when there have been organisational changes and subsequently institutional imbalances (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The coincidence of the proposed fee increase and the refusal to insource outsourced workers created a favourable political opportunity for the emergence of #WitsFeesMustFall.

Workers and students at Wits had an existing coalition, notably the 'Wits Workers' Solidarity Committee' that was founded in 2011 (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). This Solidarity Committee would serve as an important form of human resource to strengthen the movement. As such, workers at Wits became directly involved in the students' struggle during the #WitsFeesMustFall protests (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). The movement deliberately utilised the university's liberal institutional culture as a political opportunity structure, facilitating the mobilisation of human resources through cross-sector alliances between students and staff (Ho, 2022).

The #WitsFeesMustFall emerged from heightened worker and student frustrations directed at the institution. The student protest on looming tuition fees increase began on 14 October 2015. This was after the Student Representative Council had unsuccessfully opposed the tabled fee increments at the level of university's council, thereby presenting a political opportunity. Thus, the protest action grew into a student movement that became known as #WitsFeesMustFall. The movement systematically brought the university's activities to a halt. It was jointly led by the Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA)⁵ and the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Council (EFF SC). However, a majority of the participants in the movement were politically unaffiliated. At the outset, the #WitsFeesMustFall movement predominantly comprised of students from the Faculty of Humanities and expanded to include students and academic staff from other faculties.

The formation of #UPrising

Similarly, on 30 September 2015, University of Pretoria students, led by the SRC, launched the #DownWithFinancialXenophobia protest on proposed 2016 tuition fee increases that would disproportionately affect international students. Although framed around financial exclusion, the protest had limited impact, largely due to UP's generally apolitical student culture and the fact that local students were less directly affected (Nomvete &

⁵ The Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) is affiliated to the African National Congress (ANC), and the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (EFF SC) is affiliated to the EFF. Both are dominant political parties in South Africa.

Mashayamombe, 2019). The #UPrising was formed by 11 students who referred to themselves as the Tuks 11. These students were from different student political and social formations at UP's Hatfield campus (Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019). The failure of the SRC-led #DownWithFinancialXenophobia protest to compel the university's management to halt tuition fee increases equally presented political opportunity that led to the formation of #UPrising. The 11 founding members were from different faculties enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes from across most faculties. The #UPrising started from a secret meeting at the Hatfield campus's botanical area as a session to reflect on the frustrations students were experiencing.

The frustrations were then ventilated on a Twitter handle #UPrising and a Facebook account (Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019). Facebook and Twitter would become an important resource for communication, human and resource mobilisation for this movement at different stages, reminiscent of the latter's use in the Arab Spring earlier in the 2010s (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

The Tuks 11 combined forces with Grassroots movement which was a manifestation of factions in the South African Students Congress (SASCO) and ANCYL on campus (see Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019). The SASCO and the ANCYL had historically dominated the student political space at the University of Pretoria (Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019). Thus, they had also begun mobilising against similar issues as the Tuks 11. Despite the differences of political culture between the Tuks 11 and the ANC-aligned student and youth organisations (SASCO and ANCYL), they reached compromise and agreed to function as #UPrising. They also agreed to adopt a non-partisan student movement given the prevailing student culture across UP's campuses. The Tuks 11 and Grassroots's action was consistent with how most successful social movements collaborate and organise themselves. As previously established, the efficacy of a social movement is predicated on its capacity for resource acquisition and participant mobilisation (Buechler, 1993; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Consequently, the convergence of these two formations facilitated a strategic consolidation, expanding the resource base to ensure that both human capital and material resources were aggregated from a diversified organisational network rather than a solitary entity.

Similarities and differences in formation

Despite their divergent institutional origins, the #WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising movements exhibited a clear strategic convergence, unified by a shared opposition to the 2016 tuition fee escalations. Institution-specific grievances as well as proposed tuition fee increases forged grievance and sense of injustice that student leaders leveraged and "coordinated available resources" to form respective movements (Edward & McCarthy, 2004). This suggested a ripe political climate and therefore opportunity to broadly challenge the face of South African higher education. Both movements adopted a non-partisan framework as a fundamental strategy, successfully broadening their communal appeal and securing the mass participation critical to their impact.

Nevertheless, some contrasts can be observed between the two movements in that while the #WitsFeesMustFall formed a concrete alliance with Wits workers, this was not the

case with the #UPrising. The demand for an end to outsourcing was, however, included in the #UPrising's memorandum of demands to the university's management. Students and worker alliances became more prominent late 2015, and in 2016 (Nicolson, 2016). The inclusion of ending outsourcing in the 2015 memorandum of demands was contested within #UPrising. The University of Pretoria's EFF Student Command demanded the inclusion of insourcing of all staff, while other leaders resisted, citing potential jurisdictional conflict with organised labour. Institutional political histories dictated #FeesMustFall's local articulation, contrasting Wits' liberalism with UP's conservatism (Maylam, 2024). #WitsFeesMustFall capitalised on worker-student solidarity at its inception, whereas #UPrising's trajectory was constrained by the lack of historical alliances and strategic risk-aversion regarding organised labour at that time. Thus, the two movements' coordination, composition and mobilisation of various resources varied though the main goal was to forge collective action against proposed fees increase.

Notwithstanding the above, it can also be contended that earlier protests on the inadequacy and inefficiency of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) by mostly universities of technology and Historically Black Universities (HBUs), #RhodesMustFall at the University of Cape Town, #RUshutdown at Rhodes University and the #OpenStellies at Stellenbosch University in the early part of 2015 laid the groundwork for the #FeesMustFall movement. This is inclusive of #WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising. These issues and events constitute ideal opportunities that the two movements amongst others harnessed and exploited, mobilised and utilised available resources and forged collective action.

The role of Information Communication Technologies in the movements

From the genesis until the end of the first wave of #FeesMustFall in 2015, Information Communication Technologies (ICT) like email and social media including, Twitter (X), Facebook (Meta), and WhatsApp by student activists were intensively used. These social media platforms served as an important resource for the movement and were used to recruit, mobilise, organise, and communicate with students and civil society. Giddens (1990) states media play a central role in terms of "time and space compression", this was evident during the #FeesMustFall. In the context of this movement these ICTs and media forms were instrumental in ensuring that movement developments were shared in real time. Therefore, those who wanted to join, show solidarity or raise awareness could do so from anywhere in the world. In the same vein, those who challenged the movement, like university management and the state, had their own use for the ICTs.

Use of social media and ICT at Wits and #WitsFeesMustFall

At Wits, the management used the email system to communicate and to downplay the protests with an aim to discredit the movement to fellow students, staff and external stakeholders (Chinguno et al., 2017). The #WitsFeesMustFall movement directly responded by using the SRC's access to the university's email system and sent counter messaging. However, Wits management later blocked the SRC's access and use of the university's email system. For some students, this took away their access to communication from the SRC which was the only source of verifiable information regarding protest activities. Given this

drawback, the movement shifted focus and intensified the use of social media to counter university narratives to the university community and the public. In addition, the movement used social media to document protest action, provide updates to staff and students and garner solidarity and sympathy.

Furthermore, Wits management utilised mainstream media reports to counteract the student movement to the public. Several mainstream media and news sources published “questionable narratives” (i.e. frames that portrayed students as violent and that their actions could not be justified). The use of mainstream media proved effective for the university. It served to discredit and, therefore weaken public support and sympathy for #WitsFeesMustFall. For instance, some parents discouraged their children from participating in the university movement and the broader #FeesMustFall movement:

Eish, I need to take the call outside, it is my dad, he has been calling me 50 times a day since he saw the news. He asks if I am studying and says I should not toyi toyi, imagine! The news showed them when campus control was pepper-spraying us. Now he thinks it is Sarafina. (Fallist 4)

Use of social media and ICTs at UP and #UPrising

At UP, the #UPrising leaders and activists encountered similar challenges. UP is generally a conservative university with deep Afrikaner traditions. It often deploys intensive monitoring and surveillance on students and university property (Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019). In the formation stages of #UPrising, the activists used the SRC’s resources for organisation, coordination and communication. In response, the university attempted to turn off campus Wi-Fi upon realisation that social media was the main mode of communication. Also, The #UPrising movement relied heavily on ICTs because ongoing protests had resulted in management suspending classes. This created an organisational and coordination exigent for student leaders, as students were no longer physically gathered on campus. Consequently, ICTs became a primary channel of communication to coordinate and engage a dispersed student body.

The paradox of social media and ICT use in the two movements

The #WitsFeesMustFall movement banned the presence of supposed biased media reporters from attending and covering the events of the movement. The movement limited interviews only to media houses that were viewed as progressive such as the *Daily Vox*, an online news platform that has a large social media following within the student community. Also, some of the Fallists⁶ in the movement were journalists employed at the *Daily Vox*. The hashtag #WitsFeesMustFall became essential for forming a social media following. The Fallists used this hashtag to communicate and inform students and the public of the movement’s activities through images, videos, audio, and documents as reported in the comments below:

6 ‘Fallist’ is a term that was used by students in the movement to denote their active support of the movement. Students aligned with #WitsFeesMustFall generally referred to themselves as Fallists (Chinguno et al., 2017).

Yah, I do not come to the demonstrations much [chuckles], I still have research and assignments to do, so I'm playing catch up as much as possible. But Twitter keeps me updated, I come to the evening meetings, but I spend the whole day tweeting, liking, and retweeting so I really feel like I'm here ... (Fallist 8)

Conversely, the #UPrising sought out the media as the UP seldomly attracts media attention, unlike Wits. #UPrising activists were of the view that mainstream media gives more coverage to Wits and UCT activities, ignoring other universities. Therefore, they welcomed media coverage to articulate student grievances through #UPrising. In addition to the use of social media platforms, the #UPrising leadership availed themselves for interviews with mainstream media houses and articulated their frustrations at the university and government actions (Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019). The #UPrising leadership was not selective on the types of media houses it engaged with in comparison to the #WitsFeesMustFall leadership.

Social media platforms such as Twitter had the most #FeesMustFall activities due to the fast-paced nature of the platform and easy accessibility to students and sympathisers. The activities of both movements were paired with engagement on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The latter was mainly used to spread clandestine details to students regarding ongoing plans and strategies in the movements. Our observations suggest that the social media activity of the activists in the movements led to the gathering of large-scale public support and solidarity. The support that the movement received from the public was particularly greater in 2015. The movements received material and emotional support from several stakeholders, including religious leaders and the religious community, some prominent political leaders, alumni, celebrities, and non-profit organisations (NPOs). Confronted by longstanding grievances associated with inadequate funding, the two movements harnessed human social organisation and cultural resources such as internal organisation (i.e. structures and division of labour), alliances with the broader community for support, ICTs and developed tactics and strategies and undertook collective action (Edward & McCarthy, 2004).

#WitsFeesMustFall and #UPrising effectively tapped into ICTs and social media platforms to plan, mobilise and coordinate students and collective action while at the same time communicating counter-narratives to those offered by the respective universities and some media houses. Social media is an important platform for student social movements to recruit, mobilise, organise, and communicate with members and the public (Bosch & Mutsvaio, 2017; Bosch, 2013; Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Castell, 2012). Castell (2012) avers that social media use is a crucial tool that can impact the ability of social movements to reach wider audiences. Movement leaders' ability to "coordinate and leverage available resources" also led to the success of the collective action (Edward & McCarthy, 2004).

Leadership dynamics

Leadership dynamics and challenges in #WitsFeesMustFall

Morris and Staggenborg (2004, p. 153) aver that social movement success depends on leadership's capacity to inspire commitment, mobilise resources, frame demands, and

influence outcomes. From the beginning, the #WitsFeesMustFall movement was declared a “horizontal movement”, which meant that participating members were equal in terms of decision-making. The movement was non-partisan though it was initiated by the PYA-led Wits SRC (Chinguno et al., 2017). The four major student political formations on campus were the PYA, the EFF SC, and DASO⁷ which formed a coalition. They each had a representative in the movement’s steering committee. This also included other apolitical student interest groups:

Here we are a horizontal movement. We do not have leaders. We are all leaders here. So, all of us have the right to just go to the podium and take the mic and address the crowd because we are all leaders here. (Fallist 10)

Nevertheless, the movement had four prominent faces who publicly stood as its representatives, namely Nompandolo Mkhathshwa, Shaeera Kalla (incoming and outgoing SRC presidents respectively), Mcebo Dlamini and Vuyani Pambo. At first, decisions were made in public student meetings. The setting of the meetings was like that of an imbizo.⁸ It was open to all; any Fallists could make comments and suggestions. For instance, student activists held a sit-in with the university’s Vice-Chancellor (VC), Adam Habib and other members of the university’s management and council to discuss the students’ demands (see Nkosi, 2015 in the *Mail & Guardian*). The #WitsFeesMustFall leadership refused to meet privately with the VC in favour of a public space where everyone could attend and participate:

We are obviously EFF members and that will never change. We started this thing and we are here to make sure that the SRC will not sell us out to Habib. We want all the meetings of the EXCO to be public, and they must not be allowed to meet with the ANC here. We know them. This movement is for the poor we do not want it to be compromised. (Fallist 9)

The cracks in the open leadership style of the movement emerged however, following the major protest march to the Union Buildings on the 23 October 2015 by students from public universities and colleges in South Africa. Student leaders from the ANC-aligned PYA had opposed the march to the Union Buildings and had also held a ‘clandestine’ meeting with ANC officials eroding trust within the movement, hence straining the open leadership style. The former President Jacob Zuma had announced a zero per cent fee increase for the 2016 academic year (Areff, 2015). Disagreements on how to proceed after this announcement further emerged among the Fallists. Some wanted the movement to end to allow for the resumption of the academic programme. Others argued that the movement’s goal for a free, decolonised education and insourcing of workers was still outstanding and equally important. By then, the slogan of the movement had changed to ‘a free-decolonised education for all in our lifetime’ (Chinguno et al., 2017).

In addition, splinter groups emerged out of this chasm. First were those who wanted to completely shut down the movement and became part of a sub-movement called the #OpenWits. The second group supported the continued existence of the movement,

7 Democratic Alliance Students Organisation (DASO)

8 Imbizo is a Nguni word that means a gathering to share knowledge and debate ideas.

albeit following the guidelines suggested by the university's management. The third group wanted to continue with the struggle until all the demands had been met.

Leadership dynamics and challenges in #UPrising

In contrast to the #WitsFeesMustFall movement, leadership dynamics and challenges emerged from the embryonic stages of the formation of the #UPrising. After #UPrising had started its mobilisation activities and framing demands to gain solidarity and sympathy, the need to create layers of leadership structure emerged due to contestations for power and the potential of the movement being hijacked by competing forces. The #UPrising leadership experienced challenges from individuals aligned to student political formations (mainly, the UP's SASCO and ANCYL branches) who felt entitled to the socio-political turf at UP. These individuals and the organisations they represented had been the face of student politics at the university such as the 'Right to Learn Campaign'. The #UPrising created a new layer of leadership and devolved some of the duties to the Central Planning Committee (CPC):

The meeting I went to was one of those where we had different students coming from different structures who were going to work under a single banner: UPrising Central Planning Committee. These people will always go back to their constituencies and say this is the plan and moving forward; what would you like us to communicate in that meeting . . . The EFF SC group would go to its constituency . . . PYA the same thing . . . (#UPrising CPC 2)

The CPC devised a programme of action in consultation with different constituencies but owned and led the process. The CPC members were drawn from various student political and social formations from campus as indicated. The CPC had 20 members with five from each organisation. The CPC became the driver of the movement; and the contestations emerged along gender and political lines. The CPC had to be non-political. However, the engagement between its members reflected their different ideological orientations. The role of the CPC was to collect mandates from different constituencies, discuss them, and make decisions and plans. One CPC 3 member observed that UP EFF SC CPC members were very resolute and knowledgeable when it came to meetings. This showed that they had had prior discussions with their constituency.

Something that I observed was the discipline of the fighters (UP EFF SC). The fighters were extremely disciplined, you could see they were clearly caucused. So, when they speak on issues, they would speak with one voice, it was clear to us. So, with that, it made their voice very strong and made it very difficult for us to convince them on certain issues and change their position. (#UPrising CPC 3)

The creation of the CPC did not guarantee the elimination of leadership contestations as various student campus-based political formations sought to gain more influence on the direction of #UPrising because it had gained attention and momentum. This was unique and new at UP given its conservative history and institutional culture which tended to muzzle dissenting voices. Outsourcing/insourcing, and the use of Afrikaans language at UP remained contentious issues. The UP EFF SC was not willing to compromise. It resulted

in break-away groups in 2016 as had happened at Wits. Some forces, for instance, would disagree with #UPrising leadership on the routes and destination of protest marches. Choice of routes was negotiated by #UPrising leaders with SAPS⁹ to avoid violent clashes.

Issues of leadership and associated dynamics in the #UPrising and #WitsFeesMustfall depict the centrality of leadership in student movements. The ability to persuade, think strategically, mobilise resources, coordinate and delegate opportunities determines the success or failure of collective action (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004, p. 153).

Conclusion

Using a comparative approach, the article highlights both the distinct and shared dynamics that emerged across the two movements, identifying ICT and organisational leadership as driving forces. The RMT argues that social movements pursue their objectives by strategically drawing on different forms of resources and available opportunities (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Edward & McCarthy, 2004). As such, our analysis revealed the centrality ICT tools, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp as important resources in the movements. These platforms allowed for communication, mobilising, securing of material resources and galvanizing of public support, sympathy and solidarity. This phenomenon was consistent with events in the Arab Spring in North Africa from late 2010 and through the year 2011 where social media was pivotal to the movement (Cini & Guzman-Concha, 2017; Bellei et al., 2014; Gleason, 2013; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Within the different hashtags used in the different university movements and the national unifier hashtag, #FeesMustFall, different agendas which mirrored campus and university-specific issues emerged. Through effective mobilisation of resources such as social media, both movements gained public appeal that resulted in them receiving material support from internal and external stakeholders. For both movements social media also allowed observers to engage in the protest as they liked through sharing content related to the movement.

In terms of leadership dynamics, both movements were non-partisan and yet made up of activists from different student formations. At UP however, problems emerged from the onset, as the space was tightly contested by existing student political figures. It was a different case at Wits up until the march to the Union Buildings. This can be explained by the existing institutional culture that had historically supported collective action and alliances between staff and students at the university. This is an example of how institutional culture shapes the form that student movements take (see Ho, 2022). Finally, this article also showed that although the Fees Must Fall movement dissolved in 2015 after the announcement of the zero per cent fee increase, others in both movements wanted to resolve campus-specific matters. At UP the EFF SC cohort proceeded to #AfrikaansMustFall and #Endoutsourcing. Similarly, at Wits the movement split and some activists fought for re-opening the university; others, a free, decolonised education and #Endoutsourcing. Whilst it is arguable to say #AfrikaansMustFall free and decolonised education (through curriculum reform) were achieved respectively in the two universities, ending outsourcing was achieved in both institutions by the end of the academic year 2016.

9 South African Police Services (SAPS)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Relational experiences of meaning making as a pathway to academic adjustment among African international university students in South Africa

Relasionele ervarings van betekeniskepping as 'n pad na akademiese aanpassing onder Afrika internasionale universiteitstudiante in Suid-Afrika

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ABSTRACT

Relationships constitute a core aspect of psychological wellbeing models. More so, research from different sociocultural contexts has shown that relational experiences provide a form and shape for an individual's worldview. By applying meaning-making models, this study aimed to explore relational experiences of meaning making that contribute to academic adjustment among African international students at a university in South Africa. In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 undergraduate and postgraduate students. Meaning making through relational experiences among African international students was underscored by their concern for the wellbeing of close family members and in cross-cultural social interactions that imposed a coherent worldview on the students' lives. Such worldviews provided direction and motivation to forge ahead in their educational pursuits, while acknowledging the importance of intrapersonal connections in this process. Additionally, their social contributions enabled them to establish connections with the broader community. In terms of theoretical contributions, our study showed how relational experiences of meaning making enable international students to forge a sense of identity and purpose, all of which are essential for academic adjustment. Our findings also have implications for wellbeing interventions at higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS

Relationships, meaning making, African international students, South Africa

OPSOMMING

Verhoudings vorm 'n kernaspek van sielkundige welstandsmodelle. Verder het navorsing uit verskillende sosiokulturele kontekste getoon dat relasionele ervarings die vorm en aard van 'n individu se wêreldbeskouing beïnvloed. Deur betekenisvormingsmodelle toe te pas, het hierdie

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studie ten doel gehad om relasionele ervarings van betekenisskepping te ondersoek wat bydra tot akademiese aanpassing onder Afrika internasionale studente aan 'n universiteit in Suid-Afrika. In-diepte-onderhoude is gevoer met 30 voorgraadse en nagraadse studente. Betekenisskepping deur relasionele ervarings onder Afrika internasionale studente is beklemtoon deur hul besorgdheid oor die welstand van naaste familieledes en deur kruiskulturele sosiale interaksies wat 'n samehangende wêreldbeskouing in studente se lewens gevestig het. Sulke wêreldbeskouings het rigting en motivering verskaf om voort te gaan met hul opvoedkundige strewe, terwyl die belangrikheid van intrapersoonlike verbindings in hierdie proses erken is. Daarbenewens het hul sosiale bydraes hulle in staat gestel om verbindings met die breër gemeenskap te vestig. In terme van teoretiese bydraes toon ons studie hoe relasionele ervarings van betekenisskepping internasionale studente in staat stel om 'n gevoel van identiteit en doel te vorm, wat noodsaaklik is vir akademiese aanpassing. Ons bevindings het ook implikasies vir welstandintervensies by hoërsonderwysinstellings.

SLEUTELWOORDE

Verhoudings, betekenisskepping, Afrika internasionale student, Suid-Afrika

Introduction

The international migration of African students to other countries to pursue a better quality of education and quality of life is a quite common occurrence. As part of their study experience, these students form different relationships and have a myriad of interactions, what we refer to as relational experiences. Besides other benefits, these relational experiences contribute to how individuals make sense and meaning of their world (Martela & Steger, 2016). In South Africa, the majority of international students are from other African countries, especially those that actively promote internationalisation (Nyerere, 2022). South Africa participates in intra-Africa academic mobility schemes that are aimed at promoting higher education cooperation between different countries. These schemes aim not only to improve skills and competences of students, but also to develop and retain high quality human resources for Africa's development (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2016; Nyerere, 2021; Sehoole & Lee, 2022). There is a general intra-regional migration of students within the African continent for study purposes, but South Africa is by far one of the most popular destinations.

The first major survey done among international students in South Africa showed that the country had the highest number of international students enrolled compared to all other African countries, hosting nearly 43,000 foreign students in 2014 (MacGregor, 2014). Although this number is actually reported to have decreased from previous years (72,875 in 2012) due to xenophobic attitudes, hostile attacks, strict government policies, and other adjustment challenges, South Africa remains the highest ranked educational hub in Africa (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Khumalo, 2017; Mittelmeier et al., 2019). In 2023, the number was 45,000 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). Regardless of its cultural and socio-political challenges, South Africa is still the most preferred destination for many African international students, mainly because of the

strong reputation of its higher education system, a greater availability of technology, a wider range of research and innovation opportunities, affordable fees, and affordable cost of living (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017; International Education Association of South Africa, 2020; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021).

The growth of student sojourner numbers has led to an increased awareness of the importance of investigating the wellbeing of this group, since research has widely demonstrated their difficulty integrating into academic and social environments (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Chigeza et al., 2013). Most of the research pertaining to African international students coming to South Africa has focused on their experiences and challenges in terms of financial difficulties, prejudice and discrimination, and xenophobic attacks (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Sing, 2016; Tella, 2018).

Important to wellbeing is an individual's ability to create order, make sense and establish some form of stability in their personal worldview and lived experience – that is the process of meaning making. For African international students, this process might be even more critical as they do not only enter a new phase of their lives, they also have to adjust in an unfamiliar sociocultural context (Lashari et al., 2018). To engage in this process of meaning making, relationships have been identified as key (Delle Fave et al., 2011, 2016; Wissing et al., 2020). As much as previous studies have addressed specific challenges in the adjustment process of African international students (Tella, 2018), there is a gap in research to understand relationships that foster meaning making as pathways towards academic adjustment.

Literature review: Experiences of international students

Upon arrival at campuses, international students are usually socialised into the institution's culture through orientation initiatives and tour guides (Chigeza et al., 2017; Fletcher-Anthony & Efthymiou, 2017). These initiatives help the students to familiarise themselves with the new environment and become aware of the institution's espoused cultural values, history, and mission statements (Linley, 2017). Despite these social programmes, international students have still been found to be at greater risk of mental illness during their time at university compared to their host peers, as they face different adjustment issues, both on and off campus (Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Hyams-Ssekasi & Caldwell, 2018).

The adjustment process for international students is governed by various individual and environmental factors that also influence the meaning-making process, for instance, the individual's ability to engage with the host context and experience a sense of belonging and satisfaction (academic and social) (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Rabia, 2016; Rivas et al., 2019). These factors (individual and environment) in turn determine the individual's level of adjustment and positive experience during their academic journey (Bastien et al., 2018; Lashari et al., 2018; Vasilopoulos, 2016). Most African international students at South African universities report suffering marginalisation or alienation, and having experienced psychological and psychosocial problems like homesickness, loneliness, low self-esteem, immense culture stress and adjustment problems (Chigeza et al., 2017; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Mutongoza & Olawale, 2023; Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Weber, 2016).

Meaningful connections influence not only the individual's degree of interaction with the host country, but also their level of acculturative stress, academic and social satisfaction, and sense of belonging and engagement – all of which are important contributors to their level of adjustment (Bastien et al., 2018; Lashari et al., 2018; Vasilopoulos, 2016). According to Mason (2017b), international students are more comfortable with and reliant on social relationships (with friends and family) than on professional ones. Thus, social relationships are at the core of international students' meaning-making processes, and it is interesting to note how they aid in students' social and academic adjustment.

Theoretical framework

Meaning making

According to Steger (2012), meaning making refers to the individual's capacity to identify order, coherence and purpose in life, as well as to set, pursue and attain goals that could result in a sense of contentment. The three-dimensional model of meaning (coherence, purpose and significance) is proposed by most scholars (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016; Mason, 2013; Steger et al., 2021). Coherence emanates from a cognitive theoretical component and is about a sense of comprehensibility, while purpose builds on the motivational component and expresses having a sense of directedness, being enthusiastic about the future, and pursuing future-oriented goals in life. The third facet, significance, speaks to the worthwhileness, importance and value one attaches to life.

University students are said to be in constant search of meaning as they begin to define and redefine their identity through exploration, experimentation, and connection (Negru, 2012; Li et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2017). Experiencing meaning at this stage enables them to manoeuvre through the immense changes, experiences and challenges that they have to face while creating a coherent worldview (Ryff & Singer, 2006; Steger, 2009).

Regarding the search for meaning among South African university students, Mason (2017a) emphasizes that students experience meaning as beyond the self to include relationships, education, and religion. Mason (2017a) also highlights how students begin to pursue prosocial quests that transcend intrapersonal needs and contribute to the development of community and family (Mason, 2017a). Nell (2014) found that relationships, hope of achieving own plans and goals, personal growth and development, were the most significant ways through which South African university students made meaning of their lives. These results corresponded with those of Wissing et al. (2014) who found that relationships – particularly with family – were the most important source of meaning among university students in South Africa.

Relational experiences of meaning making

Relationships, which are usually identified as any form of connection one has with another person or a group of people, have been found to contribute significantly to the wellbeing of individuals (Wissing et al., 2019). Studies have shown that most people who report to be happy and satisfied with their lives usually have positive relationships with people around

them (Kansky, 2018; Tough et al., 2017; Wissing et al., 2019). Relationships – both social and professional – are vital, as they offer support, interpersonal emotional regulation, companionship, motivation and mentorship, all of which improve one's social, emotional and psychological wellbeing (Williams et al., 2018).

After leaving their homes, family and social networks, international students struggle to create relationships that will facilitate their adjustment and adaptation to university life (Williams et al., 2018). In a study by Kasese-Hara and Mugambi (2021), international students in South Africa reported that social support from academic staff and other students was vital for their adjustment. A review of previous literature has confirmed that relationships are one of the most important sources of meaning making among university students (Khumalo, 2017; King & Hicks, 2021; Wissing et al., 2019; Wissing et al., 2020). In their study, Wissing et al. (2020) demonstrated that relationships are important sources of meaning because they lead to intrapersonal gains like growth, competence, mastery, satisfaction and inner wellbeing (Wissing et al., 2020). According to Lashari et al. (2018), social networking and friendship formation are important sources of meaning making among international students as they facilitate interaction and connections, which are important in satisfying emotional, personal, and academic needs.

We argue that relational experiences as sources of meaning making among international students might allow them to understand their new world through the lens of emerging social relationships while retaining the identities linked to the relationships in their home country. Experiencing purpose could emanate from goal-directed behaviours that are relational in nature (Wilson et al., 2021) and serve to preserve or protect close others. Whereas the significance component of meaning might be derived in relationship as an end itself. When students believe that a certain social relationship is important for their wellbeing, relationships like it are seen as significant as an end in themselves.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no research is available on how African international students at South African universities experience relational meaning making. The current study therefore sought to explore these students' relational experiences of meaning making and its contribution to the students' adjustment at a South African university. Findings from this study are critical because while South Africa is a major destination for migrant African students, the country is also known for its xenophobic attacks and at times hostility towards foreigners. It is important to understand how African international students navigate such a space through relational meaning-making experiences to ensure they adjust and succeed academically. The present study centred on the question: what are the relational experiences of meaning making that contribute to academic adjustment among African international students in South Africa?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to provide an in-depth understanding of African international students' relational experiences of meaning making as pathways to their academic adjustment.

Research context, sampling, and participants

The research was conducted at a South African higher education institution situated in the Gauteng province. It is one of Africa's top universities and one of the largest contact universities in South Africa. Altogether 19 undergraduate and 11 postgraduate (Honours, master's and PhD) students were purposively selected for this study. The students were from the humanities, engineering and education faculties. The group consisted of 18 males and 12 females, and their mean age was 23 years old ($SD = 3$).

The main criterion for inclusion in the study was that students had to be originally from another African country but enrolled at the University. To qualify for inclusion, the participants had to have studied at the University for at least one year, but they may not have lived in South Africa for more than three consecutive years. African countries represented in the study included Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Swaziland. Due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, snowball sampling (a chain-referral sampling method) by Creswell and Creswell (2018) was used to recruit students, and interviews were conducted both over Zoom and face to face. Advertisements on online platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp were also used to create awareness about the project.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the relevant board (the University's Ethics Committee for Human Research in the Faculty of Humanities (HUM049/0320)). The study was explained to the participants and their written informed consent was obtained. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences, and the final study findings were presented using pseudonyms so as to ensure participants' anonymity.

Data collection

In-depth interviews were used to understand the relational experiences of meaning making that fostered the academic adjustment of African international students. Interviews were conducted in English by trained research assistants using an open-ended interview guide as a guideline for probing. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, some interviews were conducted virtually by means of telephone and Zoom calls, but some were done face to face, with each full interview lasting approximately 40 minutes to an hour.

Data analysis

The responses to the in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic analysis based on the six steps suggested by Clarke and Braun (2014). This method enabled the researchers to identify patterns of meaning and to interpret, describe and report on various aspects of the themes that emerged from the findings. Themes were inductively extracted. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, there was prolonged engagement in the field and the researchers continuously checked with participants if their views had been accurately captured. Two experienced coders analysed the data independently. Researchers kept reflexive notes throughout the study to reduce the possibility of biased findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lub, 2015). Our positionality, as

both foreign researchers, allowed us to acknowledge and understand participants' experiences. Study participants were identified according to a set code pattern, for example, P14 M UG, which indicates the participant's number (P14), gender (M), and level of education (UG: undergraduate).

Findings and discussion

In response to the research question concerning relational experiences of meaning making that contribute to academic adjustment among African international students in South Africa, four themes emerged: (i) sense of purpose; (ii) a connected coherent whole; (iii) sense of self; and (iv) social contribution. In the meaning-making process, relational experiences among African international students centre around the individual's ability to find purpose and identity. This is further enhanced by their understanding of the world as a coherent whole because of the opportunity to give back and contribute to the social space around them.

Theme 1: Wholeness and purpose

Making meaning through relational experiences among international students was grounded in their concern for the wellbeing of close family members. Such concern was linked to their experiencing of a sense of purpose. Building on previous research, our study shows that internalised processes such as a sense of purpose are developed through the fostering of existing relationships with close family members and forging new ones by interacting with the host country nationals. This finding is critical because although relational challenges are common for international students, they also provide an avenue for developing important indicators of functioning, such as a sense of purpose.

I talk to my family just to hear how is it, how everyone is doing at home ... you know that thought will linger on in your mind, you not as happy as when you hear that everyone is doing fine, everyone is doing well ... the state of my family does influence like my whole being to a certain extent. (P6 M UG)

I speak with my in-laws and my parents, I will be happy too, when I know everything is going fine with them it motivates me to continue with my studies. (P20 M PG)

Beyond the need for support and social interaction, international students explained that their concern for the wellbeing of others and for maintaining existing connections was linked to their own feelings of being motivated, having a sense of direction and purpose. It would seem that their close relationships allowed this group to focus on what was important amidst the challenges of life as a foreign student. Relationships created a pathway towards adjustment and prevented them from feeling lost in the unfamiliar space they had found themselves.

The findings of our study confirm the views of Damon et al. (2003) who purport that sense of purpose involves having a stable intention to accomplish something meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. In a similar vein, Sharma and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018), as well as Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2023), argue that sense of purpose plays a crucial role in college students' study persistence and

eventual attainment of a degree. For African international students in this study, clarity and purposefulness resulted from their maintaining of relational interactions that reminded them of their reason for being in South Africa. Being assured of their family's wellbeing brought feelings of contentment and allowed the study participants to focus on their educational pursuits.

In order to aid their adjustment within the university space, international students seemed to purposefully draw on their social ties, which guided them to manage the challenges of university life and establish their place as international students. It became apparent from our study that relational experiences serve as an important compass when individuals find themselves within a space that requires an adjustment of their worldviews.

From a theoretical perspective, according to Martela and Steger (2016), a sense of purpose is linked to the understanding of meaning. However, the current study shows that relationships form a crucial part of this process. Wissing et al. (2020) found that relational domains of meaning in life were predominant in a sample of South African and Ghanaian adults. In their study, motives for relationships as a source of meaning were linked to support felt, personal growth experienced, the experience of satisfaction, happiness, joy, pleasure, inner state of wellbeing, or a sense of competence and mastery (Wissing et al., 2020). Among African international students, relational experiences that allow for meaning making are those experiences that support the finding and fulfilling of a personal purpose.

Theme 2: A connected and coherent whole

This theme suggests that instead of focusing on the individual, our study revealed that it was the person in relation to others that provided participants with a coherent worldview. This is because relational meaning-making processes came with social interactions that provided a coherent worldview for African international students. Fostering a clear and rational worldview provided a way to interpret their current lived experiences and to forge ahead in their educational pursuits. For Participant 11, meaning in life was attributed to seeing others as part of a larger “whole” that included the individual, while responses from the other participants confirmed their wish to interact with fellow students.

But my view regardless of where we are coming from. The best way to make the society better, make meaning out of life is to relate with the other as an integral part of you.
(P11 F PG)

These people around added colour to my life here in South Africa and gave me a family away from home. (P3 M UG)

You need like friends to interact with, different kinds of people and also just getting to know what other people know and how they value life and also the different culture that are around the place. (P8 M PG)

It's the very fact that I'm a human being, I think that's very important and then like I have people around me, that I'm able to interact with, making friendships and interacting with people it give meaning to me. (P7 M UG)

Participants in the study highlighted the significance of cross-cultural interaction and considered it important in shaping a coherent worldview. The interactions were a source of “colour” and “value” for international students. The connotation of colour and value points to the fact that relationships fashioned the way these international students saw the world, what was important and perhaps even what made life worth living.

Despite the fact that the students came to South Africa with different goals and educational aspirations, the pathway to their adjustment and achievement of such goals was linked to relationships that added colour and value to their lives. Glass and Westmont (2014) as well as Rivas et al. (2019) agreed and found that social interactions were very effective in promoting feelings of belonging, which often mediate positive academic and social outcomes.

Other studies – in contrast – report international students as having poor relationships and cramped social contact with host students (Chigeza et al., 2013; Chinyamurindi, 2018; Hale et al., 2020). Apart from hampering the bridging of cultural divides, limited contact has in the past resulted in international students facing academic and personal challenges (Glass et al., 2015; Hale et al., 2020). The results of the current study are in stark contrast with the latter and instead resonate with the findings of Anthony et al. (2005) and Stacey (2007) who indicate that people influence one another by how they perceive one another; thus, patterns of meaning and relating are propagated or limited by how people act in each given moment. In our study, it seems that both African international students and the citizen students created relationships that were not defined by their status of “foreigner” and “citizen”. This in turn allowed for meaningful positive reciprocal interaction. One participant even mentioned that “*South African people are very friendly*” (P11 F PG) and another described how they felt like equals with citizen students.

I would say there's been a lot of support, like especially from the university, like very formal support structures. You are as comfortable as students who are from here. There isn't a difference and difficulty. (P1 F UG)

Theme 3: Intrapersonal connectedness

In addition to the external interactions that formed part of African international students' experiences of meaning, there were instances where students looked within themselves during this process of meaning-making. By asking questions about values, significance and purpose, students engaged in introspection, explored what was important to them and found motivation to continue with their educational pursuits. Our study demonstrated how African international students manage to thrive by constantly reminding themselves of who they are and what their priorities are. This deeper connection with their inner identity is linked to their reflecting on future prospects of finding good job opportunities, provided that they succeed at university.

What I value the most you know because when I look at, into like why we came here, what was my main priority to come here, all I can see is that it's just been a form of constant growth in the sense of being. (P29 M PG)

So often I remind myself why I am here, and I tell myself that I need to do what needs to be done so that I finish, I came here for this PhD, and I need to focus on it, look for other opportunities elsewhere. (P5 M PG)

African international students were apparently able to adjust to their new environment by reminding themselves of their reasons for coming to South Africa. Such motivations provided a way for them to thrive through meaning making, echoing a sense of purpose as purported by Steger (2012). Even when conditions were difficult in their host country, African international students' ability to make meaning by connecting with their inner purpose seemed to provide a pathway towards adjustment.

I want to thrive as much as I can, it gives me the sense of meaning to why exactly I'm here because that's my initial priority to why I moved to this country, I'm essentially here in South Africa for academic reasons, that's very important to me. (P25 M UG)

Trying to make sense it is like a driving force, it's like it's difficult but it's worth it because I get a good education and I also get good job opportunities. (P10 M PG)

In line with our findings, Li et al. (2022) suggest that university students use this period of adjustment as a time to define and redefine their identity and future selves – that is, what we label as meaning-making processes, based on intrapersonal connectedness. Our findings also correspond with those of Chigeza et al. (2017) and Newsome and Cooper (2016), who mentioned that the unique struggles international students face can sometimes lead to a deeper awareness of and connection with the self. Wissing et al. (2020) maintain that intrapersonal motives for experiencing meaning are linked to an inner sense of competence and opportunities for personal growth. The need for growth was emphasized in our study, as students wanted to succeed and achieve the goals for which they had come to South Africa.

Theme 4: Social contribution

Our findings demonstrated a relational dimension of meaning making through connections with the larger community in which students find themselves. We refer to this as a form of social contribution, where they engage in activities to improve the wellbeing of others while establishing new connections. From a theoretical perspective, Keyes (2003) defined social contribution as a facet of social wellbeing, where an individual engages in activities to promote the wellbeing of their own community or society. What is unique to our study is that such relational experiences and social contribution proved to be key for meaning making among international students in South Africa. Typically, most international students would be more concerned about achieving their personal and/or educational goals, but our study shows that to experience meaning in life, students went beyond a focus on the self. Students mentioned that they were involved in a variety of activities on campus as well as in the larger community, as an act of giving something back to the host institution and country.

I am involved in political and social activism on campus together with other citizen students, I like sharing ideas and to give voice to the voiceless, this is very important to me. (P19 M PG)

One of the most important things in my life is making the world a better place to live.
(P9 M UG)

We interact and make friends with South African students as we do community service.
Things that we do, in terms of giving back initiatives, they connect a lot with some of the
things that I'm involved in back home and give meaning in my life. (P2 M PG)

The above excerpts show that the international students in our study made meaning by actually striving to improve the quality of life for South African citizens in their various give-back activities.

According to Mahali et al. (2018), relational experiences are at the core of wellbeing, and one such relationship involves the self and the community. Our study found that interactions on this level – in the form of social contribution – indeed form part of the meaning-making process. Moreover, Lillyman and Bennet (2014) claim that international students who make meaning through sharing their personal experiences and knowledge with the host country, as well as through networking with citizens, succeed academically.

Conclusion

As a novel contribution to studies centred on the experiences of African international students, maintaining relational interactions with family members (as a primary source of connections) provided a sense of direction and purpose to the lives of the participating African international students, reiterating Steger's (2012) theoretical proposition. Nurturing these relational ties and sustaining regular interaction with relatives in their countries of origin aided the students' contentment and motivation to pursue and attain their educational goals. An applied contribution of the study is that psychological support services and interventions offered to international students who are struggling to focus on their studies can capitalise on reminding these students of their relationships with family members and re-affirming the goals that formed part of their initial decision to study in South Africa. A positive education approach could be embedded into teaching and support services in a way that fosters wellbeing while promoting academic achievement.

Our findings further reflect that adjustment comes through creating a coherent worldview, based on interactions with members of the host society. For African international students, meaning in life was enhanced when they viewed themselves as part of an integrated whole and did not identify or define themselves in terms of their status as foreigners. This outlook allowed positive cross-cultural interactions with citizen students. An integrated worldview provided not only motivation to forge ahead with educational pursuits, but also instilled a sense of belonging, which in turn assisted them to adjust to their new learning environment. Our study suggests that the connotations of "value" and "colour" allowed international students to feel part of a larger whole; hence they were able to cope with the demands of their new lives. It also seems to contradict research that shows a decline in African international students in the country. However, our findings may well reflect the views of a few privileged students who have had slightly better experiences in the higher education space. Despite this discrepancy, we argue that our findings may be relevant for future students who can leverage existing

and new relationships to navigate broader academic challenges and psychosocial issues peculiar to South Africa. Within the higher education space, Student Affairs should be intentional in their attempts to better integrate both local and international students in the academic system.

Making sense of who they are and reminding themselves of their goals and values in life allowed the African international students in our study to form deeper intrapersonal connections. They experienced meaning through introspection and through redefining their identities and inner purposes – all of which served as pathways towards their adjustment and the achievement of their educational goals. Our findings also show that meaning making was experienced beyond a focus on the self. It extended to engaging in activities that would contribute to the wellbeing of South African society at large, as a form of social contribution. An important theoretical implication is how coherence, significance and purpose could take different forms depending on the sociocultural context of those being studied. In this sample, it was about relationships providing significance, motivation to pursue their goals, while helping them to understand their current world as international students in South Africa. This relational view of wellbeing has consistently been emphasized in African wellbeing literature but it has not been adequately explored in the context of African international students whose life-worlds include both those in their home countries and in South Africa.

Recommendations

The numbers of African international students who journey to South Africa in search of a good quality of life and better education can be expected to continue to rise. Thus, it is important to understand how their lived experiences and relational meaning-making processes enable these students to adapt and thrive in their educational pursuits. The findings of this study suggest that the academic adjustment of African international students may be enhanced through relational meaning-making experiences that promote a sense of purpose, a coherent worldview, intrapersonal connections, as well as motivation to achieve educational goals. Programmes that allow for cross-cultural social interaction should be encouraged to allow the establishing of new relational connections, the sharing of knowledge, and the creation of networks for African international students to flourish in the host country. In addition, higher education institutions can use strategies like a buddy system where host nationals are paired with international students to assist them in adjusting to their new academic space. Counselling and psychological services in institutions of higher education should design and implement educational and psychological interventions that promote meaning making among their African international students. An institutional climate or culture that prioritises the nurturing of positive relational experiences can be fostered through orientation programmes, newsletters and a reward system for outstanding ambassadors of this culture.

Regarding recommendations for future research, new studies can explore the complexities and potential challenges that arise in intercultural interactions and determine how meaning making occurs even in the face of negative relational experiences. In addition, there is a need for impact studies that determine the extent to which meaning-making

interventions are beneficial for African international students. Future research can also involve longitudinal data collection to follow these students over a period of time to better understand their relational experiences. Given that social contribution is key to the meaning-making process and the ability to communicate in the community is necessary, African international students should be encouraged to enrol for short courses aimed at learning local languages other than English. Since South Africa has eleven official languages, they should focus on the language used mostly around the host institutions where they are studying.

Limitations of the study

COVID-19 restrictions affected our study in that some of the interviews had to be conducted virtually over the telephone or by Zoom. Although the use of different or inconsistent interview formats could have affected the quality of the data collected, we ensured that the same process was followed both virtually and in person.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (HUM049/0320), with additional permission from the University's International Cooperation Division. All participants provided written informed consent and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Prescriptive or developmental advising? A situational approach to first-year students in a mathematics course at a South African university

Keletšo ya taelo goba ya tlhabollo? Mokgwa wa maemo go moithuti khosong ya dipalo ya ngwaga wa mathomo yunibesithing ya Afrika Borwa

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ABSTRACT

Owing to the history of South Africa, the challenges associated with new students entering institutions of higher learning each year are well established in the academic discourse and civil society circles. The quality of mathematics education is a particular cause for concern. South Africa, considered as a developing country, requires a student population with skills relevant to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). In this article, we draw from personal experience by challenging the implicit assumption that ‘at risk’ students fall in line and seek available support for their benefit. Based on personal experience, we argue that students do not arrive at university *tabula rasa*; they draw on their worldviews and personal experiences as frames of reference. Therefore, they sometimes reject what they perceive as ‘intruding’ university interventions. It is to address this challenge that student advisors and all other stakeholders dedicated to student support must find creative and innovative approaches. Drawing on the Dunning-Kruger effect, we demonstrate that, at times, students suffer from inflated self-images. This is a metacognitive deficit that accounts for inflated self-appraisals and, as such, necessitates the interchangeable use of prescriptive and developmental advising.

KEYWORDS

Developmental advising, prescriptive advising, self-concept, Calculus Readiness Test, student support

KGOPOLLO KAKARETŠO

Ka lebaka la histori ya Afrika Borwa, ditliahlo tšeo di amanago le baithuti ba bafsa bao ba tsenago dihlengwa tša thuto ya godimo ngwaga o mongwe le o mongwe di hlomilwe

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gabotse ka gare ga dipolelo tša thuto le didiko tša setšhaba sa badudi. Se se tshwenyago ke boleng bja thuto ya dipalo ka mo go kgethegilego. Ka ge e le naga ye e hlabologago, Afrika Borwa e nyaka palo ya baithuti bao ba nago le bokgoni bjo bo lebanego le Saense, Theknolotši, Boentšenere, le Dipalo (STEM). Go ya ka tše di boletšwego ka mo godimo, re tšea go tšwa maitemogelong a motho ka noši mo seabeng sa bjale ka go hlohla kakanyo ye e sa kwagalego ya gore baithuti bao ba lemogilwego bao ba lego ‘kotsing’ ba wela mothalong gomme ba nyaka thekgo ye e lego gona bakeng sa go ba hola. Go ya ka maitemogelo a motho ka noši, re phega kgang matlakaleng a gore baithuti ga ba fihle tabula rasa ya yunibesithi; ka fao, ba tšea dipono tša bona tša lefase le maitemogelo a bona ka noši bjalo ka foreime ya tšhupetšo gomme ka go realo ka dinako tše dingwe ba gana seo ba se bonago bjalo ka ditsenogare tša yunibesithi tšeo di ‘tsenago gare’. Ke tlhohlo ye moo baeletši ba baithuti le bakgathatema ba bangwe ka moka bao ba ineetšego thekgong ya baithuti ba swanetšego go hwetša mekgwa ye bothlajana le ya boitlhamelo. Ka go diriša mafelelo a Dunning-Kruger, re bontšha gore, ka dinako tše dingwe, baithuti ba tlaišwa ke diswantšho tša go ipona tše di buduletšwego. Ye ke tlhaelelo ya kgopolo- tšhomo yeo e ikarabelago ka ditlahlobo tša go itlahloloba tše di phagamišitšwego gomme ka ge go le bjalo, e nyaka tšhomišo ye e fapantšhwago ya keletšo ya taelo le ya tlhabollo.

MANTŠU A BOHLOKWA

Go eletša ka tlhabollo, go eletša ka taelo, kgopolo ya go ipona, Teko ya go itokišetša ga calculus, thekgo ya baithuti

Introduction and methodological considerations

The challenges faced by the higher education sector in South Africa are well documented and therefore need not be repeated here (Maree, 2015; Moodley & Singh, 2015; Staff Writer, 2019). Generally, our first-year students demonstrate under-preparedness, poor language proficiency, rural-urban divide, lack of suitable accommodation, and poor adjustment. Considering these, several South African universities, following examples from American and European universities and colleges, have put in place measures to support students who are likely to struggle at higher learning institutions. These institutions have seen a rise in new centres and units dedicated to student support, championing various programmes such as tutoring, mentoring, and academic advising (Schreiber et al., 2024; Versfeld & Vinson, 2024; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; De Klerk, 2021; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010; Engelbrecht et al., 2014; De Klerk et al., 2017). These programmes use early warning systems (EWSs) that flag individual students as ‘at risk’ of failure based on certain competencies (Jokhan et al., 2019).

The current reflective contribution challenges the implicit assumption that identified ‘at-risk’ students fall in line and seek available support for their own benefit. Based on our personal experience, we argue that students do not arrive at university *tabula rasa*; they draw on their worldviews and personal experiences as frames of reference. Therefore, they sometimes reject what they perceive as ‘intruding’ university interventions.

This article builds on more recent work with a similar focus in the South African higher education context (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; De Klerk et al., 2017). The contributions in the following pages present our experiences as advisory practitioners to first-year students in a mathematics course at the University of Pretoria (UP); therefore, the input does not follow any specific methodological orientation. These are observations based on daily interactions with students that take place through one-on-one consultations, group sessions, class visits, and email communications following their participation in the Calculus Readiness Test (CRT). It is important to note that these interactions are not framed or carried out as a research project; they simply form part of our crucial daily practitioner duties. Put differently, this reflective contribution does not necessarily portray students as research subjects; rather, it is a response to what Bensimon (2007, p. 443) refers to as “the invisibility of practitioners in the discourse on student success”. Consequently, our participation has focused on participant observation; however, it is not carried out in the form of a traditional ethnographic investigation (Van Maanen, 1995).

By sharing our experiences, we hope to contribute meaningfully to efforts aimed at achieving student success. It is to this challenge that student advisers and all stakeholders who are dedicated to student support must channel their strategies and energies. Below, we discuss how interventions should get buy-in from whom they aim to assist. In employing both prescriptive and developmental advising approaches (Crookston, 1972), we demonstrate how the two, when used interchangeably, can effectively ‘empower’ students to make the right choices about modules and programmes for their academic futures.

The article is structured as follows: first, we offer a brief historical discussion of the mathematics challenge in South African institutions of higher learning. Second, we explore how the problem is currently tackled at UP – a large higher education institution in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Third, we delve into the theoretical framework. Fourth, in demonstrating how we have had to adapt our approach, we share our experiences as an academic success coach (first author) and as a senior technical assistant (second author) in the Department of Mathematics. Finally, our concluding remarks end our reflection as practitioners.

The history of mathematics challenges in South African higher learning institutions

Owing to the history of South Africa, the challenges associated with new students entering institutions of higher learning each year are well established in academic discourse and civil society circles (Scott et al., 2007; Schreiber et al., 2018). The quality of mathematics education presents a particular cause for concern. South Africa, as a developing country, requires a student population with skills relevant to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). As a gateway subject, mathematics plays a critical role in the careers and degree programmes at university to which students have access. In the era of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and its related emphasis on competent graduates in the areas already mentioned, the mathematics challenge is of national concern (Shay, 2020; Fricke et al., 2008; Mahlaba, 2020).

The majority of learners arrive ill-prepared for the rigours of university mathematics and, often, university education in general. The reasons for this are of little interest here, except to say that research has pointed out the mathematics teaching abilities of teachers, often compounded by poorly resourced schools, as a foundational weakness (Tachie, 2020; Fricke et al., 2008). Challenges such as these have placed institutions of higher learning under pressure to come up with interventions aimed at ameliorating the impact of poorly prepared students who arrive on campuses every year. Below, we reflect on some of the EWSs at UP and demonstrate how they shape the work of practitioners in terms of how we intervene meaningfully.

Dealing with the problem: Calculus Readiness Test and other early warning systems

First-year students at UP are measured for readiness through several other measuring instruments such as the Student Academic Readiness Survey (STARS). “STARS is a baseline test that identifies students with a need for academic, psycho-social (for integration into the university environment) and/or financial support” (Department for Education Innovation, 2019, p. 62). STARS is important in identifying students who are more likely to find the university setting challenging in terms of language proficiency, adaptation, and financial needs. However, the STARS-identified challenges assist very little in determining the quality of students’ skills in mathematics, who are registered in intensive mathematics programmes. It is in this context that the Calculus Readiness Test (CRT) becomes important in bridging the gap and clarifying the picture.

Since 2016, the Department of Mathematics at UP has encouraged first-time entering students registered for intensive mathematics and engineering degree programmes to write the CRT during their orientation week. The Online Preparatory Mathematics (OPM) course has been designed to support all students in being better prepared for their first-year mathematics modules. The course has incorporated the already existing CRT in the Department of Mathematics that was developed as an early warning diagnostic test to students who were identified as high-failure risks. The course is meant to assist students in advancing their knowledge and skills in mathematics and to provide an adequate foundation for studying university mathematics. The content includes a preliminary CRT, designed to help students determine whether they are adequately prepared to study mathematics at university level. This consists of questions on topics that are covered in the high school curriculum, such as algebra, functions, trigonometry, exponents and logarithms, differential calculus as well as some analytical geometry. Each question in the test is taken from a pool of questions ranging from easy to difficult.

The OPM course is not compulsory. However, it is highly recommended, particularly for students who have scored below 65% in the CRT. Extensive statistical research conducted by the Department of Mathematics at UP shows that these are students who have a high risk of failing the first-year module. In addition, the CRT is arguably a better predictor of success in university mathematics than the matriculation mathematics mark.

After taking the CRT, students need to complete the OPM course, which is divided into six themes: (1) The Real number system, (2) Algebraic expressions, (3) Exponents and (4) Logarithms, (5) Functions and graphs, as well as (6) Trigonometry. This course includes reading content and watching videos explaining the requisite knowledge on the selected topics that provide an essential foundation for mathematics at university level. Students must work through the exercises provided in each section/theme in order to acquire the required level of technical skills; they are also able to monitor their own progress, since there is a final test at the end of each theme that informs them of their achievement level. If they do not show proficiency in a topic, they can revisit it.

Thereafter, they write another test, called the ‘Final Test’ or ‘post-CRT’, with questions that are again drawn from a pool of questions on each topic, also ranging from easy to difficult. The scores that they get from this test will then count towards their final semester mark. The OPM course is open to students in the engineering streams as well as in maths-intensive STEM programmes. The modules under consideration are MTH 158 (engineering) and MTH 114 (other maths-intensive degree programmes). The statistics in Table 1 depict the performance of students who were registered for the OPM between 2020 and 2023, as well as students who had completed the course and written the final CRT.

Table 1: The effect of the Online Preparatory Maths course on student pass rates in MTH 114 and MTH 158

MTH 114							
Year	Total no. of students	Total passed	Registered for OPM	Completed OPM	Passed module (OPM registered only)	Passed module (Completed course)	Average CRT mark
2020	567	283 (50% of total)	208 (36.7% of total)	45 (21.6% of OPM registered)	163 (57.6% of total passed)	39 (13.8% of total passed)	78.40%
2021	677	278 (41.1% of total)	633 (93.5% of total)	563 (89% of OPM registered)	265 (95.3% of total passed)	253 (91% of total passed)	54.60%
2022	702	596 (84.9% of total)	311 (44.3% of total)	411 (69% of OPM registered)	288 (92.6% of total passed)	231 (74.3% of total passed)	71.50%
2023	695	400 (57.6% of total)	665 (95.7% of total)	457 (68.7% of OPM registered)	391 (97.7% of total passed)	327 (81.8% of total passed)	43.90%

MTH 158							
Year	Total no. of Students	Total passed	Registered for OPM	Completed OPM	Passed module (OPM registered only)	Passed module (Completed course)	Average CRT mark
2020	1046	698 (66.7% of total)	834 (79.7% of total)	263 (31.5% of OPM registered)	594 (85.1% of total passed)	183 (26.2% of total passed)	61.70%
2021	1191	683 (57.3% of total)	1076 (90.3% of total)	205 (19.1% of OPM registered)	667 (97.7% of total passed)	150 (22% of total passed)	66%
2022	1256	624 (49.7% of total)	1158 (92.2% of total)	875 (75.6% of OPM registered)	588 (94.2% of total passed)	471 (75.3% of total passed)	69%

In Table 1, the average pass mark for students who have registered for and taken the final CRT differs for both modules; the engineering students' averages are more or less in line with the national average of 53.8% to 69.1% between the years 2020–2024, whereas there are fluctuations in the years 2020–2023 for MTH 114. This is partially due to the fact that both the course content and final CRT questions are reviewed and updated yearly, based on student performance during the semester.

We suggest that the CRT intervention suffers from the same weakness as most other university-based interventions that take place at the start of the academic year. In our experience, generally, most students are non-responsive to information about their capabilities and talents or lack thereof. This can be attributed to the human psychological nature to reject everything and anything that is non-affirming of our sense of identity, strength and talents (Demo, 1992). A more plausible explanation is that first-year students generally tend to mediate any new university information through personal experiences from high school. Thus, a piece of information from a test written for a minute, when measured against obtaining a distinction in Grade 12 mathematics and being top of the class in most grades in high school, simply does not make sense to a first-year student. Therefore, rather than accept and use the information as an opportunity for introspection, most first-year students offer reasons that justify their incongruous experiences. The most common explanation offered is also the most fatal, *"I was not prepared for the test"* (private one-on-one conversation with a student in 2023). As it turns out, the test requires no preparation because the assessment is an evaluation of skills supposedly already mastered in high school years. For those categorised as at risk, this is the basis to reject the outcome. The above, according to Kruger and Dunning (1999), is a metacognitive deficit that accounts for inflated self-appraisals. Metacognition refers to the ability to

measure how one is performing when one is likely to be accurate in judgement and when one is likely to be in error.

As the aforementioned shows, even the most well-intentioned interventions, informed by the most reliable data sources, can fall short. Arguably, then, the packaging of the messages and the timing of feedback should take centre stage. Well-timed intervention and messaging can be empowering to students because it can affect how they think about their study choices and decisions; for this reason, it is important to balance support and empowerment in student-support services. Student support, however, does not take place in a vacuum. Students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities play a crucial role in how messages of support or intervention initiatives are received. In measuring the academic maturity of students registered in the four-year programme (FYP), Yani et al. (2019) have found that students tended to reach academic maturity about six months after their entry into university, and only then become realistic about their own abilities. Therefore, it is not surprising that those in the more demanding mainstream programmes and even in the more challenging first-year mathematics modules tend to reject advice outright at the onset. Our experiences converge with the findings of Yani et al. (2019) in that it is only after the results of the first semester test that students are willing to engage with their abilities more honestly and open to possible programme change. This, as they have started to develop a more realistic view of their own maturity.

Crookston (1972) contrasts prescriptive and developmental advising. Arguably, an interchangeable use of the two can be helpful to foster a nuanced appreciation and unravel the intricacies of the advisor-advisee relationship (Fielstein, 1994). Drawing on the work of Crookston (1972) and employing the notion of self-concept and the Dunning-Kruger effect (Dunning, 2011; Kruger & Dunning, 1999), we motivate and discuss the interchangeable use of developmental and prescriptive advising in daily practice in the section below. Self-concept relates to reflexive individual processes of change and adaptation as individuals encounter new life situations and transitions. The realisation that students (especially in their first year of university) are still maturing (Yani et al., 2019), renders them more likely to make mistakes in their choice of courses or ignore advice based on inflated self-assurance. Making mistakes is part of growing-up; the crux is when self-incompetence robs one of the ability to recognise one's mistake(s) (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Theoretical framework

Crookston (1972) distinguishes between a prescriptive and a developmental approach to advising. The former is a top-down approach in which the advisor is the source of all knowledge in a doctor-patient type of relationship. As such, the advisor makes all the diagnoses, gives directives and, if followed religiously, all problems will be solved. In this mode, the advisor teaches and the student learns (Crookston, 1972). The responsibilities are clear and straightforward in that the advisor, as a source of information, provides guidance and leadership and the student is expected to follow. Accordingly, the advisor's responsibility is fulfilled as and when teaching is complete; the ball is in the student's court to follow through on what has been taught. This regimented manner shapes the relationships between student and advisor in such a way that there is no shared

responsibility to each other. It is not surprising that the student views the advisor as the authoritative figure with all the answers and, therefore, when suggestions and teachings fail to bear results, the student accordingly refuses to shoulder any responsibility for their failure (Crookston, 1972).

Unlike the prescriptive approach, the developmental approach departs from the premise that the advisor and the student “differentially engage in a series of developmental tasks, the successful completion of which results in varying degrees of learning by both parties” (Crookston, 1972, p. 6). This is a buy-in and consensus-building approach aimed at achieving a certain level of rapport between the advisor and the student. As such, both parties’ task includes an agreement on responsibilities, about who takes the initiative and supplies the knowledge and skills demanded by the task.

The use of self-concept and the Dunning-Kruger effect – cognitive bias (Dunning, 2011) – in this reflective piece is informed by the weakness in Crookston’s (1972) approach as discussed above. His approach is useful for understanding why a prescriptive approach might be undesirable. However, it falls short in explaining why, at times, students might reject or are reluctant to seek out support, irrespective of whether a prescriptive or developmental approach is utilised. Furthermore, the dichotomous approach fails to appreciate individual student needs (Fielstein, 1994). Most students who make it into the mainstream programmes at UP, do so on merit and with high grades for both mathematics and physics. For example, the BSc Actuarial and Financial Mathematics degree requires mathematics achievement level 7. This translates into an achievement grade of between 80–100%. BSc Applied Math, BSc Mathematical Statistics and BSc Mathematics require level 6 with a slightly lower BSc Physics achievement level 5. Unquestionably, these are likely to be a group of self-assured students with little need for additional support. Their view of themselves and their academic abilities is well established because it is based on their matric results.

The bias in students’ self-evaluation of their academic abilities when they transition to university is well supported by other scholars (Yani et al., 2019). Therefore, this fits the distinction made by Turner (1968), as cited in Demo (1992), between ‘self-image’ or ‘self-concept’, which refers to how individuals perceive themselves at a given moment and ‘self-conception’ which represents one’s relatively enduring stable sense of the *real me*. According to Burke (1980), as cited in Demo (1992), the ‘self-image’ is nothing more than a ‘working copy’; thus, subject to constant change, revision, and editing as and when the situation so demands. Unlike self-concept, self-conception is likely to resist external changes such as those brought about by the outcome of the mathematics readiness test and enforced through the top-down prescriptive advising approach. This self-conception comes up against its own blind spot in the first semester test results; consequently, a process of editing, revisions, and updating begins. This is to be expected because the ‘working self-concept’ or ‘self-image’ is considered an active and shifting array of accessible self-knowledge (Markus et al., 1987, as cited in Demo, 1992). This ‘self-knowledge’ is critical to how our students view themselves; therefore, having obtained certain grades in matric informs perceptions such as: *“I am very good with Mathematics, the only reason I did not do well in the Math readiness test is because I wasn’t prepared for it”* (private email conversation with students 2020).

Encountering certain situations triggers a process of modification in attitudes and prevailing self-images. This occurs, despite the tendency to view oneself as the same person every day (Demo, 1992). As already alluded to, it is only when this self-knowledge is seriously challenged in weekly activities and semester tests that adjustments are made and openness to seek out support begins.

Drawing on a developmental advising approach, we demonstrate how we have shifted the timing in mathematics advising to achieve maximum impact and empower students to think differently. To do this, we deliberately avoid the artificial and unhelpful dichotomy between prescriptive and developmental approaches because both serve a purpose at various stages in the student's learning cycle (Grites & Gordon, 2000).

Advising as developmental

According to Crookston (1972, p. 5), a developmental advising approach departs from the following premise:

. . . that developmental . . . advising is concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision but also with facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioural awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills. Not only are these advising functions but, deriving from the above assumptions, they are essentially teaching functions as well.

Importantly, the approach posits that the student cannot be a passive recipient of knowledge during this but must share equal responsibility in how the process unfolds. This, therefore, demands that the student actively seeks support and avoids being a victim of circumstances. Crookston (1972) is against placing too much responsibility on the student and advocates a balanced approach in how the relationship is nurtured. He lists ten central components that guide the relationship between advisor and student and distinguishes prescriptive advising from developmental advising (Crookston, 1972). These are: abilities, motivation, rewards, maturity, initiative, control, responsibility, learning output, evaluation, and the relationship. For our purpose and as it relates to this discussion, we focus on the first eight only, which we describe below and demonstrate how each dovetails with our approach to advising. To be clear, prescriptive and developmental advising approaches are used interchangeably as guided by context and the different learning stages.

Intervening on first contact

The first four of the eight identified dimensions, namely (i) abilities, (ii) motivation, (iii) rewards and (iv) maturity are key components of the largely impersonal and data-driven prescriptive, top-down approach employed on first contact (Crookston, 1972). During orientation week, first-year students are required to write the maths readiness test to assess the level of knowledge required to succeed in maths-intensive programmes. Ability plays a central role in how students perform in the assessment. Therefore, a student is arguably certified fit to continue with mathematics-intensive degrees according to their ability to demonstrate the required level of competence or advised to consider a different degree programme. Put differently, ability is assumed to be a key indicator of intelligence,

achievement, and interests (Crookston, 1972). Therefore, ability serves as an indicator to assist the prescriptive advisor in reaching a conclusion about what the student is not. The student has failed to demonstrate the basic level of competence in this area; therefore, the student is not this or that.

Contrary to Crookston (1972), however, measurable traits such as ability are not designed or intended to be punitive in nature. University studies are relatively expensive and time sensitive (i.e. period to completion). For this reason, advisors and universities carry a moral obligation to direct students accordingly. This is done without taking away the student's choice to decide how to proceed. Viewed from this angle, prescriptive advising, when buttressed by recognition of choice and self-determination, can arguably be a valuable form of development and empowerment (Fielstein, 1994). The data-driven maths readiness assessment encourages, if not forces, introspection in those affected and this is empowering. We consider it empowering to the extent that students are confronted with uncertainty about their future. This can happen irrespective of whether students have passed or failed the assessments. The assessment is an opportunity for students to interrogate what they know about themselves or what they thought they were capable of (self-concept). In turn, this sparks a chain reaction, activating as it does, notions of motivation, rewards, and maturity.

The outcome of the assessments can reinforce pre-existing beliefs about having chosen the right career path and natural abilities in this or that. The opposite can also happen, however, motivation to continue or go in search of a new career path may come into play as a core component of the decision to remain in the intended degree programme or to change. This, according to Crookston (1972), must be a self-committed process rather than imposed by others. Self-driven or imposed, tapping into this inbuilt human condition can be the difference between dropout or completion in the minimum time. Of the prescriptive advisor and their view on rewards, Crookston (1972) says, and here we quote at length:

... [the prescriptive advisor] views the student's motivation to produce as limited largely to achieving a high grade, gaining credit for the course, or obtaining a degree in order to realize a certain level of income, or as avoidance of parental censure or withdrawal of privileges ... developmental advisors recognize that in the current [university] generation there is a tendency to reject the economic security and social mobility goals of their parents in favor of the rewards of personal growth, self-fulfilment, and human commitment. Moreover, there is a tendency to gain intrinsic satisfaction from goal accomplishment, rather than being motivated to achieve for status or prestige. (Crookston, 1972, pp. 6–7)

It is an exercise in futility to debate students' drive for achievement; what cannot be gainsaid is students' ability to flourish when their passions meet their talents. Students, as is our human condition, want different things at different stages of life; therefore, we eschew the dichotomous presentation of prescriptive and developmental advising (Grites & Gordon, 2000).

Humans tend to ignore, avoid, or wish away things that make us feel inadequate. It is in instances like these that prescriptive advising is required. According to Fielstein

(1994) some aspects of prescriptive advising are informational and didactic; therefore, there are prerequisites for developmental advising. Many students reject outcomes that contradict a view that they are knowledgeable, smart, or intelligent. Without a university experience, most students frame their abilities through what they know – high school experience. Often, first-year university experiences tend to be incongruous and jarring; they can lead to disengagement and uncomfortable feelings. Therefore, the prescriptive approach is not so much informed by a view that students are immature or irresponsible; rather, by recognising that, at times, students can become victims of what they do not know (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Arguably, not knowing has consequences for our actions and non-actions. For most, this unknown is, for the first time, revealed by impersonal data-driven math readiness test results. The results are not ahistorical; they have been packaged through years of students' experiences in first-year mathematics at UP. This is to say, students are nudged into a mature consideration of whether they belong to their chosen programme of study, which is most important at their age, given the fact that many students are still trying to find themselves and, as such, decisions are informed by self-image as opposed to self-conception (Turner, 1968, as cited in Demo, 1992). Further, Kruger and Dunning (1999, p. 112) argue,

when people are incompetent in the strategies they utilise to achieve success, they suffer a dual burden; not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices but in addition to this, their incompetence robs them of the ability to realise it.

First-year students, owing to a variety of reasons such as schooling, being first-generation university entrants, etc. can suffer from inflated self-assessments due to insufficient metacognitive abilities.

Conclusion

As the foregoing accounts demonstrate, both descriptive and developmental approaches are critical to advising. However, they require a contextually sensitive deployment in order to cater for students' academic needs. To do this, the two approaches must be theoretically enriched, for example, by drawing on the various theoretical frameworks that attempt to make sense of student behaviour. This allows for a proper appraisal of the student population and its attitudes to support (both top-down and bottom-up) interventions. While the Dunning-Kruger effect goes some way in explaining why students at times reject support, what is required is research on how to disarm and breakdown barriers to inflated self-images.

The foregoing is critical to ensuring that students engage and do not wait until it is too late in the semester to seek help. As research from Australia has started to suggest, student support should not be optional (Kift et al., 2010). As such, support should be incorporated into the curriculum regardless of students' socio-economic and educational backgrounds. For example, this can be achieved through concrete partnerships between academics and support practitioners in which visits by support practitioners to lecture halls become a key component of teaching and learning. Lecture halls provide a captive audience and thus afford a wider reach, especially when supported and actively encouraged by the academics

concerned. Such regular integration of support services may also serve to destigmatise help-seeking behaviours.

Ethics statement

The UP granted permission for this study to be conducted. The study did not involve human subjects, only aggregated data of student grades participation in an online preparatory course. Identifying information such as module/course names have been changed.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial interest emanating from this study.

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Enhancing student engagement support through advising learning communities: A multi-campus experience

Go tokafatsa tshegetso ya boitshwaro jwa baithuti ka go gakolola ditlhopho tsa thuto: Maitemogelo a dikhamphase tse di farologaneng

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement includes both the actions of students and the practices of institutions. Learning communities (LCs) are educational programmes that combine both curricular and co-curricular experiences for students and serve as a way to increase participation in high-impact practices to boost engagement and help students transition into university. This reflective case study offers a framework to enhance student engagement by providing targeted support strategies through the Central Academic Advising Learning Communities (CAALC) project at the University of the Free State (UFS). The article shows how themes of student engagement, supported by Astin's Student Involvement Theory (SIT), were used to develop the said project for undergraduate students. Between 2022 and 2023, a total of 2,129 students from the residential communities and 927 students from the curricular and student-type communities participated in all the project initiatives. Residential communities are on-campus housing arrangements, where students enrolled in two or more shared programmes reside closely together. In contrast, curricular and student-type communities are tailored for specific groups, such as students who are co-enrolled in multiple courses (often from different fields) unified by a common theme, such as students with disabilities, commuter students, probationary students, and so forth. In the first two years of the project's implementation, participation trends and feedback were collected at the end of each year, with the students' voices informing the strategy for the following year. The results indicated that student behaviour, sense of belonging and peer support, learning outcomes, and institutional support influence students' level of engagement in learning. The study recommends a framework that potentially enhances institutional perspectives on student engagement and could be used to support the creation of environments more conducive to learning and fostering a sense of belonging through intentionally designed initiatives and the sharing of effective, evidence-based practices.

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KEYWORDS

Academic advising, learning communities, student engagement, student involvement theory

KAKARETSO

Go nna le seabe ga baithuti go akaretsa ditiro tsa baithuti mmogo le ditsela tsa go bereka tsa ditheo. Mekgatlho ya go ithuta ke mananeo a thuto a a kopanyang maitemogelo a dithuto le a a kwa ntle ga phaposi-borutelo, mme a bereka e le tsela ya go oketsa go nna le seabe mo ditirong tse di nang le le kakanyo e kgolo go godisa kgatlhego le go thusa baithuti go fetela mo yunibesithing. Thutopatlisiso eno e fana ka letlhomeso la go tokafatsa go nna le seabe ga baithuti ka go fana ka tshegetso e e totobetseng le dikano ka porojeke ya bogare ya go gakolola mekgatlho ya go ithuta mo theong ya thuto e e kwa godimo. Atikele eno e bontsha kafa merero ya go nna le seabe ga baithuti, e e tshegeditsweng ke Tiori ya go nna le seabe ga baithuti (SIT) ya ga Astin, e dirisitswe go tlhabolola porojeke e e umakilweng ya baithuti ba dikirii ya ntlha kwa yunibesithing ya Freistata (UFS). Magareng ga ngwaga wa 2022 le 2023, palogotlhe ya baithuti ba le 2,129 go tswa mo mekgatlhong ya bonno le baithuti ba le 927 go tswa mo mekgatlhong ya dithuto le ya mofuta wa baithuti ba nnile le seabe mo matsapeng otlhe a porojeke. Mekgatlho ya bonno ke thulaganyo ya go nna mo khamphaseng mo baithuti ba ba ikwadisitseng mo mananeong a le mabedi kgotsa go feta ba nnang mmogo gauifi. Go farologana le moo, mekgatlho ya dithuto le ya mofuta wa baithuti e diretswe ditlhophatse di rileng, jaaka baithuti ba ba kwadisitseng dithuto tse di tshwanang (gantsi go tswa mo mafapheng a a farologaneng) mme ba kopanngwa ke morero o le mongwe, jaaka baithuti ba ba tshelang ka bogole, baithuti ba ba tswang kwa gae, baithuti ba ba tlhokometsweng ka ntlha ya maduo, jalo le jalo. Mo dingwageng tse pedi tsa ntlha tsa go diragatsa porojeke eno, dipelo tsa kopanelo le maikutlo di ne tsa kgobokanngwa kwa bokhutlong jwa ngwaga mongwe le mongwe, mme mantswe a baithuti a ne a tlhotlheletsa maano a ngwaga o o latelang. Diphetogo di ne tsa bontsha tsholofelo ya baithuti ba ba ratang go nna karolo ya setšhaba le komuniti, segolobogolo mo palong e e oketsegileng ya maloko. Mokgwa o o tlhalositsweng wa go tlhama porojeke eno, o tla oketsa maitemogelo a institushene mabapi le boikgatsatso jwa baithuti, mme o ka dirisiwa go tshegetsa tlhokego ya go tlhola mafelo a a siametseng go ithuta le go rotloetsa maikutlo a go nna karolo ya sengwe, ka matsapa a a tlamilweng ka maikaelelo le go abelana ka ditsela tse di nang le bosupi le tse di nayang maduo.

MANSTWE A BOTLHOKWA

Tlhokomelo ya thuto, mekgatlho ya go ithuta, go nna le seabe ga baithuti, tiori ya go nna le seabe ga baithuti

Introduction and background

The University of the Free State (UFS) is a multi-campus institution located in the Free State, South Africa, with two campuses in Bloemfontein and a rural campus in Qwaqwa. In 1904, it was designed for 8,000 students but over the past 121 years, it has grown to

host approximately 41,900 students across seven faculties (UFS, 2025). Over a relatively short period, too, the UFS has shifted from being a predominantly white, Afrikaans-speaking university – in the late 1980s and early 1990s – to one where, currently, 90% of its students are black African, the majority of whom are first-generation students, meaning they are the first in their families to receive tertiary education. This shift in the student demographics at the UFS has come about as South African higher education focused extensively on widening access, promoting further inclusivity, and driving economic development. Part of widening access has also been to support students financially. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) provides financial support to students whose families earn less than a particular threshold income. Approximately seventy per cent of the undergraduate student population is supported by NSFAS funding, illustrating the socio-economic backgrounds and environments from which the students come (Mokgotho et al., 2023).

As a consequence of this widened access, the sector has experienced increased student enrolment, particularly from commuter students, as reported by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2022). As aforementioned, the UFS has also experienced a rapid increase in the number of students it accommodates. However, access to higher education is not enough, as students need to persist and succeed in their studies. Therefore, as commuter student enrolment increases, it becomes crucial for institutions to adjust and provide tailored curricular and co-curricular support to ensure student success and engagement (Van Zyl & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021). This is particularly important because commuter students frequently encounter challenges in integrating into the university environment, which hinders their engagement and sense of belonging (Pokorny et al., 2017; Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Tinto, 1997).

The literature supports that once students have accessed a university and engaged in co-curricular activities, they experience several advantages, including higher average marks than their peers, being more connected to the university and their classmates, being retained at a higher rate, feeling closer to faculty, and making a smoother transition to university (Stassen, 2003; Williams, 2000). Furthermore, from an international perspective, Kuh (2008) has listed 11 educational activities as high-impact practices, which include learning communities (LCs) that help students develop essential skills such as critical thinking, active learning, collaboration, integration of prior knowledge, and a sense of belonging. While students often start higher education eager to earn a degree, they may not be sufficiently prepared to succeed (Weinstein et al., 2011). Thus, participating in learning communities helps address this issue by offering a strong support network that serves as a foundation for developing self-sufficiency and achieving student success. O'Regan (2023) also confirms that LCs have emerged as an effective framework for enhancing student engagement and fostering a sense of community among students.

Zhao and Kuh (2004) and Scardamalia and Bereiter (2021) describe learning communities as courses where faculty and students learn together through purposeful activities designed to foster engagement in both academic and social learning, inside and outside the classroom. By taking courses together and regularly discussing their experiences within a structured programme, students' involvement in a learning community is believed

to create better opportunities for meaningful undergraduate experiences at university (Ross & Okojie, 2023). As South African higher education focuses on promoting inclusivity and driving economic development, equity should mean more than access to HE; that is, it must incorporate equal opportunities – environments in which all students genuinely have every chance of succeeding through academic support, excellent teaching and mentoring, and other initiatives (CHE, 2022). The overarching aim of this study is thus to explore how participation in academic advising LCs influences student engagement by examining the experiences, perceptions, and interactions of students with academic advisors within these communities.

Conceptualising academic advising and student engagement

To explore how participating in academic advising LCs influences student engagement, it is important to understand that the foundation of student engagement revolves around the interaction between students' involvement in effective educational behaviours and the degree to which institutions establish environments that encourage students to engage in these effective educational behaviours. This implies a sense of accountability on the part of institutions to plan interventions, design spaces, and compile curricular and co-curricular high-impact practices to best support students' optimal learning and development (CTL, 2018). In this study, student engagement refers to both the actions of students and the practices of institutions (CTL, 2018; Kuh, 2008). Academic advising is one way to achieve student engagement. Based on the teaching and learning mission of higher education, academic advising is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. As a high-impact practice, advising synthesizes and contextualises students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities, and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes. (NACADA, 2024). Determining which practices have an impact on student success has been well researched internationally, but context matters. According to Naidoo and McKay (2018), graduating in the minimum time has been the main indicator of student success. Until recently, however, with the change and transformation that have taken place in higher education globally, and certainly in South Africa, a redefinition of student success is required.

Nationally, efforts to improve student engagement are useful for identifying which practices are effective investments in student success. As one of these investments, academic advising is seen as one of the best ways to foster students' intellectual, personal, and social growth. It is a service that connects students' academic and personal lives, promoting overall development (CTL, 2018; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). According to a 2018 report from the UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning, students engaged in advising programmes generally develop better relationships with various staff members, particularly academic and support staff, as well as their peers (CTL, 2018). In South Africa, Tiroyabone and Strydom (2018, p. 4) state that the purpose of academic advising is “to empower students in their learning development process to explore and align their personal, academic, and career goals.” Within this framework, academic advising aims to enhance student involvement and enrich their understanding of various concepts (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; CTL, 2018; Strydom et al., 2017).

Student Involvement Theory as a framework for designing learning communities

The guiding framework of this study is Student Involvement Theory (SIT) through which Astin asserts that students “learn by being involved,” meaning that when students are actively participating in their learning, they derive more benefits from their college experience (Astin, 1984, p. 33). Characteristics of students who are involved include those who devote considerable energy to studying, spend a lot of time on campus, participate actively in student organisations, and interact frequently with faculty members and their peers (Astin, 1984). This supports the study’s purpose to confirm that student participation in LCs influences their engagement, particularly involvement in both curricular and co-curricular learning activities. This study further confirms that LCs contribute to both students’ academic and social integration into the institution, ultimately enhancing their engagement. In higher education (HE), Astin’s paper on student involvement is often cited as one of the founding approaches for student engagement; his theory was proposed to support efforts in HE to design effective learning environments (O’Regan, 2023). Astin (1984) highlights five postulates in his theory that apply to this study:

- Involvement includes physical and psychological energy that can either be very general or specific.
- Involvement occurs along a continuum, and students manifest different degrees of involvement, which vary depending on the individual and the situation.
- Involvement can be measured qualitatively or quantitatively.
- The level of development and learning associated with a programme is directly related to the quality and quantity of involvement within that programme.
- Any educational policy’s success is inextricably linked to its ability to increase involvement.

According to Astin’s findings, students who invest more in their university experience get more out of their university experience, which ultimately influences their overall development (Johnson, 2022). Similarly, a student’s actions during their time at university hold significance, but so do their emotional experiences and the establishment of a strong sense of belonging within the institution and community (Berry et al., 2024; Sithaldeen et al., 2022).

Although the theory holds considerable influence, it has faced criticism for its Western-centric perspective and its limited relevance in diverse sociocultural settings. For example, in the context of higher education in South Africa, which comprises first-generation students and commuters from various ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultural traditions, students may engage in ways that differ from Astin’s original sample of students in the United States. Additionally, the theory emphasizes observable behaviours such as participation in campus activities, which may not align with the values or lived realities of students from collectivist cultures or marginalised backgrounds (Hernandez et al., 1999). However, given that South Africans are influenced by African philosophies such as ubuntu and first-generation students are usually from marginalised backgrounds, the SIT aligns with the values of South African students.

Contrastingly, Tinto's (1993) model of Student Retention highlights the role of academic and social integration in student persistence; however, it has also been critiqued for its limited consideration of systemic inequalities and non-traditional student experiences (Berger & Milem, 1999). However, compared to Tinto's model, Astin's SIT offers more nuanced understandings of student engagement and retention, particularly in multicultural and structurally diverse educational environments. Thus, the academic experience is often narrowly focused on classroom activities, but it should also encompass involvement in campus events, sports, and opportunities for professional growth. Astin's framework proves beneficial for this study as it aids practitioners in creating environments that better promote student learning (Johnson, 2022) and offers valuable insights into how LCs can be structured and implemented to enhance and support the engagement of diverse student groups (first-generation, residential, commuter, or probation, etc.).

Purpose of the study

The South African HE sector needs to develop new pathways for student success that are inclusive, transformative, responsive, and relevant (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Students arrive at university with various needs that can influence their chances of achieving academic success (Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1997). Traditionally, meeting these needs has been the responsibility of student affairs practitioners, who provide a variety of co-curricular services, including academic advising (AA) (Schreiber, 2014). Co-curricular programmes create safe spaces where students can connect, share experiences, and build support networks (Bowman & Rosser, 2019). The informal nature of such programmes allows for quick adaptation to emerging student needs (Schreiber, 2014). However, this informality can also foster a less rigorous academic mindset and hinder efforts to generate scholarly work on these practices. Without proper research on the application of LCs in national higher education and academic advising-focused contexts it becomes challenging to share best practices and gather empirical evidence on how and why impacts are achieved, which is essential for encouraging institutional investment in effective strategies.

Considering this, the Central Academic Advising (CAA) office at the UFS sought to implement a project offering strategies to enhance the engagement and success of undergraduate commuter students in a higher learning institution. The Central Academic Advising Learning Communities (CAALC) project was established in 2022. According to Lenning and Ebbers (1999), learning communities can take place in the following forms:

- *Curricular learning communities* are made up of students co-enrolled in two or more courses (often from different disciplines) that are linked by a common theme;
- *Residential learning communities* organise on-campus living arrangements so that students taking two or more common courses live in close physical proximity; and
- *Student-type learning communities* are specifically designed for targeted groups, such as academically underprepared students, historically underrepresented students, students with disabilities, or students with similar academic interests, for example women in math, science, etc.

Owing to the longstanding relationship between the CAA and Residence Life (Housing and Residence Affairs) offices, the majority of the students connect through on-campus residential living by attending academic workshops offered by the advisors and requested by the elected student leaders. This increases the opportunities for out-of-class interactions and supplementary learning opportunities. The other student populations that connect in the curricular communities consist of commuter (off-campus) students who voluntarily sign up for membership at the beginning of each academic year.

Signing up for CAALC membership includes receiving communication from the senior advisor/project lead, which is related, but not limited, to upcoming initiatives, activities of the project, workshops offered by other student support offices, and vacancies for student jobs and volunteering opportunities on campus. The student-type communities include students who connect through specifically designed student organisations and associations (i.e. bursary-funded organisations, student-athletes, and faculty-specific student chapters, etc.) who request ad-hoc group academic advising support from the senior advisor/project lead. The students in the residential and student-type learning communities are not required to be members signed up to CAALC.

The project activities begin post-registration, usually on 1 March, with the official marketing and CAALC membership sign-up. The marketing of the membership takes place through the UFS student news marketing platform and the advising social media platforms (i.e. Facebook and Instagram). Regarding membership statistics, the total number of students who signed up in 2022 was 496 and 531 in 2023. This indicates an increase of 35 students from 2022, with 387 of these students being from the Bloemfontein campus, and 144 from the Qwaqwa campus. Additionally, the LCs also engage with the following student-type groups; 10 students funded by the Old Mutual Education Fund, 24 students from the Empower Campaign (high-performing football athletes), 10 students funded by the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), and the Law female students affiliated with the South African Women Lawyers Association (SAWLA) student chapter. Although the project involves three forms of LCs, the study will focus specifically on the curricular learning communities with the following objectives:

- To explore how CAALC enhances the engagement of undergraduate commuter students (from a student involvement framework) to meet their varying needs within the university context.
- To contribute to the underexplored impact of LCs in national HE and advising contexts.
- To contribute to empirical evidence on the how and why of impact achievement and generate national scholarly work on student engagement support programmes and practices.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of how academic advising learning communities influence student engagement. The rationale for using qualitative methods is that they are superior to other approaches for identifying assumptions, expectations, and behaviour (Ivala & Kioko, 2013), which justifies the need to capture both measurable outcomes and rich, contextual insights aligned with Astin's Theory of Student Involvement, emphasizing both the behavioural and psychological investment of students in learning.

Sample

The sampling process began with an open call for participation communicated to all registered undergraduate students via the Blackboard Student Organisation announcements and the Academic Advising Office's social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook). This broad outreach aimed to ensure the visibility and accessibility of the Central Academic Advising Learning Communities (CAALC) project across the student population. Students who responded to the invitation and voluntarily signed up for membership – either at the beginning of the first or second semester – formed the initial pool of potential participants. From this pool, purposive sampling was employed to select participants for the study. This method was chosen to ensure fair representation across:

- Mainstream and extended programmes,
- All seven faculties,
- Different academic years, and
- Both Bloemfontein main and Qwaqwa campuses.

Response rates varied depending on the semester and the effectiveness of the communication channels utilised. Voluntary sign-up processes typically resulted in self-selection bias, where students who were more motivated, engaged, or aware of academic advising support services were more likely to participate. This might possibly have led to an overrepresentation of students who were already proactive in seeking academic support. Furthermore, the following potential biases were acknowledged:

- Self-selection bias: Students who opted into the CAALC project may differ systematically from those who did not, particularly in terms of academic motivation, awareness of support services, or digital literacy.
- Digital access bias: communication relied heavily on online platforms, which may have excluded students with limited internet access or low engagement with institutional social media platforms.
- Campus representation bias: although efforts were made to include students from both campuses, logistical and contextual differences between Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa might have influenced participation rates.
- Programme imbalance: despite purposive sampling, some programmes or faculties might have had higher or lower representation due to varying levels of student interest or awareness.

To mitigate these biases, the sampling strategy prioritised diversity and representation, and the study design included contextual analysis to interpret findings within the scope of these limitations.

Data collection

Two forms of feedback surveys were used to determine students' experiences and perceptions from engaging in the webinars, workshops, and LC activities. The surveys were adapted from students' lived experiences within advising learning communities. The surveys included only biographical items and open-ended items that were aligned with Astin's Theory of Student Involvement, focusing on:

- Perceived value of the learning communities.
- Sense of belonging and peer support.
- Psychological motivation and academic identity.
- Engagement with faculty and advisors.

The use of the two surveys enabled data triangulation, which strengthens the research findings by cross-referencing information from different participants' experiences, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the results. The instruments were chosen to align with the study's theoretical framework and to capture both measurable outcomes of the project and nuanced student perspectives. The two surveys were created on the Questback survey solution and feedback platform; the links were shared with the participants at the end of the facilitated activities and via email following the activities. Between 2022 and 2023, approximately 520 participants completed both surveys. The first survey was filled out by all students who had attended the project's activities, whether they were members or not, excluding students from the residential communities. The second survey was completed solely by students who were members in 2022 or 2023, sharing their perceptions and experiences of membership.

Data analysis

The qualitative data collected through open-ended survey responses were analysed by the researcher/project lead advisor using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data to provide a rich and detailed account of student perceptions and experiences. The latent level of thematic analysis was conducted to explore the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptual frameworks that shape students' engagement in academic advising learning communities (LCs). This approach enabled the project lead to uncover deeper insights into the factors that enhance or hinder student interest and involvement. The initial coding was conducted by the researcher, who was familiar with the context of the study and trained in qualitative analysis. The researcher read the data multiple times to become immersed in the content and then generated initial codes independently. The researcher then compared the codes and discussed collaboratively with an independent researcher to identify areas of agreement and resolve discrepancies. To enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the thematic analysis, the project lead/researcher ensured the following:

- The use of investigator triangulation, where an independent researcher contributed to the development of the themes to reduce individual bias.
- The development and repeated refinement of a codebook to ensure consistency in coding across the dataset.
- The maintenance of an audit trail, documenting decisions made during the coding and theme development process to ensure transparency and replicability.

Through this rigorous and collaborative process, the project lead refined and validated the final themes, ensuring that they accurately represented the data and aligned with the research aims.

Ethical considerations

During the implementation of this project and study, all participants were treated with respect and sensitivity. Activities carried out during the study were communicated to the participants, and voluntary informed consent was sought from every student who participated through the completion of an RSVP link for each initiative and membership registration. The anonymity of participants was also assured. It is noteworthy that, when the project was carried out, the Centre for Teaching and Learning (where the case study was conducted) did not require ethical clearance. Nonetheless, the Director of Student Success in the department provided permission for the study to proceed based on the ethical considerations outlined above.

Results and discussion

The following four themes were identified through data analysis, which was done using the latent level of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) student behaviour/attitude; (2) sense of belonging and peer support; (3) learning outcomes; and (4) institutional support.

Student behaviour/attitude

The student behaviour/attitude theme aligns with postulates one and two of the SIT. These postulates relate to involvement, looking at how much physical and psychological energy a student invests in their academic life, and how students' levels of involvement occur along a continuum and vary based on the individual and the situation. The data revealed that 33 out of 335 students, after participating in the CAALC initiatives, recognised mistakes they had made in their learning and negative habits that led to poor academic performance. Furthermore, the students expressed that setting goals for the upcoming semester felt attainable, and they experienced reduced anxiety and increased motivation to enhance their situation by developing a solid schedule, effective study strategies, and maintaining a healthy diet. Only one student explicitly remarked on feeling engaged during one of the project initiatives, which is insufficient to represent the entire student sample group. Consequently, the data support the first and second postulates, that students exhibit differing levels of involvement, likely influenced by a variety of factors including their interests, external circumstances, and institutional support.

Table 1: Student attendance across Academic Advising LCs (2022 and 2023)

	2022 attendance	2023 attendance
Curricular-type communities	175	306
Student-type communities	–	39
Residential communities	752	1,784
Total attendance	927	2,129

Table 1 shows that most students who participated in the CAALC initiatives between 2022 and 2023 came from residential communities, followed by those from curricular-type and student-type communities. The literature indicates that living arrangements are an important aspect of student engagement because of the unique opportunities available in the environment (Astin, 1984; Chickering, 1974; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Worsley et al., 2021). As a result of the living arrangements, institutional housing, and residential programmes, it is clear that residential communities would experience the highest attendance. Interestingly, student participation from the curricular-type communities grew over the two years, while students from the student-type communities initially were not involved with CAALC in the first year but took part in the following year. This illustrates that students are not equally engaged in all facets of their education; they tend to be more committed to their curricular (academic) activities, while their co-curricular participation may vary or even be non-existent. Again, these student behaviours align with Astin’s postulates that students show varying degrees of involvement (engagement) depending on the individual and the context.

Sense of belonging and peer support

The sense of belonging and peer support theme corresponds with the second and third postulates of the SIT. As previously mentioned, the second postulate indicates that students’ levels of engagement occur on a spectrum and differ based on individual circumstances. In contrast, the third postulate asserts that engagement can be assessed both qualitatively (e.g. depth of involvement) and quantitatively (e.g. time spent in class) (Astin, 1984). Schudde (2011) discovered that students residing on campus experience greater social support and have more opportunities for co-curricular activities compared to commuter students. This finding aligns with the abovementioned discovery and highlights the differences observed in attendance between students from residential communities and those from curricular and student-type communities. Nonetheless, about 16 out of 335 participants noted how the CAALC initiatives encouraged extensive interaction, allowing the sharing of ideas and solutions for student improvement and learning from peers’ experiences.

The low number of student responses in this theme aligns with Astin’s second postulate, which suggests that students’ levels of engagement vary based on individual circumstances. It may also indicate that most of the 335 students did not feel a sense of belonging and peer support from attending the CAALC initiatives. Additionally, the few insights shared by students involved in the initiatives show that returning to campus

post-COVID-19 was difficult, but they managed these challenges with the support and guidance provided through the project. Berry et al. (2024) and Sithaldeen et al. (2022) confirm that student engagement is crucial to what students experience at university, including how they feel and whether they develop a strong sense of belonging to the institution and its community.

Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes theme aligns with the fourth postulate of the SIT. This postulate suggests that the level of development and learning associated with a programme is directly related to the quality and quantity of involvement within that programme. It further emphasizes the direct link between involvement and educational outcomes. The learning objectives and outcomes of the project can be understood through the competencies shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Project learning objectives and student outcomes

Objectives	Student outcomes
Practical competencies – navigating the institution.	Identify and connect with appropriate campus personnel and resources.
Curricular competencies – core academic skills and strategies	Develop study strategies, time management, exam preparation, and connect to relevant resources to enhance critical thinking, academic writing, and other academic skills.
Co-curricular competencies – health, wellbeing, social, and interpersonal skills	Assume responsibility for multiple dimensions of self-care and understand the relationship between wellbeing and academic performance. Actively develop a social and support network, explore identity, and build a sense of institutional belonging, responsibility, and commitment.

Based on the data collected, 251 out of 335 student responses to the open-ended survey revealed that participating in the CAALC initiatives and being members provided them with valuable insights into effective academic skills and strategies, as well as an understanding of how their wellbeing relates to their academic performance. Studies indicate that students often prioritise other activities, like socialising or academic responsibilities, over sleep, leading them to place less importance on rest compared to their daily engagements (Paterson et al., 2019; Pegado et al., 2025). With that said, consistent with the learning outcomes of the project, students remarked that, besides finding ways to improve their time management skills, they also gained insights about non-academic matters, such as maintaining a healthy diet and establishing healthy sleeping habits.

The ‘Road to Exams’ webinar emerged as the most sought-after initiative, with 73 students sharing their insights on the webinar, which equipped them with practical strategies for exam preparation and educated them about the application of institutional exam policies to excel in their mid-year and year-end examinations. Aligning with literature stemming from Astin’s SIT, it is recommended that educators focus less on what they do and more on what the student does: how motivated the student is and the amount of time

and effort they invest in the learning experience. Consequently, increased and enhanced engagements from students correlate with greater learning and development outcomes (Astin, 1984, 1999).

Institutional support

The theme of institutional support aligns with the second and fifth postulates of the SIT. The second postulate addresses the varying levels of student engagement, which can be affected by a variety of factors, including the support provided by institutions. In contrast, the fifth postulate asserts that the effectiveness of any educational policy is fundamentally tied to its capacity to enhance student involvement. For any educational policy or programme to succeed, it must promote increased participation among students. This connection links the theory to institutional practices and decision-making processes (Astin, 1984).

Twenty-two out of 335 students indicated that the institutional support they received played a role in their engagement levels: this included gaining awareness of the available support services, especially in health and wellness; interacting with student support professionals who provided important contact information; understanding the various forms of academic advising; and making regular visits to the office. These results support Kuh's (2001) argument that institutional environments that are perceived by students as inclusive and affirming may lead to higher levels of student engagement in their studies. Contrastingly, some students identified institutional factors that hindered their engagement, such as experiencing unstable internet connectivity during the webinars when participating remotely, a need for content that includes more concrete examples of applying study skills across various subjects/modules, and a preference for face-to-face initiatives due to challenges with load shedding off-campus. The findings above highlight the significance of institutional policies and practices in influencing student engagement levels in learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1984).

Limitations

A significant limitation of the study is the small sample group of students from the curricular learning communities, which is not representative of the broader undergraduate student population at the institution. Furthermore, Yin (2014, as cited in Priya, 2021) notes that case studies, like experiments, are generalisable to theoretical propositions rather than populations. This implies that the findings from this university case study can contribute to the refinement or development of broader theories but cannot be directly generalised to all similar contexts or institutions.

In addition to these limitations, the study relied heavily on self-reported survey data, which introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers or misremembered details. The voluntary nature of participation also raises concerns about selection bias, as those who chose to participate may differ in meaningful ways from those who did not. Moreover, the study lacked formal institutional ethical clearance, which may affect the credibility and ethical robustness of the research process.

Despite these constraints, the findings offer valuable insights that can inform strategies to enhance student engagement and support theoretical and practical developments in national higher education institutions (HEIs).

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted nature of student engagement at the UFS, revealing that student behaviours and attitudes, sense of belonging, peer support, learning outcomes, and institutional support all play critical roles in shaping their engagement with learning. However, students also identified institutional barriers that hindered their participation, such as unstable internet connectivity – particularly on the rural Qwaqwa campus – load shedding challenges during remote learning, and a need for more tailored academic content with practical examples across modules. These findings reinforce the importance of institutional policies and practices in either enabling or constraining student engagement (McCay, 2020; Astin, 1984).

The study involved a substantial number of participants: 2,129 students from residential learning communities and 927 from curricular and student-type learning communities. Among these, 335 qualitative responses from students across the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses provided rich insights into the lived experiences of those in curricular learning communities. These responses affirmed that, while not universally popular, a sense of community and belonging remains deeply valued by many students, especially those whose backgrounds align with the communal realities these learning communities reflect. Importantly, this study contributes original insights into the limited but growing body of literature on high-impact practices in South African HE contexts. It highlights the potential of academic advising and learning communities as vehicles for fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. In particular, the study offers a unique perspective on advising and engagement in a structurally diverse, multi-campus university in the Global South – an area that remains underexplored in global scholarship.

To build on these findings, future research could apply Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Retention to explore how engagement and retention intersect in multicultural and structurally diverse educational settings. Furthermore, it would be significant to examine the role of digital infrastructure and access equity in shaping engagement, especially in rural or under-resourced campuses. Staff and advisor perspectives on implementing learning communities and advising models in African HEIs could also be explored. Lastly, a recommendation may be to investigate longitudinal outcomes of students participating in learning communities to assess the sustained impact on academic success and retention. By illuminating the experiences of students in learning communities at the UFS, this study not only informs institutional policy and practice, but also lays the groundwork for more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to student engagement and development in African higher education.

Ethics statement

The author confirms that ethical clearance was not required in the writing of this reflective practice article.

Potential conflict of interests

The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

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CALL FOR PAPERS FOR A SPECIAL ISSUE OF JSAA:

Postgraduate student affairs in Africa and beyond

Guest editors: Dr Thierry M. Luescher & Dr Silence Chomunorwa

Researcher Development Academy

University of Cape Town

Higher education systems across Africa and the Global South are experiencing rapid growth in postgraduate enrolments, including honours, master's and doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows. At the same time, universities are increasingly recognising that postgraduate success depends not only on academic training and supervision, but also on the broader ecosystem of support, development, engagement, wellbeing and belonging that surrounds postgraduate and postdoctoral scholars.

Questions relating to postgraduate funding, inclusion, wellbeing, identity development, governance, transitions into, through and out of postgraduate studies, postgraduate attributes, local and international mobility, digital learning and institutional support structures for research education and researcher development are all becoming increasingly important.

This special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) will advance student affairs scholarship, policy and professional practice by examining how universities in Africa and beyond support postgraduate and postdoctoral scholars and how postgraduate student affairs can contribute to equitable student access, wellbeing, and success. The guest editors welcome contributions from emerging and established researchers, student affairs practitioners, graduate school leaders and professionals involved in postgraduate support, as well as from postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows from Africa and beyond.

NB. Recognising international differences in terminology, this special issue uses "postgraduate" as an umbrella term for study beyond a first degree (e.g. a bachelor's degree). It refers to students enrolled in postgraduate diploma, honours, master's and doctoral programmes (and postdoctoral fellows, where appropriate).

Scope of the issue

- Student experience of postgraduate studies, doctoral education, and postdoctoral experience
- Policy, leadership and organisation of postgraduate student affairs and services
- Models of postgraduate support, graduate schools, postgraduate centres, and specialised units
- Transitions into, through and out of postgraduate/postdoctoral studies
- Career development, career services, and employability of postgraduate students
- Institutional alumni tracking, alumni networks, and alumni development of postgraduates

- Developing postgraduate and postdoctoral research cultures and institutional environments
- Researcher identity development, novice and emerging research education programmes
- Postgraduate and postdoctoral publishing cultures, publishing demands, metric anxiety
- Postgraduate and postdoctoral funding, scholarships/fellowships and financial precarity
- Postgraduate work-study programmes, assistantships, on-campus work
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- Indigenous knowledge and approaches in postgraduate student development
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Dr Kgadi Carrie Mathabathe is a purpose-driven higher education leader passionate about advancing student success through transformative policy, inclusive support systems, and research-based strategy. As director of Student Affairs at the University of Pretoria, she leads multi-stakeholder initiatives that bridge academic advising, student wellbeing, and institutional transformation. An NRF Y2-rated researcher, her work spans the strategic development of wrap-around support, institutional governance reform, peer-assisted learning models, and global collaborations focused on reimagining student agency and access in the Global South.

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Prof. Dr Birgit Schreiber, PhD, has served in senior leadership positions in sub-Saharan Africa and Europe higher education with 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 trans-national bodies, notably USAf South Africa, SARUA, DAAD and ERASMUS, teaches, does research and supervision, programme 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 monograph, on various themes around social justice, student affairs, student engagement and higher education leadership, gender and SDGs. She was the founding editor and is the editorial executive of the *Journal for Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA), she is on the board of the *Journal of College Student Development* (JCSJ) and a column editor for the *Journal of College and Character* (JCC). She serves as the president for 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 Freiburg, Germany, research associate at Pretoria University, and she is Germany Country Director for the STAR Scholars Network and sits on various boards (SANRC, University of Johannesburg; CASHEF, University of Pretoria).

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Dr Angelina Wilson Fadji is a senior lecturer in Psychology at De Montfort University, UK, specialising in psychological wellbeing and positive mental health within African contexts. She holds a PhD in Psychology from Stellenbosch University and completed postdoctoral research at North-West University. Her work explores how individuals, particularly young people in deprived settings, cultivate resilience and thrive, contributing significantly to culturally grounded theories of wellbeing.

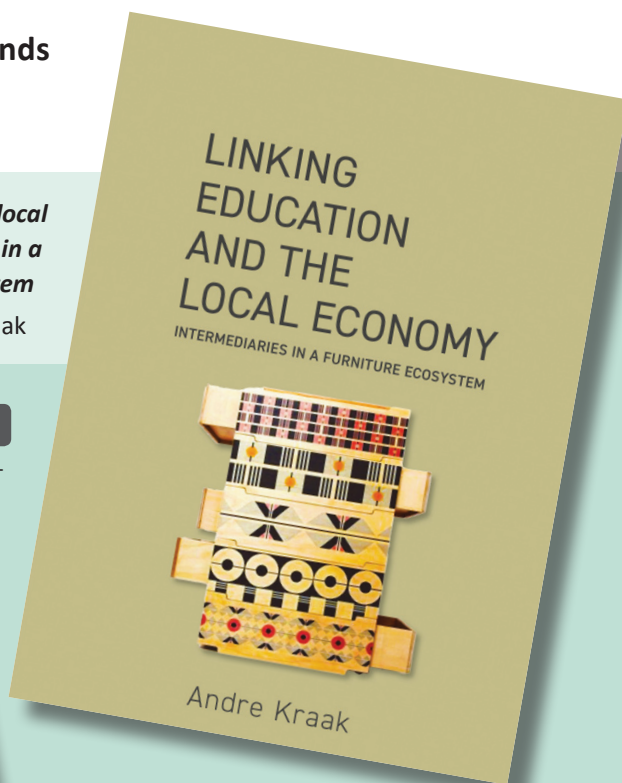
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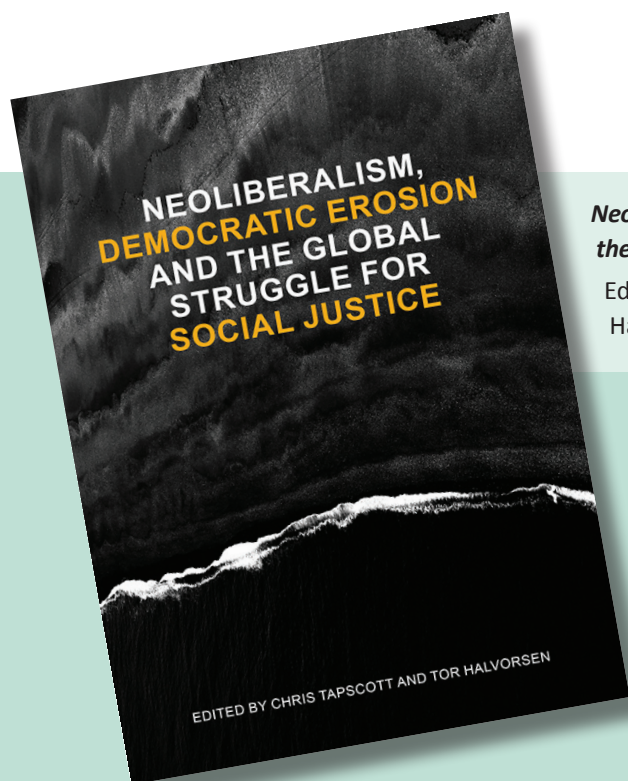
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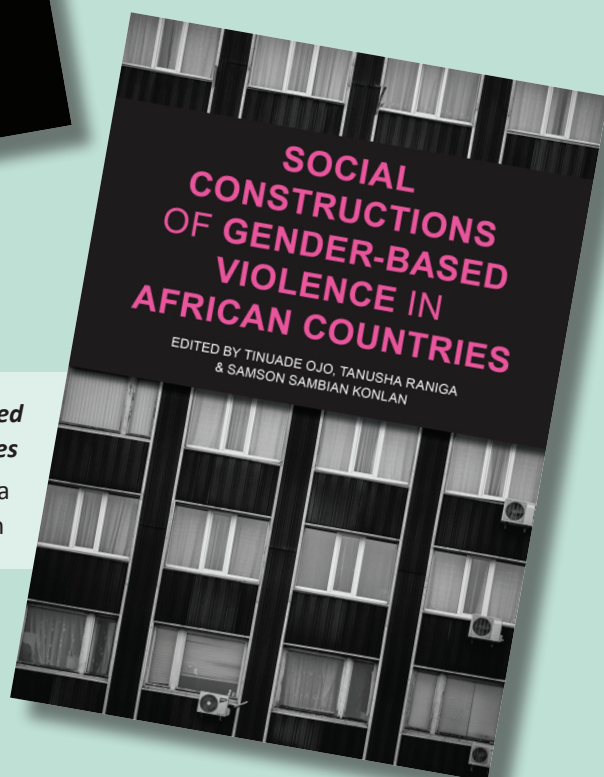


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Please note: Due to a high volume of manuscripts under review and migration of the Journal to UCT, **JSAA is currently not accepting any open submissions**. JSAA will re-open for open submissions in the course of 2027.

Submissions in response to specific calls for papers (for guest-edited, themed issues) are welcome but they must be made directly to the corresponding editor of that call. Consult past JSAA issues, JSAA announcements and the JSAA LinkedIn page for calls for papers.

JSAA Editorial Team, 15 July 2026

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

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

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

Please note that different requirements apply:

- **Research articles:** Contributors are encouraged to submit original research-based manuscripts of ca. 5000 words, including all references, notes, tables and figures. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150-200 words and about five keywords. They should be double-spaced and all pages consecutively numbered.

- **Reflective practice articles** (reflective practitioner accounts) on professional campus practice are peer reviewed. They are screened and reviewed according to the same criteria as research articles, albeit with a different emphasis. They do not need to include extensive consideration of recent literature and theory but focus on in-depth description and learnings. They must comply with standard academic convention and scholarly practice. Typical length: 2,500 - 5,000 words. Abstract: 150 - 200 words plus about five keywords.
- **Book reviews** should be between 800 - 1,000 words. Competent reviews of key student affairs books are published at the discretion of the Editorial Executive.
- **Letters to the editors, comments and critique** of no more than 2,500 words, are also welcome and published at the discretion of the editors.
- **Proposal for the journal's Interviews and Dialogue section and Calls and Notices** must be emailed directly to the journal manager. The publication of calls and notices (for conferences; vacancies etc.) may incur a nominal fee.

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

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

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2. The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the Editor).
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Section review policy and process

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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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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Guest editorial

Sharing practices to co-construct the profession of academic advising

Gugu Wendy Khanye & François Strydom

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Birgit Schreiber, Teboho Moja & Thierry M. Luescher

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Ninette Aucamp

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Gugu Wendy Khanye & François Strydom

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Keitumetse Poen



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