Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

Supportive contexts for student success

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

Vision and mission

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

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

Focus and scope

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

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

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

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Supportive contexts for student success

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

Student affairs and services practitioners in African higher education are challenged to provide transformative student development and support to a very diverse body of students, and they often do so without the level of resources – human, financial, and infrastructure – that their counterparts in other world regions can draw on. For African student affairs practitioners, drawing from the ubuntu philosophy and their African collectivist practices, their strategy is often to design supportive *contexts* for success and collective approaches to support, rather than individual support *interventions*, to maximize their reach despite limited resources. This is an acknowledgement of the social articulation of student success, an articulation that communicates success from personal development to academic achievement and real-life outcomes, and a relation between notions of success within higher education and beyond to the world of work and achievement of sustainable livelihoods.

The resource constraints facing African student affairs practitioners are not only of a human, financial and infrastructural resource nature; context-relevant knowledge resources are also a constraint to supporting student success. The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) has sought to address the latter gap with its mission "to contribute to the professionalization of student affairs in African higher education". Since 2013, JSAA has been publishing original articles dealing with the theory and practice of student affairs in universities in Africa and related relevant contexts.

This issue of JSAA, entitled 'Supportive contexts for student success', delves into the multifaceted dimensions of student support across different contexts – from the campus environment to the classroom, from residence life to life online, and from psychological well-being to collective student organization. The articles investigate not only the traditional forms of direct support, but also the broader contextual conditions that either facilitate or hinder student achievement.

The first article, 'Hauntological engagements: Visual redress at Stellenbosch University' by Elmarie Costandius,† Gera de Villers, and Leslie van Rooi, sets the tone for this theme. It investigates how visual and cultural redress at Stellenbosch University impacts student experience and institutional transformation.

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Following this, 'Cyberbullying in Kenyan universities: Lessons and insights from personal experiences of deans of students' by Angella Kogos, Tom Kwanya, Lucy Kibe, Erick Ogolla, and Claudia Onsare, provides a critical examination of the challenges posed by cyberbullying and the strategies employed by university administration to mitigate these issues.

Mpho P. Jama and Pulane Malefane contribute with 'Reflective perspectives of residence heads' experiences and responses during COVID-19 at a Free State university', offering a detailed look at how residence life practitioners navigated the complexities brought on by the global health crisis.

In 'Student motives, expectations, and preparedness for higher education: A gender-based study', Jade Jansen, Badrunessa Williams, and Azmatullah Latief present insights into how gender influences student motivations and readiness for higher education.

The mental health and coping mechanisms of postgraduate psychology students during the COVID-19 pandemic are examined by Tasneem Hassem, Victor de Andrade, Sumaya Laher, Nabeelah Bemath, and Katherine Bain in their article, providing valuable lessons learned from this unprecedented period.

Naadhira Seedat and Rishen Roopchund explore 'The role of the Muslim Student Association at a South African university in promoting a sense of belonging, community service, and a student-centred environment', highlighting the significance of faith-based student organizations in fostering a supportive campus climate.

Nina Rossouw's study, '"Did 'Step-Up' help in stepping up?" Transition programmes as a factor to improve student academic performance', evaluates the effectiveness of transition programmes designed to aid students' academic progress.

Linda Meyer and Birgit Schreiber shed light on the unique challenges faced by first-generation students at private universities in South Africa and the opportunities these institutions have to address these challenges in their article on 'South African private universities: The unique challenges of private university first-generation students – The unique opportunity for private higher education institutions'.

The procedures and practices in providing student support services at a nursing college in South Africa are scrutinized by Thembekile P. Skakane-Masango, Ntombifikile G. Mtshali, and Sandiso Ngcobo, who offer a comprehensive look at the state of student support in nursing education.

Jessica Versfeld and Caitlin Vinson delve into 'Exploring first-year engineering student perceptions of peer-led study groups in a Global South context', presenting a study on the role and impact of study groups on student performance in demanding environments.

Bernadette Johnson's 'Disturbed: Doing deep transformative work – Reflections on social justice work in South African higher education' provides a reflective account on the progress and challenges of social justice initiatives within higher education institutions with a focus on Wits University, discussing their unique approach to institutional transformation.

In keeping with our striving to bridge the gap between Anglophone and Francophone African higher education and contribute to the decolonisation and African academic

language development in African higher education, last year, JSAA started to translate all the abstracts of its research and reflective practitioner articles into a second African official language. In this issue we are proud to have eight French abstracts, one Afrikaans and one isiXhosa abstract translation. We thank our translation editors for their sterling work.

Added to the eleven research and reflective practice articles, we publish in this issue a report on the 7th Global Summit of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS). In this report, David Newman offers insights into the global discourse on student affairs and services. Two renowned keynote speakers, Professors Jouhaina Gherib from Tunisia and Birgit Phillips from Austria enriched the participants of this 7th Global Summit held in Korea in May 2024.

Finally, Jia Zheng reviews the special issue 'Towards professionalization of student affairs across the globe', edited by Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo and Birgit Schreiber, providing a critical analysis of this seminal work published by *New Directions for Student Services* in Fall 2023.

JSAA announcements

Starting mid-2024, JSAA will be formally hosted by the Centre for the Advancement of Sustainable Higher Education Futures (CASHEF) in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. With this move, JSAA can cement its existing strong relations with the University and the Faculty. We are grateful for the support provided by our affiliation with CASHEF for our journal manager, and the affiliation with the Faculty and University more broadly, for the hosting and technical support we receive. At the same time, we recognise Prof. Kolawole Samuel Adeyemo, the director of CASHEF, and the outgoing dean of education, Prof. Chika Sehoole, who have enabled this. On behalf of JSAA, Prof. Birgit Schreiber – JSAA Editorial Executive – has entered into a formal affiliation with the Centre and is also on the board of the Centre. We look forward to a long and fruitful collaboration.

At this occasion, we would also like to congratulate some more members of the JSAA Editorial Executive and Editorial Board for professional achievements. First, two of our editors have received research ratings from the South African National Research Foundation.

Dr Henry Mason, who serves on our Editorial Board, has received a C2 NRF rating in April 2024. This is a huge achievement, and we are so happy for him! We are grateful for the contributions he makes to South African scholarship and African knowledge about student success in higher education. Dr Mason contributes to our knowledge with research and publications, with teaching and mentoring emerging scholars. Dr Mason, too, contributes significantly by supporting the editorial work of the Journal with energy, enthusiasm and a critical scholarly eye. The work that is required to publish this journal, twice per year, is mostly invisible and often goes unnoticed and Dr Mason continues to contribute towards this Journal in extremely valuable ways. Thank you, Henry, and heartfelt congratulations on the NRF C2 rating.

In 2024, Prof. Thierry Luescher has been re-rated by the NRF and improved on his original NRF rating to a C1 rating. According to the NRF, Thierry is recognised nationally and internationally as a well-established researcher with a body of high-quality research output in the field of higher education studies. In particular, the NRF rating outcome letter to Thierry notes:

> *The reviewers were unanimous in recognising the significance of your research and indicated that you had made a significant contribution to the study of student politics and representation, student affairs and higher education in Africa more broadly, and with major contributions on understanding of transformations in African higher education.*

As JSAA we are particularly proud to see the NRF mention "student affairs and higher education in Africa" as among the fields where Thierry is internationally recognised to have made important knowledge contributions. This is a great achievement for him personally, but it is also an achievement for the Journal, and the college of editors who have built student affairs in Africa as a recognisable field of research.

Second, we want to congratulate Dr Birgit Schreiber's appointment as extraordinary professor by the Faculty of Education Faculty at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town. The University of the Western Cape is Birgit's alma mater, and she was for many years the director of the Centre for Student Support Services of this university. It was during her tenure as director there that JSAA was established, with Birgit as one of the founding editors. We are immensely proud to have Birgit receive this recognition.

Lastly, we congratulate our Editor-in-chief, Professor Teboho Moja for a student nominated award she received – the James Johnson Distinguished Faculty Award. The award was given as an honour by the New York University Black Student Union.

We hope this issue not only enriches your understanding of the supportive contexts necessary for student success but also inspires further research and practice in this vital area of student affairs.

Happy reading!

Birgit, Thierry and Teboho

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hauntological engagements: Visual redress at Stellenbosch University

Iingxoxo ngeHauntology: Ulungiso lwembonakalo kwiYunivesithi yaseStellenbosch

Elmarie Costandius,[†] Gera de Villiers[1] & Leslie van Rooi[2]

ABSTRACT

This article asks the central question of how to practically engage in the ongoing production of space at Stellenbosch University (SU) as to reimagine and redefine spaces. Spaces, which affect people indirectly and subconsciously, can act as microaggressions on one hand and places of safety connected to identity on the other. The Visual Redress (VR) project at SU focuses on removing or replacing contentious visual elements on campus and facilitating engagements to alter experiences of places and spaces. The VR project is not only interested in physically transforming the space, but also in facilitating critical dialogue and physical interventions to engage in spatial memory and emotional remembrance. In this article Hauntology is used as a methodology to remember and reflect on visual elements on the Stellenbosch campus of SU and how the memory of the past and the dead in the form of visual elements still haunts the present. These hauntological engagements include crucial interactions with students, lecturers, and the various publics of the university. In this article the researchers will provide an overview of VR at SU and show and discuss the processes of three specific VR projects that were implemented at SU to illustrate the importance of hauntological engagements with the aim of reconstructing spaces.

KEYWORDS

Hauntology, space, visual redress, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

ISISHWANKATHELO

Eli nqaku liphakamisa owona mbuzo ungundoqo wendlela yokuzibandakanya kuqulunqo lweqonga oluqhubayo kwiYunivesithi yaseStellenbosch (iSU) njengokucinga ngokutsha kunye nokuchaza ngokutsha iqonga. Amaqonga, achaphazela abantu ngokungathanga ngqo yaye bengaqondanga bona, anokusebenza njengohlaselo olungaqondakaliyo kwelinye icala kunye neendawo zokhuseleko ezihambalena nobuni kwelinye icala. Iphulo loKulungiswa kweMbonakalo (VR) eSU ligxile ekususeni okanye ekutshintsheni iimbonakalo ezinokuxabanisa ekhampasini kunye nokuququzelela iindibano zokutshintsha amava eendawo kunye nawamaqonga. Eli phulo leVR alijolisanga kuphela ekuguquleni iqonga ngqo, kodwa likwajolise ekuququzeleleni iingxoxo ezibalulekileyo kunye nokungenelela ngokuthe ngqo okubandakanya iinkumbulo ngendawo kunye neenkumbulo ngokweemvakalelo. Kweli nqaku iHauntology isetyenziswa njengendlela yokukhumbula kunye nokucamngca ngezinto

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ezibonakalayo kwikhampasi yaseStellenbosch yaseSU kunye nendlela inkumbulo yexesha elidlulileyo kunye nabalishiyayo eli limagade ahlabayo ngendlela yezinto ezibonakalayo ezisakhathazayo kule mihla. Olu nxibelelwano lwe-hauntological lubandakanya uthethathethwano olubalulekileyo nabafundi, abahlohli, kunye noluntu lweyunivesithi ngokubanzi. Kweli nqaku abaphandi baya kubonelela ngesishwankathelo seVR eSU kwaye baya kubonisa ze baxoxe ngeenkqubo zamaphulo amathathu eVR athe aphunyezwa yiSU ukubonakalisa ukubaluleka kothethathethwano lwe-hauntological ngenjongo yokwakha ngokutsha iziko..

AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO

Hauntology and production of space as methodology

Jacques Derrida (1994) coined the term 'hauntology', a portmanteau of the words 'haunting' and 'ontology', to contemplate the idea that both the past and the 'lost future' haunt the present like a ghost. Hauntology is real, like ontology, but silent and perceived as absent. Derrida's work, *Specters of Marx* (1994), specifically references the spectres of communism, but it could be relevant in many other contexts. Derrida deliberates on what we can learn from the dead and what the past could inflict on the future. Powel (2016, p. 258) refers to Derrida's connotation of inhabitation to hauntology that refers to a body that is inhabited by a foreign guest, a "sense of obsession, a constant fear, a fixed idea, or a nagging memory" that unconsciously lies within the body. Mark Fisher in his book *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), refers to cultural hauntology and argues that we are haunted by the lost futures that never arrived – a type of continuous nostalgia. Auchter and colleagues (2019, p. 670) emphasise the ongoing process of haunting and argue that "to be is to be haunted". Carol Taylor and Nikki Fairchild (2022, p. 195) refer to Karen Barad's (2017) view on hauntings, they "are not simply rememberings of a past fixed and frozen in time but [...] then-now, [and] past-present-future".

Bozalek et al. (2021) argue that hauntology is about engaging with the historical ghosts, to reject the fixities of the past and to reimagine a different future. Zembylas et al. (2019) refer to Avery Gordon's (2008) focus on violent systems of power that emerge in everyday life that seem to go unnoticed and not have an effect because they are not concrete or visible. An hauntological analysis, according to Taylor and Fairchild, (2022, p. 195) "moves beyond the calculations of current hegemonic formations to engage with the incalculable". Haunting is not only material, it is also embodied and works affectively. According to Brian Massumi (1995), affect is a matter of autonomic responses that are occurring below the threshold of consciousness and cognition and rooted in the body. Affect can be cautiously described as the way we feel things in our bodies, a visceral and unnameable sense and experience of which we may not fully be aware, but that affects us (Massumi, 1995). Zembylas et al. (2019, p. 25) ask: what can we do "to expose the materiality and affectivity of a colonial university, the ruins, traces, fragments, gaps, absences and displaced actors and agencies that register affectively?" They continue by referring to Derrida: How do we "provide openings for new political claims that do not naturalize the past or the present, but see it as 'getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts'" (Zembylas et al., 2019, p. 45).

Spaces are entrenched with haunting narratives of the past. Haunting experiences enable us to feel the "historical injustices and violences as already threaded through the places we move on/through" but also allow moving beyond where alternative stories can be told and recognised (Shefer & Bozalek, 2022, p. 33). Spaces that experienced trauma can be 'read' through hauntology in a historical sense, but also in anticipation of what is to come (Gordon, 2008). Unresolved social issues reveal themselves in the present and will continue to do so in the future through haunting experiences of spaces.

Space is a mental and material construct, and Henri Lefebvre (1991) says that spaces shape those who inhabit and move through them – they could naturalise behaviour and privileging certain modes of being over others. Spaces can act as microaggressions, and spaces affect people indirectly and subconsciously. Space, therefore, involves cognitive thinking as well as a feeling or emotional connection or disconnection to a space. We create a mental perception of space, of what is symbolically signified, with an additional emotional and embodied dimension. Kurt Abrahamson (1999) refers to this as creating a cognitive map. Lefebvre (1991) specifically emphasises the practical emotional and embodied dimension of space apart from the epistemological conceptualising of space.

Contextualising space in South Africa and at Stellenbosch University

The traces of colonialism and apartheid are still deeply embedded in countries with a past similar to that of South Africa, and this is reflected in the curriculum, landscape and inequities present at higher education institutions in these countries. The relationship between the coloniser and colonised and the "psychological, material and cultural effects of these relationships" (Ratele & Duncan, 2007, p. 110) needs to be engaged with and reflected on. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020, p. 896) argues:

> What emerges poignantly is that the struggles to decolonise knowledge are never separate from other struggles against patriarchy, racism, sexism, capitalism and other repressive, exploitative and dehumanising logics. At the centre of resurgent decolonisation of the twenty-first century is the broader issue of re-humanisation of the dehumanised.

The structures of historically entrenched power involved and continue to involve dispossession in many areas, including public spaces (Phala, 2016).

The attention on addressing lived spaces has been emphasised globally with the removal of colonial or oppressive statues and changing of names of places and streets in various countries around the globe. The USA, specifically after the murder of George Floyd, but also Australia and various European countries, have in recent years experienced many protests and the defacement and removal of statues that symbolise a history characterised by oppression and discrimination that played out in practices of slavery, racial and gender divisiveness, amongst others. In Africa, these processes have been taking place for years without media coverage or consistent documentation. These processes include the fact that numerous statues have been removed, moved, or contextualised; new artworks have been added; street names and names of buildings have been changed; and new buildings have been erected to house cultural artefacts

and modify the way these artefacts are exhibited and used (Costandius & de Villiers, 2023).

In South Africa and at Stellenbosch University (SU), there is an urgent need for redress that includes an embracing of justice, responsibility, and equality aligned with the values of the South African Constitution (1996). The establishment of democracy in South Africa in 1994 was aimed at liberating people who had been denied basic political and socio-economic rights (Bentley & Habib, 2008). The legislation on redress identifies three very distinct categories of disadvantage that warrant attention: race, gender, and disability (Bentley & Habib, 2008). SU, in particular, has a history that is strongly tied to a colonial and apartheid past. White, privileged students and lecturers tend to experience the campus culture of historically white universities, such as SU, as natural and welcoming (Badat, 2016). Black and/or disadvantaged students and lecturers tend to find this culture "discomforting, alienating, disempowering, and exclusionary" (Badat, 2016, p. 85). Achille Mbembe (2021) argues for rejecting politics of otherness that defines centre–periphery relations and calls for re-centring Africa on the continent. The spaces at higher-education institutions (mind, body, classroom, curriculum) should also be decolonised (Mbembe, 2016). Approaches to these spaces can be to erase, replace, or re-interpret them. Given its history, this rings true for SU. Although SU has moved a long way from its apartheid based realities, it continues to be criticised for its apparently slow pace of change and transformation also in relation to the VR project (Van Rooi, 2021, pp. 52–53).

The draft revised South African 'White paper on arts, culture, and heritage' (DAC, 2017) aims to promote a vibrant arts, culture, and heritage environment that is based on the principles of freedom of expression, equality, openness, balance, and sustainability. This white paper highlights the recognition of the equal dignity of and respect for all cultures, including the cultures of persons belonging to minorities and of indigenous peoples (DAC, 2017).

Policies for higher education institutions in South Africa show great progress towards transformation, but transformation requires moving beyond policy to practical projects that require deeper cognitive and embodied engagements (SU, 2021, p. 2). It is normal practice to write a policy before starting a project, but in the case of the SU Visual Redress (VR) project, the practice and engagements took place before the policy was written and approved. This is demonstrative of a deeply formative process that only later culminated in the establishment of a policy and a structure. The SU VR policy was approved by the SU Council 2021 (effective 2022) to "guide visual redress and the processes linked to the (re)naming of buildings, venues and other facilities and premises of SU" (SU, 2021, p. 1).

Participant contribution

This article discusses the importance of engagement processes of three VR projects implemented on SU's campus from 2019 to 2022. This includes responses from one campus-wide (Stellenbosch campus of SU) online survey (2020) and two rounds of in-person interviews (both in 2022) conducted to collect data regarding responses

to the VR project and general feelings on campus. The respondents' identities were anonymised according to their self-identified racial category (B=Black; W=White; C=Coloured; I=Indian) and self-identified gender (F=female; M=male). The number included is only utilised to help differentiate the respondents. The researchers have included these metrics because race and gender are two aspects of our society that need to be redressed (Bentley & Habib, 2008) and, especially for South Africa, these are aspects that affect the ongoing production of space also in relation to VR at SU.

Overview of redressing space at Stellenbosch University

The VR project started in 2013 in the Visual Arts Department with the aspiration of moving projects outside the studio space and into the main square of the university to engage other students on campus in transformation and social justice related projects. The concept 'visual redress' spontaneously developed from a student group project on National Women's Day (a South African holiday celebrated yearly on 9 August that commemorates the historically significant Women's March of 1956) that addressed the absence of statues/artworks of women on campus (Figure 1). The words 'visual redress' were used for the first time in the course of this project and it then became a concept that was used in various projects that aimed to make the campus a better and more welcoming space for all students.

Figure 1: Eva: Sprout, grow blossom. Addressing the absence of women in the visual spaces on campus. National Women's Day, 9 August 2013.

In South African higher education institutions, the student protests from October 2015 to late 2016, now commonly known as the Fees Must Fall protests, called for the decolonisation of higher education spaces and equal access to these spaces. Student activism is described by Sonwabo Stuurman (2018, p. 1) as a "form of action or practice that seeks to make changes to how the university systems function, or which challenges a particular paradigm, be it politically, socially, economically or otherwise". He also argues that student activism is informed by the prevalent conditions of economic and political crisis, which directly affect student's financial situation. This, therefore, also affects the status of students and their personal identities, and that could lead to the infusion of financial and identity issues in student protests (Stuurman, 2018). Engaging and understanding historical pain, forgiveness and healing can help in addressing identity issues related to social injustice.

During the abovementioned student protests, this article's first author worked with one of her master's students, to identify sensitive spaces such as statues, names of buildings, and plaques that were offensive or hurtful, one such issue was the Jan Marais statue. At the centre of the Stellenbosch campus of SU, on what is called the Rooiplein (Red Square), is the statue of Johannes Henoch (Jan) Marais. In 1915, Jan Marais made a distinctive financial contribution towards the establishment of SU with the money that he had accumulated in the mining industry. During the 2015 and 2016 protests, the students called for an inquisition into historical statues and symbols at the university, and in particular called for the removal of the Jan Marais statue (Figure 2). Protesting students in 2016 attempted to set the statue on fire. This event specifically led to the implementation of actual measures by the SU management to create a welcoming space for all on campus. It was decided to retain the statue and create opportunities to engage students and staff in conversations about the history of the university and Jan Marais. The importance of having these engagements is highlighted by a student: "*I don't know the history of Mr Jan Marais but … I feel like I can assume with the history of South Africa … just leaving it there is not really addressing stuff in my opinion*" (BM1). The statue must be questioned and engaged with, not allowed to just stand unproblematised on campus.

A staff member (WM1) made the following comment that supported the retention of the statue and the possibilities for interventions with it:

> *If we forget the past, there is a strong possibility that we are repeating it, maybe just in a different form. I would like to see the things that are there from the past explained, rather than removed … Explain it and make it an educational thing, instead of remove it, out of site out of mind – we tend to forget.*

Keeping the statue allows for it to be contextualised and for history to be interacted with. As a contrast to the Jan Marais statue, a sculpture of a circle of women, *The Circle*, has been erected on a stretch of grass next to the statue and will be discussed in the following section.

In 2017, a VR Plan was written up based on students' projects and suggestions during the protests, and this was presented to the SU Rectorate, the management body of the SU. This plan was written into a

Figure 2: Statue of Johannes Henoch (Jan) Marais on the Rooiplein at the centre of the Stellenbosch campus of SU

financial project request to the university based on which substantial funding was made available to implement projects linked to the plan. Aslam Fataar (2021, p. 8) in the book, *Evoking Transformation: Visual Redress at Stellenbosch University*, writes: "Visual redress refers to processes involving changes in the university's visual environment and culture that promote restitution, inclusivity and institutional cohesion". VR at SU is interlinked with the SU Transformation Plan (2017), as it is included as one of the crucial aspects to redress: Programmes, People and Places; where VR falls under 'places' to redress. But it is clear that the theme of transformation and decolonising place could invite varying intensities of interest – from a sense of belonging, activism, curiosity, to distance or fear. A dedicated VR committee was also established in 2018 to facilitate an institution-wide discussion on and implementation of public artworks. This committee complements the SU committee for the naming and renaming of buildings, venues, and other facilities/ premises and as such there is direct interaction between these two institutional committees. It should therefore also be mentioned that these two committees are guided by the same policy (SU, 2021, p. 2).

Spatial interventions

This section discusses three projects on campus that evolved from the VR project and the need to redress and redefine spaces on campus to overcome its hauntological aspects. These interventions, all installed on and around the Rooiplein in 2019, are the welcome benches, Stellenbosch area maps, and ***The Circle*** sculpture

The first intervention discussed is the welcome benches (Figure 3). Welcoming messages in 16 different languages and dialects were inscribed on benches around campus. South Africa currently has 12 official languages, namely Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Seswati, Xitsonga, Sestwana, Tshivenda, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and the recently added South African Sign Language. Braille and dialects of Afrikaans, Kaaps and Moeslim Kaaps, were also added to the benches. isiNdebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Seswati, Xitsonga, Setswana, Tshivenda, isiXhosa, isiZulu are indigenous African languages. Afrikaans, a language that developed during the 19th century in South Africa, is mainly based on Dutch but also has Malay, Indonesian, and Khoekhoe (Khoi) and San influences. The language of the San and Khoi people, Khoekhoegowab, was also added to the benches. The San and Khoi people are the indigenous people of Southern Africa and are regarded as the first nations of South Africa. It was they whom the Dutch colonisers met when they landed in the Cape. Khoekhoegowab is still a spoken language and its speakers are currently struggling to have it recognised as an official language of South Africa.

The idea for these benches came from Monique Biscombe, a student of SU at the time. In 2019, lecturer Sima Mashazi from the General Linguistics department at SU volunteered to contact first-language-speaking students to ask them to contribute welcoming messages. However, because of the hierarchies of languages created in the colonial and apartheid past as well as the impact of current social realities and dynamics, this was not a straightforward task. Even after the installation of the benches, differences emerged in the meaning of the messages, for instance the saying 'koppel 'n

Figure 3: Welcoming messages on benches: Zulu, Kaaps and San, 2019

lyn' (connect a line) in Kaaps has different meanings depending on which area you are from. One meaning is to 'put people in contact with each other' and the other refers to using drugs. Students who understood the message as referring to drugs felt that SU was trying to devalue their culture because they connected their culture with drug use. They felt so strongly about the matter that they considered transferring to another university. This event catalysed many discussions between students and lecturers who speak Kaaps

themselves and also opened up the conversation in general about diversity and inclusivity regarding languages on campus.

In 2019, student Maambele Ambie Khosa indicated that she appreciated the diversity and inclusivity regarding language use on the benches when she came across one that included her own language. The bench held a proverb in Xitsonga: 'Dyondzo i xitlhangu xa vutomi', which means 'Education is the key to a good life' (SU, 2019b). She posted a picture on social media (Figure 4) with the caption: "Thank you for acknowledging our home language. I had to dress up and locate this bench because it reminds me of home and who I am" (SU, 2019a). During data collection in 2022, a student said about the benches: "*I think it's a*

Figure 4: Maambele Ambie Khosa in her traditional Xitsonga dress in front of the bench on the Rooiplein, 24 September 2019

good initiative because it makes everyone feel welcome" (BM7). Another comment also notes the issue of language diversity and inclusivity: "*I think they are good because we always sit by these [benches] with the braille, and I feel like it brings more of an awareness that we are living in a very like multicultural, you know, world and country*" (CF3). These responses acknowledge that including all of these languages increases cognizance of the multicultural – and multilingual – nature of campus.

The debates regarding inclusivity and languages led to discussions on segregated living areas in Stellenbosch that are still a reality for most citizens of the town. Student Joshua Mclean developed the idea of adding maps of Stellenbosch areas to the outside walls of the library on the Rooiplein (Figure 5). What seemed to be a relatively clear and manageable project again turned into a long discussion and interaction. People from some areas/neighbourhoods in the broader Stellenbosch region saw themselves as living in independent towns/communities/villages, while others saw themselves as being part of the town of Stellenbosch. This resulted in engaging discussions by the members of the VR committee, which represents people from different areas in Stellenbosch.

Because of apartheid laws linked to forced removals (Group Areas Act of 1950), some people of colour had been forcibly removed from their homes in central Stellenbosch from an area known as Die Vlakte (The Plains) to the outskirts of the town in established neighbourhoods that catered, under law, for specifically pre-designated groups of people. Through engagement it became clear that people who had been forcibly removed felt that they were part of Stellenbosch, whereas other communities that had been formed as mission stations, for example, felt that they were independent towns. These discussions also opened up issues of land ownership that resulted from pre-colonial, colonial, and apartheid-linked occupations. The VR committee proposed to add bridges between the maps to show that it was a continuous process of building relationships between people of different areas in and around Stellenbosch. As Ratele and Duncan (2007) argue, the relationship between the coloniser and colonised needs to be deeply reflected on. Through these interactions, new insights emerged on the different perspectives of the sensitive issues, and it was only through these processes that we could learn from each other and finally move on to the implementation of the maps.

Figure 5: Maps of the broader Stellenbosch on the walls of the SU library, 2019

The last intervention to discuss in this article is **The Circle** sculpture (Figure 6) that was placed on an area of grass across from the prominent and towering Jan Marais statue on the SU Rooiplein. The idea for the artwork originated during the 2015/2016 student protests when Stephané Conradie, who was part of the Open Stellenbosch student movement, initiated discussions on the matter. The Open Stellenbosch movement specifically opposed culture and language based exclusionary practices and policies at SU and linked directly with the larger Rhodes Must Fall and the later Fees Must Fall protest (Van Rooi, 2021, p. 51). Conradie's rationale for the artwork was that during the protests there was "a lot of animosity and confusion and the idea came if everyone could sit down in a circle and humble themselves and talk, then maybe we would move forward" (Anthony, 2019). Conradie suggested that, because women are underrepresented on campus, the artwork should comprise 11 South African women. This contrasts the Jan Marais statue, which follows a traditional art historical format of a heroic male figure on a pedestal.

However, there was difficulty in deciding whom to include. A survey was launched on campus that included about 300 female students of different racial and cultural groups to vote for women that they considered role models. The survey was structured in such a way that the same number of students from different racial groups on campus voted. In the end, the women selected, based on most voted received, were: Krotoa/ Eva, the Khoi ancestress of many families in South Africa; Prof Thuli Madonsela, former Public Protector and current Law Trust Chair of Social Justice in the Faculty of Law at SU; anti-apartheid activists Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Fatima Meer and Lilian Masediba Ngoyi; actress Quanita Adams; author and poet Antjie Krog; Wimbledon wheelchair tennis player Kgothatso Montjane; artist and activist Zanele Muholi; and music artist Dope Saint Jude.

Figure 6: 'The Circle', 2019

A long process of engagement was followed with either the women themselves or, if they were deceased, with their living relatives to obtain permission for adding the art figures to **The Circle**. One family decided not to include their mother, as they felt the university was connected to the apartheid past and is still today associated with that history. It was then decided that the eleventh woman would be an anonymous woman to represent the voices of all other women who are encouraged to take part in the discourse.

As is the nature of our engagement with art and symbols in public spaces, informal conversations occur from time to time. Given its significance, one such conversation is noted in this article. After installation of **The Circle**, an interesting observation was made by a male staff member during a visual redress walkabout who felt that the women in a circle symbolised subservience to the man (Jan Marais) standing on a pedestal. A student reacted to that comment during the walkabout and said that in some cultures in South Africa women would sit on the floor while men would sit on chairs in traditional cultural meetings and that could be the reason for the interpretation. Conradie, however, felt that it was a mindful decision to move away from single people on pedestals and towards and a new way of engagement with each other: on equal ground. SU has to work very hard to become a more inclusive and welcoming space for all because of its problematic history, but that also means that channels for dialogue are always open and in that way these important conversations stay alive.

One respondent noted: "*I really think the women sculpture is a good thing. Women are not always given credit for what they do. I think [gender] equality is important. Many times, we only represent male figures and forget about women*" (CM3). Historically, and in the Western world especially, statues have focused on male figures and their contributions. This response acknowledges that women also deserve to be praised for their contributions to society. CF3 indicated that **The Circle** is helping to do this: "*… we're always on the grass by [it] and then we read all of them like, all the women and what they have accomplished and it's really interesting to know about these women and be made aware of it*". However, there are also those who do not believe that there is benefit to initiatives such as these: "*Why spen[d] money on these things, the pain sit inside people, fix this first. You will spend millions on this [VR] … Instead of changing names they should apologise to us*" (CM7). He feels the university has not done and is not doing enough to alleviate the pain and foster healing for those who were previously disenfranchised.

Others suggested that the public art on campus is a visual cue that the university is making strides towards transformation. WF7 said, "*I think it's really cool to have sculptures on campus, especially in public places. It does make you aware that the university is making an active effort to change the institutional associations*." CF4 agreed:

> I think it serves a purpose, it's showing that change is happening and people are being acknowledged and that we are trying to become more connected as a people. I think it's also making students more comfortable, especially people of colour.

These comments imply that the VR Project promotes the ideas of the South African 'White paper on arts, culture, and heritage' (DAC, 2017) and the VR policy (SU, 2021). They show that the university is making an effort to transform and to make campus more equal and diverse; more welcoming.

Reimagining and redefining space

As Mbali Phala (2016) suggests, space is never neutral. This is especially true of SU's campuses, campuses of a historically white university. BM1 spoke to this issue, "*I just feel like, there's not a lot of people who look like me [in class] ... So that kinda makes me*

nervous, I guess, so that would probably be the main cause of my discomfort." Another respondent commented:

> *I think, everyone sort of warned me before I came like, "oh don't go to Stellenbosch – it's the racist university; it's the white university"… I don't think the university itself is like hostile and racist to me at least, but my experience of the students and staff being the majority white was really disappointing, cause it's not really a true reflection of the whole South Africa.* (WF7)

This relates to Zembylas et al.'s (2019, p. 25) question on how "to expose the materiality and affectivity of a colonial university, the ruins, traces, fragments, gaps, absences and displaced actors and agencies that register affectively". Haunting is not only about the tangible. It is also about the intangible, about how it is embodied. Space affects people – it makes them feel nervous, uncomfortable, disappointed, etc.

This feeling of space is not only confined to SU, but also to the town in which it sits. As BM3 stated:

> *There is an invisible line [in town], and you don't get to see it, but as a person of colour you know that as I cross here … it feels like Europe basically. Those are the type of things that I would like to see being addressed and transformed. Yes, as a university we can change and make benches, but how are we influencing the community? Because it's one thing for students here to be accepting and loving but, as you leave out the door, the town sings a different tune. And you still feel so isolated. Still, like, 'you are our guest, you don't belong'.*

These comments highlight the deep and entrenched perceptions about Stellenbosch – as a town and university. They demonstrate the long and hard engagements towards transformation that need to continue to assure everyone that all spaces at SU belong to everyone and no one is a guest. They also indicate that these engagements need to happen not only on campus, but also in collaboration with the town, with the public spaces that the university borders, so that these can also become more welcoming spaces. Embodied engagements enable us to associate sensitive spaces with something more pleasant, where people can feel safe. This is something the VR project hopes to facilitate with these and other initiatives.

How do we 'heal' spatial trauma? In physical interactions, body language and facial expressions are more prominent, and that can assist in creating a more respectful space for communication and understanding. Healing from historical pain begins with engaging and understanding. This means that the body needs to be present – and a mind/body learning and healing experience is necessary. The construction of new spaces and a deeper engagement with issues to create more inclusive and diverse visual landscapes also have the potential to be extended and implemented within communities around campus.

There is potential to foster healing and forgiveness through the combination of VR with collaborative engagements. Opportunities for learning and healing were opened through the deeper engagements sparked by these projects. Therefore, an important

aspect of VR on campus is not only the changing of the visual landscape, but also the processes that are followed to enable new understandings. An important aspect of VR activity is inclusive dialogue and consensus-generating processes at the various sites on campus. These processes emphasise the deliberative participation and collegiality necessary for ensuring that VR contributes to a cohesive and inclusive campus culture (SU, 2021, p. 3).

Concluding remarks

There are deep silences around material histories, such as statues and spaces, but they are also heavy with the presence of ghosts. VR brings these ghosts to life, offering a voice to the various emotions affected by material histories. It is about being able to "provide openings for new political claims that do not naturalize the past or the present, but see it as getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts" (Zembylas et al., 2019, p. 45). South Africa, Stellenbosch, and SU are certainly burdened with "generations, generations of ghosts" (Zembylas et al., 2019, p. 45).

Hauntological engagements remind us that colonialism is not over and done with and its oppressive nature still has intergenerational impacts. Rather than a static memorialization, engaging in a hauntological encounter encourages us to remember and to participate in conversations with each other. It urges us to think about our roles in decoloniality (and implicatedness in coloniality). As Bozalek et al. (2021, p. 3) refer to Barad (2017, pp. 47–48):

> The past is not fixed, not given, but that isn't to say that the trace of all memories can simply be erased. Memory is not a mere property of individual subjects, but a material condition of the world. Memory—the pattern of sedimented enfoldings of iterative intra-activity—is written into the fabric of the world. The world 'holds' the memory of all traces; or rather, the world is its memory (enfolded materialization).

The haunting informs our understanding of what was and shapes what will be. It could also serve as a call for more mourning; to hollow out memories and remind us of our shared vulnerabilities. And, as is the nature of the spaces of higher learning, the lessons learned through these engagements could also be applied to other university campuses throughout South Africa and abroad.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cyberbullying in Kenyan universities: Lessons and insights from the personal experience of deans of students

La cyberintimidation dans les universités kenyanes : Leçons et enseignements tirés de l'expérience personnelle des doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants

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ABSTRACT

Deans of students are the main points of contact between the university management and the students they serve in Kenyan universities. This position exposes them to acts of hostility both online and offline. This article explores the experiences of deans of students in Kenyan universities with cyberbullying. It specifically analyses the prevalence of cyberbullying among deans of students in Kenyan universities, the nature of cyberbullying meted out to deans of students, the strategies used by the deans to counter cyberbullying, and the effectiveness of these strategies in mitigating cyberbullying. This study was qualitative. Data was collected through interviews with 25 deans of students from eight private and seventeen public universities in Kenya. The study findings show that most of the deans of students have been bullied online at some time or another by their students. Deans of students were bullied for their looks, competencies, and associations. This, in turn, has affected how they perform their duties. The deans countered cyberbullying by blocking the bullying accounts, unfriending hostile "friends", deactivating or disengaging from social media, seeking legal redress, creating rapport with the students to stem hostility, seeking counselling, or confronting the bullies directly. The study revealed that the strategies used by the deans of students to curb cyberbullying were largely ineffective. This study recommends that universities provide staff sensitization training on cyberbullying and strengthen counselling and peer support systems among staff. This would enable their staff, such as deans of students, to deal with the effects of cyberbullying. These recommendations, if implemented, could help secure a favourable online working environment for the deans of students at Kenyan universities as they interact with their students, increase their morale at work, and improve the working relationship between students and the deans of students.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants sont les principaux points de contact entre la direction de l'université et les étudiants qu'ils servent dans les universités kenyanes. Cette position les expose à des actes d'hostilité en ligne et sur le terrain. Cet article explore les expériences des doyens des universités kenyanes en matière de cyberintimidation. Il analyse en particulier la prévalence de la cyberintimidation parmi les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants dans les universités kenyanes, la nature de la cyberintimidation subie par ces derniers, les stratégies utilisées par les doyens pour lutter contre la cyberintimidation ainsi que l'efficacité de ces stratégies pour atténuer les effets de la cyberintimidation. Cette étude était qualitative. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entretiens avec 25 doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants, issus de huit universités privées et de dix-sept universités publiques du Kenya. Les résultats de l'étude montrent que la plupart de ces doyens ont été victimes d'intimidation en ligne à un moment ou à un autre de la part de leurs étudiants. Les doyens d'étudiants ont été malmenés en raison de leur apparence, de leurs compétences et de leurs associations. Cela a eu des répercussions sur la manière dont ils s'acquittent de leurs tâches. Les doyens ont contré la cyberintimidation en bloquant les comptes des auteurs de ces intimidations, en supprimant les « amis » hostiles, en désactivant les médias sociaux ou en s'en désengageant, en demandant une réparation juridique, en établissant une relation avec les élèves pour endiguer l'hostilité, en demandant des conseils ou en affrontant directement les auteurs de l'intimidation. L'étude a révélé que les stratégies utilisées par les doyens des étudiants pour lutter contre la cyberintimidation étaient généralement inefficaces. Cette étude recommande aux universités de sensibiliser leur personnel à la cyberintimidation et de renforcer les systèmes de conseil et de soutien par les pairs au sein du personnel. Cela permettrait aux membres du personnel, tels que les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants, de mieux gérer les effets de la cyberintimidation. Ces recommandations, si elles sont appliquées, contribueront à garantir un environnement de travail en ligne favorable pour les doyens des universités kenyanes lorsqu'ils interagissent avec leurs étudiants, à améliorer leur moral au travail et à améliorer les relations de travail entre les étudiants et les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants.

MOTS-CLÉS

Cyberintimidation, intimidation, doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants, universités, étudiants d'université, Kenya

Introduction

According to Jowi (2009), Kenya has embraced mass education to address various social and economic challenges. For instance, the country has rolled out diverse strategies to increase the reach of university education and improve its quality by increasing student funding and encouraging and setting up quality assurance guidelines for universities through the Commission for University Education (Makau, 2022). Scholars such as Ngolovoi (2010) and Owuor (2012) argue that one of the strategies used by the Kenyan government to increase access to university education in the country is by increasing the number of public and private universities. Mukhwana et al. (2016) report that the number of universities in Kenya grew exponentially from six (6) in the 1990s to more than 70 in the 2000s. As the number of universities and students increased, so did the challenges faced by students and institutions. According to Yakaboski and Birnbaum (2013), challenges such as oppositional behaviour, inadequate housing, and dilapidated infrastructure jeopardize the government's effort to enhance education's contribution to national development.

Comprehensive student support services are required to support students in class and ensure they graduate with the requisite skills to enable them to contribute to

nation-building. Ludeman and Gregory (2013) opine that providing support services in financial aid, housing, food or catering, and counselling has great potential to boost student recruitment, enrolment, retention, and graduation. Kenyan universities offer these critical support services through the dean of students' office. Indeed, Yakaboski and Birnbaum (2013) report that all universities in Kenya, private or public, have established offices for deans of students to offer psychosocial support to students. Although their specific roles differ from one university to another, the job description of deans of students in Kenya is anchored in the *in loco parentis* philosophy. Essentially, they occupy a quasi-parental role for students in the university during their time away from their biological or legal parents. The goal of the service is to support students in coping with a range of new challenges, including the freedoms that come with enrolment at universities in contrast to the highly structured life secondary education had provided.

Deans of students in Kenya face a myriad of challenges in fulfilling the services required by their positions. One of the biggest challenges is inadequate preparedness for the role. According to Yakaboski and Birnbaum (2013), several deans of students are appointed through less-than-transparent processes with little regard for their skills or qualifications. At times, they are handpicked and serve the interests of the university management more than the students'. This may put them at cross purposes with the students they serve. Despite these challenges, deans of students in Kenyan universities offer essential services which enable their institutions to deliver their core mandates, exemplified by the graduation of competent professionals.

By its very nature, the office of the dean of students often deals with students closely and frequently serves as the face of the university administration. The office may also act as the arbiter in conflicts between students and other parties, including the university management. Thus, students regularly visit the office seeking counselling, comfort, redress, or guidance. Another role played by deans of students in Kenyan universities is organizing and supervising student representative elections. In this role, they are responsible for all the logistics associated with the elections. For instance, they might supervise nominations, printing ballot papers, actual voting, tallying the votes, and declaring the winners. Electoral challenges and differences are among the significant causes of hostility between deans of students in Kenyan universities and their students. The issues are often exacerbated by Kenya student politics closely mirroring national politics.

To reach the students they serve, deans of students in Kenyan universities currently use diverse communication channels. Lately, social media is one of the popular channels through which deans communicate or interact with their students. The popularity of social media amongst deans of students is partly because it enables instant and direct communication with students, as opposed to traditional forms of communication such as noticeboards and memos. Despite its benefits, using social media as a communication channel between deans and students exposes deans of students to the risk of cyberbullying. Disgruntled students, and other parties, may utilize social media to attack and vilify their deans, hiding behind basic social media features which enable anonymity, immediacy and broad reach.

This article analyses the prevalence of cyberbullying of deans of students in Kenyan universities; the nature of cyberbullying meted out to deans of students; the strategies the deans use to counter cyberbullying; and the effectiveness of these strategies in mitigating cyberbullying.

Literature review

Cyberbullying is violence enacted digitally (Zhang et al., 2022). It is the application of the internet and associated technologies to harass, intimidate or cause harm to another person. This online harassment is emerging as a new phenomenon affecting many people (Parsitau, 2020). Globally, the increasing use and convenience of technology, coupled with more human interactions due to the enabled connections, has turned traditional bullying into digital bullying, making cyberbullying a form of bullying that is novel and challenging. Parsitau (2020) further explains that the ubiquity of the internet and other communication technologies in Africa, particularly Kenya, has unfortunately led to increased cyberbullying. This view is supported by Makori and Agufana (2020), who assert that the growth and explosion in the use of technology in various forms, such as the internet and mobile phones, and the exponential growth and uptake of social media, has exposed many young people to cyberbullying incidents. Parsitau (2020) expounds that cyberspaces are today characterised by online anonymity and, as such, they expose the "invisible evil world" of cyberbullying and online harassment that have wrecked lives; caused profound pain, and hurt millions of online users; destroyed relationships; and affected people's integrity, health, well-being and careers. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly apparent that cyberspaces can become violent and ungovernable civic spheres.

Ndiege et al. (2020) acknowledge that cyberbullying exists in institutions of higher learning in Kenya. They conducted research among 364 students in selected private universities in the country and determined that 75.8% of the students had experienced cyberbullying. They note that cyberbullying is real, and many learning institutions continue to grapple with its effects. Mathew (2019), in his study to establish the prevalence of cyberbullying behaviour among adolescents in sampled schools of Westland's Sub-County, Nairobi County-Kenya, reported a significant correlation between cyberbullying perpetration and cyber-victimisation behaviour. Unfortunately, the study concludes that students exhibiting cyber-victimisation behaviour tend to become perpetrators themselves. According to Nasir et al. (2020), cyberbullying is the natural outcome of unchecked or tolerated real-world bullying, be it in the home, at school or in the surrounding community. This encourages violent behaviour amongst students leading to increased bullying incidents. In their study on the identification and knowledge of bullying in adolescents and its effects on the behaviour of bullying friends, they observed that 20–25% of students had been opponents and victims of bullying, and between 4–9% had been bullies while 9–25% had been terrorized. Nasir et al. (2020) note that global reports on school violence and bullying stand at 22.8–48.2%.

According to Kwanya et al. (2022), cyberbullying often takes the form of exposure, outing, exclusion or isolation, impersonation, cat-fishing, cyber-stalking, trolling, flaming,

shaming, vigilantism, blackmail, and revenge porn, among others. Parsitau (2020) concurs that cyberbullying may involve trolling, sexual harassment, and other gender-based violence against men and women. Other forms of cyberbullying include sharing unwelcome content, sexual harassment, or threats of sexual violence, such as threats of rape, death threats, hate speech, and professional sabotage. According to Ndiege et al. (2020), cyberbullying may also take the form of victimisation through deception, public humiliation, writing mean and malicious messages electronically about someone, making fun of others and teasing them, telling lies to and about others, or sending them rude messages. They further state that male students were more likely to commit acts of cyberbullying compared to their female counterparts. Makori and Agufana (2020) also agree that cyberbullying can occur in various forms, such as sending malicious messages or text messages, messages of a sexual nature known as sexting, or sending pictures or videos of someone to distribute the content to others. Sometimes, individuals may impersonate others online or create false profiles to perpetrate cyber aggression.

Makori and Agufana (2020) opine that clearly defining cyberbullying and understanding its causes is crucial to mitigating it. However, having a unified definition of cyberbullying is difficult because it takes many forms. The common underlying feature is that, unlike traditional bullying, it is perpetuated on digital platforms on the internet, such as social media, and through mobile devices. This study identifies with the definition of cyberbullying provided by Belsey (2008), cited by Hollá et al. (2017), as using information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group to harm others. Nasir et al. (2020) advocate for increased health education to improve understanding of adolescent bullying behaviours. Ndiege et al. (2020) support this view and explain that it is imperative that educational institutions in developing countries, especially in Africa, put in place frameworks that can deal with this novel reality of cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning. They further acknowledge that most universities do not have a deterrent mechanism for cyberbullying among students, and most lack a proper framework to support victims. Ndiege et al. (2020) further urge that more research should be undertaken to provide effective mitigation strategies. The government of Kenya recognises the imminent reality of cybersecurity challenges in the country and has consequently put in place measures to tackle them. Among such measures is the enactment of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018). Section 14 of the Act specifically addresses cyberbullying.

In their research, Achuthan et al. (2023) mapped research on cyberbullying between 2010 and 2021. They showed that most research on cyberbullying came from developed countries such as the United States (which had more than 1 000 publications on the subject) and the United Kingdom (more than 400 publications). Only India and Indonesia from the developing countries were among the top contributing countries, with more than 100 publications. From the foregoing, it is evident that there is a substantial volume of literature on cyberbullying. It is also noted that a large part of the current research on cyberbullying occurs in developed countries. Thus, developing countries, especially those in Africa, have fewer studies on the vice (Ndiege et al., 2020). Meta-analysis research on cyberbullying by Kwanya et al. (2022) points out that most of the studies on

cyberbullying have revolved around the safety concerns of children, adolescents, and youth. There is also a gender perspective to the concerns in which girls have featured prominently. Thus, they argue that some perspectives of cyberbullying are inadequately covered by this research, especially in Kenya. These perspectives include theories of cyberbullying; elements of cyberbullying; forms of cyberbullying; legal and legislative frameworks; measurement of occurrences and effects of cyberbullying; demographic perspectives of cyberbullying; and strategies for coping with cyberbullying.

The study by Kwanya et al. (2022) reviewed 359 studies on the subject and found that, as much as they focused on cyberbullying among students, none included bullying among teachers or staff. Thus, there is a gap as educators' experiences are underrepresented. It is also evident that all the reviewed studies on cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning have focused on students. No study known to the authors has so far investigated cyberbullying from the perspectives of deans of students. Although they play a pivotal role in maintaining social normalcy in academic institutions, educators are often not the focus of research on cyberbullying, and when they are included in the scope of the research, they are more often than not considered in the light of their role in mitigating cyberbullying among students rather than their own experiences with cyberbullying (Fredrick et al., 2023; Rajbhandari & Rana, 2022). Similarly, while there are studies on cyberbullying in universities, the plight of deans of students as victims of cyberbullying seem to be ignored.

This article seeks to bridge this gap by drawing attention to the fact that deans of students also experience cyberbullying. Consequently, they also need psychosocial support to cope with this menace, just like their students. Like other victims of bullying, deans of students may become victim-bullies, thereby challenging the delivery of their crucial services to students and the institution.

Methodology

According to Chen and Luppicini (2017), a phenomenological study examines reality from individuals narrating their real-life experiences and feelings. The phenomenon under study is cyberbullying. It is studied in the light of personal, real-life experiences of deans of students at universities in Kenya. A phenomenological approach was ideal for this study because it enabled the researchers to understand the nature, prevalence, and consequences of cyberbullying experienced by deans of students in Kenyan universities.

The population under study was deans of students at universities in Kenya. Although there are over 70 universities in the country, this research focused purposively on the 49 fully chartered. The 49 universities were then further stratified according to their location into eight regions, the former provinces of Kenya. These are Nairobi, Rift Valley, Nyanza, Eastern, Coast, North Eastern, Central, and Western. The regions were used to stratify the population because not all counties in the country have fully chartered universities; hence the distribution was more representative by region rather than county. The universities were further stratified into private and public universities. After that, the researchers purposely chose 17 public and eight private universities. There are more public than private universities in Kenya. Therefore, two public and one private

university were selected from each of the eight regions mentioned above, except the North Eastern region, which has no private universities. This produced a sample size of 25 deans of students. Primary data were collected using interviews guided by an unstructured interview schedule. Data were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti.

Demographic data of deans of students

From the sample of 25 deans of students, 7(28%) were female, while 18(72%) were male. All the respondents in the study had postgraduate qualifications, with 16(64%) of them having PhDs, while 9(36%) had master's level training. Table 1 shows the areas the respondents specialized in.

Table 1: Area of professional specializations of deans of students

S/N	Professional specialization	Frequency
1	Counselling Psychology	5
2	Education	4
3	Religion and Theological Studies	4
4	Human Resource Management	2
5	Economics	1
6	Organic Chemistry	1
7	Leadership and Governance	2
8	Environmental Sciences	1
9	Social Education and Ethics	3
10	Public Administration	1
11	Peace and Conflict Management	1
Total		25

It is evident from Table 1 that the deans of students at Kenyan universities are drawn from a wide array of specializations. Nonetheless, the majority are specialized in fields associated with the humanities and social sciences. Counselling Psychology is the most popular specialization among the interviewed deans of students. This is followed by Education as well as Religion and Theological Studies.

Presentation of the findings

All the deans of students in the 25 targeted universities were interviewed. The results of the interviews are presented here in five subsections structured according to the study's specific objectives.

Prevalence of cyberbullying of deans of students

The findings revealed that only 7 out of the 25 deans of students interviewed had not been cyber-bullied by their students. The remaining 18 deans had been bullied in cyberspace by their students. This indicates that the prevalence of cyberbullying of deans of students in Kenyan universities is high. From the findings, all the deans of students

who had been cyber-bullied by students were active on Facebook and WhatsApp for at least one hour daily. They used both platforms for official communication with students on institutional matters, follow-up on student activities, and assistance with online learning. This shows that, aside from memos on notice boards, deans of students interact with students online to a large extent and are therefore exposed to hostile online engagement. The deans who reported that they had not experienced cyberbullying also reported that they were not active on social media. A number of them did not have social media accounts. Figure 1 shows what the deans of students use social media for.

Figure 1: Uses of social media by deans of students in Kenya

Reasons for cyberbullying of deans of students

The deans of students concurred that most cyberbullying occurred during the student elections period. Students vying for elective posts in their respective university student unions bully deans of students for perceived unfair or biased election results. This is mainly because deans of university students in Kenya officiate students' elections as part of their official duties. Their involvement in student elections exposes them to bullying by students striving to gain political mileage by appearing 'tough and unafraid' of the university administration to be elected by their colleagues to elective posts in the students' union. Hereunder is a verbatim response to this question:

> *Respondent 15: The student elections period is the peak time for cyberbullying in the university. Students vying for leadership positions try to get political mileage by hitting at the administration.*

The respondents also reported that if students had any conflict with the university management, they would ordinarily bully the deans of students because they view them as representatives of the administration, as indicated in the verbatim response below.

> *Respondent 17: I am the face of the university administration to students; any conflict that arises between the university and the students ends up with me getting bullied.*

Deans also reported that their students often bully them when government funds disbursed by the Higher Education Loans Board (Helb) are delayed. Figure 2 shows the reasons why deans of students in Kenyan Universities are bullied.

Figure 2: Reasons why deans of students in Kenya get bullied

Types of cyberbullying experienced by deans of students

Different types of cyberbullying include exclusion, cyber-stalking, shaming, outing, exposure, sextortion, blackmail, vigilantism, trolling, and flaming. The majority of the deans who experienced cyberbullying were trolled or flamed. This often took the form of inflammatory rhetoric being directed at the deans in question online or the spreading of inflammatory and untrue statements about their character or alleged actions. Some of the experiences are captured in the verbatim responses below:

Respondent 15: Yes, during students' election time, I was accused of favouring students from a particular community to win the elections.

Respondent 19: I had a negative experience on Facebook. The messages I received from my own students were hurtful.

Respondent 7: Mostly they were insults from students …

Respondent 18: The students would take any of my photos where I was featured with a lady and then claim that I was 'eating' their money entertaining women. The ladies in question were often my family members or work colleagues.

Some deans also experienced cyber-stalking. One respondent said he was stalked by a female student who kept sending him strange messages.

Respondent 11: This student would send me unsolicited messages while at the same time sending insulting messages to my wife.

Deans of students also experienced varied forms of shaming, with one respondent stating that she was body shamed. Mean comments were made about her physical appearance and how she dressed. Hereunder is her verbatim response:

> *Respondent 2: To be honest, what they talk mostly about me is my hair; they say that it hasn't been dyed properly.*

Effects of cyberbullying on deans of students

The effects of cyberbullying on deans of students were also varied. Those affected said that they were angered and distressed by the situation.

> *Respondent 19: It affected my family; it also annoyed and stressed me …*

> *Respondent 20: I was stressed and hurt psychologically. I kept thinking, 'What are my bosses saying?' It really affected me.*

For some, the cyberbullying incidents affected their motivation to perform their duties as deans of students to the same students who were bullying them. One said:

> *Respondent 20: One young man came back to seek my services after graduation; he was the same student who had abused me. I wondered whether I should write for him a good letter of recommendation.*

Deans of students' strategies to counter cyberbullying and their effectiveness

All the 25 deans of students in Kenyan universities showed an awareness of the different ways to counter cyberbullying. As indicated in the word cloud shown in Figure 3, the most common strategy to counter cyberbullying is blocking the bullying accounts or unfriending hostile connections. Deactivating or disengaging from social media and seeking legal redress against those perpetrators whose identities are known were also suggested as strategies for confronting cyberbullying.

Deans of students in Kenyan universities also applied other methods of dealing with cyberbullying. Some of these included creating rapport with the students, seeking counselling, documenting the incidences, and confronting the bullies directly to correct the misinformation being circulated. Other strategies used are given in the verbatim responses below:

> *Respondent 1: My first reaction is to make friends with the students; once you create a rapport, it is easier to work with them.*

> *Respondent 8: … I make friends with them, especially during elections; be close to your students.*

> *Respondent 14: I had received counselling prior to assuming the office of dean of students; this made it easier for me to deal with cyberbullying.*

Respondent 17: Sometimes, I stone-wall them, ignore them or fight back in case of misinformation.

Respondent 20: I made sure the case is very well documented … just in case I needed to take further action.

The findings showed that while the deans of students are aware of the general strategies one can use to curb cyberbullying, most of them felt that the cyberbullying they experienced came with the territory and that they should take it in their stride. Thus, they chose to have a good rapport with their students rather than blocking or disengaging from social media.

Figure 3: Word cloud of strategies used by deans of students to counter cyberbullying

Discussion of findings

Deans of students in Kenyan universities perform essential roles in helping to support students academically, personally and socially. Besides providing logistical support regarding accommodation and catering management, deans of students also offer career counselling and general guidance to the students under their care. According to Jackson (2016), one of the crucial roles of the dean of students is handling student crises while they are on campus. Essentially, they support students through the most challenging times during their stay on campus. Frequently, the divisions of deans of students are supported by professional counsellors, caterers, institutional housekeepers, sports coaches, chaplains, and social workers, among others.

The findings of this study reveal that the prevalence of cyberbullying in universities in Kenya is high. Deans of students, as university community members, often fall victim to cyberbullying. Although there is limited research on the cyberbullying of deans of students, several studies confirm that cyberbullying is prevalent in universities and other institutions of higher learning. For instance, Al-Rahmi et al. (2018) argue that as

many as half of university students have encountered acts of hostility in cyberspace. This is mainly because cyberbullying is rampant among youth and young adults who are university students (Kokkinos et al., 2014; Lee & Sanchez, 2018). Parsitau (2020) attributes the high prevalence of cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning to the rising levels of aggressive behaviour in society. She argues that with the growing ubiquity of ICTs, physical bullying has become digital. However, Kowalski et al. (2012) conducted a study revealing that most college students experience cyberbullying for the first time while at college or university. In other research, Kokkinos and Antoniadou (2019) explain that loneliness, idleness, anxiety, problematic internet use, and online disinhibition cause aggressive online behaviour. Regardless of the catalyst, Lewis (2011) asserts that the prevalence of cyberbullying is bound to increase with the growing adoption of digital technologies in society. D'Antona et al. (2010) explain that young people are exposed to digital technologies too early. Furthermore, this early exposure is not accompanied by adequate guidance on how to use these technologies ethically. Therefore, it can be deduced from the foregoing that institutions of higher learning globally are the crucibles of online bullying. It is, therefore, not surprising that nearly all the deans of students in Kenyan universities have been bullied online by their students.

The findings of our study revealed that the deans of students are often targeted because they work closely with the students. The close interaction can sometimes lead to disagreements which may sometimes result in bullying. Since the students may not confront their deans directly, they hide behind the veil of anonymity of digital media to express themselves. Betts et al. (2017) acknowledge that the anonymity digital technology affords its users is the leading enabler of cyberbullying. Deans of students are also considered the bridge between the university administration and the students. Therefore, students blame them for disagreements between the students and the administration. When this happens, the students may retreat behind technology to vent their anger towards the university by bullying the dean. According to Boakye-Yiadom (2012), who conducted a study in Ghana, some students were dissatisfied with the services of the offices of the deans of students which led to hostile online exchanges.

The deans of students in Kenyan universities have encountered diverse types of cyberbullying. These depend on the specific contexts and the issues around the conflict triggering the bullying. These include body shaming, trolling, cyber-stalking, and flaming. Although these were the forms of bullying the deans have so far experienced, this article argues that the deans may be exposed to all types of bullying. Betts et al. (2017) report that cyberbullying commonly experienced in universities includes sharing violent and unpleasant images, threatening and insulting communication. These forms of cyberbullying are likely to change as new technologies emerge. Similarly, they also change to circumvent the mitigation measures conceived to contain them.

It is clear from the findings that the deans of students are not immune to the effects of cyberbullying. They experience stress, anger, and anxiety. It is also clear that the relationship between the students and the affected deans might be strained due to the impact of cyberbullying. Some deans found themselves conflicted when it came to providing services to the same students who they believed bullied them behind the

veil of anonymity in cyberspace. Nixon (2014) explains that cyberbullying results in similar consequences regardless of the age or position of the victims. Therefore, bullied deans may experience loneliness, anxiety, and depression. These may lead to suicidal ideation, substance abuse, aggression, and other delinquent behaviour within and beyond the universities. Watts et al. (2017) explain that victims of cyberbullying may experience social strains which can affect their personal, social, and professional lives. Faryadi (2011) explains that victims of cyberbullying are unlikely to perform their duties effectively. Therefore, those exposed to cyberbullying may be ineffective in managing their responsibilities. Universities in Kenya should take cases of cyberbullying of deans of students seriously.

The findings demonstrate how the deans of students use diverse strategies to stem or cope with cyberbullying, echoing other studies. Watts et al. (2017) recommend reporting cyberbullying incidents to the relevant authorities and seeking legal redress. Faucher et al. (2014) recommend that serious action be taken against perpetrators of cyberbullying. These could include suspending or expelling the offenders. Such stringent responses will serve as examples to would-be bullies and stem the wave of cyberbullying in universities. Elçi and Seçkin (2019) recommend sensitization of university students on the criminal and immoral nature of cyberbullying and the possible consequences to the bullies. This awareness is likely to discourage students from perpetrating the vice. López-Meneses et al. (2020) explain that unless cyberbullying is countered with a severe response, it is likely to spread like a bushfire and consume the benefits of technology use in institutions of higher learning. Lieberman et al. (2011) recommend personalized counselling to perpetrators of cyberbullying.

Conclusion

Many studies have demonstrated that cyberbullying is prevalent in institutions of higher education. Many of these studies have also revealed its prevalence amongst students. The current study has shown that, in some instances, deans of students are also bullied. The deans of students may experience diverse forms of cyberbullying depending on their contexts and the factors triggering it. The effects of cyberbullying on the personal, social, and professional lives of deans of students are diverse. Therefore, university authorities should take cyberbullying on deans of students seriously. Stringent action should be taken against the bullies to discourage these incidents.

Recommendations

This study recommends the following actions for mitigating cyberbullying of deans of students in universities:

1. Cyberbullying should be acknowledged as a prevalent vice;
2. university authorities should develop policies and strategies for dealing with cyberbullying in their communities;
3. deans of students in Kenyan universities should develop clear strategies for social media use to reduce their exposure to cyberbullying;

4. deans of students in Kenyan universities are encouraged to embrace an open dialogue with their students as a means of pre-empting hostile responses such as cyberbullying;
5. universities in Kenya should hold regular awareness campaigns against cyberbullying;
6. and deans of students should seek psychosocial support, such as therapy, to cope with any adverse cyberbullying incidents.

Acknowledgement

Ethics statement

All participants in this study gave their informed consent before participating in the study. Additionally, the researchers obtained ethical clearance and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya.

Potential conflict of interest

We, the authors, declare that we have no conflict of interest to disclose regarding the research and publication of this article.

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Research Article

Student motives, expectations and preparedness for higher education: A gender-based study

Motivations, attentes et état de préparation des étudiants à l'enseignement supérieur : Une étude basée sur le genre

Jade Jansen,[1] Badrunessa Williams[2] & Azmatullah Latief[3]

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify whether gender differences exist related to the motives, expectations and preparedness of students entering accounting studies at a South African university. A questionnaire was used to gather the data from a sample of first-year students and t-tests were employed to identify differences in findings between gender groups. The findings indicate that gender differences exist in the motives for studying and for choosing to study accounting, in particular with females indicating a stronger desire to gain a better understanding of themselves, while males appeared more confident of succeeding in the programme and scoring marks at the top of the class. Identifying and understanding gender differences is expected to have implications for teaching and learning which can further reduce gender imbalances in the profession. The study is of particular interest to academics, professional bodies and universities educating students in the field of accounting, which has historically been perceived to be a male-dominated profession.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude vise à déterminer s'il existe des différences entre les sexes en ce qui concerne les motivations, les attentes et la préparation des étudiants qui entreprennent des études de comptabilité dans une université sud-africaine. Un questionnaire a été utilisé pour recueillir les données auprès d'un échantillon d'étudiants de première année et le test t a été utilisé pour identifier les différences de résultats entre les groupes d'étudiants de différents sexes. Les résultats indiquent qu'il existe des différences entre les hommes et les femmes en ce qui concerne les motivations à étudier et à choisir d'étudier la comptabilité, en particulier chez les femmes où l'on constate un désir plus marqué de parvenir à une meilleure connaissance de soi, tandis que chez les hommes, on constate une plus grande confiance dans la capacité à réussir le programme et à obtenir les meilleures notes de la classe. L'identification et la compréhension des différences entre les différents sexes devraient avoir des répercussions sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, ce qui peut contribuer à réduire les déséquilibres entre les hommes et les femmes dans la profession. Cette étude présente un intérêt

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particulier pour le corps académique, les organismes professionnels et les universités qui forment des étudiants dans le domaine de la comptabilité, une profession historiquement perçue comme dominée par les hommes…

Introduction

Introduction and motivation

The objective of this study is to identify gender-based differences related to the motives, expectations and preparedness of students embarking on an accounting degree programme at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa.

Public finances are a significant source of university funds through government subsidies (Jansen & De Villiers, 2016). To ensure the efficient use of these funds, the government has mandated South African universities to increase and maintain high pass rates (Council on Higher Education, 2011). Studies such as those by Sallai et al. (2023) identify factors such as motivation and expectations as contributing to student attrition and performance. Identifying and managing factors affecting pass rates can result in benefits to all stakeholders.

Research on the success of first-year students in South Africa studying toward a tertiary accounting qualification has focussed on student background factors using archival data (Baard et al., 2009; Du Plessis et al., 2005, 2007; Jansen & De Villiers, 2016; Myburgh, 2005). Gender, ethnicity, prior academic achievement and language are some of the factors commonly considered in these studies. Most of the extant studies focus on the relationship between these factors and the success of first-year students. The focus of the current study is to consider factors related to students' psychological state at the point of entry to the university, with an emphasis on the identification of potential differences related to student gender.

South Africa's disproportionate gender representation in professional and management roles still reflects high gender inequality (Callaghan & Papageorgiou, 2020), with questions being raised specifically about the representation of women in the accounting profession and the degree to which the accounting profession reflects the shifting gender demographics of society or even actively shapes that society (Haynes, 2017). Haynes (2017) emphasises that research on gender and accounting should be a central concern of critical accounting scholars in the interests of emancipation and social justice, with women having been admitted to the accounting profession after many decades of struggle. The focus on gender differences arises from this and the fact that findings in earlier South African studies on accounting students and gender produced mixed results (Davidson, 2002; Du Plessis et al., 2005; Jansen & De Villiers, 2016). Research has found gender differences in the way accounting students approach their studies (Arquero et al., 2009; Wally-Dima & Mbekomize, 2013). For instance, Everaert et al. (2017) found that female students engage more in deeper learning and spend more time learning than male counterparts. The current study proposes interrogating gender-

based differences in the motives, expectations and preparedness of students embarking on an accounting degree programme at the UWC.

Background

The UWC was established as a university for coloured students by the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 (Nyahodza & Higgs, 2017; Lalu & Murray, 2012). UWC is one of a few historically disadvantaged institutions that maintained its autonomy after many tertiary institutions were merged between 2002 and 2005 (Lethoko, 2016). UWC has historically attracted students from economically disadvantaged communities because its fees have been significantly lower than other residential universities in the Western Cape (Council on Higher Education, 2010). The result is that UWC students are typically first-generation university students from less affluent families (Venter et al., 2001). Although this differentiates the UWC student profile from most universities, where different results may be expected from similar studies, understanding these students' motives, expectations and preparedness is expected to be beneficial to both current and future students of the institution and other universities.

Literature review

Motives, expectations and preparedness

Student motives, expectations and preparedness have varied in educational research. To understand the university experience from the student's perspective, researchers need to identify and understand the student's expectations and motives in choosing a course of study and a particular university. Student motives, expectations and preparedness for higher education affect how students learn and approach higher education, with motivated students expected to be more successful (Beatson et al., 2020; Everaet et al., 2017).

Studies on the source of student motivation distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Kotera et al., 2021). Intrinsically motivated students are motivated by internal factors such as the pursuit of knowledge. This reflects internally inspired behaviour for the attainment of personal goals and achievement (Kotera et al., 2021). Extrinsically motivated students are motivated by external factors such as obtaining a particular job or salary (Han et al., 2022). Since higher education seeks to inculcate deeper learning (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017), intrinsically motivated students will presumably gain the most from the learning process at institutions of higher education.

Research has shown that realistic expectations and confidence positively contribute to student performance (Beatson et al., 2020). Confident students cognitively engage more in the education process (Rowe et al., 2023). However, overconfident students tend to overestimate their abilities, creating expectation gaps that might serve as impediments to adjusting their behaviour when they receive negative feedback (Pintrich, 2003). It is useful to identify and manage expectation gaps between the student and the university.

Students' preparedness for higher education has been found to relate to their success, while other studies found that successful students often have better time

and study management skills (Holder, 2007). Venter (2020) found that many economic and management sciences learners are not prepared for studies at a higher education institution. Byrne and Flood (2005) concluded that students should be encouraged to enhance their time management skills after finding that students spent considerably less time on their studies than desired, decreasing their chances of successful completion. Interestingly, a study by Jansen et al. (2022) found students had reasonable expectations about the time commitment required to succeed in their undergraduate accounting course.

Along with unpreparedness, misplaced expectations of first-year students have been found to impact student attrition (Arquero et al., 2009) and performance in higher education, consequently, placing heavy demands on university resources (Papageorgiou & Carpenter, 2019).

Gender

There appear to be gender differences in the selection of a particular qualification (Charles & Bradley, 2009). Liu and Morgan (2020) found that the choice of course of study was driven more by personal interest for male students, while female students' selection of the course of study related to the career it could give them, with an emphasis on a career that would allow them to focus on quality time with their families. These differences could reflect societal differences stemming from social pressures.

According to Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2017), although they are generally more sensitive in reacting to stress, women seem to exhibit greater persistence at university. They found significant gender differences in how students deal with academic situations. Smith and Naylor's (2001) study of more than 400 000 university students found that females were more likely to show long-term persistence in their studies, which was significantly less influenced by their grades. Other studies suggest gender differences in how students engage with and manage stress (Osborne, 2001; Tamres et al., 2002). Papageorgiou & Callaghan (2020) found gender-related changes in the performance of accounting students in 2017 and suggested the change might be attributable to the different genders' responses to the #FeesMustFall student protests.

Severiens and Ten Dam (1994) report males scoring more on extrinsic and achievement motivation and lower on the fear of failure, but gender differences may be situation-dependent, and similar to Huikku et al. (2022), they suggest future research into potential gender differences. Everaert et al. (2017) state that female students spend significantly more time on accounting and engage more in deep learning when compared to males and consequently perform better in their accounting exams. Identifying these gender differences may be the start for educators to develop gender-specific teaching strategies to enhance learning outcomes. This has implications for educators who plan and present gender-neutral lessons on the assumption that such lessons are equally beneficial to the genders (De Lange & Mavondo, 2004).

Determining whether such gender differences exist with the subjects of this study might have teaching and learning implications in terms of ensuring an inclusive curriculum.

Research design and methodology

The target population of this study consisted of first-year students registered for the compulsory Financial Accounting (FIA) 131 module in the first year of the B.Com (Accounting) degree at UWC, in the 2018 academic year. Students enrolled for this degree at UWC are required to do four compulsory core subjects, including Financial Accounting. FIA 131 is the first semester module of the first year of Financial Accounting. The research instrument consisted of a questionnaire, adapted slightly from that used by Byrne and Flood (2005). The questionnaire consisted of closed and open questions in three sections. Section A consisted of closed questions gathering biographical data and the students' intentions about engaging in part-time work. Section B consisted of questions related to students' intentions regarding the amount of time they intended to invest in their studies. Section C consisted of a further six sub-sections. Section C was answered using a five-point Likert scale similar in design to that used by Arquero et al. (2009). The questions generally requested students to rate the likelihood of them agreeing or disagreeing with the question, with a score of 1 indicating that they 'strongly agree', 2 indicating that they 'agree', 3 indicating 'neutral/don't agree or disagree', 4 indicating 'disagree' and 5 indicating 'strongly disagree'. The first subsection in Section C enquired about external parties' influence on the student's decision to study at a tertiary institution and to study B.Com (Accounting). The second subsection evaluated the student's considerations in deciding to study at a tertiary institution. The third subsection investigated the student's willingness and ability to self-manage their active engagement in the learning process. The fourth subsection evaluated the student's reasons for deciding on the B.Com (Accounting) degree. The fifth subsection asked the students about their expectations of the outcomes of studying this degree and the sixth subsection investigated how confident the student felt about their imminent academic journey.

Individual members of UWC staff interrogated and commented on the questions, process and objective of the questionnaire before it was finalised and administered. The objectives of the study were explained to students attending the first FIA 131 lecture and it was emphasised that their responses would be kept confidential and only used in the study. The questionnaire was then administered to the students. Of the approximately 169 students registered for FIA 131 in 2018, 166 students completed the questionnaire, but 37 questionnaires were not fully completed and therefore disregarded. Therefore, the study consists of information obtained from 129 students or 78% of the registered students. The group consisted of 67 (52%) female and 62 (48%) male students.

Similar to Arquero et al. (2009), t-tests were used as the primary statistical analysis to identify differences between the groups of male and female students. The students' genders were used as the dependent variable with females coded 1 and males 0.

Results and findings

Time allocation

To gauge what students' expectations were regarding the amount of time that they would need to spend on their studies, they were asked how much time they expected to spend on various activities, including studies, leisure time and part-time work. The university communicates its guidelines and expectations regarding students' time commitment to studies in faculty calendars, including that students are expected to complete 47 hours of study weekly (excluding assessments) across all their subjects for the first semester of their first year.

The t-tests revealed that female students expected to spend an average of one hour fewer on studies per week (46 hours per week) than male students (47 hours per week). This finding is insignificant ($p > 0.1$) and aligned with the university's suggestion (47 hours per week). Of the 67 female students (62 male), 63% (males: 65%) intended doing part-time work, with females expecting to spend an average of 2.9 hours (males: 3.3 hours) per week on part-time work. It would be interesting to interrogate the type of part-time work that students planned to engage in and whether they aligned to their education goals (which would enrich their learning experience).

Table 1: Time allocation

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
How many hours per week do you plan to spend on:			
Part-time work?	(3.71)	(1.337)	0.198
Entertainment away from your studies?	(0.66)	(0.248)	0.805
Sport/gym?	(0.94)	(0.804)	0.423
Studying?	(1.02)	(0.373)	0.710

Motives

Motivation seems to play a major role in students' success in accounting studies (Du Plessis et al., 2005). Intrinsic motivation comes from a passion to understand the subject matter, which is aligned with the student's identity and sense of purpose; while extrinsically motivated students wish to fulfil an external goal, such as to attain recognition from others, avoid punishment or obtain a better salary (Ho et al., 2021).

The results in Table 2 show that female B.Com (Accounting) students were influenced significantly more by parents ($p < 0.05$) and relatives ($p < 0.05$) than male students. That females placed more reliance on family in guiding their decision to study accounting might suggest a gender difference in the general family dynamic and the roles of young males and females within the family. The results did not reveal any significant difference in role players' influence on the decisions taken by male students to study accounting.

Table 2: Role players

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
Indicate to what extent the following people influenced you to study at a tertiary institution and in particular to study B.Com (Accounting):			
Your parents	(0.43)	(2.11)	0.037**
Your teachers	(0.17)	(0.796)	0.428
Your siblings	(0.06)	(0.271)	0.787
Extended relatives	(0.44)	(2.016)	0.046**
Friends	(0.20)	(0.837)	0.404
Career guidance teachers	(0.23)	(0.948)	0.345

** significant at the 5% level with $p < 0.05$

Gender differences also emerged in the motivation to study at a tertiary institution and to study B.Com (Accounting) specifically (see Table 3), with differences not isolated to intrinsic or extrinsic motives. Significant differences were noted for females wanting to face new challenges and broaden their horizons ($p < 0.05$) and wanting to develop a better understanding of themselves ($p < 0.1$), but also indicating a greater likelihood of having ended up studying because they seemed to have rather drifted into higher education ($p < 0.1$). Males seemed to be motivated significantly more by the fact that accounting has better career prospects ($p < 0.1$), which might emanate from socialised gender roles of males being the breadwinners of a household. This is supported by Liu and Morgan (2020), who found that males were interested in a career that could enable them to provide for the family.

Table 3: Motives

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
To what extent did the following influence your choice to study at a tertiary institution?			
I believe that a university degree will create new opportunities for me in the future	(0.16)	(1.150)	0.252
The degree will enable me to get a good job	(0.09)	(0.693)	0.490
I want to develop my mind and intellectual abilities	0.07	0.600	0.549
Completing this degree will increase my earning potential	0.05	0.418	0.667
This degree will help me develop knowledge and skills which will be useful in my life after university	(0.04)	(0.381)	0.704
I want to become a better-educated person	0.01	0.046	0.963
This degree will enable me to meet the education requirements for my career	(0.032)	(0.253)	0.801
I wanted to study accounting in an in-depth way	0.02	0.121	0.904

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
To what extent did the following influence your choice to study at a tertiary institution?			
I want the chance to face new challenges and broaden my horizons	(0.30)	(2.187)	0.031**
I am interested in pursuing postgraduate studies	(0.05)	(0.340)	0.734
I want to meet new people and make new friends	(0.06)	(0.413)	0.680
I like the idea of participating in sports and social activities at the university	0.12	0.623	0.534
I want to prove to myself that I can be successful at university	(0.04)	(0.360)	0.719
I really want to obtain a university degree	(0.01)	(0.124)	0.902
Having done well in school, going to university seemed like the natural thing to do	(0.21)	(1.212)	0.228
I am attracted by the opportunities of having an active social life at university	(0.12)	0.752	0.453
I believe that university will give me the opportunity to improve my self-belief and self-confidence	(0.03)	(0.240)	0.810
Progressing to university is what others expected of me	0.20	1.038	0.301
I want to develop a better understanding of myself	(0.22)	(1.755)	0.082*
Coming to university affords me at least three more years for me to decide what I really want to do	(0.01)	(0.058)	0.954
All my friends were going to university	(0.33)	(1.510)	0.134
I rather/kind of drifted into higher education	0.37	1.945	0.054*
I want to qualify as a Chartered Accountant	(0.07)	(0.480)	0.632
I think that I have the skills and abilities that are suited to the study of accounting	0.27	1.958	0.052*
I am attracted to career prospects for accounting graduates	0.24	1.771	0.079*
I enjoyed subjects at high school related to the degree	0.00	0.011	0.991
I want to learn more about accounting	(0.03)	(0.238)	0.813
My friends also planned to come to UWC	0.02	0.112	0.911
I wasn't too bothered about what I studied at university	0.30	1.362	0.176
My friends also planned to do B.Com (Accounting)	0.01	0.063	0.950

* significant at the 10% level with p < 0.1; **significant at the 5% level with p < 0.05

Preparedness for higher education

The transition to higher education is affected by students' preparedness for tertiary studies. Byrne and Flood (2005) state that most students who enter tertiary studies obtain their learning experiences from high school. Yet practices experienced at school may develop skills that do not adequately prepare students for higher education (Money et al., 2020). The resulting expectation gaps could lead to student failure and attrition.

Identifying and managing these expectation gaps is critical to retaining students and ensuring their success.

Table 4 shows no significant gender differences in the preparedness of students, except for males, assessing overall that they possessed the necessary skills to be proficient at accounting ($p < 0.1$). Males also seemed significantly more prepared to participate in class ($p < 0.1$). When evaluating expected performance, males were more confident about completing all the exams on the first attempt ($p < 0.05$), their ability to perform above average ($p < 0.05$) and their ability to achieve results in the top 10% of their class ($p < 0.05$). Further research could be conducted to understand what drives the confidence of male students and whether the confidence is realistic relative to their performance.

Table 4: Preparedness

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
Indicate whether you feel willing and/or comfortable to do the following:			
Participate in class	0.35	1.836	0.069*
Organize your own life generally	0.16	1.281	0.203
Ask for help from your lecturers/tutors	0.14	1.185	0.238
Complete written assignments (projects/essays)	(0.08)	(0.557)	0.578
Take responsibility for your own learning	0.09	0.796	0.427
Plan your studies in a time-effective manner to meet your deadlines	0.04	0.365	0.716
Initiate your own study activities	(0.14)	(1.270)	0.206
Evaluate your own progress	0.027	0.233	0.816
Participate in group work	0.05	0.251	0.802
Know what is expected of you academically at university	0.028	0.253	0.801
Work independently without direction from a facilitator/ lecturer	(0.03)	(0.164)	0.870
Be confident about your ability to use a computer	(0.07)	0.463	0.644
Indicate the extent to which you feel confident in:			
Your ability to handle the course material	0.15	1.064	0.289
Your ability to pass all your exams at the first attempt	0.35	2.480	0.014**
Your ability to perform above average in your university studies	0.31	2.014	0.046**
Your ability to achieve results in the top 10% of your class	0.32	1.988	0.049**

*significant at the 10% level with $p < 0.1$; **significant at the 5% level with $p < 0.05$

Expectations emanating from studying B.Com (Accounting)
Students were asked to evaluate whether, and to what extent, a given range of possible outcomes would be met after their time at the university and after studying towards

a B.Com (Accounting) degree. As shown in Table 5, no significant gender differences were found between the expectations of students. This might be the result of marketing by the profession, career guidance by teachers and advertising by the university. These initiatives might create transparency and clarity about what can be expected from this and similar programmes. This might also relate to the fact that the entrance requirements for the programme are among the highest at the university and the programme often attracts relatively good students from both genders, who are looking for intellectual growth and stimulation.

Table 5: Preparedness

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
To what extent does the following represent your expected outcome from studying B.Com (Accounting):			
To develop new skills	0.10	0.971	0.333
To broaden my horizons	(0.17)	(1.444)	0.151
To meet new people	(0.04)	(0.248)	0.804
To have a good time	(0.30)	(1.516)	0.132
To experience intellectual growth and stimulation	(0.01)	(0.141)	0.888
To learn about new ideas	(0.07)	0.650	0.517
To increase my self-esteem and self-confidence	(0.049)	(0.316)	0.753

*significant at the 10% level with $p < 0.1$; **significant at the 5% level with $p < 0.05$

Discussion

This study investigated the motivation, expectations and preparedness of first-year students studying B.Com (Accounting) at UWC. While this group of students represent an interesting and important group because of their socio-economic backgrounds, the generalizability of the findings might be limited as the study focused on students from one university in one region of South Africa. However, the findings add significantly to the knowledge of the student experience at the first-year level.

The data used in the study relates to the 2018 first-year B.Com (Accounting) class at UWC. Universities were forced to alter their teaching and learning strategies significantly during the 2019/2020 academic year due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. While teaching and learning conditions have mostly returned to pre-COVID-19 norms, the transition is not yet complete. Further, the increased use of online and distance learning technology has altered the higher education landscape somewhat. However, the fundamentals of student motivations, expectations and preparedness in the 2018 academic year still apply and, therefore, the findings of this study bear relevance for higher education institutions grappling with issues of attrition, throughput and student success.

These findings indicate that a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivate students and that these differ based on the student's gender. Female students seem

motivated to study, and to study B.Com (Accounting) particularly, by parents and relatives and for reasons of self-discovery such as broadening their horizons and understanding themselves better. Understanding this finding, universities might want to offer electives, outside the business faculty where accounting-related subjects are traditionally taught, that broaden students' thinking and understanding beyond that developed by the core subjects in the programme. This will assist the holistic development of the student and contribute to fostering the desired graduate attributes.

The findings indicate that, at least at the beginning of their studies, students seem to have accurate expectations of the time commitment required to complete the first semester. This is contrary to prior findings that student expectations of the time required to complete their course were significantly lower than what the institution recommended (Byrne & Flood, 2005) and a finding (in Spain) that male students expected to commit considerably less study time than female students expected (Arquero et al., 2009).

Overall, males appeared more confident than females about their preparedness for higher education, although the reasons are not clear, indicating also a greater likelihood to participate in class and score above-average grades during their studies. Further research is warranted to explore the reasons for gender differences in confidence related to their preparedness for higher education.

Conclusion

Student success in higher education benefits all stakeholders and the economy. It is widely recognised that the greatest risk of attrition is at the first-year level and studies have found that attrition is attributable to expectation gaps and the unpreparedness of first-year students for the demands of higher education (Arquero et al., 2009). Consequently, reducing student attrition is a priority for all institutions of higher learning and institutional stakeholders, not least of which is the government, which has to ensure the efficient use of fiscal resources.

Ethics statement

The authors have obtained the necessary institutional approval to conduct the research.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postgraduate psychology students' mental health and coping during COVID-19: Lessons learnt

Santé mentale et adaptation des étudiants des cycles supérieurs en psychologie pendant la période de la COVID19 : leçons tirées de l'expérience

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ABSTRACT

The transition in learning trajectories, academic pressures and stressors associated with financial and societal pressure that South African postgraduate university students experience places them at risk of mental health difficulties. For these students, their mental well-being has been further threatened due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent switch to emergency remote teaching. This study aimed to explore the physical and psychological health, resilience and coping amongst two Psychology honours student cohorts at a South African university. Using a repeated cross-sectional design, a sample of 38 Psychology honours students enrolled in 2020 and 39 Psychology honours students enrolled in 2021 voluntarily participated in the study. Overall, students reported poor mental health, with elevated levels of anxiety and burnout and moderate post-traumatic stress symptoms. The 2021 cohort reported significantly lower levels of self-efficacy, increased post-traumatic stress symptoms and employed coping through self-blame more frequently. Students' feelings of isolation persisted as well as feelings of hopelessness with regard to the contextual challenges faced by the country and the pandemic. Over the course of the pandemic, students found that they had less anxiety about online learning, however, they noted that the mental health support provided by the university was not sufficient. These results highlight the important role university mental health services play in fostering student mental well-being and thus the need to prioritise making mental health services to students more accessible and efficient.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les étudiants sud-africains de cycle supérieur et postuniversitaire sont exposés à des risques de troubles de la santé mentale en raison de la transition des trajectoires d'apprentissage, des contraintes académiques et des facteurs de stress associés aux difficultés financières et sociétales qu'ils subissent. Le bien-être mental de ces étudiants a été encore plus menacé par la pandémie de COVID-19 et le passage consécutif à l'enseignement d'urgence à distance. Cette étude visait à explorer la santé physique et psychologique, la résilience et l'adaptation de deux cohortes d'étudiants en psychologie dans une université sud-africaine. En utilisant un modèle transversal répété, un échantillon de 38 étudiants de cycle supérieur en psychologie inscrits en 2020 et de 39 étudiants de cycle supérieur en psychologie inscrits en 2021 ont volontairement participé à l'étude. Dans l'ensemble, les étudiants ont fait état d'une mauvaise santé mentale, avec des niveaux élevés d'anxiété et d'épuisement professionnel et des symptômes de stress post-traumatique modérés. La cohorte 2021 a signalé des niveaux d'auto-efficacité nettement inférieurs, des symptômes de stress post-traumatique accrus et une utilisation plus fréquente de l'auto-culpabilisation comme moyen d'adaptation. Le sentiment d'isolement des étudiants a persisté, de même que le sentiment de désespoir face aux défis contextuels auxquels le pays est confronté et à la pandémie. Au cours de la pandémie, les étudiants ont constaté qu'ils étaient moins anxieux à propos de l'apprentissage en ligne, mais ils ont noté que le soutien en matière de santé mentale fourni par l'université n'était pas suffisant. Ces résultats soulignent le rôle important que jouent les services de santé mentale des universités dans la promotion du bien-être mental des étudiants et, par conséquent, le besoin prioritaire de rendre les services de santé mentale aux étudiants plus accessibles et plus efficaces.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic threatened the physical and mental health of many individuals (Rajkumar, 2020; Salari et al., 2020) resulting in an increased rate of depression and anxiety amongst individuals worldwide (Fancourt et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020). Prior to the pandemic, university students were already vulnerable to mental health disorders and distress (Alonso et al., 2018; Auerbach et al., 2016; Bantjes et al., 2019). South African university students, in particular, experience many stressors which include a lack of finances, fear of failing, difficulties in procuring accommodation, transport challenges, death of a significant individual, emotional and mental stressors, as well as institutional stressors such as protest actions against university management, adjusting to academic demands and fitting into institutional cultures (Auerbach et al., 2016; Mall et al., 2018; Maringe & Osman, 2022; Mason, 2017).

In order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, 191 countries witnessed the closure of various educational institutions (UNESCO, 2020), with South African tertiary educational institutions being no exception. South African contact universities were closed, and students were required to vacate student residences for the duration of lockdown level 5 (March–April 2020). A staggered approach was implemented to phase in specific groups of students during various lockdown levels experienced by the country post lockdown level 5. During lockdown level 4, final year students who required clinical training were allowed to return to campuses, while universities had to support other students through remote multimodal learning, also referred to as emergency remote teaching in South Africa. During lockdown levels 3 and 2, it was proposed that

33% and 66% of the student population would be allowed to return to campuses, respectively. These students had to fall in the following categories: students living with disabilities; students who were not able to access the internet where they were residing; students whose places of residence were not conducive to studying; and students who faced extreme difficulties engaging with remote learning (South African Government, 2020). Students became isolated during the pandemic and their recourse to social networks and emotional support were reduced (Elmer et al., 2020). The lockdown also removed opportunities for the alleviation of their stressors, opportunities which El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) report were particularly helpful to Psychology postgraduate students such as support from friends, family, classmates, regular exercise, and hobbies. Subsequently, studies conducted on South African undergraduate students' learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown have found that students experienced social isolation, difficult online learning conditions (Laher et al., 2021; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021), reduced academic ability (Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021), and challenging home dynamics which included multiple responsibilities (Laher et al., 2021; Maringe & Chiramba, 2022; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021). Unsettling changes to routines and sleep disturbance were also common (Davy et al., 2021). Despite this, students demonstrated resilience and reported a variety of coping strategies to manage feelings of despair during the lockdown, such as connecting online to access support from family, friends and lecturers, and various spiritual coping strategies (Eloff, 2021; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021).

The transition to online learning forced universities to develop flexible course content and assessment strategies conducive to online learning and teaching (Maringe & Chiramba, 2022; Mhlanga, 2021). This resulted in video recording presentations, real-time video conferencing as well as written communications. However, the transition to online learning for students was challenging. When compared to pre-pandemic levels, students reported negative achievement emotions such as anxiety and boredom more frequently, with females and students in the natural and life sciences and arts and humanities reporting more learning-related anxiety (Raccanello et al., 2022). During the pandemic, it was found that "students' technostress caused by the misfit between environmental demands (e-learning) and students' abilities (access to online resources)" (Mpungose, 2020, p. 6) complicated matters further. These stressors were further exacerbated as a result of limited access to laptops, no or inconsistent electricity, and transitioning to online learning (Hedding et al., 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021). The pandemic thus highlighted the gross inequalities in educational access and outcomes for learners from variable socio-economic backgrounds (Fouche & Andrews, 2022; Patrick et al., 2021; Landa et al., 2021; Maringe & Chiramba, 2022). The transition to online learning, coupled with living through a pandemic, resulted in university students experiencing mild to extreme levels of stress, anxiety, as well as depression (Hamza et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Van de Velde et al., 2021). Better study conditions were associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Fialho et al., 2021) and students who felt more confident in their use of technology appeared to adapt more easily (Raccanello

et al., 2022). The lived experiences of South African university students raised concerns regarding mental health and the transition to online learning (Laher et al., 2021).

The transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies can place strain on students' mental health due to the major transitions in the students' learning trajectories (Cvetkovski et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the potentially increased stress on postgraduate students, it is reported that postgraduate students in the field of Psychology may be especially vulnerable to stressors due to the evaluative and competitive nature of graduate training (Rummel, 2015). Postgraduate students of Psychology are prone to clinically significant anxiety, depression and chronic physical health symptoms (Rummel, 2015). Moreover, postgraduate students of Psychology report that the contributors to their mental health challenges relate to, amongst others, academic responsibilities; financial responsibilities, including debt; and poor work/school/life balance (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). During the pandemic, notwithstanding these existing stressors, the lockdown, the modified modes of teaching and learning, concerns about their own and others' health (Elmer et al., 2020), and the aforementioned stressors precluded honours students from engaging in research activities with people and at research sites (Hedding et al., 2020), thereby introducing an unsettling hiatus into their postgraduate trajectories. For postgraduate students, the disruption to the structure, flow, and predictive path of the course caused by the lockdowns, limited physical interaction and the closure of many facilities also affected opportunities to conduct research (Hedding et al., 2020), a core component of postgraduate study. Moreover, they may have experienced challenges because students who were living at university residences were evacuated during the lockdowns which meant that they were away from their research sites and laboratories (Hedding et al., 2020; Makhado et al., 2022). For students who live in less-resourced areas, electricity and data network infrastructure tends to be poor and that further exacerbated attempts at remote learning (Hedding et al., 2020; Mpungose, 2020). There was a rush for students to change research topics and methodologies which may have compounded the stress which students were experiencing.

While past research draws attention to the increased pressures and strain experienced by postgraduate students prior to the pandemic (Cvetkovski et al., 2019; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Rummel, 2015) , there is limited research exploring the impact on the mental health of these students over the course of the pandemic (Makhado et al., 2022). Therefore, this study reports on the mental health of honours students at two time points during the pandemic, allowing for comparison and providing a sense of how students' abilities adapted over the course of the pandemic. Underpinned by the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Lazarus, 1993), this study was thus undertaken to explore honours students' mental health experiences during lockdown level 3 of the COVID-19 pandemic in July 2020, and subsequently with the next cohort of Psychology honours students in 2021 in South Africa. Hence, the following research questions were explored:

- What were the levels of physical and psychological health, resilience and coping amongst Psychology honours students in 2020 and 2021?

- What were the health and study experiences of Psychology honours students in 2020 and 2021?

Methods

Research design

This study used a mixed-method research design (Caruana et al., 2015). Data were collected from two distinct postgraduate honours Psychology cohorts (2020, 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic, through an online survey platform. Data collection for the 2020 cohort opened on 1 June 2020 and closed on 30 June 2020. Hence, data for this cohort were collected during Lockdown Phase 3 in South Africa. The university was just over one month into emergency remote teaching at this time and students were completing or had just completed their first semester examinations when they responded. Lockdown Phase 3 commenced on 1 June 2020 and ended on the 17 August 2020. During this time, all high-risk economic activities, such as entertainment, sports, conferences and social events, were prohibited. Individuals were required to wear a face mask in public spaces, allowed to travel to and from work and attend funerals and places of worship provided strict health protocols were adhered to and capacity was limited to 50 individuals (South African Government, 2020).

Data collection for the 2021 cohort opened on the 1 June 2021 and closed on the 23 August 2021. During this data collection period, South Africa moved through various lockdown phases (adjusted alert level 2 [31 May to 15 June 2021]; level 3 [16 June to 27 June 2021]; level 4 [28 June to 25 July 2021]; and level 3 [26 July to 12 September 2021]) because of the rise in COVID-19 infections leading to the third COVID-19 wave (National Institute for Communicable Diseases, 2021).

Sample

The samples for both cohorts consisted of postgraduate Psychology honours[6] students at the University of the Witwatersrand. The sample sizes for the 2020 and 2021 cohorts were 38 (Mage = 27.61 years; SDage = 7.978) and 39 (Mage = 28.85 years; SDage = 8.564), respectively. Student participation was voluntary and remained anonymous unless they chose to provide their details for further interviews for a follow-up study. Despite the low response rate, the feedback provided was very useful in terms of understanding postgraduate students' experiences and mental health during COVID-19. The 2020 and 2021 cohorts of students, although not identical, are very similar in that both were subjected to the same entrance selection for the degree registered and both experienced the same teaching mode – strictly online with a combination of synchronous sessions and asynchronous teaching material by the same staff members for the respective modules. The same asynchronous material was used for both cohorts.

The demographic characteristics of both the 2020 and 2021 cohorts are summarised in Table 1. Most participants from each cohort identified as female (2020 = 78.9%; 2021

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6 Honours refers to students in their fourth year of study/first year of postgraduate study in Psychology in South Africa.

= 89.7%), Christian (2020 = 48.6%; 2021 = 54.05%), first-language English speakers (2020 = 64.9%; 2021 = 56.4%), and were unmarried (2020 = 81.6%; 2021 = 84.6%) or in a relationship (2020 = 68.4%; 2021 = 53.8%). The majority of the participants in the 2020 cohort were white (2020 = 47.4%), while in the 2021 cohort, the majority of the participants were black (2021 = 51.3%). Most participants lived with immediate family (2020 = 43.2%; 2021 = 43.6%), had no children (2020 = 80.6%; 2021 = 82.1%), experienced financial worry some of the time (2020 = 54.1%; 2021 = 38.5%) and were not diagnosed with a chronic medical condition (2020 = 78.4%; 2021 = 71.8%).

Table 1: Demographic data of the two cohorts

Variables				
	2020 cohort		2021 cohort	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Gender				
Female	30	78.9	35	89.7
Male	7	18.4	4	10.3
Other	1	2.6		
Race				
Black	13	34.2	20	51.3
White	18	47.4	11	28.2
Indian	6	15.8	5	12.8
Coloured	1	2.6	2	5.1
Other			1	2.6
Religious affiliation				
No religion	7	18.9	10	27.03
Christianity	18	48.6	20	54.05
Hinduism	2	5.4		
Islam	3	8.1	5	13.5
Judaism	3	8.1	1	2.7
Other	4	10.8	1	2.7
Home language				
Afrikaans	2	5.4	2	5.1
English	24	64.9	22	56.4
IsiNdebele	1	2.7		
IsiXhosa			3	7.7
IsiZulu	1	2.7	4	10.3
Sepedi (North Sotho)	1	2.7	5	12.8
Sesotho	2	5.4	1	2.6

Variables				
	2020 cohort		**2021 cohort**	
	Frequency	**%**	**Frequency**	**%**
Setswana	3	8.1	2	5.1
Other	3	8.1		
Marital status				
Married	7	18.4	6	15.4
Not married	31	81.6	33	84.6
Relationship status				
In a relationship	26	68.4	21	53.8
Not in a relationship	12	31.6	18	46.2
Living arrangement				
Alone	6	16.2	4	10.3
Immediate family	16	43.2	17	43.6
Other relatives			2	5.1
University residence	2	5.4	2	5.1
Housemates	3	8.1	3	7.7
Partner	5	13.5	6	15.4
Partner with children	5	13.5	5	12.8
Number of children				
0	29	80.6	32	82.1
1	2	5.6	2	5.1
2	2	5.6	4	10.3
3	2	5.6	1	2.6
5	1	2.8		
Financial worry				
All the time	6	15.8	7	17.9
Some of the time	20	52.6	15	38.5
Rarely	6	15.8	12	30.8
Never	5	13.2	5	12.8
Chronic condition				
Yes	8	21.6	11	28.2
No	29	78.4	28	71.8

Instruments

An online questionnaire consisting of a demographic section and several mental health screening instruments as well as five open-ended questions was used. Gender, age, race, level of financial concern/worry, year of study, family and other support structures, and whether the student suffered from a health condition prior to COVID were requested in the demographics section.

General mental health: The Global Mental Health Scale (GMH-4) of the PROMIS Global Health Instrument (v 1.2) was used to assess overall mental health (Hays et al., 2017). The scale consists of four items and uses a five-point response format with items one to three having the same anchors (Excellent - Poor) and item four having a unique anchor (Never - Always). The GMH-4 has been shown to be reliable (Hays et al., 2017) and valid (Katzan & Lapin 2018). The GMH-4 evidenced an internal reliability in excess of 0.73 after item 4 ("How often have you been bothered by emotional problems?") was removed.

Depression and anxiety: The Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) consists of two 7-item subscales that are rated on a four-point scale (0-3). One scale measures level of anxiety and the other depression. The HADS has been validated across multiple languages and settings (Bjelland et al., 2002; Herrman, 1997), including with patients diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in South Africa (Wouters et al., 2012). An internal consistency reliability coefficient that ranged from .74 to .84 was found for the depression subscale and .69 to .86 for the anxiety subscale.

Burnout: The Burnout Measure-Short Version (BMS) contains 10 items addressing the frequency of experiencing symptoms of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion using a 7-point Likert scale (1: *Never;* 7: *Always*). It has been successfully used in the South African context with an internal consistency reliability coefficient of 0.82 (Fatoki, 2019). In this study, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient that ranged from .89 to .93 was obtained for the BMS.

Coping skills: Coping skills were assessed using the Brief COPE Inventory. This inventory of 14 subscales measures different aspects of coping as follows: self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioural disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humour, acceptance, religion, and self-blame. Participants are asked to rate the degree to which they use each coping strategy to deal with a particular stressful event using a 4-point Likert scale (1: *I haven't been doing this at all*; 4: *I've been doing this a lot*). For the purposes of the proposed study, item 19, 'going to the movies' as an example of coping was removed as it was not applicable during lockdown level 4. The scale has been used in South Africa with good internal consistency reliability (Kotze et al., 2013). Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged between 0.59 and 0.99 for the coping subscales, except for the self-Distraction (α = 0.26), active coping (α = 0.49), acceptance (α = 0.44), and planning (α = 0. 51) subscales.

Resilience: The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10) measures resilience or how well one is equipped to bounce back after stressful events, tragedy, or trauma (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007; Connor & Davidson, 2003; Vaishnavi et al., 2007). The

scale consists of 10 items which are answered on a Likert scale of 0-4 (0: *Not true at all*; 4: *True nearly all of the time*). The measure has adequate test-retest and internal consistency reliability as well as good construct validity evidence (Vaishnavi et al., 2007). Previous studies in Nigerian student and South African adolescent populations have found reliability coefficients of 0.81 and 0.93 respectively (Aloba et al., 2016; Jørgensen & Seedat, 2008). In this study, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the samples ranged from 0.82 to 0.92 for the resilience scale.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Checklist—Civilian Version (PCL-C): The extent to which students were bothered by their reactions to traumatic experiences occurring in their everyday lives was evaluated using the *PCL-C* (Weathers et al., 1993). This scale comprises 17 items, measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*) (Weathers et al., 1993). The scale has been shown to be reliable and valid (Conybeare et al., 2012; Weathers et al., 1993), including with a university sample (Ruggiero et al., 2003). The scale has been successfully used within the South African context (Gomo et al., 2018; Peltzer et al., 2007; Watt et al., 2012), including within a university setting (Peltzer, 1998). A Cronbach's alpha coefficient for both samples was in excess of 0.87 in the current study.

Self-efficacy: The Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem 1995) was used to assess students' self-efficacy, that is, their beliefs in their own abilities to respond to novel or difficult situations. The scale consists of 10 items which are answered on a 4-point Likert Scale (1: *Not at all true*; 4: *Exactly true*). This scale demonstrates a satisfactory internal consistency of 0.86 and test-retest reliability of 0.75 after 12 months (Wu et al., 2004). Internal consistency reliability for this study was good with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranging from 0.82 to .90.

Self-reported, open-ended questions: Five open-ended questions about the participants' experiences of COVID-19 were included at the end of the questionnaire. The questions asked students about their experiences during lockdown, particularly their mental health experiences, their experiences of working on university work at home, their support structures at home, the challenges experienced and their needs in terms of support from the university.

Procedure

All Psychology honours students were notified about the study via an announcement on the e-learning management system. The announcement included a link to the questionnaire on the online survey platform. Completion of the survey required minimal data and all students had received 10GB of daytime data and 20GB of night-time data from the university.

Data analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted on SPSS Version 27 and 28 (IBM Corporation, 2022). Descriptive statistics were used for demographic information as well as to determine levels of mental health, coping and resilience in the sample. Group differences were examined using independent sample t-tests or an independent Mann-Whitney

U-test where parametric assumptions were not met. Content and an inductive-semantic thematic analysis, as specified by Braun et al. (2016), were used to analyse the open-ended responses.

Results

Table 2 depicts the descriptive statistics of the 2020 and 2021 participants' scores on measures of psychological health. On average, participants from each cohort did not obtain an elevated score for depression (2020 cohort 1: M = 6.87, SD = 4.180; 2021 cohort: M = 7.56, SD = 3.455), and demonstrated resilience (2020 cohort M = 28.66, SD = 7.397; 2021 M = 26.14, SD = 6.176) and self-efficacy (2020 cohort M = 38.18, SD = 7.780; 2021 cohort M = 34.64, SD = 4.486). On the self-efficacy scale, significant differences were obtained between the groups (see Table 2). The 2021 cohort demonstrated lower levels of self-efficacy (η^2 = 0.019) in comparison to the 2020 cohort. Participants demonstrated slightly elevated scores for anxiety (2020 cohort M = 10.34, SD = 4.783; 2021 cohort M = 11.62, SD = 3.668), burnout (2020 cohort M = 3.43, SD = 1.306; 2021 cohort M = 3.764, SD = 1.213), and moderately severe post-traumatic stress symptoms (2020 cohort M = 39.21, SD = 17.216; 2021 cohort M = 45.54, SD = 11.959), as well as poor general mental health (2020 cohort M = 11.08, SD = 2.774; 2021 cohort M = 10.62, SD = 2.720). Participants in the 2021 cohort demonstrated an increase in post-traumatic stress symptoms (η^2 = 0.081). The most common coping mechanism employed by participants was acceptance (2020 cohort M = 4.29, SD = 1.183; 2021 cohort M = 4.308 SD = 1.866), while substance use was identified as the least commonly utilised coping mechanism (2020 cohort M = 0.66, SD = 1.681; 2021 cohort M = 0.744 SD = 1.390). A significant difference on the self-blame coping mechanism was demonstrated (p = 0.026, η^2 = 0.065), where the 2021 cohort employed self-blame as a coping mechanism more often in comparison to the 2020 cohort.

Table 2: Mental health variables descriptive statistics and comparison test results

Mental health variables	2020 Cohort					2021 Cohort					Test-stat	Sig
	N	Min	Max	M	SD	N	Min	Max	M	SD		
GMH total	38	5.00	11.00	11.08	2.774	39	5.00	16.00	10.62	2.720	-.636	.525
Anxiety	38	1	21	10.34	4.783	39	4	20	11.62	3.668	-1.313*	0.097
Depression	38	0	19	6.87	4.180	39	1	18	7.56	3.455	-.797*	.214
Self-distraction	38	1	6	3.82	1.411	39	1	6	3.923	1.476	.358	0.720
Active coping	38	0	6	3.50	1.466	39	0	6	3.564	1.447	0.151	0.880
Denial	38	0	6	1.21	1.492	39	0	4	0.949	1.395	-.916	0.360
Substance use	38	0	6	.66	1.681	39	0	6	0.744	1.390	1.237	0.216
Use of emotional support	38	0	6	2.92	2.084	39	0	6	2.923	1.797	0.010	0.992
Use of instrumental support	38	0	6	2.68	1.741	37	0	6	2.270	1.742	-1.139	0.255
Behavioural disengagement	38	0	6	1.42	1.703	39	0	6	1.539	1.890	-.022	0.983
Venting	38	0	6	3.03	1.668	39	0	6	2.667	1.545	-.992	0.321
Positive reframing	38	0	6	3.63	1.762	39	0	6	2.821	1.485	-1.939	0.52
Planning	38	1	6	3.11	1.429	39	0	6	3.487	1.684	1.293	0.196
Humour	38	0	6	2.39	1.701	39	0	6	2.103	2.024	-0.861	0.389
Acceptance	38	2	6	4.29	1.183	39	0	6	4.308	1.866	0.898	0.369
Religion	38	0	6	2.82	2.091	39	0	6	3.308	2.179	0.991	0.321
Self-blame	38	0	6	1.95	1.800	39	0	6	2.872	1.936	2.223	0.026
Resilience	38	9	40	28.66	7.397	36	14	40	26.17	6.176	-1.809	0.070
Burnout	38	1.20	7.00	3.43	1.306	36	1.6	6.70	3.764	1.213	1.185	0.236
Self-efficacy	38	16	40	38.18	7.780	36	21	40	34.64	4.486	-3.089	0.002
PLC-C	38	17.00	85.00	39.21	17.216	35	23	78	45.54	11.959	-1.183*	0.071

Note: GMH: General mental health, HADS: Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale, PCL-C: PTSD CheckList – Civilian Version *Independent sample T-test

Based on the open-ended responses provided by the students, a number of themes were evident across both cohorts. There were concerns around psychological well-being, academic pressure/challenges as well as support mechanisms available to them.

Psychological well-being

Feelings of isolation, emotional challenges, a sense of hopelessness and anxiety, and depression symptoms were subthemes evident within the broader psychological well-being theme.

Feelings of isolation

Feelings of isolation persisted throughout the pandemic as this was reported consistently in both cohorts. The isolation felt was attributed to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions as well as the lack of social contact:

> *It has had a negative impact on me. I feel trapped in my small living space. For two and a half months, I was restricted to not stepping outside my home (strict complex rules). This was really hard on me mentally because I thrive on fresh air and sunshine and to be able to run/walk daily. I exercise regularly but I don't have the space to exercise indoors. I felt extreme fatigue.* (P11, 2020)

In 2021, extended periods of decreased social contact over the past two years appeared to be taking a toll: "*Struggling with psychical isolation*" (P6, 2021).

Emotional challenges

Emotional challenges experienced by postgraduate students appear to have persisted over the course of the pandemic and those students with existing mental health issues appeared to struggle more. For example, one participant (P22, 2021) stated:

> *Things were easier at the beginning of the pandemic. Over time, I have noticed my mental health fluctuate. I have good weeks and bad weeks. My anxiety has definitely gotten worse, and I am increasingly having issues with keeping my attention on important tasks at hand.*

This excerpt also reflects the impact of emotional stress on academic learning, with difficulty maintaining attention emerging often in the data. For some postgraduate students, besides persisting, their emotional challenges also intensified, as per this excerpt:

> *With the constant mutations of the virus and looming new variants as well as uncertainty of the effectiveness of the vaccine towards the new variants, the paranoia just seems to be increasing.* (P30, 2021)

Although some reported an abatement in their anxiety levels, they also stated that it still remained and added to other challenges such as fatigue, anger, eating disturbances, and emotional liability. For example, Participant 26 (2021) reported:

> *I was very anxious and scared at the beginning of the pandemic. I still feel anxious now but not as much and not as often. The fatigue still feels the same.*

Another participant stated,

> *My eating is all over the place though, hasn't changed much. Less crying, still have angry outbursts.* (P28, 2021)

Sense of hopelessness

There is a sense that participants held out for an amelioration of symptoms over time from when the pandemic was declared, but their responses suggest that such hopes may have been dashed. Extended periods of anxiety seemed to contribute to an enhanced sense of hopelessness as expressed by Participant 31 (2021) who shared that

> *Initially, the pandemic felt like an opportunity to rest, but now I feel trapped and exhausted from being stir crazy. I also have less hope about a positive future than I did at the beginning of all this.*

Concerningly, hopelessness about the future was evident in many responses: "*When it started, I was hopeful for better times. Now, I don't believe things could ever improve*" (P29, 2021). Adding to their sense of hopelessness seemed to be the contextual challenges in South Africa as expressed by this participant:

> *At the beginning, I was stressed about the virus itself. Now the virus itself has become far less of a concern and instead it's things like economic stability, civil unrest, employment opportunity, financial stress etc. as a lingering result of the lockdowns that cause the stress.* (P31, 2021)

Anxiety and depressive symptoms

While symptoms of anxiety were present in both cohorts, the reasons attributed to anxious feelings differed. Anxiety in the first cohort had a more fearful component to it:

> *It has been really stressful and emotionally draining. These last two or three weeks, in particular, I have found myself becoming extremely paranoid. My dad has Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, my seven-year-old nephew has Osteomyelitis and a weak immune system, so I panic when someone in my house leaves because I have family members who are high risk.* (P36, 2020)

Although less fearful, the anxiety in the second cohort featured more uncertainty (related to the future and the unknown in relation to the various iterations of COVID-19 at that stage): "*It's worse now ... I am at school having to focus on the uncertainty of COVID and the uncertainty of how I will cope with my academics*" (P32, 2021).

Based on the qualitative data, symptoms of depression were prevalent, albeit subclinical as indicated on the HADS. Students in both cohorts described feelings of negative affect, crying as well as disturbances in both eating and sleeping patterns. Depression amongst the 2021 cohort appeared to be exacerbated by the prevalence

of loss and grief and the seeming endlessness of the pandemic. Students appeared to be grappling with the losses of the previous year in multiple areas: loved ones, social contact, academic achievement expectations, the university "experience", etc. "*At the beginning, the COVID-19 illness felt distant but now it is close to home with people I know personally having died*" (P5, 2021).

Academic pressures/challenges

In both cohorts, it was evident that students found learning challenging due to the shift to an online medium. Students reported feeling demotivated, finding it difficult to balance work/life and studies and highlighted the challenge in not having an academic structure (space). The 2021 cohort acknowledged the challenges of online learning as difficult but necessary. Students indicated that the stress of the pandemic and concerns with regard to death and ill-health added to the difficulty of the postgraduate experience, as explained by this participant:

> *My experience has only worsened. I have lost 2 friends to the virus in 2021 - they were my age. Honours in 2021 has been by far the most stressful and most competitive year of my life. Being in that environment and that pressure in the middle of the COVID devastation only added to my mental and physical health issues.* (P19, 2021)

Support

The theme of support is presented in two subthemes relating to personal and academic support.

Personal support

Students in both cohorts reported several support mechanisms that they had at home. Social support from close others was the most common support mechanism reported by participants. This included "family support structure" and support from romantic partners and friends. Several students reported that this support was not sufficient and had not addressed all their needs. The availability and use of recreational activities (exercise, taking dogs for a walk), personal interest (meditation, sermons, musical instruments) and access to resources (online streaming) were experienced by participants as support mechanisms.

Academic support

The only difference between cohorts in this respect was that students in the second cohort appeared to report fewer anxiety symptoms with regard to the need for academic support from the university. In the first cohort, the shift to online learning seemed to be more overwhelming. Perhaps, due to adaptations having been made by both the university and students to online/blended learning, this seemed to be less of an issue in the second cohort. The participants in the 2021 cohort felt that mental health support was lacking and that there was a need for more accessible mental health support to be provided.

Discussion

While a generally lowered level of mental health amongst postgraduate students has been found previously (Rummel, 2015; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012), results from this study indicate that postgraduate Psychology students' general mental health during the initial months of the pandemic and a year into the pandemic was increasingly negatively affected. Higher levels of anxiety were found across both samples. This trend is similar to that observed by Khan et al. (2020), Hamza et al. (2020) and Van de Velde et al. (2021). While the levels of depression on the HADS were subclinical, the qualitative data highlights various symptoms of depression experienced in both cohorts which could be attributed to the multiple losses (deaths and social environments) experienced during these times. These losses may also account for the moderate levels of PTSD experienced in the samples and increased PTSD symptoms in the 2021 cohort. The elevated levels of anxiety (reported in both the quantitative and qualitative data) and depression (reported in the qualitative data), are likely linked to the moderate levels of PTSD found in both cohorts. These trends were also found in a US student sample, where high levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and COVID-19-specific worry were significantly associated with PTSD symptoms (Liu et al., 2020).

Interestingly, self-efficacy decreased and post-traumatic stress symptoms increased across the samples. This can potentially be attributed to the persisting uncertainty regarding the virus, changes in lockdown levels and the country's economic situation during these times. The endlessness of the pandemic, and the associated contextual difficulties, such as higher levels of poverty, civil unrest and infrastructure challenges, appeared to have heightened students' sense of hopelessness regarding the future. Despite the endlessness and contextual difficulties experienced, students demonstrated resilience and continued to employ positive coping strategies during this time. The 2021 cohort of students used self-blame more often as a coping strategy. This may be linked to beliefs that they should have adjusted or be coping better later in the pandemic.

The results aligned with the theoretical orientation of the study. From the results it was clear that on primary appraisal, students perceived the environment as threatening. From the qualitative responses, an assessment of resource (un)availability contributed to stress and ultimately mental ill-health. Coping responses were generally positive, leading to possibly better mental health outcomes as the pandemic progressed but with increased levels of self-blame. University support strategies may have aided pacing and re-appraisal, but from the responses provided, these were not necessarily enough.

The results did highlight the success of online teaching strategies employed by the university, as the 2021 cohort were less anxious with regard to online learning. While this may reflect some positive adjustment to online learning in the 2021 cohort, it may also reflect improved teaching in the 2021 academic year, given that staff had also had time to learn and adjust.

Despite the university putting strategies in place to support students with respect to their mental health, it is evident that this support was not sufficient. While the university provided students with a mobile crisis application (app) and a toll-free line, the barriers associated with the use of such platforms need to be considered. These barriers include,

amongst others, access to an internet connection, financial implications of the app installation and usage, electricity supply, cultural barriers, under-staffing, and a lack of digital devices (Mbunge et al., 2022). These results highlight the need for universities to revise support strategies in order to make mental health services more accessible to students, especially in times of crisis. It would be useful to conduct a follow-up study to assess student mental health now that university campuses have once again opened as opportunities for face-to-face learning and socialising may have helped to lessen feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Since the pandemic and the rapid transition to remote and online learning, contact universities in South Africa have increasingly been calling for the integration of blended learning approaches. As is evident from the findings of this study, online and hybrid teaching can introduce feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression. It is vital to consider issues of staff and student mental health, resilience and coping in addition to pedagogy and content when embracing blended approaches (Naidoo, 2022).

While this study provides insight into postgraduate experiences during the pandemic, it is necessary to note that the sample was from a relatively small and particular department at one university. In addition, a repeated cross-sectional design was employed which limited within-group comparisons. It is recommended that future studies explore students' coping post-pandemic and identify any residual effects of the pandemic on student mental health using a larger and more diverse sample.

Conclusion

This study explored the mental health experiences of two cohorts of students completing an honours degree in Psychology during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the university provided students with mental health support, it is evident that this support was insufficient as symptoms of depression and anxiety were prevalent, student self-efficacy decreased, and PTSD symptoms increased over the course of the pandemic. Despite this negative mental health impact, students continued to display resilience and employed positive coping strategies, however, self-blame became more prominent as the pandemic continued. The transition to online learning improved over the course of the pandemic with students feeling less anxious in this regard. Whilst this study was conducted on postgraduate Psychology students, the findings are commensurate with student experiences in various fields from other local and international institutions (see Eloff, 2021; Laher et al., 2021; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021). These findings provide support for using the transactional model of stress and coping to understand student coping not only during the pandemic but also in the course of their postgraduate studies.

This growing body of research indicates the importance of considering student health and mental health in university strategic planning. A number of institutions in South Africa offer health services at dedicated units on campus but mental health services are often understaffed and underserviced. Since the pandemic, universities have introduced increased access to toll-free crisis lines and publicised student counselling services more widely, yet our experiences with our students have indicated

that campus services have not been able to cope with the increasing demand for mental health support. This was already the case pre-COVID but has worsened during and post the pandemic. Hence, there is a strong need for universities to prioritise mental health on campus.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand (Protocol No. H20/03/33). Both in the announcement and on accessing the link, students received the participant information sheet which detailed the aims of the study and the conditions of their participation. Students remained anonymous unless they provided details to be interviewed later. Students were provided with details for the free online and telephonic counselling services offered by the university and encouraged to use these if they felt overwhelmed.

Potential conflict of interest

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

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"Did 'Step-Up' help in stepping up?" Transition programmes as a factor to improve student academic performance

"Het 'Step-Up' werklik 'treë' vorentoe moontlik gemaak?' Oorgangsprogramme as 'n inisiatief om die akademiese prestasie van studente te verbeter

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ABSTRACT

The transition into higher education is a challenging process for many students. Students are often underprepared academically (amongst other aspects). This under-preparedness influences students' subsequent academic performance, and ultimately, overall student success. Research has shown that successful student transition into higher education can set the foundation for success at university. A transition programme (Step-Up) was offered to Bachelor of Commerce students before the start of the first semester to better prepare students academically and assist with the transition into higher education. The causal-comparative research design that was adopted demonstrated that in their first semester, the students who attended the transition programme consistently performed better academically than those who did not. Transition programmes can be a valuable form of early academic intervention that can and should be employed to cultivate student success and furthermore enable students to feel more prepared for higher education.

KEYWORDS
First-year students, transition programme, early academic intervention, causal-comparative research design, academic performance

OPSOMMING

Die oorgang na hoër onderwys is 'n uitdagende proses vir baie studente. Studente is dikwels (onder andere) akademies ondervoorbereid. Hierdie onvoorbereidheid beïnvloed die studente se daaropvolgende akademiese prestasie, en ook uiteindelike algehele studentesukses. Dit is egter bewys dat suksesvolle studente-oorgang na hoër onderwys die grondslag vir sukses op universiteit kan lê. 'n Oorgangsprogram (Step-Up) is voor die aanvang van die eerste semester aan BCom studente aangebied om hulle sodoende beter voor te berei vir universiteit, asook om te help met die oorgang na hoër onderwys. Die oorsaaklike-vergelykende navorsingsontwerp wat aangeneem is, het getoon dat studente wat die oorgangsprogram bygewoon het, deurlopend akademies beter presteer het as diegene wat dit nie bygewoon het nie. Oorgangsprogramme kan 'n waardevolle vorm van vroeë akademiese intervensie wees wat aangewend kan en behoort te word om studentesukses te kweek en studente verder in staat te stel om meer voorbereid vir hoër onderwys te voel.

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Introduction

For many students, the transition to higher education is a challenging process (Pownall et al., 2022; Thomas, 2011; Van Herpen et al., 2020; Wollscheid et al., 2021). Successful student transition into higher education can set the foundation for success at university (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Thomas, 2011). Higher education is both a new and different learning environment; students need to build new relationships with peers and lecturers and might need to redefine their learner identities and develop independent working skills (Van Herpen et al., 2020; Wollscheid et al., 2021). Literature demonstrates that there continues to be a gap between students' expectations of higher education and their experiences in higher education (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Tate & Hopkins, 2013; Thomas, 2011; Van Herpen et al., 2020). First-year undergraduate students often struggle to adapt to the academic expectations of higher education and may have difficulties grappling with the structure, independence, and content of university-level learning (Pownall et al., 2022). These first-year students may also struggle with a sense of belonging and the shift in identity that they often experience when entering university (Van Herpen et al., 2020).

Pre-tertiary teaching and learning experiences often form the foundation for expectations about tertiary education and can assist in providing students with a sense of capability and belonging (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Van Herpen et al., 2020). Even with pre-tertiary experiences providing the opportunity to foster a sense of capability about higher education, in reality, students are often underprepared *academically* to enter higher education (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Van Herpen et al., 2020), even though they may meet the entrance requirements for higher education. Insufficient student support, inequality in the schooling system (specifically in South Africa), insufficient support for academic and social adjustment were some of the reasons identified by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2020) that affected students in their transition to tertiary education and subsequent academic performance. According to Lombard (2020), there is considerable evidence that current preparation at the school level, particularly in South Africa, is inadequate in ensuring a successful transition from high school to higher education. A significant number of students find the transition difficult or lack the necessary skills and motivation to succeed in higher education (Joynt, 2018; Lombard, 2020; Nel et al., 2009).

Underprepared students entering higher education is not a new issue (and not unique to South Africa). It has remained a longstanding challenge that continues to demand attention (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Mungal & Cloete, 2016; Nelson et al., 2012). Higher education institutions have a part to play in assisting first-year students build the academic competencies necessary on entering higher education (Kift et al., 2010; Nel et al., 2009; Van Herpen et al., 2020). Development education, preparatory studies, learning assistance, basic skills programmes, and academic support programmes are some of the suggested interventions that can help students successfully transition

into higher education (Kift et al., 2010; Nel et al., 2009; Van Herpen et al., 2020). It is imperative for both institutional and student success that higher education institutions support students to successfully transition into higher education (Coertjens et al., 2017; Gale & Parker, 2014). This successful transition can partly be achieved through the implementation of initiatives such as transition programmes. To facilitate healthy and productive transitions into higher education, students should also be provided with the opportunity to actively participate in their transition experiences (Pownall et al., 2022; Richardson & Tate, 2012). The literature cited above demonstrates that students often struggle with the transition to higher education and therefore often struggle to adapt to their first year of study.

It is argued in this study that transition programmes can assist to prepare students more effectively for higher education. Additionally, transition programmes can be regarded as a form of early academic intervention, if it enables students to be academically better prepared and subsequently lead to increased academic performance. This study, therefore, contributes to the knowledge regarding the effectiveness of student transition programmes, as a form of early academic intervention, on the subsequent academic performance of the students.

Given the problem discussed above, the following research question guided the present study: *Does attending a transition programme affect the academic results of first-year BCom students at a private higher education institution?*

Literature review

Transition into higher education

Higher education institutions should assist students entering higher education with the transition into higher education (Kift et al., 2010; Nel et al., 2009; Van Herpen et al., 2020), as an effective transition could assist student success. Student retention can be promoted through the implementation of support systems that foster environments that promote student success (Ferris, 2018; Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) argues that higher education institutions should aim to help students continue with their studies to enable student success. As discussed above, one way that institutions can provide students with support systems is through the adoption of transition programmes (Joynt, 2018). One of the main threats to student retention is academic failure, which can result from various factors, including under-preparedness (Council on Higher Education, 2013). Although it can be a challenging phenomenon to mitigate (Joynt, 2018), under-preparedness can be addressed through the implementation of transition programmes (Joynt, 2018; Nel et al., 2009). During the transition from high school to tertiary education, students need support to navigate the processes of separation, transition and incorporation (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1988) further recommends that this engagement with students should happen within the first six weeks of the start of the first year, for them to receive maximum benefit from such support.

The transition process into higher education comprises four phases (Clercq et al., 2018; Coertjens et al., 2017; Nicholson, 1990). These are preparation, encounter,

adjustment and stabilisation. During the preparation phase, students think about and decide on their chosen qualification and where to enrol. Students who are accepted to study then enter the encounter phase, where they are exposed to a new learning environment and a different academic culture (Van Herpen et al., 2020). The encounter phase usually takes place during the first few weeks at university and often requires students to deal with the friction between their perceptions and their current experiences, and the subsequent formation of their identities as university students (Van Herpen et al., 2020). Furthermore, they are likely to struggle with the ability to navigate the demands and opportunities higher education presents (Coertjens et al., 2017; Gale & Parker, 2014). The adjustment phase occurs when students gradually adjust their attitudes and behaviours during the first year. Finally, when students demonstrate the behaviours and attitudes necessary for obtaining satisfying social and successful academic outcomes, the stabilisation phase occurs (Christie et al., 2016).

The present study investigated the effect of an intervention that occurred between the preparation and encounter phases of the transition into higher education. As illustrated above, this is a vulnerable and unstable time for students, but it also presents a window of opportunity, as students are open to learning and taking on new learning patterns and behaviour and defining their learner identities (Van Herpen et al., 2020). If transition programmes have the ability to assist students in achieving better academic results (or at least enabling students to be more academically prepared for higher education), they can be considered as a form of early academic intervention that ultimately enables and promotes higher levels of student success and retention in higher education.

Early academic interventions

Tinto (2014) argues that if access is given to higher education, the responsibility, or even obligation, rests with the institution to do everything in its power to ensure that the student gets the necessary support to be successful in their studies. This underlines the need to implement effective interventions that will assist and improve student success (van Zyl et al., 2020). Interventions within higher education institutions can exist for various motives, including behavioural, financial, personal and academic reasons (Campbell & Hussey, 2015). Interventions in higher education can broadly be categorised as non-academic and academic (Braun & Drew Sellers, 2012; Flinchbaugh et al., 2012). Non-academic interventions are typically centred around generic skills or motivational techniques. Academic interventions on the other hand aim to address an academic deficiency: either filling gaps in inadequate prior knowledge or attempting to prepare students for future academic endeavours (Joynt, 2018). Academic interventions are primarily directed towards improving student academic performance (Campbell & Hussey, 2015). Academic interventions can vary in duration and timing (i.e. when the intervention takes place): before, during or as extended-term interventions (Joynt, 2018). For the present study, the intervention was implemented during the transition phase into higher education and aligns with Tinto's (1988) recommendation about engaging students within the first six weeks of their first year in higher education.

Studies done in the fields of accounting (Jones & Fields, 2001; Joynt, 2022) and micro-economics (Campbell & Hussey, 2015; Smith & Ranchhod, 2012) have illustrated a positive association between attending an intervention and subsequent academic performance.

This suggests that if potentially underprepared students have been identified and an intervention is effective, offering an early academic intervention can be a proactive solution to addressing under-preparedness (Ferris, 2018; Joynt, 2018). This type of intervention can be defined as an academic activity in addition to the main curriculum, aiming to prepare students to be better equipped for survival in the mainstream curriculum by providing support before the introduction of the mainstream curriculum (Maphosa, 2014). The present study investigated a transition programme (referred to as the Step-Up programme) that was offered on a voluntary participation basis to all first-year Bachelor of Commerce students before the start of their first semester at a campus of a multi-campus private higher education institution in South Africa. Since all students met the entrance requirements for a Bachelor of Commerce degree, and Step-Up was offered during the transition phase into higher education, the intervention was not regarded as a bridging course or 'boot camp' (Jackson, 2014) or a requirement to gain access to further studies. The rationale behind the Step-Up transition programme (discussed below) is to better prepare students academically (amongst other aspects of development), and the current study argues that if the attendance of Step-Up produced better academic results, then it could be regarded as a (valuable) early academic intervention.

The Step-Up transition programme

The Step-Up transition programme aims to address the shift between secondary school and higher education. Transition programmes have proven to help students connect to peers and lecturers, feel at home in higher education, and perform better academically (Thomas, 2011; Van Herpen et al., 2020). However, it is suggested that the extent to which transition programmes affected academic performance varied according to the type of programme, the measures adopted, and the group characteristics (Porter & Swing, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2013). The focus of the Step-Up programme was to better prepare students academically by introducing students to various topics dealt with in three of the key modules of the first semester of study, and at the same time, prepare the students more effectively for tertiary education generally.

First-year Bachelor of Commerce students were provided with the opportunity of registering for and attending Step-Up sessions for two weeks before the start of the first semester. The modules presented were Business Management, Economics, and Accounting (traditionally challenging modules for first-year students). Each module was presented by an experienced first-year lecturer, with lecturing material that was developed and adapted from the prescribed materials for the various modules. Lectures took place in the mornings with two-hour time slots per module, with a total of between ten and fourteen hours per module during the two weeks. The aim of the Step-Up programme was to deal with the basic concepts and principles of each of these

modules and serve as an introduction to the formal academic work that would be dealt with in the first semester. Many of the concepts taught in the Step-Up programme are introduced at secondary school level, however, many Bachelor of Commerce students do not necessarily complete these modules at secondary school level.[2] Therefore, there is often very little foundational knowledge for students to refer to when these modules are taught during the semester. The Step-Up programme aims to address this 'foundational knowledge problem' by introducing some of these concepts before they are covered in detail during the semester as part of the formal curriculum. Step-Up furthermore aims to assist with the successful academic transition to higher education by making students comfortable with the notion of higher education, the expectations and responsibilities of students, attending lectures, and how work is taught.

It is hoped that the experience and the knowledge that students gain during these two weeks will help them (amongst other areas of holistic development) to be better prepared academically for higher education, which may subsequently lead to better academic performance during the semester. Various studies found that student transition programmes were an example of good practice, applicable to a variety of learning contexts and that the positive results from such transition programmes are sustained for at least 12 months, positively influencing student retention (Nelson et al., 2012), shaping students' expectations and preparing them academically for the transition into higher education (Joynt, 2022; Mungal & Cloete, 2016; Thomas, 2011).

Methodology

A causal-comparative research design was adopted for this study. A causal-comparative study aims to explore and identify relationships between attending the intervention (Step-Up) and the first-semester academic results (Salkind, 2010; Terre Blanche et al., 2006; Tudor, 2018) to determine reasons for the current status of the phenomenon under study (Johnson, 2000; Salkind, 2010). Causal-comparative studies are also referred to as *ex post facto* research as the study is done retrospectively because the event or intervention already occurred (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Johnson, 2000; Tudor, 2018). Causal-comparative studies investigate whether individuals in one group are different in one or more characteristics than the individuals in another group (Morris & Wester, 2018).

The aim of this study was to determine the effect of the Step-Up transition programme on a group of students by comparing the academic results of the students who chose to attend the programme with the results of those who did not attend the programme (Salkind, 2010). This causal-comparative study cannot state that a true cause-and-effect relationship exists between attending Step-Up and first-semester academic results (as many factors can potentially influence academic performance), but it does provide insight into what may have caused a difference to occur (or not) and

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2   Completing Business Management, Economics and Accounting at secondary school level is not included among the entrance requirements for a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the institution in which the study was conducted.

provides an answer when investigating the possible differences between the control and experiment groups (Salkind, 2010).

It is also relevant to note that groups being compared in causal-comparative research studies are already formed (Johnson, 2000; Morris & Wester, 2018), the researchers have no control over who is placed in the control and experimental groups, therefore sampling is not completely random (Salkind, 2010), and results cannot be generalized. As the semester results of both the control and experimental groups were available, no sampling was done: the complete datasets of the two groups were compared. Using the complete datasets of the groups contributes to strengthening the validity and reliability of the results of the study. Matching was furthermore adopted to strengthen validity by comparing the results at various assessment points, and module by module, instead of just the overall averages of all three modules (Salkind, 2010; Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

Causal-comparative studies present certain limitations, and these relate to this study in the following manner: the research took place *ex post facto*, therefore the team could not manipulate the implementation of the Step-Up programme (Salkind, 2010). There could be other factors that influence the academic performance of students, such as the lecturer, class attendance, support for students at home, adapting to higher education in general and so on, therefore it can never be certain that attending Step-Up is the cause of better academic results (Salkind, 2010). A counter-argument to this could be that both the attending group and the non-attending group would be exposed to these other factors in equal measure.

Data collection

The population for this study was first-year students enrolled for a Bachelor of Commerce degree at a private higher education institution in South Africa. As discussed above, certain students chose to be part of the Step-Up programme and these formed the experiment group, whilst others did not or registered too late into the academic year to be a part of the Step-Up programme, and they formed the control group. Existing data were used for this study, in the form of the average of various assessment scores of both the experiment and control groups throughout the first semester of 2022.

Various assessment points exist throughout the first semester at the institution. Typically, two formative assessments are held (which can either be a test or an assignment) and a summative assessment (exam) concludes the semester. The scores of these three assessment points were used as data and analysed. A distinction was made between the scores of the three modules that formed part of the Step-Up programme (to ensure matching). Descriptive statistical methods were used to test and compare mean, mode and median score differences between the control and experiment groups to determine whether one group is on average greater or less than the other group (Morris & Wester, 2018; Salkind, 2010).

A total of 227 students registered for the first year of a Bachelor of Commerce degree; 168 of whom completed all three assessment points for all three of the modules that formed part of the study. Of the 168 students who completed all three assessment

points for all three modules, 19[3] students attended the Step-Up programme, and 149 students did not. The other 59 students that either deregistered, changed qualifications, missed a formative assessment opportunity, or did not write the first summative exam opportunity, were excluded from the study.

Results and analysis

The descriptive statistical analysis that was done by calculating the mean, median and mode of each module illustrates that all three modules present normal distribution characteristics around the mean (as illustrated below). This normal distribution is mostly consistent for all three modules, in all three assessment points, irrespective of whether it is the Step-Up or non-Step-Up group. This normal distribution characteristic enhances the validity of the two datasets (Salkind, 2010). It can further be noted that in all three modules, students who attended the Step-Up programme, performed, on average, consistently better than those who did not attend the Step-Up programme.

The results and analysis presented below take into consideration only the number of the Step-Up students who attended or wrote all the assessments (19 students). Also included in these results and analysis are those students who did not participate in the Step-Up programme (149 students).

For Accounting (results below), formative assessment 1 (F1) is done by way of an open-book assignment, so these marks are often higher than those obtained for a closed book, timed test, such as formative assessment 2 (F2).

Table 1: Step-Up vs non-Step-Up Accounting results

	Accounting (non-Step-Up students)			Accounting (Step-Up students)		
	F1	F2	S	F1	F2	S
mean	79.94	63.63	52.90	87.75	69.25	59.20
median	83.00	64.00	52.00	92	71.5	55
mode	88	63	65	97	75	47

The formative assessment 2 (F2) marks are the interesting ones to note as it can be argued that with open-book assignments all students have the same resources available to them while completing the assignment. However, in a test, learned knowledge needs to be reproduced under exam conditions. Step-Up aimed to introduce certain key concepts students often struggle with, especially later in the module. The effect of Step-Up can be seen in these results as the introduction to these concepts during Step-Up assisted students to have a better understanding of the 'basics' of Accounting. The conditions that exist in the test would also be present during the summative assessment (S) (exam). The Step-Up group yet again performed better than the non-Step-Up group in the summative assessment.

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3   While 29 students attended Step-Up, the aim was to study the Step-Up students who wrote all assessment points, and that was 19.

In the Business Management module (results below), the first formative assessment (F1) is written as a closed-book test, and the results again demonstrate students' ability to reproduce learned knowledge. It can be argued that the initial exposure to key terms and concepts during Step-Up, which were (again) later taught during formal lecturers (that these students then had the benefit of learning about for a second time), might have helped students become more familiar with concepts that they were required to study for the test. The Step-Up students performed better in the first formative assessment (F1), as well as in the second formative assessment (an assignment), and that trend continued through to the summative assessment.

Table 2: Step-Up vs non-Step-Up Business Management results

	Business Management (non-Step-Up students)			Business Management (Step-Up students)		
	F1	F2	S	F1	F2	S
mean	68.87	60.05	66.88	75.15	64.70	72.90
median	68.00	60.00	68.00	75	65	74
mode	70	50	78	68	77	66

The Economics module (results below) only has tests as part of the formative assessment structure (F1 and F2), requiring students to reproduce knowledge under exam conditions for all assessments in this module. A consistent mark difference can be observed: Step-Up group performing on average better than the non-Step-Up group. It can also be argued, as mentioned above for Business Management, that the introduction to key concepts during Step-Up could have helped the students understand them better, which enabled them to obtain higher marks for Economics than the students who did not attend Step-Up.

Table 3: Step-Up vs non-Step-Up Economics results

	Economics (non-Step-Up students)			Economics (Step-Up students)		
	F1	F2	S	F1	F2	S
mean	69.12	54.09	43.03	74.55	61.55	48.95
median	68.00	52.00	39.00	76	66.5	45
mode	82	37	48	90	68	46

As discussed in the methodology section, causal-comparative research does not prove cause-and-effect results, however, it does provide valuable insights into the causal relationship between the variables (Salkind, 2010). Through a comparison of results for three different modules for the group that attended Step-Up with those who did not attend Step-Up, the results of this study demonstrate that there is a causal relationship between attending the Step-Up programme and subsequent academic performance during the first semester.

Discussion

The results above are significant on various levels. They illustrate that students who attended Step-Up performed consistently better academically than those who did not. It can be argued that the introduction of the Step-Up programme influences the subsequent academic performance of first-year students. As demonstrated in the literature review, students are typically underprepared for tertiary education (Lombard, 2020), and this has dire consequences for the success rate of first-year students (Moosa & Aloka, 2022). It is clear that the two-week intervention programme can provide support to better prepare these students for tertiary education. This can also then serve as an important first step in the direction towards addressing the low pass rates among first-year students.

Confidence is an important ability in most endeavours but especially so in tertiary education, and it is inextricably connected to student success (Clercq et al., 2018; Jackson, 2014; York et al., 2015). The results above may also implicitly reflect some of the confidence that students have gained by attending the Step-Up programme. Having participated in Step-Up, a student's confidence in their abilities at tertiary level may be boosted as it grants them prior knowledge of and time to understand the subject at a more convenient pace. It can therefore be argued that the student would be more likely to be successful in that subject. This introduction of 'prior knowledge' is a key component of the intended outcomes of Step-Up, and students who attended the programme would also now possess the prior knowledge that translates to higher levels of confidence. Lastly, on a personal level, the results confirmed the convictions the presenters of the Step-Up programme have always had – that the attendees are indeed provided with a chance to '*step up*' into their tertiary studies. While the programme has been running for about six years, this is the first conclusive evidence to have assessed that the programme has lasting academic merit.

It is, however, also relevant to consider other possible reasons that the Step-Up students performed better academically. One important consideration is that the more diligent students would have chosen to attend Step-Up,[4] and it could therefore be argued that it is logical that they would then perform better academically. On the other hand, this could be balanced out by the students who may have had one or more of the Step-Up subjects offered at school and therefore opted to not attend Step-Up as they believed that they had the required prior knowledge. Similar to the discussion on confidence above, it is relevant to consider that the students gained the appropriate *mentality* for tertiary education from attending Step-Up, so participating in Step-Up had the effect of leaving students feeling more prepared for their studies. This feeling of being better prepared can be what contributed to their subsequent academic success (Thomas, 2011; Van Herpen et al., 2020). Therefore, the importance and relevance of Step-Up might lie not just in introducing students to prior (academic) knowledge, but rather fostering the correct mentality and feeling of preparedness.

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4 Step-Up attendance was voluntary.

One other factor that might be relevant is that students who registered late for the academic year would automatically not have been able to attend Step-Up, as only students who had registered about one month before the start of the semester received invitations to attend Step-Up. This would also mean that students who registered late might have even missed a part of the semester (and that influenced subsequent academic performance), while students in Step-Up would have all been ready to attend class from the first day. A further argument can also be made that the students who were registered on time attended Step-Up and were therefore (as discussed above) more prepared for their tertiary studies, as they would have been well-informed and comfortable with the new environment by the end of the Step-Up programme. This would have given them a two-week head start to get comfortable with the new environment as opposed to other students – so it can be argued that the phases of transition discussed above (Clercq et al., 2018; Coertjens et al., 2017; Nicholson, 1990) occurred earlier for the students attending Step-Up. This initial introduction (irrespective of the academic goals) would have made them more prepared for the new phase, and they would have felt more integrated into the system of tertiary education.

Since participation in the Step-Up programme comes with no academic risks (no assessments, homework), it can be regarded as a valuable platform that affords students the time to find their feet, understand how tertiary education works and adjust their expectations to the experience (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Tate & Hopkins, 2013; Thomas, 2011; Van Herpen et al., 2020). With adjusted expectations, students are more prepared in terms of what to expect when the first formal lecture starts and can therefore more easily adjust to their roles as tertiary students.

Conclusions

It is evident that there are distinct benefits to students attending an academic transition programme. The benefits are seen at several levels, but this study focussed on the increased academic performance of those students attending the Step-Up transition programme. For the institution, the question can now justifiably be asked whether the programme should be extended to other campuses, other qualifications, or possibly even made mandatory for certain students, given the benefit that it can have on improving students' transitions into tertiary education. Other higher education institutions may also take note of the results and use the present as a case study to guide them in their deliberations on introducing transition programmes to their incoming first years (that go further than merely 'orientation' and spend time on crucial academic preparation) to ensure student success.

There are several other topics relating to the above that warrant further research. For example, the results of future Step-Up participants should be analysed similarly to the above to create longitudinal evidence of the academic influence that Step-Up has had. What would also be valuable would be getting to hear from Step-Up attendees in their own words how they experienced the programme and whether they left the programme feeling more or less equipped and prepared for tertiary education.

Transition programmes such as Step-Up serve as an early academic intervention and have an immediate and potentially lasting effect on students' subsequent academic performance. It can lay the foundation for successful student transition into higher education and therefore equip the student to be academically successful in their first year of tertiary studies.

Ethics statement
Ethical clearance for the study was obtained within the institution in which the study took place [R. 00007 (REC)]. All participant information was anonymised throughout by using only student numbers as identifiers when working with the data. To ensure the accuracy of the reported data, two other researchers performed statistical analysis of the data.

Potential conflict of interest
No conflict of interest.

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South African private universities: The unique challenges of private university first-generation students – The unique opportunity for private higher education institutions

Universités privées sud-africaines : Défis uniques des étudiants de première génération des universités privées et opportunité unique pour les établissements d'enseignement supérieur privés

Linda Meyer[1] & Birgit Schreiber[2]

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the formidable obstacles first-generation students (FGS) encounter within the South African private higher education sector which locates the study on which it is based in the literature around the overall experience of first-generation students. Extensive research has underscored the various challenges faced by FGS, posing hindrances to their academic success in higher education. FGS often grapple with a complex journey fraught with challenges around finances, social adjustment, and epistemological access, to name a few. This research adopts a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional research design. The study utilises a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire supplemented by open-ended questions to gather data from a sample of 1 208 students. The study reveals that close to one-third (30.5%) of the sample found the academic requirements challenging, just less than two-thirds (63.6%) found the coursework overwhelming, and more than half (57.7%) received support from faculty and academic advisors. In terms of financial challenges, less than a quarter (21%) indicated that they face financial challenges most of the time. The results of this study are reflective of similar research on the challenges experienced by South African FGS. The authors suggest that more research is needed to examine the unique challenges the FGS experience at private universities in South Africa. Moreover, the authors argue that an overall systemic and structural transformation is needed to enable institutional changes that would ease the challenges of all students.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se penche sur les obstacles considérables que rencontrent les étudiants de première génération (EPG) dans le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur privé sud-africain. Il situe cette étude dans la littérature consacrée à l'expérience globale des étudiants de première génération. De nombreuses recherches ont mis en évidence les divers défis auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants

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de première génération et qui entravent leur réussite dans l'enseignement supérieur. Les EPG sont souvent confrontés à un parcours complexe parsemé de défis financiers, d'adaptation sociale et d'accès épistémologique, pour n'en citer que quelques-uns. Cette étude adopte une approche quantitative avec une conception de recherche transversale. L'étude s'appuie sur un questionnaire à échelle de Likert en 5 points complété par des questions ouvertes pour recueillir les données auprès d'un échantillon de 1208 étudiants. L'étude révèle que près d'un tiers (30,5 %) de l'échantillon a trouvé les exigences académiques difficiles, un peu moins des deux tiers (63,6 %) ont trouvé les activités de cours écrasantes, et plus de la moitié (57,7 %) ont reçu un soutien de la part des professeurs et des conseillers académiques. En ce qui concerne les défis financiers, moins d'un quart (21%) ont indiqué qu'ils étaient confrontés à des défis financiers la plupart du temps. Les résultats de cette étude reflètent des recherches similaires sur les difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants sud-africains de première génération. Les auteurs suggèrent que d'autres recherches sont nécessaires pour examiner les défis uniques auxquels les étudiants étrangers sont confrontés dans les universités privées d'Afrique du Sud. En outre, les auteurs soutiennent qu'une transformation systémique et structurelle globale est nécessaire pour permettre des changements institutionnels qui atténueraient les difficultés de tous les étudiants.

MOTS-CLÉS

Enseignement supérieur sud-africain, enseignement supérieur privé, étudiants de première génération, défis, opportunités

Introduction

In South Africa's diverse higher education landscape, a growing emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity has led to an increasing enrolment of students from various socio-economic backgrounds; among these, are first-generation students (FGS). A development which is much applauded, supported and needed to improve communities and South African socio-economic growth. First-generation students are often defined as the first in their families to pursue higher education (Pascarella, et al., 2004) and have emerged as a distinct and vital demographic to grow the living standards and socio-economic resources of South African communities. Lucier (2019) describes a first-generation student as one who is in the process of getting a university qualification and emerging from a family where neither parent has ever attained a tertiary-level qualification. As South African universities endeavour to accommodate a more diverse student body, it is crucial to understand and address the unique challenges these first-generation students encounter. According to Christie et al. (2008), such students face unfamiliar challenges when entering tertiary education and find little cultural or social capital to support their efforts. Yet others (Hands, 2020; O'Shea, 2016, p. 59; Richards, 2022) assert that FGS can draw "upon existing and established capital reserves in this transition to higher education" and draw on prior and existing resources and can readily adjust to the new challenges given impactful support.

The term "first-generation student" is widely recognised in educational literature (Pascarella et al., 2004), particularly in the context of South Africa, where historical disparities have posed significant hurdles to equitable access to higher education (Mahlomaholo, 2019). Historically, disadvantaged groups have often had limited access to quality secondary education, perpetuating social inequalities. Efforts have been made to redress these imbalances, for instance, the 'Education White Paper 3' of 1997 (DoE,

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1997) at the policy and national levels and various more recent examples at the local institutional level, for instance, the 'First-Generation Commission 2008' at Stellenbosch University (Heymann & Carolissen, 2011). First-generation students remain vulnerable to various academic, financial, and social challenges, including discursive issues and how this group is constructed and referenced (Soudien, 2010). There are emerging voices that increasingly focus on institutional and structural issues around how FGS are supported and how FGS continue to be constructed within deficit discourses (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016).

Wilbur and Roscigno (2016) opine that first-generation students are often at a disadvantage when compared to non-first-generation peers. Such disadvantages include inadequate information around and lack of exposure to university life. Bourdieu's cultural and social capital notion is frequently cited as an explanatory model to illuminate the challenges. Bourdieu's notions on cultural and social capital are premised on ideas of cultural under-preparedness of FGS around the type of knowledge and dispositions required to navigate the higher education environment. Phillips et al. (2020) highlight the psychological and academic stressors incurred by FGS and suggests that the "cultural mismatch contributes to worse experiences and academic outcomes among first-generation students and that these disparities persist even until graduation" (Phillips et al., 2020, p. 1112).

The experiences of first-generation students in South Africa, despite the country's progressive higher education policies, persist to include various challenges (van Zyl-Schalekamp & Mthombeni, 2015). While FGS can mobilise unique resources, it is recognised that their experiences may significantly impact their success rate in higher education (Hands, 2020; O'Shea, 2016; Richards, 2022; van Zyl-Schalekamp & Mthombeni, 2015).

This research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining the significant challenges that first-generation students encounter within the South African higher education system, focusing on their experiences at a private higher education institution. Our focus is on one of South Africa's leading private higher education institutions with a diverse student body of 30 000. The findings of this research inform strategies and interventions to enhance the educational experiences of first-generation students, thereby fostering a more accessible, inclusive and equitable higher education landscape in South Africa. In addition, the authors compare and seek to generalize the challenges experienced by FSG to highlight the systemic and structural necessary efforts to shape a tertiary learning environment that is supportive of all students. This is a unique opportunity for private higher education institutions in South Africa.

Literature
Ives et al. (2020) contend that the educational experiences of first-generation students are influenced by a multitude of factors, including financial constraints, epistemological access, a sense of belonging, and family conflicts, to name a few. Additionally, students encounter a myriad of challenges during their transition from high school to higher education, which encompasses differences in learning practices and class dynamics,

discursive usage by lecturers that may create language barriers, and the prevailing institutional culture (Naong et al., 2009). According to Naong et al. (2009), first-year students in South African universities face challenges such as feelings of isolation, difficulties in adapting to independent life, time management, and the management of social and cultural diversity, as well as social and family expectations.

This study explores various factors that shape the experiences of first-generation students, ultimately impacting their academic journey. The various factors are grouped here into socio-economic and financial challenges, academic preparedness and academic support. Familial poverty can adversely affect the kind of financial support a student can mobilise, thus impacting their ability to focus on academic success. This is reflected in various studies, citing financial and socio-economic challenges leading to student stress (Liamputtong, 2011; Noang, et al., 2009). A study on first-generation students revealed that financial challenges are particularly acute for them, often forcing them to take on extra jobs to make ends meet, worrying about their families' financial coping and compromising on essential requirements, like food, Wi-Fi access and accommodation due to financial challenges. This is against the backdrop of a high drop-out rate in South Africa's higher education institutions (Motala, 2017), where barely half of the admitted students complete their degree programmes. Yoganathan (2017) opines that over 40% of students either drop out or never graduate from higher education due to numerous issues related to financial challenges. First-generation students, in particular, may face barriers related to living in off-campus or far-from-campus accommodation, which impacts transportation costs, class attendance, and the ability to build social and supportive relationships on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004).

A second issue discussed here as creating challenges for FGS involves academic preparedness and accessing support (Hands, 2020). First-generation university students often have had a less privileged high school experience, exacerbating their challenges adapting to university teaching and learning culture. Academic challenges, including new pedagogies, difficulties in note-taking, and fast-paced and impersonal teaching methods, are common among first-year students (Modipane, 2011). Morrow (2007, 2009) adds issues around epistemological access as critical in the success of first-generation students, students from disadvantaged contexts and first-year students in general, which is also supported by Lewin and Mayoyo (2014).

The transition from high school to higher education brings forth a host of new responsibilities for first-year students, including increased independence and decision-making without parental guidance. First-generation students often straddle two worlds: expectations of success within their families, and the unfamiliarity of the academic world. This duality can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression, affecting their sense of belonging in both realms.

South African private universities

Private universities were originally designed to meet vocational training needs and then grew into a for-profit system (Kruss, 2004; Mabizela, 2002, 2007). However, the private higher education sector has reinvented itself to become "important role players in the

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South Africa higher education landscape" (Bezuidenhout et al., 2013, p. 275). The private higher education institutions receive no financial support from the public national fiscus in South Africa. They are thus reliant on their own strategy and quality provision to deliver on their promised student success. Bezuidenhout et al. (2013) highlight that little research has been undertaken to examine the main drivers of success in this sector and conducted a study to explore the motivation for the choices of students who enrol in private higher education institutions. Their results (Bezuidenhout, et al., 2013) suggest that safety and security conditions, academic reputation, and reasonable fees were among the key factors motivating students to choose private over public universities in South Africa.

There has been an enormous need to expand the higher education sector in SA. Private higher education institutions have responded to this need by providing relevant courses and degrees and doing so in ways that support student success. Currently (CHE, 2022; DHET, 2019), there are 131 private universities and 26 public universities in South Africa (CHE, 2022). In 2019, the higher education sector comprised 1 074 912 students in the public sector and 208 978 in the private sector, which is about 16.3% of students in private higher education institutions and 83.7% enrolled in public institutions (CHE, 2022; DHET, p. 9). There are many similarities in these sectors (staffing numbers, student demographics, etc.) and also pass rates. The key difference is that students receive no government grant or funding if they enrol in private higher education institutions.

This study focuses on the challenges of first-generation students in private higher education in South Africa, where institutions do not receive government subsidies and their students do not receive government grants (like NSFAS, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme). Consequently, private higher education institutions that enrol students from low socio-economic backgrounds face unique challenges and must be deliberate in supporting their first-generation students. High drop-out rates (Motala, 2017) and extended graduation timelines due to student challenges place financial constraints on students and potentially delay student graduation and success (Uleanya et al., 2011; Uleanya & Gamede, 2018; Uleanya et al., 2019).

This article suggests that much more research needs to be done to understand the challenges faced by students at private institutions. However, the authors also point out that this is a unique opportunity for private institutions that are perhaps more agile to respond to the entire student experience with a more attuned and supportive learning context to support all students. These ideas are premised on the suggestion that the learning context needs to adjust to the diverse and uniquely challenged and resourced students entering higher education (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016).

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the challenges first-generation students face at Rosebank College, a private higher education institution in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Research design

The quantitative approach facilitated the collection of structured numerical data, which can be subjected to statistical analysis to derive meaningful insights. We opted for a cross-sectional research design to capture a snapshot of the experiences and challenges of first-generation students, gathering data at a single point in time.

Research site

Rosebank College is a private university status higher education institution with nine campuses spread across South Africa, with six faculties and 28 000 students enrolled in undergraduate contact teaching and learning degrees.

Participants

The target population comprised the 28 000 students registered at this private higher education institution. From the submitted 1 300 respondents, 1 208 remained valid responses, altogether making *N* = 1208, which is 4.31% of the overall population.

Survey instrument

The online survey took less than 10 minutes to complete and had 3 sections. Section A asked the participants about biographical information and demographics, section B focused on their perceptions of academic load and their experienced challenges around managing their demands, and section C focused on the kind of support they access and receive. We employed questions with Likert scale-type responses and also included two open-ended questions that enabled responses in text form. The Likert scale responses ranged from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree", offering a spectrum of five responses.

The questionnaire encompassed items related to academic challenges, financial obstacles, social support, and personal experiences. Additionally, two open-ended questions were integrated into the questionnaire, enabling participants to provide qualitative insights and share their personal experiences. These questions were structured to encourage participants to elaborate on their challenges and experiences, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of their perspectives.

Data collection

A cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey, ethical clearance and the option to take part or opt-out, together with the survey link, was sent via email to all students registered at Rosebank College during March and April 2023. The participants could click on the survey link and, by doing so, consented to take part in the survey. Participants could withdraw or discontinue at any point with impunity. The survey was kept open until we collected data from a sample of 1 300 students (5%), providing a representative cross-section of the student population.

Analysis

The gathered data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 27. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies,

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were computed to summarise and interpret the data. Furthermore, inferential statistical analyses were employed to investigate relationships and associations between variables.

Prior to full-scale data collection, a pilot test was executed to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot testing phase was then used to refine the survey instruments.

Ethical clearance was received from the Ethics Committee at Rosebank College. The survey instrument and consent letters were distributed to all campuses using an online platform, ensuring respondent anonymity and informing students of the study's purpose, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Results

Results are presented in graphs and tables, offering a comprehensive visual representation of the findings. For reasons of scope and length of this article, only the data of the FGS are reported, and the qualitative responses are omitted. These will be the focus of another paper.

Demographic profile

The demographic profile of the participants included their age, academic programme, and the year of study for which they were registered. The sample size is 1 208 students, as shown in Table 1. Findings, as reflected in Table 1, reveal that a majority of students were relatively young, with 80% of students between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age. Of the 80%, 75% of them were first-generation students. The Faculty of Education predominates, with 50% (599 respondents) of the students majoring in Education and of the 50%, 49% are first-generation students. The second faculty is Commerce, reflecting 30% of the sample (363 respondents); 35% (127 respondents) of whom were first-generation students. The ICT faculty has the lowest number of first-generation students, with 6% (22) respondents. It was found that 30% of students are first-generation students. Further research is needed to establish characteristics which explain the discrepancy in the number of first-generation students in South African higher education in both private and public tertiary institutions.

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

Sample (N = 1208)			
Characteristics	**Group**	**Number of sample (N) (percentage % of sample)**	**FGSs of the overall sample (N = 370 = 30%)**
Age	Under 18 18 – 24 25 – 34 35 – 44 45 or older	5 (0%) 972 (80%) 177 (15%) 46 (4%) 8 (1%)	1 (0%) 277 (75%) 69 (19%) 21 (6%) 2 (1%)

Sample (N = 1208)			
Faculty/Programme	Commerce	363 (30%)	127 (35%)
	Education	599 (50%)	181 (49%)
	Humanities	138 (11%)	40 (10%)
	ICT	108 (09%)	22 (6%)
Year of study	First Year	542 (45%)	170 (46%)
	Second Year	304 (25%)	96 (26%)
	Third Year	234 (19%)	64 (17%)
	Fourth Year	100 (100%)	28 (8%)
	Other	28 (2%)	12 (3%)

Academic pressure and support for first-generation students

In response to students experiencing academic pressures, Figure 1 depicts the findings that 30.5% of students found academic requirements challenging, while 33.1% of students could neither agree nor disagree; however, 36.4% of students found the academic requirements not challenging. Asked about feeling overwhelmed, it appears that 63.3% of the respondents indicated that they indeed felt overwhelmed, and 16.4% disagreed with feeling overwhelmed (see Figure 1). In terms of receiving academic support, 57.7% indicated that they received academic support from academic support staff at Rosebank College, and only 17.1% indicated that they hadn't receive academic support (see Figure 1).
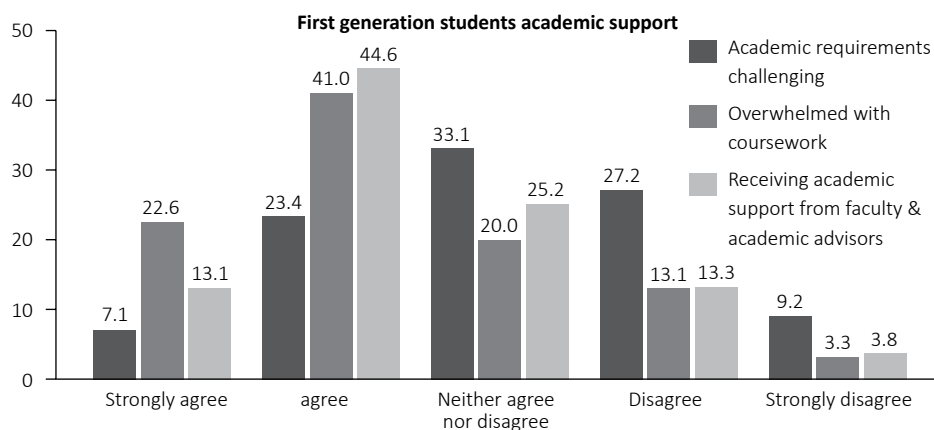
Figure 1: Information about academic load, challenges and support

Financial challenges

Respondents were asked if they faced financial challenges that affected their ability to attend classes on campus. Figure 2 below indicates that 21% of FGS report financial challenges that impact their ability to attend class. However, 29% indicated that they sometimes or rarely experience financial challenges, and 48% of FGS reported that they "never" had to face financial challenges that affect their ability to attend classes.

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I face financial challenges that affect my ability to attend classes on Campus
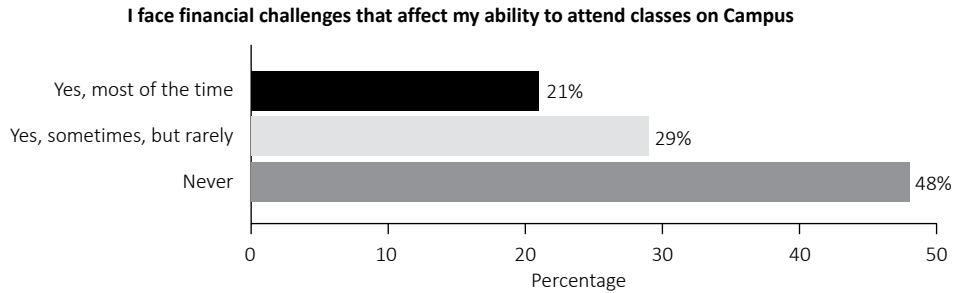
Figure 2: Financial challenges experienced by FGS in this sample

Discussion

The literature and research concur that first-generation students (FGS) face unique challenges that can be clustered into financial, academic, epistemological and social issues (Case et al., 2018; Hands, 2020; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016; Lewin & Mayoyo, 2014; Mabizela, 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2007; Naong et al., 2009; O'Shea, 2016). The results of this study underscore these findings and align with the national and international findings around challenges FGSs face in higher education institutions. Consequently, specific academic, social and financial support and attuned pedagogy are required to assist FGS with academic challenges.

Moreover, the overall results of our study suggest that, indeed, FGS do experience difficulties around managing the academic load and also find the academic demands challenging. In addition, financial challenges are some of the significant problems the FGS faces. Liamputtong (2011) concurs that financial pressure is one of the stressful factors that impact the success of students in higher education.

To mitigate these challenges, private higher education institutions would benefit from emboldening their efforts to support the unique needs of the FGS. There is a need to develop financial aid, and scholarship programmes to engage the South African government and extend the NSFAS to students in private higher education, targeting first-generation students. This will alleviate the financial burdens and help cover expenses related to transportation, data access, and tuition fees. Private higher education must create initiatives involving the families of first-generation students in the higher education process. These initiatives can help manage family pressures and improve family support for FGS educational journeys. The proposed recommendations may enable South African private universities opportunities to provide support and opportunities for first-generation students, enabling them to overcome the obstacles they face and succeed in their academic journeys.

While the focus is on the FGS themselves and the support tailored to their experience, there are also strong arguments that suggest that the teaching, learning, academic and social-cultural context in higher education need to be re-examined to adjust to the profile and needs of the variety of students who indeed are in the South Africa higher education context, including FGS. Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) suggest that singling out various groups does not serve the overall student and institutional

success agenda. Rather, they argue that there is a risk of focusing on a "narrow band of students, over a limited time period and that it separates the educational thinking and planning for the foundation students from the mainstream" (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016, n. p.). A unique focus on 'special needs' groups is to the "detriment of either group of students and lecturers" (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016, n. p).

This study reveals that the FGS indeed have significant challenges which needs to be considered when shaping supportive interventions. However, heeding Leibowitz and Bozalek's (2016) recommendations, it would be useful to consider the overall institutional teaching, learning, and support offerings to impact student success significantly. It is argued in this article that private institutions have a unique opportunity to do so, given their agile and ambitious intentions.

Conclusion

The study investigated various challenges impacting first-generation students in South African private higher education. The study found that FGS face challenges around academic load, academic context, and financial difficulties, to name a few. Our results indicate that almost a third (30.5%) of students in our sample found academic requirements challenging, nearly two thirds (63.3%) of this sample felt overwhelmed, and almost half (49%) said they do not experience financial pressures. Over half (57.7%) of this sample indicated that they received academic support. The authors recommend that more research be conducted to examine the profile of challenges FGS face at private institutions compared to the challenges faced by students at public institutions.

Overall, private higher education institutions are already offering substantial academic support, as evidenced in this study (over half of the students in this sample, 57.7%, indicated that they had accessed academic support). While private higher education institutions are aiming their efforts at the students and their unique needs, the students and institutions would also benefit from considering systemic and structural issues that would enhance the overall learning experience of all students. This, indeed, is an opportunity for the private higher education institutions, which often have agile and responsive systems, ready and primed for meaningful and relevant responses to the kinds of diverse students, including FGS, entering the higher education sector.

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Exploration of the procedures and practices for providing student support services in a nursing college in South Africa

Explorer les procédures et les pratiques en matière de prestation de services de soutien aux étudiants dans un établissement de formation en soins infirmiers en Afrique du Sud

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ABSTRACT

The shortage of nurses is a global crisis, particularly in remote and rural communities. Contributory factors are retirements, resignations, recent increased deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reduced production of nurses because of high attrition rates. This article's purpose was to investigate the provision of student support in the nursing education institution (NEI) of the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province in South Africa and come up with a model to improve completion rates. The researchers intentionally selected three KZN campuses based on their demographical location and programme offerings for the study. For data collection through in-depth interviews, the study adopted a case study design and employed a qualitative explorative approach, purposely sampling the NEI's senior academic staff. Strauss and Corbin's stages of coding were used to conduct the data analysis. The findings suggest comprehensive orientation and academic support as strong measures applied by the NEI to provide student support services and highlighted a need to improve enabling resources. Psychosocial support was predominantly provided by the hospital, which implied a lack of on-site comprehensive support. A necessity for developing a comprehensive student support model for the NEI emerged from the study. The model is expected to enhance the support and, in turn, increase completion rates.

RÉSUMÉ

La pénurie du personnel infirmier est une crise mondiale, particulièrement dans les communautés rurales et isolées. Les facteurs qui y contribuent sont les départs à la retraite, les démissions, l'augmentation récente du nombre de décès due à la pandémie de COVID-19 et la diminution de la production en personnel infirmier en raison de taux d'attrition élevés. L'objectif de cet article

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est d'étudier l'aide apportée aux étudiants dans un institut de formation en soins infirmiers de la province du KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) en Afrique du Sud et de proposer un modèle pour améliorer les taux de réussite. Les chercheurs ont intentionnellement sélectionné trois campus du KZN en fonction de leur situation démographique et de leur offre de programmes sur lesquels porte cette étude. Pour la collecte des données par le biais d'entretiens approfondis, cette étude a adopté un modèle d'étude de cas et a utilisé une approche qualitative exploratoire, en échantillonnant de manière délibérée le personnel académique supérieur de l'institut de formation en soins infirmiers. Le codage par étapes de Strauss et Corbin a été utilisé pour l'analyse des données. Les résultats suggèrent que l'orientation globale et le soutien académique sont des mesures fortes appliquées par l'institut de formation en soins infirmiers pour fournir des services de soutien aux étudiants et soulignent la nécessité d'améliorer les ressources nécessaires. Le soutien psychosocial a été principalement fourni par l'hôpital, ce qui implique un manque de soutien global sur place. L'étude a mis en évidence la nécessité de développer un modèle complet de soutien aux étudiants pour l'institut de formation en soins infirmiers. Ce modèle devrait permettre d'améliorer le soutien et, par conséquent, d'augmenter les taux de réussite des étudiants.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) has set strategic goals to promote global health and well-being, particularly in line with the sustainable development goal of ensuring healthy lives for all (World Health Organization, 2016a, 2016b). The need for a well-supported nursing and health care workforce, especially in remote and underserved communities, is closely tied to this mission, as outlined in the WHO's human resources for health objectives (World Health Organization, 2021). However, in 2013 the WHO reported a shortage of 9 million nurses, of which 1.8 million were in African regions. It further predicted a downswing of 9 million health care workers by 2030, primarily in low and middle-income African regions, estimated at 2.8 million (World Health Organization, 2016b). This calls for urgent and extreme action to recruit and retain global health care workers, primarily nurses (World Health Organization, 2016c).

In South Africa, the shortage of nurses is critical because of a skewed nurse-to-patient ratio and a high percentage of nurses approaching retirement (Butt et al., 2024; Schütz, 2021). Budget cuts and a mismatch between the skills of unemployed nurses and the industry's requirements exacerbate this situation (Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative, 2024). Additionally, student attrition and poor throughput in nursing colleges are pressing national issues (MacGregor & Ross, 2024).

Among the factors affecting student success are support policies and practices that shape teaching in nursing education institutions. In response, the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) focus has moved from quality audits to quality enhancement to strengthen teaching and learning. The World Health Assembly (WHA) resolved to protect, safeguard, and invest in the health care and health workforce. This could be, for instance, by increasing nursing students' graduation rates, especially those from disadvantaged communities, which can be a challenge for all stakeholders in nursing education. Student support policies are to be put in place to ensure admitted students are supported holistically to completion (SANC, 2020). The Department of Higher

Education and Training (DHET) promised ring-fenced funding for student support (DHET, 2013). Moreover, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) mandates that the learning management systems are used to monitor student progress and identify those at risk of failure (Department of Health, 2020).

The shortage of nurses in South Africa, plus the 2019 transition of nursing colleges to HE, necessitates that NEIs upscale strategies in student support provision. Student success results from "intentional, structured and proactive actions and policies" (Tinto, 2012) and increasing success rates requires alignment of sector-wide policies and practices (Council on Higher Education, 2014). Mudaly and Mtshali (2018) also suggest a well-coordinated and intentional student support programme. Yet, authors criticise the attention to underperformance and the absence of tailored academic support which creates an impression that academic support is associated with poor performance (Nnadozie & Khumalo, 2023; Paideya & Bengesai, 2017).

Student support procedures and practices

Student support involves both academic and non-academic development, including aspects such as economic, emotional, and social well-being (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018), which aim to improve the quality of learning and teaching (Speckman & Mandew, 2014). HEIs focus on widening access for inclusivity and economic development. Nonetheless, access alone is insufficient; students must persist until programme completion (Tinto, 2014). Various strategies such as advising, mentoring, orientation, early identification of students at risk of dropping-out, tutorials, student integration, remediation, coaching, and supplemental instruction have boosted student academic performance in HEIs (Catarino & Aires, 2017; Mansouri & Mrabet, 2017; Tinto, 2014).

Studies attest to HEIs having typically mandatory orientation programmes and policies that acclimatize students to HEIs. However, not all students are aware of their institutions' student support policies or programmes (Abadingo & Sanchez, 2023; Skakane-Masango et al., 2023).

Tutoring is a traditional method employed to prevent student attrition, but it primarily focuses on short-term academic improvement. However, addressing the diverse causes of attrition requires a coaching and tutoring model that motivates students for long-term success (Mansouri & Mrabet, 2017). In contrast, poor motivation may lead to disengagement (Chipchase et al., 2017). In a later study, Mansouri found that more Moroccan students benefited from coaching than a tutoring programme, and this led to formulating a coaching developmental model (Mansouri, 2020), whereas a tutoring programme in a Portuguese university achieved outstanding results by providing comprehensive support (Catarino & Aires, 2017).

Similarly, mentoring is an effective student development practice, fostering knowledge, skills, and a sense of belonging. However, resource shortages hinder its implementation in both HEIs and clinical settings (Setati & Nkosi, 2017; Shikulo et al., 2020; Speckman & Mandew, 2014). To combat student attrition, McConney and Fourie-Malherbe (2022) proposed an intentional peer mentorship model for first-year students.

The model encompasses aspects such as the academic, social, institutional, and wellness. Its success depends on factors like the intensity of mentorship, time investment, reasons for mentorship and its wellness component. The formalization of academic advising is another practice that breeds positive academic outcomes in mentoring (de Klerk, 2022; Reed et al., 2019). However, de Klerk cautions that improving success is challenging due to inequality and complex structural constraints in HE. These constraints seriously impact academic advisors' work (de Klerk, 2021; de Klerk, 2022; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). Academic advisors aim to enhance students' participation in diversified teams, utilising campus resources, and fostering social responsibility, and cognitive and emotional competencies (de Klerk, 2021; de Klerk, 2022; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). In addition to academic advising, the life coaching initiative, which is a proactive psychosocial support intervention, has averted premature drop-out (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021).

Lastly, monitoring and tracking systems, promptly implemented, and taking a holistic approach to student support, would enhance student success (Mayse, 2022). Likewise, policymakers and researchers have increased calls for comprehensive, integrated support models and wraparound services to improve completion rates (Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018; Shikulo et al., 2020; Tinto, 2014).

The academic monitoring support model

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN's) academic monitoring and support (AMS) guided this study model for the undergraduate programmes. The AMS model is systematic, comprehensive, and intentional as a guiding framework for NEIs in supporting students from underprivileged environments. It focuses on monitoring student progress and offering relevant support. The model has four phases of support from before commencement of training to completion of training (Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018).

(i) Pre-enrolment phase: this support is provided before students are enrolled and it equips the student with knowledge about the nursing career and training programme before they decide to enroll. (ii) Integration phase: this support facilitates transition of the students into higher education and focuses on underprepared students, in particular those from rural and remote communities. Integration support mainly offers compulsory orientation for students. (iii) Engagement phase: this phase is centred on different types of support, which includes a student-centred transformative curriculum, academic support, and psychosocial support. And lastly, (iv) the transition phase support is when the student is prepared for the work environment, from application processes, interview preparations, to expectations in the work environment, and different available career pathways (Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018).

In its implementation, principles like responsiveness guide the model, how the institution responds to national DHET imperatives, the National Department of Health (NDOH) and the South African Nursing Council (SANC) in relation to education and health systems. Also, the AMS model considers factors which may influence the provision of student support services in line with transforming the health system. These

factors are called architects, for example, the availability of resources for implementing student support services (Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018).

Research and methodology

The researchers adopted a case study design, which enabled the exploration of practices and procedures in providing student support services (SSS) during the novel move of nursing education institutions to HE in South Africa (SA). A qualitative approach, using individual interviews, was employed and was appropriate for the study to attain in-depth knowledge from participants on how SSS are implemented in the NEI (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Study setting

The study occurred in the biggest district of the KwaZulu-Natal province, in South Africa, where the principal investigator (PI) sampled three campuses of the public nursing education institution (NEI). The PI intentionally selected campuses that were differentiated by demographical location and programme offerings to provide a more representative sample of the campuses in the province. The first campus was situated in the city centre, the second, in an urban area; and the third one in a township. Two campuses either offered mainly a postgraduate (PG) programme or undergraduate (UG) programme and the third campus offered both UG and PG programmes.

Sampling

The study had a total of 160 population, from which 18 participants were selected across the three campuses of the NEI. The interview participants were recruited using purposive sampling as best-suited informants about the college's student support practices and procedures (Roestenburg et al., 2021). The study participants were academic staff (lecturers and managers) of both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) programmes from the three campuses, as per Table 1 below. These participants had more than five years' experience in nursing education and therefore were expected to have in-depth knowledge of the study practices and procedures applied in providing student support (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Table 1: Sampling per campus

Campus and programme	No. of participants	Race	Gender	Category	Highest qualification
X Undergraduate programmes	6	African: 5	Male: 1	Principal: 0	PhD: 1
		Coloured: 0	Female: 5	Deputy Principal: 1	Masters: 3
		Indian: 1		HOD: 1	Honors : 2
		White: 0		Senior lecturer: 4	Bachelor: 0

Campus and programme	No. of participants	Race	Gender	Category	Highest qualification
Y Undergraduate and postgraduate programmes	6	African: 4	Male: 2	Principal: 1	PhD: 1
		Coloured: 0	Female: 4	Deputy Principal: 0	Masters: 5
		Indian: 1		HOD: 2	Honors: 0
		White: 1		Senior lecturer: 3	Bachelor: 0
Z Postgraduate programmes	6	African: 4	Male: 0	Principal: 1	PhD: 0
		Coloured: 0	Female: 6	Deputy Principal: 0	Masters: 3
		Indian: 2		HOD: 3	Honors: 2
		White: 0		Senior lecturer: 2	Bachelor: 1

Data collection

The principal investigator (PI) collected data at the beginning of 2021 and completed towards the end of 2022 when saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). COVID-19 restrictions prohibited the PI from collecting data using focus group discussions as initially planned; individual interviews enabled adherence to COVID-19 infection control protocols. The PI sought permission from the campus management and research committee, who arranged interviews on their respective campuses. During the interviews, the PI could listen to and observe non-verbal cues from participants and make notes while the research assistant audio-recorded the interviews. For ethical reasons, the research assistants also conducted interviews where the PI worked.

Data analysis

The PI conducted data collection and analysis concurrently and listened to interview audio recordings several times while transcribing them verbatim. To make sense of the data, the PI immersed herself in the transcripts, reading them repeatedly, following Strauss and Corbin's stages of coding, namely open, axial, and selective coding. The PI broke down data into concepts during open coding and analysed them to identify their properties and dimensions. Then, the PI identified and regrouped concepts per their properties and dimensions in axial coding, demonstrating associations between categories and sub-categories. Next, the PI identified and analysed the codes inductively according to their meaning, comparing them for similarities and differences, then collating similar ones into categories. Finally, during selective coding, the PI reduced data

into fewer categories and sub-categories characteristic of the processes and procedures used by the college to provide student support (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Roestenburg et al., 2021). Data analysis and literature review culminated in three themes from the final categories per the study findings below.

Findings and discussion

Study findings

This study aimed to explore processes and procedures in place for providing student support services, under the guidance of the AMS framework, as discussed above. In presenting the findings, the focus will be on the first two stages of the framework, namely, support at the commencement of the programme and support during the programme. In so doing, focusing on academic and non-academic support services provided by the NEIs, as per findings. The three themes from the findings are (i) institutional procedures for providing support, (ii) identification and monitoring processes for at-risk students, and (iii) supportive measures for intervening in poor performance (Mayse, 2022; Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018).

Eighteen individual interviews were conducted with lecturers and management at the three campuses to get an in-depth understanding of the procedures and processes in place for student support. The findings are presented in themes and sub-themes, as discussed below.

Theme 1: Institutional procedures for providing support

Subtheme 1.1: Comprehensive orientation

First, the PI sought to establish the processes utilised for providing support when the students commence training to determine whether the college offers engagement support. The participants reported the following:

> *Once they are selected after the interviews, there is an orientation week, especially with the R71 (The Diploma in Nursing program, according to SANC Regulation, R171) program. The orientation week empowers the student with whatever they need, they receive an information booklet with the regulations and all that they need to know pertaining to the course. That is support that they will need as they get orientated by the lecturers that whole week.* (P3)

> *An orientation week which includes many stakeholders, lecturers, OHC (occupational health clinic) where all health assessments are done, and problems can be detected and follow ups are done. Registration and course induction takes place, academic rules, modules and disciplinary procedures and processes.* (P1)

The findings point to a wide range of support by the college and clinical staff, demonstrating that a comprehensive orientation programme exists. This programme encompasses orientation on both academic and non-academic aspects of support, as per the findings below:

We guide them during the program, orientate them with the physical layout of the wards, we tell them more about what is happening in the wards, immunize them for communicable diseases. Policies of IOD (injured on duty), like what to do, infection prevention and control manager orientate on infection prevention OHS (occupational health and safety) rep (representative) from the occupational health clinic if not well. They receive free treatment as students. Lecturers follow them up to guide them in the wards, clinical lecturers accompany them, they are also there for support to help them where they don't know. (P7)

Overall orientation about the program, what it entails, their expectations and they are told about each and every module as well as the practical component. They are told about the textbooks that are needed as well as the rules, like the attendance that is expected from them, clinically, theory and about the expectations on clinical placements (P4)

Financial support from SETA (Sector for Education and Training Authority) which covers their tuition fees and are paid a stipend. They are also given gadgets like tablets and data to help with their learning, they have a computer lab and a library, there are also playground and a swimming pool. (P6)

Although the participants reported comprehensive orientation support, they had mixed and contradictory responses about the availability and knowledge of an institutional policy that guided their activities. Those who were knowledgeable about the policy's existence stated as follows:

We do have a policy on student support. (P15)

I am not sure whether they do get support as stated in the policy, but it does exist; although I cannot remember the last time it was reviewed. (P3)

The rest of the participants either denied the presence or were not aware of the policy existence and responded as follows:

I don't remember such a policy being available. (P5)

Not that I know of. (P6)

Even though most non-academic support is provided in the hospital, participants recommended that holistic support should be available in the college, because of diverse challenges faced by students.

A more practical structure of support for the students especially when they are starting cause some even dropout, yet the relevant stakeholders are aware of the students challenges and what it results in, yet nothing is done. It is sad unfortunately cause some students go into debts trying to stay on the program. (P16)

The above findings from participants suggest that the college offers comprehensive orientation for new students. It also emerged that all other forms of non-academic

support are mainly offered in the hospital. Additionally, there is poor clarity about the availability of the policy on student support. The college doesn't have comprehensive support services on-site.

<u>Subtheme 1.2: Identifying and red-flagging poor performance</u>
Lecturers can observe those signs that may signal academic problems and flag them for intervention or referral to the academic development officer (ADO). The management (HOD and principal) in their role of supervising learning and teaching, may notice problems during monitoring of academic progress for all students.

> *Some problems can be picked up when interacting with the students, e.g., poor performance is observed. When a student performs poorly, we give the results to the ADO (academic development officer) who will in turn set up an appointment with the student to do assessment.* (P1)

> *We monitor them based on the formative tests that they are where we are able to notice poor performance and we can also see their interaction in class.* (P14)

> *Through observation of student behaviour, formative test performance and struggling with understanding concepts.* (P13)

Due to their vast experience, the lecturers can identify warning signs early by observing students during interaction in classrooms and clinical areas. Early identification of warning signs assists in prompt intervention to prevent deterioration in performance.

Theme 2: Processes for identifying and monitoring at-risk students

<u>Subtheme 2.1: Self-initiated support help/help-seeking behaviour</u>
Some students take the initiative to seek support when they realize that they have challenges with understanding concepts or any assigned work, as indicated by participants below.

> *… students are able access those tutorials and make the bookings with the lecturers.* (P6)

> *Students with problems make appointments with lecturers.* (P4)

This initiative demonstrates that students have been exposed to orientation and are aware of where and when to seek help.

<u>Subtheme 2.2: Lecturer-identified risks/-initiated support</u>
To a large extent, lecturers are proactive in observing students at risk through untoward behaviour and poor performance, and challenges with understanding concepts. They also take initiative in offering individual tuition and remedial classes, investigating causes of poor performance and referring the student accordingly.

> *Even during class, there are students that you are able to identify that maybe one student doesn't care, and you may see that one student is really battling and trying though they are performing poorly but they are trying.* (P4)

On the very first test you can see he/she is not doing well, we do remedial classes, give them extra support in a form of individual lectures. We make them write the tests; we also pair them with those that are doing well. (P3)

… try to get the cause of their poor performance from there I look at how I can assist the student moving forward. (P8)

Academic staff continuously monitor identified risks using tracking systems. Risks are also identified when students demonstrate poor interaction and not finishing work.

We monitor them based on the formative tests that they are where we are able to notice poor performance and we can also see their interaction in class. (P10)

We trace them, we colour code our students during the semester to see how they perform. On the very first test you can see he/she is not doing well. (P9)

We assign them work where we are able to see if the student is able to fish the information on their own. (P1)

The subject lecturer and module coordinator keep track of student results so that as the academic staff they can pick up those at risk. (P9)

Theme 3: Institutional supportive measures for intervening in poor performance

Subtheme 3.1: Academic support

Lecturers offer academic support in the form of tutorials, small group discussions, lecturer appointments, remedial programmes, and academic counselling.

As a lecturer, I go through the student reports or results, and I call the students for a consultation on their performance and try to get the cause of their poor performance. From there I look at how I can assist the student moving forward. (P2)

They get one-on-one meetings with the lecturer, they have the option of meeting with the lecturer, getting extra work, meeting with the lecturer who would re-tutor them in areas where they feel their deficit. (P7)

They are given a second chance to write; they are initially told the percentage that they would need in order to re-write or carry the subject. We give them extra tutorials, day off, study day before they re-write; everybody avails themselves to help them. If they need help, they know that all the doors are open. (P12)

Academic support measures are applied per unique student needs, especially feedback sessions following formative assessment.

When we have students that do not necessarily fail but consistently perform poorly, one of the things I do is when tests are written it does not end with giving out marks but also feedback on content covered, questions asked and how they were expected to answer; where the gaps were in terms of the information that they gave and why they did not

score full marks. This is also a form of support that students get, the valuable feedback at the end of any evaluation, whether it's a theoretical evaluation or clinical evaluation. (P8)

One of the things I do is when tests are written does not end with giving out marks but also feedback on content covered, questions asked and how they were expected to answer; where the gaps were in terms of the information that they gave and why they did not score full marks. (P3)

A wide range of academic support is provided for the students, lecturers assess performance, monitor it, and offer relevant academic support. This attests to the invaluable experience lecturers have in dealing with learning and teaching issues as senior academic staff.

<u>Subtheme 3.2: Academic development officer and psycho-social support</u>
It emerged from the findings that students who were performing poorly or demonstrating untoward behaviour, were referred to the academic development officer. Having sat with the student to identify the root of the matter, the ADO would either attend to the issue or refer the student to the occupational health clinic where the student would be seen by a relevant multidisciplinary team member. For academic challenges, the ADO may refer the student to the subject lecturer.

ADO handles the academic performance issues. (P3)

Lecturers offer academic support in instances of poor performance like remedial (program) where applicable, student could be struggling in certain subjects. (P5)

Academically, counselling if a student needs it, this can be about their study or any other problem. (P3)

We pick it up in class that the students are weak, then assisted by the ADO to identify academic or social challenges. (P4)

When it comes to psychosocial issues, the hospital provides most of the support, and they refer students to specific services for issues beyond the college staff's expertise. Psychosocial issues may be financial, emotional, physical, and psychological in nature.

We refer them to the social workers, and we also counsel them. When the student is sick, we refer them to the hospital, when they have social problems, this could be referred to a psychiatrist or a doctor who will follow up. (P2)

But we do not have an EAP (employee assistance program) at college, [in the hospital] we have social workers, staff clinic (another term for occupational health clinic). Students may need support [to] identify chronic illnesses, we do counsel, but we do not have a counsellor dedicated to students. (P3)

They are advised to come forth if any problems social or otherwise. (P1)

> *… student also counselled for bereavement, for challenges of chronic illness recommended to temporarily deregister and come back when they are feeling better, but this is entirely on the student.* (P5)

A throughline across participants was inefficient psychosocial support, in particular counselling services for students at the college. The lecturers were overwhelmed with psychosocial issues experienced by students. They lamented their incapacity to provide this support, and responded as follows:

> *Lecturers are not trained counsellors, … we have inadequate counselling knowledge.* (P7)

> *I would like to see someone allocated to student counseling, that would be neutral, this can help avoid being biased. Sometimes when students share their problems with lecturers, we get to hear about them, as we are humans and mistakes happen and that is not good because the student would have told them in confidence, so getting someone from outside might help.* (P5)

> *It would be better if we have a counselor just for the college because even as lecturers, we do need that. The students won't be that open to you as lecturers, than they would to someone neutral.* (P6)

Furthermore, the participants cited infrastructural challenges which limited the utilisation of resources:

> *We need infrastructure that is disabled friendly because students on wheelchairs, cannot reach other floors and we are forced to use ground level classes.* (P1)

> *Resources need to be developed. We lack even counselling rooms at times, and they are not as comfortable as they are supposed to. Simulation labs and skills lab do not have adequate resources, even data to help students access online websites.* (P2)

Non-academic support services like infrastructure and psychosocial counselling for students was recommended by a vast number of participants. This finding suggests the necessity of a holistic student support model for the college.

Discussion

To reiterate, 18 members of academic staff comprising senior lecturers and managers from three campuses of the NEI participated in the study, as presented in Table 1. The study aimed to explore the procedures and practices for providing student support in the NEI. A myriad of studies recommend the development of a standardized, comprehensive, coordinated student support model to guide the provision of student support to improve student success in HE (Mansouri, 2020; Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018; Shikulo et al., 2020; Tinto, 2014). Three themes emerged from the findings. These were institutional procedures for providing support, processes for identifying and monitoring at-risk students, and institutional supportive measures for intervening in poor performance.

Theme 1: Institutional procedures for providing support

The findings revealed a resounding agreement on the availability and comprehensiveness of orientation for students. The orientation programme included the fundamental aspects of student support, i.e., academic, psychosocial, and financial support. Previous studies concur that the support should be holistic, with academic and non-academic aspects (Liu et al., 2022; Skakane-Masango et al., 2023; Tait, 2010).

Contrary to the agreement on providing comprehensive orientation, some participants were oblivious to the availability of student support policy. Participants' responses suggested academic staff needed to know the college's student support policy as many had never heard of it. The authors concluded from the participants' interviews that no standardized policy or student support programme existed. A coordinated, standardized, and structured student support system emerged as a solution, and the findings confirmed a need for relevant and student-centred support.

Many students were referred to psychologists, highlighting the emergence of psychosocial support, particularly mental health, as a critical challenge needing attention. Authors also highlighted increased psychosocial problems experienced by students, suggesting the necessity of on-site counsellors (Baik et al., 2019; Crawford & Johns, 2018). There was also uncertainty about the availability of psychosocial support in the NEI (Skakane-Masango et al., 2023). Despite the increase in mental illness among HE students, studies cited barriers to mental support (Baik et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2019). (Juma et al., 2016) suggested support during the transition to HE and assigning individual tutors and peer mentors on enrolment. As per Tinto's analogy of Durkheim's theory of suicide, when the college community fails to integrate students and identify those who have psychosocial issues, they may similarly withdraw from the college (Tinto, 2014).

Contrary to those who may withdraw because of challenges and lack of support, very few students apply help-seeking behaviour and approach lecturers for help, which may be beneficial because the student sees the need for intervention. This supports the findings that many students would not seek mental health treatment, primarily due to attitudinal barriers, and would handle the challenges alone (Ebert et al., 2019). Similarly, lecturers' attitudes hindered the utilisation of student support services. Instead, students preferred approaching peers (Skakane-Masango et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Processes for identifying and monitoring at-risk students

Student success takes precedence on the college agenda. CHE affirms that "student success is also affected by how well an institution monitors the performance and progress of the student and refers them for support as needed" (Council on Higher Education, 2014).

It emerged from the findings that most lecturers observe the telltale signs of poor engagement and risks of poor performance from the beginning. Consequently, they promptly commence intervention using different academic support strategies, such as remediation, one-on-one consultations, small group meetings, and extra tutorials (Council on Higher Education, 2014), to curb the problem immediately. UKZN, with its AMS theory, which is adopted as a guiding framework for this study (Mudaly & Mtshali,

2016; Mudaly & Mtshali, 2018), and other HEIs use tracking and monitoring mechanisms to identify early and support those students at risk of academic failure (Crawford & Johns, 2018).

Theme 3: Institutional supportive measures for intervening in poor performance

The findings revealed a wide range of academic support activities. The participants showcased their academic expertise in this area. They shared that they had had individual meetings with students, invited students for extra tutorials, and given feedback on performance, amongst other efforts, which is vital and encourages persistence. It also emerged from the findings that students had extra study time and second chances for assessments, a practice that supports academic progress. In contrasting findings, students with socio-economic challenges had limited time to study because they had to use their time to make money through other means (Atinaf & Petros, 2016). Studies concur that resources for student support are lacking in community colleges to meet the needs of underserved students (Bragg, 2023). This is despite the enshrining of equal rights to education policies and practices in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996).

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore student support services provided in the NEIs in KZN province and develop a model for student support (Skakane et al., 2024) . The findings point to the grave necessity of the student support model to prioritise psychosocial support because of the emotional issues students face and their effect on academic success. To improve resources at the NEIs, including the employment of on-site psychologists, the study could be beneficial for looking into the psychosocial needs of students. To strengthen the envisaged student support model, we recommend replicating the study in other NEIs to gather more data. The study is the first exploration of SSS during the college's transition to HE and, therefore, will serve as a springboard for public NEIs in ascertaining their processes and practices in providing SSS. Based on the findings, the study would suggest how best NEIs can meet the requirements for DHET for academic success. To strengthen the objectivity of findings or minimize bias, the principal investigator engaged the research assistant to interview participants at her place of employment.

Ethics statement

The study was approved by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, protocol number HSSREC/707/2019; and gatekeeper permission was granted by the KZN Department of Health (DOH). Furthermore, the principal investigator spelled out the purpose of the study to obtain consent for participation and audio-recording of interviews.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Exploring first-year engineering student perceptions of peer-led study groups in a Global South context

Explorer les perceptions des étudiants de première année en ingénierie sur les groupes d'étude dirigés par les pairs dans un contexte du Sud global

Jessica Versfeld[1] & Caitlin Vinson[2]

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore the advantages of study groups for first-year engineering students in a challenged Global South context. The research aims to explore how the support and resources provided by the peer-led study groups can help students cope with the stressors and challenges that are often associated with the transition to university and the demands of an engineering programme. Educational institutions prioritise student development, yet many student initiatives overlook student agency and that understanding students' learning approaches is necessary for effective support initiatives. A total of 40 registered engineering students, who voluntarily enrolled in the peer-led study groups, were the subjects of this study at the University of Pretoria. The research adopted a qualitative approach and aimed to explore the advantages of study groups. Data were collected through interviews and surveys with both students and study group leaders to gain their respective views on the strengths and areas for improvement of the learning community experience. The research was conducted using qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences with study groups and the associated benefits. Through participation in study groups, students benefited from the support of their peers, opportunities for alternative problem-solving methods, and improved academic performance. Furthermore, the smaller group size and collaborative nature of these groups created a supportive and empowering learning environment, where students felt confident to ask questions and engage in meaningful learning opportunities.

RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les avantages des groupes d'étude pour les étudiants de première année en ingénierie dans un contexte difficile de l'hémisphère Sud. Cette étude vise à déterminer comment le soutien et les ressources offertes par les groupes d'étude dirigés par des pairs peuvent aider les étudiants à faire face aux facteurs de stress et aux défis qui sont souvent associés à la transition vers l'université et aux exigences d'un programme d'études en ingénierie. Les établissements d'enseignement accordent la priorité au développement des étudiants, mais de

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nombreuses initiatives en faveur des étudiants ne tiennent pas compte de l'action des étudiants et pourtant il est nécessaire de comprendre les approches d'apprentissage des étudiants pour mettre en place des initiatives de soutien efficaces. Cette étude a été menée à l'Université de Pretoria auprès de 40 étudiants inscrits en ingénierie, qui se sont volontairement engagés dans des groupes d'étude dirigés par des pairs. Cette étude a adopté une approche qualitative qui visait à explorer les avantages des groupes d'étude. Les données ont été collectées par le biais d'entretiens et d'enquêtes auprès des étudiants et des responsables des groupes d'étude afin de recueillir leurs points de vue respectifs sur les points forts et les aspects à améliorer concernant l'expérience d'une communauté d'apprentissage. L'étude a été menée à l'aide de méthodes qualitatives afin de mieux comprendre l'expérience des étudiants en matière de groupes d'étude et les avantages qui en découlent. En participant aux groupes d'étude, les étudiants ont bénéficié du soutien de leurs pairs, de la possibilité d'utiliser des méthodes alternatives de résolution de problèmes et d'une amélioration de leurs résultats scolaires. En outre, la taille réduite des groupes et leur nature collaborative ont créé un environnement d'apprentissage favorable et stimulant, dans lequel les étudiants se sentent à l'aise de poser des questions et de s'engager dans des activités enrichissantes d'apprentissage.

MOTS-CLÉS
Groupes d'étude dirigés par les pairs, Sud global, étudiants en ingénierie, recherche qualitative, intégration sociale, performance académique, apprentissage collaboratif

Introduction

The objective of the study is to examine the benefits of participating in study groups for engineering students in a challenged context. Engineering students in a South African higher education context face a variety of challenges including insufficient mathematical preparation in high school, diverse economic and academic backgrounds, and difficulties with social integration (Surr, 2019; de Klerk, 2021; Wangenge-Ouma, 2021).The study groups were introduced by academic advisors in the engineering department at the University of Pretoria to address the high failure rate of the Mechanics first-year module and improve graduation rates, while also providing social support and connection for students.

The South African higher education sector is in crisis (de Klerk, 2021), with matriculants who are woefully unprepared for university education in terms of literacy, transition (Schreiber et al., 2018), and social integration (Scott et al., 2007; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). This pressure highlights the need for effective support and interventions to aid students in their transition to university and to promote academic success and mental well-being. Study groups represent a promising intervention for enhancing academic outcomes among students (Zimmerman-Oster et al., 2009; de Klerk, 2021; Strydom & Loots, 2020).

Study groups are defined as a group of individuals who share common academic goals, interests, and engage in collaborative learning activities, such as discussing course material, working on projects, and providing peer support (Lenning et al., 2003; Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002). Study groups are rooted in the notion that learning is a social activity and students thrive in supportive environments that foster active participation and exchange of ideas (Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Study groups have been shown to improve student retention, academic performance, and overall well-being (Kendall et al., 2023; de Klerk, 2021; Strydom & Loots, 2020).

Although many studies have been done on learning in developed countries, few studies have been conducted in developing countries like South Africa (Kapp & Bangeni, 2017; de Klerk, 2021; Lemmens, 2015; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). The study is particularly relevant in the South African higher education context, where students face a variety of challenges including lack of preparation, diverse economic and academic backgrounds, and difficulty with social integration (de Klerk, 2021; Bangeni & Kapp, 2017; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Although there have been strong calls for more support services from individuals working in the field, effective student support within a Global South context needs a solid, evidence-based foundation to increase the legitimacy of advising techniques for students in a challenged context (Surr, 2019; de Klerk, 2021; Wangenge-Ouma, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021).

Numerous funding initiatives make university more accessible for lower- and middle-class families with the goal of increasing the likelihood that every family will have a graduate. The graduation rates, however, are still low. Only 29% of students who registered for an undergraduate degree in 2011 graduated within the requisite time frame, according to Statistics South Africa (2019). The need for additional, often co-curricular, student support at university level is prevalent throughout the South African and global higher education sector (de Klerk et al., 2017; Lemmens, 2015; de Klerk, 2021). Typically, university support programmes include workshops or one-on-one consultations that coincide with academic coursework. These resources are typically introduced to students during first-year orientation or through the university's online resources. While these programmes are accessible to all students, their primary aim is to aid underprivileged students who may lack certain skills from high school. Regrettably, academic interventions of this nature are subject to challenges such as inconsistent attendance, insufficient planning and training, and insufficient time to develop profound cognitive and linguistic competencies (Friedman et al., 2022; Thompson & Vance, 2001).

Students from South Africa come from a context that is rife with socio-political issues, inequality, and poverty. These challenges can impact the academic success and mental health of South African students in higher education. Support and resources are important to help them overcome these barriers and reach their full potential (de Klerk et al., 2017; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Additionally, first-year students, first-generation students, and students from low SES backgrounds are more likely to drop out of school than are students who have completed their first year, come from higher SES backgrounds, or have parents who have completed tertiary education (Bitzer, 2009; Tinto, 2017). Universities and the state have agreed that students need more than access and that in the agenda of 'funding' there are other goals such as mobilising human talent and addressing the developmental needs of the students while considering the challenges that they individually face socially and culturally (Badat, 2010). Menon and Castrillon (2019) noted that, since 2010, Higher Education Summits were calling for curricula to be aligned with student expectations and not only political agendas such as funding and access to poor students. The gap was identified that funding is not the only way to assist a student to become a graduate (Kapp & Bangeni, 2017). Some argue that access does not give much more than a 50% probability of graduating, and for NSFAS-

supported students a 30% to 40% probability (Scott, 2016). This is problematic and needs to be addressed.

It is important to have a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of low- and middle-class students. This involves not only providing financial support, but also addressing social and cultural barriers and providing a supportive environment that promotes academic success and personal growth. This can be achieved through a combination of programmes and initiatives, such as academic support, mental health services, financial assistance, career development, and study groups (Scott, 2016; de Klerk, 2021). It is crucial for universities and funders to take a student-centred approach to support initiatives. This means considering the student's perspective and understanding their individual experiences and needs. By doing so, institutions and funders can tailor support programmes to better address the unique challenges that each student faces and empower students to take agency over their own education journeys (Menon & Castrillon, 2019).

There are two main directions that education researchers and university planners have taken: the first is concerned with enrolment and retention rates, and the second direction looks at what constitutes a good graduate (e.g. DHET, 2020; National Planning Committee, 2013). Both directions considered what former graduates have done to achieve, as well as what kind of support interventions worked and why. Research on retention, rather than access, and characteristics that enhance timely graduation, as opposed to graduating in general, began to take precedence in their strategic goals (DHET, 2020). Most student support programmes focus on a specific experience, such as first-year adjustment or job preparation (de Klerk, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Despite the implementation of several well-planned projects, it's possible that something is being missed. Without this focus on student agency and understanding, support initiatives may not be as effective in promoting student success and transformation in higher education (Kapp & Bangeni, 2017).

The universities may respond defensively by insisting that the students use the support services they provide. While students must be accountable for their involvement in student initiatives, it is not a straightforward process, where students just use what the institution offers. Improving the accessibility of support programmes and interventions is a crucial step in helping students overcome the barriers they face and achieve their full potential (Baijnath, 2016; Bangeni & Kapp, 2017). This can involve making support programmes and initiatives more visible and easily accessible, such as through online platforms or on-campus events (Nthontho, 2018). By making support programmes and interventions more accessible, universities and funders can help students make the most of the resources and support available to them and improve their chances of success in higher education.

Within university settings, interventions or support programmes are frequently implemented to enhance academic skills, such as through tutoring, mentoring, and academic advising. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they possess distinct nuances. According to Griffin and Griffin's (1997) account, tutoring entails collaborative learning, in which a fellow student assists others with challenging course

aspects. This pedagogical approach offers several benefits, such as fostering social connections and supplementing lectures, while also affording students the chance to cultivate teaching and leadership skills. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of tutoring can vary for some students, particularly those enrolled in the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment & IT (EBIT) programme, as tutorials are often conducted in large groups that do not facilitate students' inquiries. This study aims to explore the benefits of creating smaller study groups to generate more supportive and comfortable environment for students to interact, inquire, and learn from each other.

Implementation of the study group intervention

Collaboration between academic advisors, lecturers, and peer advisors facilitated the creation of these peer-led study groups with convenient scheduling and locations for students. According to Griffin and Griffin (1997), tutoring involves collaborative learning where a fellow student helps other students with challenging aspects of a course. This approach has multiple benefits, including creating social connections and complementing lectures. Research has shown that students can benefit from these interventions in various ways. For instance, students can receive academic support to adjust to university life and enhance their academic performance. However, there is still uncertainty regarding the efficacy of these interventions in promoting success and reducing drop-out rates. To this end, ongoing research is exploring additional non-academic skills that students require to succeed in their studies (de Klerk, 2021).

Academic advisors frequently collaborate with lecturers to solicit feedback on the effectiveness of the study group intervention. Lecturers have expressed that both the consultations and university tutorials are severely underutilised, with students often opting to hire older peers for last-minute cramming sessions before tests. Unfortunately, these brief tutorials are typically insufficient in preparing students for the module's demands. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that lectures and tutorials adhere closely to the study guide, leaving students who have fallen behind feeling too timid to ask questions when they encounter difficulties. To address this challenge, study groups were introduced, which were designed to be student-led and easily accessible to encourage participation and engagement among students. The role of the study leaders was not to be tutors, but rather facilitate the formation of smaller interactive study groups were students could help each other out. The study groups were also only one hour per week as to encourage student attendance, as engineering students already have jam-packed time-tables.

The study leaders were chosen from among the top performing students in the module, and were given additional training on how to provide effective support and guidance to their peers. The study groups met regularly throughout the semester, and provided a space for students to work together on challenging coursework, ask questions, and receive support from their peers. The academic advisors reached out to the Mechanics lecturers and asked them to email the students to inform them about the study groups. Academic advisors organized large venues for the students to meet on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Each study group met 5 times throughout the semester

with 10 to 50 students attending each session. The students would then break into smaller groups of 5 to 6 students and work on tutorial problems and then each smaller group would present to the larger group. Three to five study leaders were present at each study group session and were there to facilitate and support the smaller break away groups.

Methodology

The evaluation on the impact of study groups was conducted post-intervention and used a qualitative methodology. Data were collected through online surveys, which were completed by both the study leaders, as well as participating students. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered through focus groups conducted with the study leaders post-intervention, which were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The data collected were then analysed using a thematic analysis approach to uncover patterns and themes related to the benefits of participating in study groups.

Evaluation of the intervention

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to examine and interpret the feedback obtained from online surveys completed by both the study leaders (11 students) and participating students (16 students). The online survey consisted of questions that sought to gauge the students' perception of the benefits of the study groups, the ways in which they benefited, if their grades improved, and their recommendations for improving the study groups. Additionally, focus groups were conducted with two of the study leaders to obtain their feedback on what worked well and their suggestions for enhancing the learning community experience in the future.

Thematic analysis involved identifying recurring patterns of meaning across the interviews. Themes related to the participants' and study leaders' experiences of the benefits and limitations of the study groups were documented. The data analysis process involved the identification of possible themes, coding of data, sorting of codes into themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and describing and analysing the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The validity of the data interpretation was strengthened by having two independent researchers analyse the data, and their discussions on the identified themes culminated in consensus on the interpretation. The interpretation of the data was further validated through member checking (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018), where the results were shared with the participants in a follow-up session. The participants concurred with the researchers' interpretation of the data.

Ethical considerations

The present research was carried out in accordance with ethical principles and was granted approval by the Ethics Committee, including obtaining ethical clearance from the Research and Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria. Participants and their respective guardians provided written and verbal consent to participate in the group intervention and the corresponding research study. The implementation of the group intervention was closely monitored by academic faculty student advisors (who are

all registered psychologists) to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines. Adequate measures were taken to maintain the confidentiality of participants throughout the research process.

Results

Processes that were helpful

Both students and study leaders reported on the positive impact of peer social connection on learning, especially for a challenging module like Mechanics. Students highlighted several key factors, including the assistance provided by classmates who understood the difficulties of the material and can offer relevant insight. The presence of these classmates created a more comfortable and supportive learning environment, where students felt empowered to ask questions and engage in meaningful learning opportunities.

One of the most notable effects of peer social connection on learning is the improvement of academic performance: 87% of students reported that participation in study groups had a positive impact on their grades. This can be attributed to several factors, including the opportunities for students to learn alternative problem-solving methods, interact with their classmates, and share their experiences. Furthermore, the presence of stronger students in the group provides a valuable opportunity for weaker students to model effective learning techniques and improve their comprehension of challenging concepts.

In addition to these benefits, students also reported that participation in these study groups increased their willingness to participate in future study groups and recommend such groups to friends. This can be attributed to the smaller group size, which fostered students' confidence and aided in comprehending difficult material. The collaborative nature of these groups created a sense of shared experience, which further enhanced students' engagement and motivation to learn.

Themes from online surveys and interviews

The post-intervention qualitative data analysis showed that the students who participated in the study group intervention reported an increase in their ability to form bonds within and across peer networks, utilise learning-community networks, and place a higher value on shared experiences with their classmates. Themes are outlined and verbatim quotes given to illustrate participants' experiences of the intervention. The main themes identified from the post- intervention interviews with participating students and study leaders were:

Theme 1: Peer social connection enhances learning

The utilisation of resources provided by social ecologies can vary greatly, as it is influenced by the perceived availability of both informal and formal resources (Ebersöhn et al., 2020). Thus, it is crucial for students to understand the value of social connectedness as a protective resource, particularly during times of academic stress related to a challenging course. The collaboration that took place in study groups not

only aided in the comprehension of difficult concepts, but also highlighted the positive impact of social connection. By promoting the benefits of social connectedness, students could better understand the role of social support in their academic lives, as shown the in the following quotes:

> *The study group sessions were very helpful. The groups were fantastic and it was nice to work with others going through what you are going through and having that support.*

> *The choice of students to run the study groups was great.*

> *It is a good platform to help students help each other.*

Studies have demonstrated that peer mentorship can enhance not only motivation, but also provide balance to mitigate stress and burnout. Peer support, whether in the form of guidance or simply a listening ear, may aid in internal stress management or learning coping strategies (Freidman et al., 2022). Student-led networks necessitate the establishment and maintenance of productive partnerships among learners within the same peer group. The implementation of study groups facilitated the communication and interaction among students, resulting in a heightened level of peer connection and learning as evidenced by the following post-intervention quotes:

> *We challenged each other and helped each other.*

> *Working on the problems with my group helped me to grasp the material more easily.*

> *Coming together and helping each other with the work really helped me.*

> *All the leaders had different approaches and strong points, so we were able to give different ways to look at a problem.*

Theme 2: Sense of shared experiences

In addition to student's appreciation of the benefits of peer connection (working together on the module was easier than working on the module alone), students reported that participation in the intervention made them aware of shared experiences students went through. The realization that other students were facing similar difficulties in the module proved to be a valuable experience for the participants. By acknowledging the struggles of their peers, they gained a sense of support and empowerment.

> *You realise that you are not the only struggling so we could comfort and support each other.*

> *Learning what other students who have done the module before was insightful.*

> *Knowing that we weren't the only ones in the class gave us hope and kept us motivated to keep going.*

The findings of recent research reveal that engineering students frequently arrive at the university with a STEM-ego, characterised by a robust sense of academic self-efficacy. These high-performing high school students who pursue STEM programmes at university hold the belief that they do not require additional support. Nonetheless, this perspective can have adverse effects on their academic performance and their willingness to seek help. The results from this study highlight that these students are not familiar with failure, as they have been accustomed to receiving good grades in high school. For those students who struggle with this particular module, this can be a novel experience as they confront failure for the first time in their lives. Consequently, sharing similar experiences of difficulty with the module helped students feel less isolated and empowered them to persist in their studies, as seen in the following quotes:

> *I appreciated the fact that there were other people who found the module a bit tricky and were making an effort to do better.*

> *For some of these students it was their first time failing so it really made them lose hope, but for the students who stuck it through with the module, it really helped them to see other students also struggling.*

Theme 3: Small group size enhances learning

Many of the students entering South African universities are in diverse economic, academic, and psychosocial positions (Kapp & Bangeni, 2017). As a result, South African universities try many initiatives to support students holistically. Thus, there has always been an understanding of the need for holistic support (intellectually, ethically, culturally, socially, and even physically), but there appears to be a lack of understanding as to what that support would mean practically. Withering (2019) argues that students voices are usually absent from the discourse on student interventions despite these good intentions. In the engineering department various academic support is offered to students, however, lecture halls and even tutorials are often attended by many students. Students may be reluctant to ask questions in big groups which can interfere with their learning. Because the study groups broke into smaller groups, it was beneficial for students as they felt more comfortable to ask questions among peers.

> *Being helped by my classmates, they understand the struggle best and they can relate the most thus making it easy for me to learn from them and as I'm more comfortable around them I can ask as much as I want.*

> *Learning from other students who also find certain concepts difficult, because the lecturers don't always understand how difficult it is to grasp.*

Collaborative learning, where a fellow student assists others with challenging aspects of a course, characterises tutoring, according to Griffin and Griffin (1997). This approach offers various advantages, such as establishing social connections and complementing lectures, while also providing students with teaching and leadership opportunities. However, EBIT students frequently view tutorials differently, as they are often taught

in large groups and do not provide an environment where students feel comfortable asking questions. Students reported that smaller study groups were more beneficial, as they felt comfortable asking questions and learning from one another, as shown in the following quotes.

> *Working in smaller groups helped us to see different ideas on how to tackle a problem.*

> *I enjoyed how we were all helping each other and giving each other some advice on how to tackle questions, that doesn't always happen in lectures and tutorials because the groups are too big and you feel shy to ask questions.*

Theme 4: Enhances students' willingness to engage with other student communities

In recent years, there has been a broadening of the discourse around student support initiatives to encompass not only the acquisition of academic skills but also the psychosocial dimension. As part of orientation, students are frequently encouraged to participate in student communities. However, there are challenges related to the use and accessibility of these communities, particularly for day students. Students in residence tend to have a stronger sense of community, as residences often organize study groups. Conversely, non-residential students may struggle to feel a sense of belonging. Students who were part of the Mechanics study group reported an increased understanding of the benefits of these communities, which, in turn, made them more receptive to participating in other student communities, as seen by the following quote:

> *I think the day students benefitted more from the study groups than the res students, because at res we have those study groups. For the day students it helped them a lot to have that support.*

> *They were very beneficial hence I highly recommend them, they should start from the beginning of the year for 2023 students.*

> *It really helped me, it made me realise that working in a group helps you to not feel alone. I wish they had study groups for every module.*

Discussion

In the realm of engineering education, academic support mechanisms such as tutoring and mentoring are pivotal, yet often traditional lecture halls and tutorials may not adequately meet the diverse needs of students due to their large size. This study underscores the advantages of breaking into smaller, peer-led study groups, which have been shown to significantly enhance the learning experience by fostering a more intimate and supportive environment where students feel comfortable to engage and ask questions. This aligns with the findings of Johnson and Riley (2021), who emphasise the supportive nature of peer interactions, particularly within the socio-cultural context of the Global South, guided by ubuntu principles.

The qualitative post-intervention interviews conducted in this study, along with thematic analyses, have helped to uncover patterns indicating the benefits of smaller, peer-led study groups. Students reported not only improved understanding and grades, but also an increased willingness to participate in and recommend such study formats. This suggests that these groups do more than just aid in comprehension; they foster a sense of community and belonging.

Furthermore, the presence of stronger students within these groups provided opportunities for peer learning, where less proficient students could emulate more effective study practices. This reciprocal educational environment not only improves academic outcomes but also embeds a sense of shared experience and mutual aid which is particularly beneficial in challenging modules like Mechanics.

The transformative potential of peer-led groups is further supported by the findings of Pointon-Haas et al. (2024), who highlight the role of social connectivity in academic resilience within the educational landscape of the Global South. As the pace of technological change impacts learning behaviours and expectations, the need for active learning strategies that place students at the core of their educational journeys becomes increasingly important (Christie & De Graaff, 2017; Arruda & Silva, 2021; Neves & Mead, 2021).

The findings of this study are twofold. First, they underscore the benefits of peer-led tutorial systems in creating a supportive educational ecosystem, which is instrumental in enhancing student learning experiences. This is particularly relevant in engineering education, where the complexity of modules often requires innovative approaches to student support and intervention. Second, the research introduces fresh perspectives on circumventing the constraints associated with traditional lecturing methods. This is achieved by highlighting the pedagogical benefits of integrating peer-led tutoring into the curriculum, thereby advocating for its adoption as a strategic measure to rejuvenate tutorial systems and address the diverse learning needs of students.

Limitations and recommendations

One limitation of this study is its reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce biases related to individual perceptions and may not capture all nuances of the study group dynamics. Future research could employ mixed-method approaches to triangulate data from qualitative interviews with quantitative performance metrics to provide a more comprehensive view of the impacts of peer-led study groups.

Moreover, while this study provides insightful perspectives on the benefits of small group dynamics within a single university, extending this research to multiple institutions would enhance the generalizability of the findings. It would be beneficial to explore how these peer-led groups function across different cultural and educational settings within the Global South to adapt and optimise these interventions accordingly.

Conclusion

In summary, this article reveals that participation in study groups may positively impact student well-being for engineering students in a challenging context, specifically in the

high-impact modules. The positive impact of peer social connection on learning is clear and well-documented. Through participation in study groups, students benefited from the support of their peers, were exposed to opportunities for alternative problem-solving methods, and their academic performance improved. Furthermore, the smaller group size and collaborative nature of these groups created a supportive and empowering learning environment, where students felt confident to ask questions and engage in meaningful learning opportunities.

Ethics statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment, and Information Technology (EBIT) Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria (EBIT/8/2023 and 18/04/2023).

Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare no known conflicts of interest.

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Disturbed: Doing deep transformative work – Reflections on social justice work in South African higher education

Bouleversé : Faire un travail de transformation profonde – Réflexions sur le travail de justice sociale dans l'enseignement supérieur sud-africain

Bernadette Judith Johnson[1]

ABSTRACT

Alternative dispute resolution, anti-discrimination, anti-bullying, diversity and inclusion in higher education has been the focus of my work over the past four years. Spaces in which I have immersed myself include transformation at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) with multiple stakeholders, transformation engagement across the South African higher education system with academics, leaders, and managers and the most recent and perhaps most prominent has been my participation in the University of Cape Town (UCT) Panel which was appointed by its Council at the end of 2022 to investigate governance failures at the university as well as my facilitation engagements in transformation at Stellenbosch University since 2023. These experiences have at times been disruptive, disturbing and about learning "to be comfortable with discomfort", an idea I discuss elsewhere in 'Doing transformation: Building transformative practices from the bottom-up' (Johnson et al., 2024). Consistent with this work, this piece is a reflection about sense-making after a series of interactions of deeply challenging and disturbing yet rewarding experiences. In some ways it takes this work forward by thinking more deeply about going deeper into inter-personal transformative practice beyond the blunt instrument of employment equity. My autoethnographic reflections in this piece are part of my larger body of work on change theory or what we may encounter as activists, professionals, leaders, and managers in doing change. In this article, I consider what doing deep transformative work may entail, what it reveals, how we may come to understand it and what we may consider as tools and ways to engage with our woundedness as expressed within the self, interpersonal relations and systemic relations or, put differently, our engagement with the expressions of the systemic within the self. This work is a reminder that even the most advanced, highly acclaimed, and esteemed colleagues and scholars do not levitate above society, nor do our institutions, as we all carry our humanness and fallibility. It is also a reminder that all scholars are not necessarily leaders. The task however is to confront ourselves in terms of how we can make better contributions in how we lead change.

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RÉSUMÉ

La résolution alternative des conflits, la lutte contre la discrimination et le harcèlement, la diversité et l'inclusion dans l'enseignement supérieur ont été au centre de mon travail au cours des quatre dernières années. Les espaces dans lesquels je me suis immergée comprennent le processus de transformation à l'Université de Witwatersrand (Wits) avec de multiples parties prenantes, le travail de transformation à travers le système d'enseignement supérieur sud-africain avec les membres du corps académique, les dirigeants et les gestionnaires, et plus récemment, et peut-être le plus important, ma participation au Panel de l'Université du Cap (UCT) qui a été nommé par son Conseil à la fin de 2022 pour enquêter sur les échecs de la gouvernance à l'université, ainsi que mon travail de facilitation dans le cadre du processus de transformation à l'Université de Stellenbosch depuis 2023. Ces expériences ont parfois été bouleversantes, dérangeantes et m'ont permis d'apprendre à «être à l'aise avec l'inconfort», une idée que j'aborde ailleurs dans «Doing Transformation : Building Transformative Practices from the Bottom-up». Dans la droite ligne de ce travail, cette pièce est une réflexion sur la manière de donner un sens à une série d'interactions et d'expériences profondément stimulantes et bouleversantes, mais néanmoins gratifiantes. D'une certaine manière, cet article fait progresser ce travail en réfléchissant plus attentivement à une approche plus approfondie de la pratique transformative. Mes réflexions autoethnographiques dans cet article font partie d'un ensemble plus vaste de travaux sur la théorie du changement ou sur ce que nous pouvons rencontrer en tant qu'activistes, professionnels, dirigeants et managers dans le cadre de l'action pour le changement. Dans cet article, j'examine ce que le travail de transformation en profondeur peut impliquer, ce qu'il révèle, comment nous pouvons le comprendre et ce que nous pouvons considérer comme outils et moyens d'aborder notre blessure telle qu'elle s'exprime dans le moi, les relations interpersonnelles et les relations systémiques ou, pour le dire autrement, notre engagement avec les expressions du systémique dans le moi. Ce travail nous rappelle que même les collègues et les chercheurs les plus avancés, les plus acclamés et les plus estimés ne lévitent pas au-dessus de la société, pas plus que nos institutions, car nous portons tous notre part d'humanité et de faillibilité. C'est aussi un rappel que tous les experts et chercheurs ne sont pas nécessairement des leaders. Nous devons cependant nous confronter à la manière dont nous pouvons apporter de meilleures contributions à la conduite du changement.

MOTS-CLÉS

Règlement alternatif des litiges, dignité réparatrice, justice sociale, anti-discrimination, oeuvres estudiantines, transformation de l'enseignement supérieur

Introduction

The tip of the iceberg of transformation in many developing countries, like South Africa, as pointed out by Pandor (2018), has been changing equity profiles in higher education, like the private sector and the larger public sector. Despite equity changes to the make-up of people in organizations, organizational spaces, practices, values, and cultures may not necessarily have shifted. Transformation is understood in different ways in South Africa: from limited conceptions linked to equity; to broader conceptions related to societal change, anti-discrimination, institutional inclusive cultures whether in historically black or white institutions; and general reforms of the higher education system such as equity, quality, and access. (SAHRC, 2016, p. 20). The latest report on transformation produced by the Human Sciences Research Council for the Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in South African Public Universities (TOC), builds on the SAHRC report, among others, and shares this view while further developing an insightful conceptual frame of different conceptions of transformation in South African higher education institutions. These framings it regards as universities' transformation narratives and maps them in relation to eight of the universities being *diversity-focused universities*, 5

universities being *developmentally engaged universities* and 13 of the universities being *contested universities,* irrespective of the historical or current typology of the total 26 universities in South Africa. A powerful insight of the report is that a combination of these narratives would best serve "multiple complementary commitments to equity and development, as well as to democratisation; quality; effectiveness and efficiency; academic freedom; and accountability" (Luescher et al., 2023, pp. 120–121). In this article I share reflections of experiences of transformation in university spaces, perhaps not in a similarly neatly packaged way, and consider reflections of what may be going on with people as they grapple with themselves within a diverse and complex changed and changing environment.

Alternative dispute resolution, anti-discrimination, anti-bullying; diversity and inclusion in higher education has been the focus of my work over the past four years. The spaces in which I have immersed myself include transformation at University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) with multiple stakeholders, transformation engagements across the South African higher education system with academics, leaders, and managers and the most recent ,and perhaps most prominent, has been my participation in the University of Cape Town (UCT) Panel which was appointed by its Council at the end of 2022 to investigate governance failures at the university as well as my facilitation engagements in transformation at Stellenbosch University since 2023.

These experiences have at times been disruptive, disturbing and about learning "to be comfortable with discomfort", an idea I discuss elsewhere in 'Doing transformation: Building transformative practices from the bottom-up' (2024). Consistent with this work, this piece is a reflection about sense-making after a series of interactions of deeply challenging and disturbing yet rewarding experiences. In some ways it takes this work forward by thinking more deeply about going deeper into transformative practice. My autoethnographic reflections in this piece are part of my larger body of work on change theory or what we may encounter as activists, professionals, leaders, and managers in *doing change*. The discussion focuses on the complexity of personal histories that need to be factored into doing deep transformative work.

The impact on people, who previously may not have occupied spaces of privilege, may be a feeling, a sense of discomfort or not knowing whether they belong or fit into the spaces they have entered. People remark that they feel a sense of alienation, that they feel like visitors, that they don't feel a sense of belonging. Often, they say they can't put their finger on it. It feels imprecise but they just sense that they do not belong. That even though they are present, they do not fit into the space. Perhaps they can sense that the spaces they occupy are distant from what they sense are spaces of power and are unsure of their own agency. These are feelings of disconnection and with disconnection, Brené Brown probes in her TEDx Talk (2011) presentation, there is shame, excruciating vulnerability, and a sense of not being worthy. We cannot lose sight of how what we are experiencing is caught up in systemic changes towards greater corporatisation in higher education globally. It is this discomfort that makes confronting deep transformative work within us so hard and yet we are challenged to lean into this discomfort in the absence of radical change from below. It points to something powerful, that transformative work

in human relations and social engagement is about the larger social questions and how these resonate within our own humanity.

As I have engaged in this work with leaders and managers across the South African higher education system, I have become acutely aware of, at times, raw and unprocessed pain, hurt and woundedness that is brought into organizational spaces without sufficient preparation for the daunting and complex task of leading higher education institutions. Academics are trained to become experts in their respective fields of knowledge, and this happens through their focus on themselves, on the me and my development. If this is the prime reason for the promotion into management and leadership positions, we have lost sight of how scholars are prepared to lead beyond themselves and what is required of them to lead others. Seale (2021) makes this point powerfully in his recent book on deanship in South African, and broader Global South, universities.

In this article, I consider what doing deep transformative work may entail, what it reveals, how we may come to understand it and what we may consider as tools and ways to engage with our woundedness as expressed within the self, interpersonal relations and systemic relations or put differently, the expressions of the systemic within the self.

This work in social justice/diversity, equity and inclusion is an unknown and uncertain space which requires us to give expression to our discomfort, to break free from our internal silencing and to extend ourselves into courageous dialogic engagements to clarify and co-cultivate spaces of recognition of diversity and inclusion we would like to live and work in. While this points to the work we need to do in relation to one another, it also signals the work we must do on ourselves as part of the what and the how we bring to doing change.

Change theory, the 'self' and leadership and management

Doing change or being immersed in a change process is what we refer to as change theory. This is in line with Reinholz and Andrews (2020), as this work focuses on "the change that happens in practice or in the doing of transformation – hence drawing a distinction from the theory of change or anticipated change" (Johnson et al., 2024, p. 16).

As discussed elsewhere, I am intrigued by how we practice, live, and do transformative work. Much has been hypothesised about the theory of change and how it can guide us proactively on what to look out for and how to know whether change is taking place, through for example, indicators, targets, and measurements of change. Less is known about how transformation offices in universities and advocates of change and safeguarding, go about bringing about change. Perhaps what we experience is how messy it can be, how overwhelming it can be, how it is centred on emotional labour and thankless giving, and exhaustion without much opportunity to reflect and theorise on the change we do.

The joy in this work is that there are various ways and avenues to engage and catalyse change. We use a rhizome-like change theory in the work we do at Wits University, where we engage with context-informed change in a cyclical manner, from identifying sparks or hotspots of change, which emerge at any point and space, to

learning about and enhancing our practices of change (Johnson et al., 2024, p. 14). Figure 1 below provides a description of our cyclical phases of *doing transformation*.

Phase 1:
Identifying the hotspots of cultural warfare or conflict/difference

Phase 5:
Feedback to Phase 1 to re-spark and re-set the Transformation Agenda

Phase 2:
Developing policies, norms, and practices

Phase 1

Phase 5

Our cyclical phases of doing transformation

Phase 2

Phase 5

Phase 3

Phase 4:
Learning from experiences of doing Transformation

Phase 3:
Testing practices, actions and 'in-between-spaces'

Figure 1: Our cyclical phases of *doing transformation* (cited in Johnson et al., 2024, p. 15)

This work has been on the how of change, the process, and the importance of consciously embracing our own transformation in transformation offices as we engage in transformative leadership and guide doing change (Johnson et al., 2024).

Here, in reflecting on what transformation work unearths within us and the work we need to do on the 'self' as leaders and managers within higher education more broadly, further conceptualisation and work on change theory is needed on the self-reflexivity of leaders and managers in contributing better to change.

Investigating the 'self' at the point of vulnerability, we also gain insight into what may be going on for managers and leaders and what and how they are grappling with living change and deepening transformative practices. For Brown (TEDx Talks, 2011) vulnerability is about really being seen and wholeheartedness, having the courage to show you and your imperfections and having compassion to be kind to yourself and others and so be authentic, which allows for the development of connection. She argues that instead of confronting this, we numb and suppress our vulnerability to cope with the world we live in. We also look for certainty and avoid uncertainty. Presenting vulnerability, is contrary to the notion of management which is about being able to

control and predict processes and outcomes (Brown at TEDx Talks, 2011). If we were to think of management as highly embedded in the context, flow, and reality of people, then understanding people and becoming whole perhaps requires us to reimagine how creative, agile, and engaged managing change in oneself and others can be.

Digging deep: Confronting our woundedness in doing transformation

Doing deep transformative work includes working with our scars, woundedness and supporting people through processes towards deepening understanding through empathy and towards healing. Through immersing myself in this work, I have encountered anger, frustration, irritation and a woundedness around change. Some of us confront our wounds, work on our woundedness and strive to heal our wounds, whilst others may avoid their own wounds by being there for others.

When we are unable to sit in the pain of our woundedness, we may externalise our wounds by blaming others and so becoming the aggressor, creating harm, pain, and humiliation in the ways we communicate and interact with others. In this way the wounded becomes the perpetrator. Race baiting[2] and weaponizing race[3] can be ways in which the wounded aggressor creates ways of coping or creating internal safety by lashing out and harming others. Race baiting and weaponizing race are ways in which we draw people into our hurt and pain to belittle, humiliate and even degrade others. They encourage the dismissal of others' pain and their silencing and withdrawal from critical conversations on race, diversity and towards inclusive culture development work. In this way, through the interplay of interpersonal relations and emotional vulnerability as an expression of systemic presence of harm within the self, the cycle of oppressive relations is intentionally or unintentionally reproduced. By surfacing this, we are engaged in deep transformative practice.

I have heard phrases like "You could never understand where I am coming from because you are not … (my race, my gender)". While this may be true, is this not true for all of us in different ways for different reasons? Is it appropriate for one race to say, "Black people can say whatever they want but white people cannot as this would be part of black people healing." I cannot stop thinking about how crude racial phrases and baiting can be when I have heard that "White women cry and run out of meetings just like coloured women do when they cannot get their way. Black women stay and fight." Humiliating expressions and drawing on racial categories to divide and infantilise can be powerful weapons to generate fear that one may be besmirched as a racist and so silencing opportunities to seek clarity, develop understanding and create ground for dialogic engagements and deep transformative work towards inclusivity.

2 "Race baiting" refers to when someone (usually an aggressor or perpetrator) notices the vulnerability and hurt related to race within another party with whom they are engaging to draw the second party into an emotive, oppositional and aggressive engagement.

3 "Weaponizing race" refers to the aggressor or perpetrator using this vulnerability and hurt against the person's (the recipient or receiver of the aggression) race to harm, injure and humiliate them for them to experience the injury/hurt the aggressor feels as a consequence of racism and inequality.

Unlike the flogging by the wounded aggressor, the wounded victim internalises hurt and pain, can be negative and feel a great sense of pity for their own conditions without embracing their individual agency in bringing about change. Change is not taking place; conditions never change, and life never improves. I have seen a depressiveness and a sense of one's agency having taken repeated beatings from grappling with how to engage and uncertainty about what is needed from within to better relations.

I have seen people take on these roles possibly from their experiences of their trauma. These reflections of woundedness are perhaps echoed in the transactional analysis of the drama triangle of the rescuer, persecutor and victim in which people may be caught in relationships of toxicity by not taking responsibility and accountability for seeing the roles they play. Standing in a space of neutrality or even hovering above the situation or above these relations, presents an opportunity for un-entanglement (Transactional Analysis, 2018).

We are all embroiled in structural and systemic architectures which allow for the perseverance/stickiness of racialised and colonial structures. How we interact with these systems is further complicated by our complex personal interlocking diversities. We grapple to understand and know how to interact in our diversity which may often lead to cultural clashes/cultural warfare. When we bring our pain and hurt and carry it into our being, into our interpersonal relations and it spills and leaks into our leadership styles, we participate in the creation of potentially explosive, hurtful, unstable, combative, and aggressive leadership engagement. The wounded aggressor carries the social and physical pain of the past into the present to cope with the present reality while not transcending pain.

There is no getting away from the deep work we need to do as individuals. People like to talk about how transformation is not taking place, and nothing has changed, yet when you probe and ask, "*What would need to be happening for us to know that transformation is taking place?*", it often takes individuals some time to contemplate their responses. Some people then point to their own reality and agency in co-creating what they would like to see. "*How do I engage with power relations in meetings? How do I give my voice expression? What am I doing to bring about transformative spaces, transformative thinking, and dialogic engagements through which deep understandings of difference, and my lack of feeling of belonging is understood and addressed? If transformation is not something that simply happens on the outside, what is my role in doing transformation?*", are some of the questions we have engaged in with university stakeholders and continue to feel our way through.

It is dangerous to make assumptions when formulating expressions that everyone will have a common understanding of the meaning being conveyed. An example stands out when an academic said to students: "We can't all be Chiefs, some of us must be Indians". Although this is a common phrase most likely to be used by a particular generation, it is not shared by everyone nor understood by younger generations. Students – most of whom are relatively younger – were infuriated, and took to social media, and accused their lecturer of racism while the lecturer had uncritically used the expression. Habib (2021) is a brilliant example of this when he used the "N" word

and was called out by students only a few months into his new directorship position at the University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) (Etheridge & Chabalala, 2021). How, when and which words we use to communicate can be received differently by the recipient than what might have been intended by the communicator. In this way, we observe diversity as different interpretations of meaning conveyed. This requires us to become more sensitive to how holistically living diversity can be.

In powerful ways, the tensions that are out there in the spaces that aggravate conflict, interact with the tensions we experience individually with change, for example like fear and silencing that result from humiliating experiences of race baiting. In fact, the system is not only out there, it also resides within us. This begs questions such as: *When we have power, what are we doing with it? Are there ways in which we can imagine doing good with power? Creating spaces and opportunities to build connectivity?*

How we undermine dignity

Hicks (2011) argues that the underlying reason for conflict is the violation of dignity or the experience of indignities. She defines dignity as inherent worth or value. The need for transforming how we think and behave in relations can be thought of at multiple levels: the individual, the group, the community or society, the organizational context as well as the systems level. Indignities are experienced in fundamental ways when people experience the absence of their inherent worth or value as being human. In Christian teachings, for example, we are taught that we are made in the image of a God. The pain of indignity through non-recognition of one's value or worth as a human as expressed in the image of God is not just non-humanising, dehumanising, but deeply demonising. Rejection of humanity by one group allows for humanity to be affirmed in one's group of belonging and so for us to feel connection and become shielded from fear of abuse and neglect. Groups take various forms, for example, a black caucus, woman's group, trade unions and organic formations mobilising such as concerned groups formed around specific issues. At heightened moments of indignity organized formations just as individuals can respond to indignity through aggression, violence, hatred, and vengeance.

By drawing on the work of Hicks on how we undermine the dignity of others, in our work on dignity, we usually share the following slide in our awareness training:

Ways in which we undermine/violate someone's dignity.

- Allowing others' behavior to determine your behavior.
- By deceiving others and yourself. Tell the truth.
- Not taking responsibility for what you say and do when you make a mistake.
- Going with the crowd even when they are wrong in order to be praised or receive approval from others.
- Agreeing with others because we want to belong/feel connection and have relationships even though it undermines dignity.
- Agreeing or being silent because we want to avoid conflict. Express yourself and stand up for yourself and others when you see the violation of dignity.
- Assuming that you are an innocent victim in a difficult relationship. Be open to the idea that you may be contributing to creating a difficult and potentially conflictual relationship.
- Resisting feedback. We may be aware unconsciously in an undignified way and criticism allows us to be open to learning and developing in being embracing of diversity.
- Be careful not to blame and shame others. We can end up trying to defend ourselves by making others look bad.
- Falsely connecting with others through gossiping and discussing others when they are not there in demeaning ways.

Figure 2: Slide 2 in TEEO presentation on principles of engagement

This slide powerfully resonates with colleagues, students, and stakeholders as ways in which dignity is undermined. Often people can identify, for example, how they go with the flow, are afraid to go against what most people say, end up presenting themselves as victims and turning to corridor talk as ways of coping with leaders' inability to listen or for them to feel heard. The formation of in and out groups, cabals, factions is powerful, and they can form fast in spaces as ways for people to find new sources of power. As these ways of undermining dignity are replicated, cultural practices are formed over time in the higher education sector. I have received, for example, bullying cases where a situation has festered for 2 years, 4 years and even up to 10 years. But they usually all start off with these subtle ways of undermining dignity.

Indignities take the form of microaggressions, racism, sexism, gender-based violence, domestic violence and conflicts in society and can be experienced within organizations as leadership and management styles, policy frameworks and governance structures.

We pretend that what we say and do does not impact people. We must work on ourselves and what we bring into the world and become far more sensitive and attuned to how we impact spaces and people.

How dignity can be restored

Hicks (2011) offers ten essential elements of dignity. These are: (1) acceptance of identity, (2) recognition, (3) acknowledgement, (4) inclusion, (5) safety, (6) fairness, (7) independence, (8) understanding, (9) benefit of the doubt and (10) accountability. Acceptance of identity entails interacting with people in ways that allow them to authentically express their selves – that are different in diverse ways – without prejudice or bias. It requires recognising what people contribute and acknowledging them by offering full attention by listening and responding to concerns raised. People need to feel

that they are included through them belonging and feeling safe from bodily harm and humiliation or shame so that they can speak without fear. That they will be treated in an even-handed manner and encouraged to engage on their own behalf to allow them to take charge of their lives with a sense of hope and possibility. What people say needs to matter as listening happens with the intention to establish an understanding through trusting people and that their motives are informed by a need to act with integrity.

If in anyway indignities are experienced or expressed, it's important to express remorse through apologising, as part of showing accountability and a commitment to restoring dignity (Hicks, 2021).

Rashedi et al. (2015) discuss compassion development in higher education, an integral area of study in psychology and religious studies. Thinking about how compassion can be promoted in students as part of their holistic transformative learning in universities. In defining 'compassion', they argue that compassion starts with recognising someone else's pain and suffering which in turn generates feelings of empathy. When empathy translates into an action-oriented affective state to alleviate the suffering of others, then compassion is experienced and is composed of the components of "(a) awareness of another's pain … (b) a feeling of kindness; (c) a yearning to mitigate the suffering; and (d) doing what is within one's ability to lessen another's suffering … Thus compassion requires one's strength to be with the suffering" (p. 132).

The political economy of transformation and its various elements, including restoring dignity and compassion, require a social and economic system that is supportive of transformation. Referring specifically to compassion, Spandler and Stickley (2011, p. 134) (cited in Rashedi et al., 2015) state that:

> *Compassion can be facilitated or significantly inhibited within different social and culture value systems. Yet it appears that dominant values in mainstream society are diametrically opposed to qualities associated with compassion. The neoliberal consensus on the necessity of market capitalism has led to the dominance of values around choice, independence, personal achievement, as well as competition, selfishness, and the pursuit of profit, status, and power.*

In thinking about restoring dignity, we need to think about restorative justice and pushing back on all systemic forms of oppression and injustice. The constitutional nature of the South African state has led to a focus on rights as legislative. While this is crucial, it is not a sufficient condition for transformation. We need to look deeper into our frameworks that give content and form to restoration. It is more than justice which at times can be elusive. It has to do with what it means to be human. Thinking about restoring dignity requires society to dig deep into how indignities are experienced and how they can be restored. African societies are deeply rooted in collective practices including their justice systems, which tend to seek restorative justice, where the impact of parties is understood in context and where the community and families can contribute to solutions. So, for example when thinking about bullying, is it not as important to understand what's happening to the bullied as is happening to the alleged bully? In cases of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) it is equally important to understand the

context and reality of the transgressed and the transgressor. Without this we cannot comprehend our healing. Digging deep to seek alternative solutions is disturbing. For example, thinking about positive masculinity in relation to GBVF.

"Restorative dignity" as a way into and overcoming our woundedness

Transformation is about recognition and restoring dignity. What the individual, the community and society go through is a healing and celebration of experiencing dignity. The process of recognition and restorative dignity requires empathy, compassion, courage, and strength in the ways in which we work. Transformation is not momentary. Transformation is a process composed of sustained and rhythmic transitions. Because of their complexity, transformation and healing work require patience in engagement with the realities of restrictions, counter-movements, and subtle flows. It's a patient and sustained engagement with restorative dignity and movement towards personal and professional strength and well-being. It can entail the following:

Helping ourselves to think and to be heard
Through her 10 components of creating a thinking environment, Nancy Kline offers us a way of helping ourselves to think and be heard. I have drawn on the slide that follows to capture her 10 components to develop an awareness of what is needed to help us think and do deep transformative work with multiple and diverse stakeholders and settings.
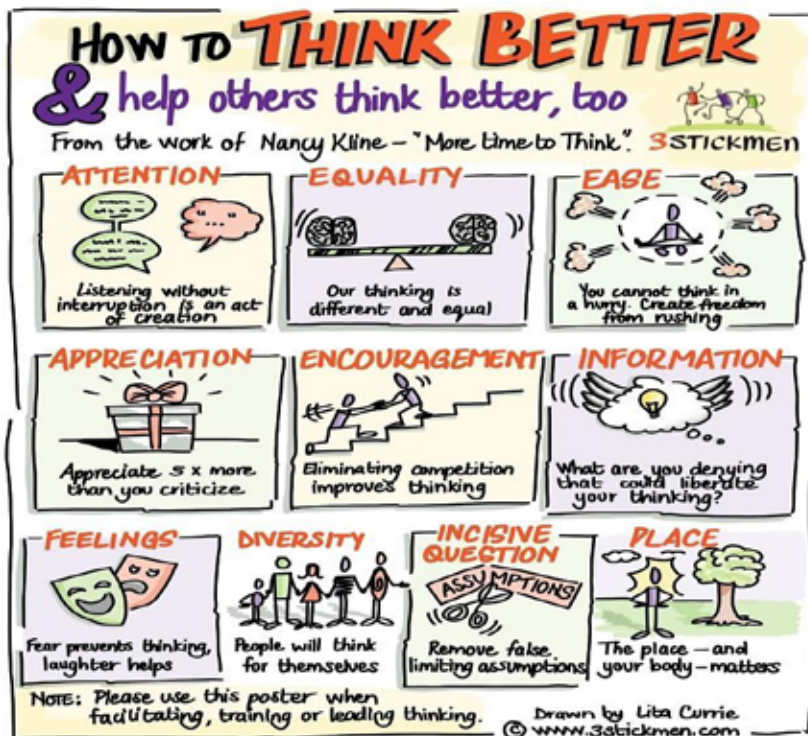

Figure 3: Slide 3 in TEEO presentation on principles of engagement

It takes us to a place of really thinking about what people are saying with curiosity and interest and digging deep into what is underlying what people are saying. This requires us to suspend what we are saying. It means we must also suspend our ideological, political, and religious preferences to discover, investigate and understand meaning for sense-making. It means

- considering whether I am present and attentive.
- Do we allow for equality?
- Are we at ease and comfortable?
- Am I appreciative of what is being said, including criticism?
- How are we encouraging each other through collaboration?
- What are we avoiding getting to know?
- How are we feeling?
- Are we appreciative of difference among us?
- Are we challenging our own assumptions as part of sense-making?
- And are we comfortable holistically, including our physical presence and space?

The thinking environment is about catalysing a supportive, creative, and generative thinking space within the university community to claim its own humanity.

Doing deep transformative work with leaders and managers

To listen to someone, you need to do your own healing. Healing may mean therapy if there is unresolved trauma. It can also mean coaching for heightening skills of listening and your impact on others and to experience being listened to and creating that environment. It is not only about thinking but also about doing and living through the learning, which often can be avoided because of potential discomfort and disturbance in feelings and bodily sensations. Yet this is the treasure chest of transformative work that needs to be unearthed and explored. George et al. (2007, p. 130) refer to this as discovering your authentic leadership, which allows one to share a passion for one's purpose, to live one's values and lead with not only the head but also with the heart; all of which are discovered through getting to know oneself and becoming self-aware. Such integrity helps to sustain organizations through good and bad times.

Space for one-on-ones and bigger spaces for healing which involve groups/teams and engagements with people who are and think differently need to be strengthened and encouraged. This allows us to get to know ourselves better. Perhaps there are layers of healing that create transformational spaces. Perhaps transformation is about re-humanising academia itself through connectivity/engagement. It's not an isolated endeavour or way of being.

Coaching offers the personal growth space for individual leaders and managers to reflect and challenge themselves in their own growth for personal, professional, and organizational well-being. During the coaching process, leaders and managers are able, through reflecting on their practice, to develop an acute sense of themselves, their impact on others and can engage with the interplay of self and systems in ways that enhance individual and collective agencies for change and well-being.

Bertrand's research on the practice of executive coaching to improve leadership capacity in academic deans at American higher education institutions shows intellectual stimulation towards transformational leadership, greater empathic behaviour and improvements in self-awareness and habits of self-care as outcomes experienced by deans personally and professionally because of their executive coaching experience. What made this possible for coaches to achieve is "the superior quality of their listening skills, their ability to offer useful perspectives and by building trust" (Bertrand, 2019, p. 110).

Coaching offers an opportunity for leaders and managers to reflect on their being, how they do change and how they confront difficulties, tensions, and conflict.

Creating more opportunities for alternative dispute resolution
In universities there tends to be a far greater focus on grievance procedures which may lead to disciplinary action, with the worst possible outcome being dismissal. There is a need to develop greater opportunities to gain clarity, understanding and to repair and restore relations. Alternative dispute resolution offers the opportunity to develop a continuum of alternative dispute resolution options. Mediation, and facilitating difficult conversations are ways that enable better understanding of our diversities and how better we can build inclusion within universities spaces and communities.

Conclusion
In this article, I have shared with you, the reader, some of my deep experiences and reflections on doing social justice work in my university and within the university system in South Africa. This work has implications for higher education leaders and managers and for student affairs researchers and practitioners. It raises worthwhile questions and learnings. In deepening our transformative work, I would recommend we consider the following:

1. ***How are we creating spaces within the work we do to reflect on ourselves and what we bring to processes and practices of creating inclusive cultures?*** Debriefing sessions and thinking environment opportunities may be important spaces we can create as part of our work as we reflect on improving what we bring to support, care and improve in the healing work we do. For example, what we bring to our work in the classroom is different to what we bring to our diversity work in the residences, as the latter are shared living spaces in which tensions reside and may fester. Humiliating and dehumanising initiation traditions, racist and gender-based violent practices manifest differently in these different spaces. This requires us to deepen what we bring to these different spaces. The work is challenging. The care of the carers and supporters of change are equally important. As we do this healing work, we have to recognise the healing that takes place within ourselves.

2. ***What opportunities are we creating to think through the work we are bringing to others?*** How might we extend our transformative work so that it is far more comprehensive and reflective of different dimensions of transformation such as

diversity work, development work and creative disruptive and contested work to create that 'sweet spot' Luescher et al. (2023) point us to? To get close to the integrated nature of the systemic, our work needs to be far more rooted in assisting people to reflect on what they bring of their selves into the space and what the space needs to be for inclusive systemic development to be stimulated in iterative and dynamic ways. A key question to explore is: *What are the implications of our shared values and ethics for the kinds of shared practices, policies, and systems we need to co-create restorative dignity and develop inclusive cultures?*

3. ***In which ways are we strengthening leadership and management self-reflexivity through tracking, learning, and sharing change at points of engagement that allow for the distributed nature of leadership and management development within all spaces and levels throughout the university?*** Student affairs spaces especially engage directly with students' university experiences, what students will become and change into as they leave the university and contribute to the restorative dignity, inclusive culture building and humanisation development within society more broadly.

4. ***Which vehicles can we establish within our universities to enable and support our work?*** In addition to existing initiatives of anti-discrimination awareness work and interventions, coaching, mentoring and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation, are some expansive ways to consider as ways to enable and support deep and comprehensive transformative work. These are vehicles that transport us into considering how the self and systems can enable changes in personal and professional reflexivity, while simultaneously delving into the social construction of *new humanising systems that enable the development of inclusivity and restorative dignity*.

Student Affairs practitioners have a powerful role to play given the direct and expansive engagements that takes place within this portfolio in teaching and learning, research and innovation, accommodation, food security and mental health spaces. Student affairs has broad reach which can lead the embeddedness of change work throughout the university life experience and beyond our students and future leaders and managers.

Acknowledgement

Ethics statement
This reflective piece is informed by the author's experience and is an ethnographic study that draws on sources that are in the public domain. No information has been included which is of a confidential nature. The views expressed in this article are the views of the author.

Potential conflict of interest

As this is reflective work, a potential area of conflict is between being an active participant, leader and initiator of ideas for practices, testing and research. Of importance is that the Transformation Office at Wits is now thought of as an Office of Praxis. Colleagues we engage with are aware of why we have chosen to work in a way that allows us to Do Transformation for Transformation. Put differently, to do transformation and reflect on our practice to share our understanding and learnings with other social justice practitioners, advocates and theorists. Given the sensitive nature of the issues dealt with in this office, no confidential information is drawn on as part of retaining a distinction related to the integrity of the office.

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Reflective perspectives of residence heads' experiences and responses during COVID-19 at a Free State university, South Africa

Perspectives de réflexion sur les expériences et les réponses des responsables de résidence pendant la pandémie de COVID-19 dans une université de l'État libre, en Afrique du Sud

Mpho P. Jama[1] & Pulane Malefane[2]

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic affected higher education institutions negatively, especially departments such as Students Affairs at the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa. When the national lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, some students were already in recess and had vacated their residences. Students that had remained were given 72 hours to vacate their residences. By 26 March 2020, the residences were locked, and only a few international and graduate students remained. These changes affected the functioning of residence heads because they had to assume different roles. This reflective article provides perspectives on the experiences and responses of residence heads during the different levels of the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa and recommendations for future practice and responses of the participating residence heads. The article uses reflective scholarship of practice as a methodology and incorporates Schön's (1987) reflection as knowing-in-action and further draws on Luescher's (2018) template for the structure and key components of reflective practice. A focus group discussion was also done to elicit more data from participants. The findings indicate that residence heads experienced anxiety and fear related to their students, families, and jobs during the different lockdown levels. The responses show that effective communication with students and university stakeholders during all levels of the lockdown was key, although confusing and conflicting at times. Most available studies have focused on the experiences and responses of students, teaching and learning, and institutions, but only a few on residence heads during COVID-19. This study provides not only an account of the experiences and responses of residence heads but also recommendations for future residence head practice in student affairs and institutions during similar times of crisis.

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RÉSUMÉ

La pandémie de COVID-19 a eu des répercussions négatives sur les établissements d'enseignement supérieur, en particulier sur les départements tels que celui des oeuvres estudiantines de l'Université de Free State (UFS) en Afrique du Sud. Lorsque le confinement national a été annoncé le 23 mars 2020, certains étudiants étaient déjà en vacances et avaient quitté leurs résidences. On avait donné 72 heures aux autres étudiants pour quitter leurs résidences. Le 26 mars 2020, les résidences étaient fermées et seuls quelques étudiants internationaux et des cycles supérieurs pouvaient encore rester. Ces changements avaient une incidence sur le fonctionnement des responsables de résidence, car ils devaient assumer des rôles différents. Cet article réflexif offre des perspectives sur les expériences et les réponses des responsables de résidence pendant les différents niveaux de confinement pendant la pandémie de COVID-19 en Afrique du Sud, ainsi que des recommandations sur les pratiques et les réponses futures des responsables des résidences concernés. L'article utilise la réflexion critique sur la pratique professionnelle comme méthodologie et intègre la réflexion de Schön (1987) en tant que connaissance-en-action. Il s'appuie également sur le modèle de Luescher (2018) pour la structure et les éléments clés de la réflexion. Une discussion de groupe a également été organisée pour obtenir davantage de données de la part des participants. Les résultats indiquent que les responsables des résidences ont ressenti de l'anxiété et de la peur liées à leurs étudiants, à leurs familles et à leurs emplois pendant les différents niveaux de confinement. Les réponses montrent qu'une communication efficace avec les étudiants et les parties prenantes de l'université à tous les niveaux du confinement était essentielle, même si elle était parfois confuse et conflictuelle. La plupart d'études disponibles se sont penchées sur les expériences et les réponses des étudiants, sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, ainsi que sur les institutions, mais très peu sur les responsables des résidences pendant la crise COVID-19. Cette étude présente non seulement un compte-rendu des expériences et des réponses des responsables des résidences, mais aussi des recommandations concernant les pratiques futures des responsables des résidences dans le domaine des œuvres estudiantines ainsi que pour leurs institutions lors de périodes de crise similaires..

MOTS-CLÉS
Pandémie COVID-19, œuvre estudiantine, vie en résidence, responsables des résidences, pratique réflexive

Introduction and background

The COVID-19 pandemic required all higher education institutions to adhere to lockdown regulations. The first regulations required South African universities to suspend all in-person engagement in academic buildings, including all out-of-class spaces. Subsequently, these spaces, such as residences, had to be vacated as far as possible. However, the various waves of COVID-19 created various phases of uncertainty in the re-opening of universities to pre-pandemic levels.

Similar to other countries, the South African Government implemented different lockdown levels that restricted the movements of people in one way or another. On 23 March 2020, the President announced lockdown level 5, a three-week nationwide lockdown with severe restrictions on travel and movement between provinces, districts, and metropolitan areas (South Africa DoH, 2020, 1 of 5). At the University of the Free State (UFS), students were already in recess and could not return to the university. Those who remained were given 72 hours to vacate their residences.

By the 26 March 2020, the residences were locked and only a few international and graduate students remained. When the country moved to level 4 of the lockdown from the 1st to the 31st May 2020, the Minister of Higher Education and Training announced that academic activities could resume for certain groups of students (South Africa Government, 2020). At the UFS, only final-year medical and nursing students returned

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to campus. When the country moved to level 3 lockdown, students who needed clinical and laboratory training returned, but up to 33% of campus capacity. From levels 2 to 1, other categories of students, including those that faced extreme difficulties studying at home, returned, but up to 66% of campus capacity. Students who lived in off-campus accommodation, though not in the selected category, were allowed to return to the province with permits (UFS, 2020a). Off-campus accommodation is not university-owned or managed by the university (UFS, 2022). The different lockdown levels severely disrupted academic programmes, residence life, and residence heads.

Residence Life (RL) is a division responsible for the overall experience of students residing in campus housing while at the university (Thomas, 2018). Furthermore, RL facilitates relationships between other students, administration, and academic departments (Dunkel & Bauman, 2013). In RL, students gain experience in leadership, mentorship, residence management, transition into higher education, and campus culture (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020). Moreover, there is peer support, mentors, tutors, even access to Wi-Fi in RL (Benjamin & Chatriand, 2008). Hence, residence heads are crucial in bringing these overall experiences together.

Residence heads manage all the activities and operations in the residences and create a sense of belonging, which provides a feeling of acceptance, security, and support for all students. They maintain a healthy community environment, oversee the residences along with housing facilities and maintenance staff, and provide guidance to the residence student leaders (Bawa, 2020). Furthermore, residence heads collaborate and maintain efforts towards promoting student success with other structures within Student Affairs, Housing and Residence Affairs (HRA), faculties, and other student support offices (Bawa, 2020), and always engage with students (Xulu-Gama, 2019).

Residence heads play important roles in higher education, including providing quality services, programmes that enhance student learning, student leadership training, community service opportunities, health and wellness experiences, etc. The impact residence heads have on students, both academically and developmentally, is essential and central to the higher education mission and enterprise (Scheiber & Ludeman, 2020). Residence heads serve as guides for students, ushering them from the unknown to the known (Groenewald & Fourie-Malherbe, 2019).

During the pandemic, residence heads managed the crisis, and effective communication was key. This crisis communication provided all affected with information that was consistent and honest throughout. A crisis can have negative consequences and lead to confusion, anxiety, and instability (Coombs, cited in Zamoum & Gorpe, 2018). In times of crisis, Student Affairs plays a role in ensuring that students' basic needs are adequately supported (Adjei et al., 2021). This was the case at the UFS during COVID-19.

In response to the pandemic crisis, universities established task forces and subcommittees including academics, human resources, facility management, health units, and student affairs. These structures met frequently to make informed pandemic-related decisions as the situation evolved (Sahu, 2020). UFS established task forces and committees that included the Teaching and Learning Management Group (TLMG), the

COVID-19 Task Team, and the Vulnerable Students' Task Team. Some residence heads were members of these teams and were responsible for making informed decisions.

Since 2020, studies on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education and student affairs have been undertaken. For example, Dunn-Coetzee et al. (2021) report on the necessity of developing tailored programmes that could mitigate risks through various interventions at the institutional and faculty levels and emphasised the need of providing the necessary infrastructure. Mutambisi et al. (2021) report on different challenges in the higher education environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that residence heads should be provided with adequate resources and lifelong learning opportunities and be re-oriented in their roles. Schreiber et al. (2021) highlight the importance of integrating student affairs into institutional processes such as teaching, living, and learning spaces because student affairs plays a supportive role and mediated, mitigated, facilitated, and improved student learning and success. Kanyumba and Shabangu (2021) purport that in some institutions, there were no clear systems and proper directives regarding COVID-19 regulations for the phased return of students to residences. This void created challenges for residence heads.

These studies focused on the experiences of students and teaching and learning, but not much on residence heads during COVID-19. The current study provides reflections on the experiences and responses of residence heads and recommendations that can be used by RL, Student Affairs, and institutions during future pandemics or similar times of crisis.

Context of Student Affairs and Residence Life

In 2020, the Student Affairs structure at the UFS was represented in the Rectorate, led by the deputy vice-rector of Student Affairs, with several portfolios. These included the dean of students, with various units, counselling, Centre for Universal Access and Disability Services, student governance, student life and Residence Life. RL is managed by an assistant director, who is a line manager for residence heads and is responsible for all student development programmes, residence activities and operations.

The Student Representative Council (SRC) reports directly to the student governance office. The prime represents the residence students through the executive official of the SRC, and the chairperson of the primes has a seat in the SRC. RL coordinates the residence committee (RC), with a prime as the leader of the RC. The operation of the residences is within HRA and managed by a senior director, who collaborates with RL.

The context above indicates that residence heads function, support, and network within different Student Affairs structures, who provide services mainly when students are on campus. Hence, during the pandemic, residence heads had to interact with almost all structures and sometimes assume different roles, such as academic support.

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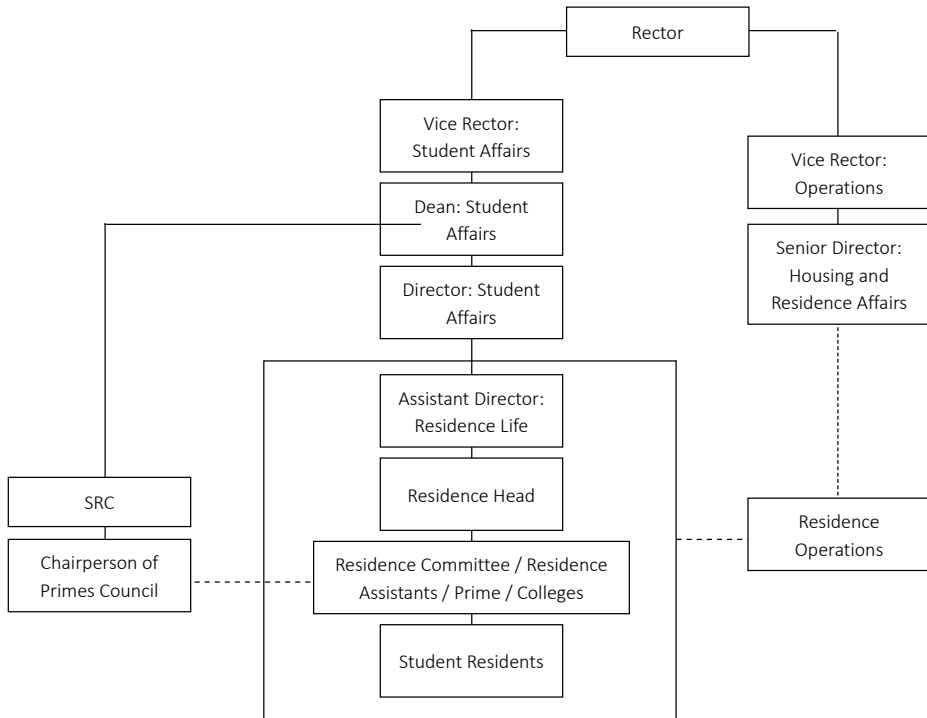
Figure 1: UFS Student Affairs strategic direction and organizational structure (UFS, 2020b)

Categories, roles, and practices of residence heads

At the UFS, there are two types of residence models, namely day residences and on-campus residences. Day residences create a platform for students who stay in off-campus accommodation to participate in all activities in the same manner as on-campus-residence students. A campus venue called a gazelle, is allocated for off-campus students, creating possibilities for these students to gather and participate in different student development opportunities. The on-campus residences are built by the university on the university grounds.

There are three residence-head appointments: (i) on-campus primary positions are appointed full-time to manage the residence and coordinate a specific student development programme, such as mentorship, marketing, health and wellness; (ii) on-campus secondary positions are full-time employees of the university, appointed primarily in either support or academic services, and perform their residence-head responsibilities after hours and over weekends; (iii) day-residence secondary positions commute and manage and coordinate residence activities during the day. Oncampus residence heads stay in an apartment attached to the students' residence building.

The context above indicates that different categories of residence heads have different roles and responsibilities for different categories of students at the UFS. In

2020, there were 23 on-campus residence heads, of which 17 were primary and 6 secondary positions. There were seven day residences, and all were secondary positions. Therefore, their proximity to students influenced their experiences and responses during the pandemic.

Methodology

Reflective scholarship of practice as methodology in student affairs

Reflection occurs when practitioners reflect-in-action on a case (in this study, COVID19) that is unique and pay attention to phenomena according to intuitive knowledge, thus allowing them to cope with unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations (Schön, 1987). Reflection is not always easy because some experiences are challenging and difficult to conscientiously think through (Sellars, 2013). Perhaps the residence heads at the UFS experienced this as they tried to cope with indefinite challenges of managing residences during the pandemic.

The main research question for this reflective contribution was: What were the experiences, responses, and recommendations for the future practice of the residence heads during COVID-19?

Drawing on Morgan's (2012) *Improving the student experience*, Luescher (2018) proposed a template for the structure and key components of a reflective practice article. Hence, this reflective article is structured according to the following key components: (i) Student Affairs and RL; (ii) description of the categories, roles, and practices of residence heads; (iii) reflections on residence heads' practices by focusing on their experiences and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (iv) residence heads' recommendations for future practice.

To elicit more data, a qualitative approach was followed that incorporates an interpretive paradigm focusing on recognising and narrating the meaning of human experiences and actions (Botma et al., 2010; Fossey et al, 2002). A focus group discussion (FGD) was used as a data collection technique, thus allowing interaction of the group members to provide perspectives and formulation of answers to the research question (Patton, 2002).

Data collection

Residence heads at the UFS were contacted via email, provided with an information document, and invited to participate in the study. A FGD guide was used to facilitate discussions. During the discussions, probing questions were asked to further guide and direct the participants toward responses that would elicit their experiences during the COVID-19 period. The FGD was conducted virtually on a Microsoft Teams meeting to adhere to COVID-19 regulations.

The target population for the study included all 30 (23 on-campus and 7 off-campus) residence heads using purposeful sampling. Because of the small population of 30, all residence heads were invited to volunteer and participate in the study as they fulfilled their roles in the residences during the pandemic. Only those who volunteered participated in the study. Eventually, 10 participated in the FGD, which, according to

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Hennik et al. (2019), is an acceptable number. Of the 10 participants, 6 were female, 4 male, 5 Black, 4 White, 1 Coloured, and comprised 7 on-campus and 3 off-campus residence heads.

A pilot study was done with two residence heads using Microsoft Teams to determine whether the questions in the interview guide would provide relevant responses. The goal of the pilot was also to get an impression of the kind of approach and questioning that would work best, the facilitation process, and duration of the discussion. Since there were no major changes to the interview questions after the pilot, the data obtained during the pilot study were used as part of the main investigation (Breen, 2006).

Data analysis

In line with data analysis in qualitative research, an iterative approach and emerging design were used to analyse the data. The data analysis did not have to wait until all the data had been collected (Botma et al., 2010). The verbatim transcripts of audio-recorded discussions done by a trained transcriber were printed and used as field notes, thus ensuring that they accurately reflected the participants' responses. During the analysis, the participants' words were noted by revisiting the audio recording and rereading the transcripts. Attention was given to non-verbal actions such as coughing, the lengths of pauses, emphasis, and tone of voice, thus allowing the interpretation of the actions during the analysis. The interview guide was used to assign preliminary codes, categories were created to identify patterns of similarities and differences, and a coding sheet was developed. Thereafter, themes and subthemes were developed. Thick excerpts from the textual evidence are provided to enhance credibility (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Notably, the authors, who are also experienced residence heads, used their insights during the identification of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings from the FGD regarding participants' experiences and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic and the recommendations participants made during the discussion. The first columns of Tables 1 and 2 represent the categories and the second columns represent the main and subthemes identified during coding.

Reflections on the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 1 presents the experiences of participants during each level of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Table 1: Experiences of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic

Level	Experiences
First notice by the institution	• Anxiety • Fear • Uncertainty • Concern • Hope
Level 5 Return of Cuban-trained and final-year Health Sciences students	• Shock • Disbelief • Anxiety and worry • Some relief and contentment • Panic
Level 4 33% of students allowed back on campus. Return of other Health Sciences students, including Natural and Agricultural Sciences students.	• Less fear and anxiety
Levels 3 and 2 66% of students allowed back on campus, including vulnerable students.	• Anxiety • Communication from RL • Concerns • Frustrations and conflict
Level 1 Maintenance of 66% capacity.	• Mixed emotions • Anxiety • Uncertainty and confusion • Despondence

Table 1 shows all participants experienced different levels of anxiety during all levels of the lockdown. When the university announced the discontinuation of academic programmes and closure of residences, participants were anxious about their roles in the empty residences and possible unemployment, as one participant highlighted: "*What is our role as res heads if we are busy managing empty spaces?*" When academic programmes resumed online, participants stated they were worried about students who had left their books in their residences. During level 4, there was less anxiety. One participant said: "*We had health care professionals who are informed about COVID and were on call, most of them – we didn't have to worry about them.*" However, the anxiety persisted in levels 3 and 2 when some students and staff were infected with COVID-19. One participant shared: "*I had a family member with comorbidities and was super worried about him.*"

During Level 1, there was anxiety about students whose home circumstances did not allow them to study but still could not return to campus. One participant recalled how "*some vulnerable students couldn't cope at home. They kept on applying to come back but were unsuccessful*". This was another anxiety related to non-adherence to COVID-19 regulations by students and the different placement of students in residences.

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As expected, there was fear, shock, disbelief, and panic during the different lockdown levels. The first group of students allowed back on campus during level 5 comprised of all final-year Health Sciences students, including 52 medical students who were trained in Cuba but had to return to South Africa to complete their final year of study and be integrated into the South African health care system. There was panic, especially in receiving the Cuban-trained students, as revealed by one participant: "*What am I going to do with these 52 people?*"; and disbelief: "*Is this really happening?*"

Despite the negative emotions, there was hope at the beginning that "*they will come back soon*" and some relief and contentment during Level 5. Interestingly, one participant said: "*to be honest, I was happy to be alone with my family in peace; I had time to relax and not deal with breakages and discipline of students.*"

Notably, there was concern for first-year students, who had only been at university for six weeks and had just begun adjusting when the university announced closure. One participant highlighted: "*Just as they're about to start settling and how the university works, then boom, the big announcement they need to pack and go.*" During levels 3 and 2, there was concern about students' well-being, especially those who had lost loved ones, were infected with COVID-19, had to be isolated or quarantined, and could not cope with the academic demands. Residence heads expected more communication regarding the pandemic and regulations from the RL office. The lack of and/or poor communication from other university structures led to frustration and some conflict.

The data show that the participants experienced anxiety, frustration, conflict, uncertainty, and confusion, especially during levels 3, 2, and 1. Most of this was caused by a lack of or poor and/or confusing communication from and with the national government, institution, faculties, and other departments, which thus led to ineffective functioning in the residences. For instance, there were daily changes to protocols regarding the placement of students in the residences; teaching and learning; and national, local, and university COVID-19 regulations. Because of the different communication channels created, students relied on the residence heads to provide the most accurate and up-to-date information, thus putting more pressure on the residence heads. As one participant remarked: "*At some stage, I felt that faculty was not doing justice to the residence heads through HRA.*"

At different levels, participants experienced mixed emotions about social distancing, COVID-19 cases, and accommodating different cohorts of students in their residences.

Reflections on the responses during the COVID-19 pandemic
Table 2 presents the responses of the participants during the different levels of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Table 2: Responses of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic

Level	Responses
First notice by the institution	• Conscientise students about COVID-19 • Communication • Helping students • Questions and answers • Public and private responses
Level 5	• Reaching out and communicating with students • Helping/supporting students • International students • Liaison with stakeholders
Level 4	• Communication and engagement • Workshops
Levels 3 and 2	• Communication • Adherence to COVID-19 protocols
Level 1	• Communication • Adherence to COVID-19 protocols

Table 2 shows that participants regarded communication as the most important response during all levels. Although this presented as a novel situation to everybody, after the institution's announcement, the residence heads had to respond appropriately and correctly to various questions from students. One participant said: "*I told them about the seriousness of the pandemic and [that] at that stage we need to consider their safety first.*" It was important to rely on official communication and take advice from the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) and Higher Health, to allay anxieties and fears. One participant referred to the public versus private response: "*we react publicly in front of students, where we always have to be a source of direction with positive vibes, but I was, joh!, going through a moment at the same time anxious.*"

From level 5, communication focused on who, according to government and university directives, was allowed to return, whether residence student leaders and/or National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funded students. Different communication platforms, such as SMS, WhatsApp, Blackboard, and phone calls were used for certain students. Although communication from different stakeholders was confusing and conflicting at the beginning, it became clearer from level 4, because more information about the pandemic and regulations was available.

Adhering to COVID-19 protocols was key, one participant stated: "*we literally had to paste the whole residence with communication posters, you know, that says, 'sanitise and wear your mask'.*" Residence heads had to apply discipline for non-adherence to regulations, as indicated by the following phrase: "*We had to be strict, you know, some were fined, we really can't say, they had to do community services.*"

One participant stated that it was commendable that the university offered different training arranged by the campus health centre, Higher Health, and Counselling Services.

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During training, more information about the pandemic, protocols, and compliance was provided, thus improving communication.

As mentioned by a participant, residence heads were expected to assume academic positions by communicating academic information and addressing the academic concerns of students too. This required liaison with the Centre for Teaching and Learning and faculties, regarding Blackboard online learning, Global Protect[3], and class timetables.

Recommendations for future practice

Participants offered the following recommendations for the UFS during the FGD:

1. Institutional

During a pandemic outbreak, or similar crisis, universities should first prioritise the return of vulnerable students to campus who may not be able to study effectively at home due to their socio-economic backgrounds. Second, there should be a system for academic support that includes provision of data and electronic devices to support online learning. Third, communication from different stakeholders to staff and students should be clear and timeous. Lastly, during crises, there must be integrated planning between all departments, faculties, and Student Affairs, using effective platforms, as reiterated by Adjei et al. (2021).

2. Student Affairs

The dean should establish effective communication platforms and strategies with all the functional areas of Student Affairs, including RL. There should be proper consultation with different departments, thus enhancing clear lines of communication, as suggested by Zamoum and Gorpe (2018).

3. Residence Life

All participants recommended that RL must consider different activities and the workload of the different categories of on- and off-campus residence heads, as purported by McCarthy (2021). Moreover, compliance protocols, guided by health experts, should be established and, in consultation with residence heads, proper and quality personal protective equipment and resources should be provided.

Conclusion

Residence heads have been perceived to be flexible in terms of their abilities to fulfil different roles. During the pandemic, they even had to phone students to determine how they were coping with online learning, data, connectivity, and home environments, which often included providing social, emotional, and psychological support, which is not in their job description (Bawa, 2020; Scheiber & Ludeman, 2020). According to the findings, during the pandemic, the roles of residence heads at the UFS, who were essential workers and provided extraordinary services, were undervalued compared to

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3 Global Protect is an app that was made available for students to access academic resources at no cost. Students could access different academic sites and university programmes using their electronic devices.

health care practitioners, who were regarded as heroes and frontline workers. The study thus provided insights into the valuable role that residence heads played during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, the study afforded opportunities for Student Affairs and RL to reflect on and reimagine the practices of residence heads and the support offered to these practitioners during crises. Although this study was limited to one institution, the recommendations may apply to other institutions during future pandemics.

Limitations

The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, the participation of some residence heads was limited, and data collection engagements were conducted virtually. The collection of data during the FGD was compromised because the interviewer had limited control over the full participation of participants, who might have been focusing on other duties.

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Ethics statement

Approval for this research study was obtained from the General/Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the UFS. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Dean: Student Affairs.

Potential conflict of interest

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

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The role of the Muslim Student Association at a South African university campus in promoting a sense of belonging, community service and a student-centred environment

Rôle de l'association des étudiants musulmans d'un campus universitaire sud-africain dans la promotion du sentiment d'appartenance, du service communautaire et d'un environnement centré sur l'étudiant

Naadhira Seedat[1] & Rishen Roopchund[2]

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions, unlike high schools, can be a very isolating environment for students due to the great diversity of students. Many students experience a sense of 'not belonging' and demoralization due to the lack of social interactions with the vast number of students in the institution's community. Student orientations are offered to first-year students within their faculties to provide a general welcome to students. However, student orientations are inadequate for students to find their sense of belonging in the greater community. Students feel a sense of belonging based on common interests, religious affiliations, and common belief systems. Several student associations based on these commonalities are established across universities in South Africa to establish a sense of belonging for individual students in the greater community. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) is one such student association that has been established for several years across various South African universities. This reflective practice article is based on the reflections of two lecturers (Muslim and non-Muslim) at a major South African university. The article aims to highlight the importance of the MSA at one campus of a major university, in creating a sense of belonging for students. The reflections encompassed the care-fostering initiatives, such as welcome events, Islamic talks and collaborations on quiz nights, in creating a sense of community (belonging) and collaboration among students. The secondary aim is to analyse the MSA's effectiveness in community service activities such as bake sales, winter-warmth hamper donations, food drives, volunteer work and fundraisers in creating a leadership and student-centred caring environment which benefits the students and the local disadvantaged communities. The Gibbs reflective model is used to capture the authors' reflections on the MSA and propose an action research plan to maintain and improve the MSA's initiatives.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les instituts d'enseignement supérieur, contrairement aux écoles secondaires, peuvent être un environnement très isolant pour les étudiants en raison de la grande diversité des étudiants. De nombreux étudiants éprouvent un sentiment de « non-appartenance » et de démoralisation en raison du manque d'interactions sociales avec le grand nombre d'étudiants de la communauté de l'institut. Des séances d'orientation sont proposées aux étudiants de première année dans leurs facultés respectives afin de leur souhaiter la bienvenue. Toutefois, ces orientations ne permettent pas aux étudiants de développer un sentiment d'appartenance à la grande communauté en général. Les étudiants ressentent un sentiment d'appartenance sur base d'intérêts communs, d'affiliations religieuses et de systèmes de croyances communs. Plusieurs associations d'étudiants basées sur ces points communs ont été créées dans les universités d'Afrique du Sud afin d'établir un sentiment d'appartenance des étudiants individuels à la communauté dans son ensemble. L'association des étudiants musulmans (Muslim Student Association, MSA) est l'une de ces associations d'étudiants qui existe depuis plusieurs années dans diverses universités sud-africaines. Cet article de pratique réflexive est basé sur les réflexions de deux enseignants (musulman et non musulman) dans une grande université sud-africaine. Il vise à souligner l'importance de la MSA sur le campus d'une grande université, en créant un sentiment d'appartenance chez les étudiants. Les réflexions ont porté sur les initiatives de soutien, telles que les séances d'accueil, les discussions sur l'islam et les collaborations lors des soirées quiz, afin de créer un sentiment de communauté (d'appartenance) et de collaboration entre les étudiants. L'objectif secondaire est d'analyser l'efficacité des activités de service communautaire de la MSA, telles que les ventes de pâtisseries, les dons d'articles d'hiver, les collectes de nourriture, le travail bénévole et les collectes de fonds, pour créer un environnement propice au leadership et à l'entraide centré sur les étudiants, au bénéfice de ces derniers et des communautés locales défavorisées. Le modèle de réflexion de Gibbs est utilisé pour saisir les réflexions des auteurs sur la MSA et proposer un plan de recherche-action pour maintenir et améliorer les initiatives de la MSA.

MOTS-CLÉS
Association d'étudiants, centrage sur l'étudiant, engagement communautaire, inclusion de l'étudiant, leadership de l'étudiant

Introduction

The main focus of universities is seen to be the transference of knowledge and skills through teaching and research (Karimi & Matous, 2018). Less attention is given to the social lives and integration of students into the vast community of the institution. Unlike secondary education institutions, higher education institutions constitute a highly diverse student community. Students, particularly minority students, experience a sense of 'not belonging'. Pedler et al., (2020) define belonging in the higher education context as "subjective feelings of connection and integration with their institution and campus community". Students can feel demoralized and isolated due to the lack of interaction with students who share the same interests, beliefs and religious affiliations as themselves. The feeling of isolation and lack of social inclusion results in negative impacts on students' mental health and, hence, on their academic success and retention in higher education (Fan et al., 2013). There are many factors that lead to student attrition in the higher education sector such as unpreparedness, financial issues and course incompatibility (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). One important factor which is generally overlooked is not being able to find one's place in the diverse student body, as humans are social beings and need to feel like they 'belong' (O'Keeffe, 2013; Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). A sense of belonging is established through meaningful interactions

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between people with common interests within a diverse student body, establishing social inclusion and integration (Karimi & Matous, 2018). Social inclusion and integration yield a positive effect on a student's social life and, hence, their academic performance and retention (Karimi & Matous, 2018). One such intervention to promote inclusivity and a sense of belonging is the encouragement of diversity and difference through student associations (Fan et al., 2013; O'Keeffe, 2013).

A student association/society is defined by Brew (1946) as a "community engaged in the task of educating itself". The benefits associated with student associations go beyond academics and are vital in the personal development of students (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). Student associations have several roles and benefits within the higher education sector. The benefits of student societies in addressing matters of inclusion and community are threefold. First, to improve student life, in particular for minorities, by creating a safe space for meaningful interaction with students who share common interests and beliefs. Second, to develop social integration and inclusion among students through the creation and empowerment of a community (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). Lastly, the sense of belonging created in these communities and social inclusion leads to reduced student attrition and improved academic performance (Pedler et al., 2020).

Student associations are prevalent at various higher education institutions around the world, with much emphasis on the benefit of student associations in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia, as the diversity of the students is ever-increasing (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013; Karimi & Matous, 2018; Fan et al., 2013). Post 1994, with the abolishment of apartheid, the diversity of students in South African higher education institutions has increased from a predominantly white student body; hence the need for diverse ethnic, religious and interest-based student societies in South African universities to create social inclusion and integration (Cradit & Wawrzynski, 2018). Religious student associations create essential platforms for students with common beliefs to come together and create a community that is empowered and united to find a path of seeking knowledge, imparting knowledge and doing good for the communities around them (Ansari, 2018). This is achieved through community engagement projects, student-led activities and community service projects and awareness projects. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) is a student association that has been established in several Western countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia, and in Nigeria on the African continent (Song, 2013; Fawzi, 2019; Ansari, 2018; Balogun, 2022). In South Africa, the MSA was first established in 1974 across several universities under apartheid rule (Mahida, 1993). Till today the MSA is an active student society aiming to create a safe space for students to come together to find a sense of belonging as well as serve the communities in need around them.

This reflective practice article aims to highlight the importance of specialized student associations, in particular the MSA, in creating a sense of belonging for students in the greater community at higher education institutions. Reflections on the effectiveness of initiatives such as welcome events, academic support, Islamic education talks and collaborations on quiz nights to create a sense of belonging through collaboration among students are presented. Additionally, a reflection on the effectiveness of the

MSA in community service activities such as bake sales, food drives, winter-warmth hamper donations, volunteer work and fundraisers in creating a leadership and student-centred caring environment that not only benefits the students, but also disadvantaged communities, is evaluated. The Gibbs reflective model will be utilised to demonstrate the authors' reflections as lecturers at one campus of a large university in South Africa. The activities and initiatives encompassed in this article are restricted to the 2022 academic year.

The Muslim Student Association (MSA) in South Africa

The South African MSA was pioneered in 1974 at several universities (Mahida, 1993) to cater to the specific needs of the community and harmonise the community's thoughts and actions. The MSA began articulating their stance against the apartheid regime in 1976 through several banned publications (Mahida, 1993). Today the MSA exists at most South African universities. The MSA at one of several campuses of a major South African university is reflected upon by two academics based at the campus in this reflective article.

Establishment and purpose of the MSA

The MSA under reflection was established in 2007 with the aim of establishing a prayer area for Muslim students on campus. At the time of writing this article, the MSA in question had 744 followers on its Instagram page, with over 300 posts demonstrating their community engagement and student-centredness initiatives. The society then evolved into a specialized student association to bring together students from different disciplines with the same religious beliefs to create a sense of community and belonging to foster care amongst students and the wider South African communities. This endeavour was accomplished through student-centred activities, community engagement drives, mentorship programmes and imparting Islamic knowledge and teachings.

Author two, the Muslim academic at the South African university, reflects on the stated purpose and objectives of the MSA, as indicated in its constitution:

- By being a non-profit organization, the MSA demonstrates its dedication to community service without financial motives, aligning with its primary goal of supporting and uplifting the Muslim student community.
- Through its initiative to promote brotherhood and sisterhood, the MSA fosters unity and joint action among members, emphasising the importance of building strong bonds within the Muslim student community and among students of the wider university and community members.
- By encouraging and enabling Muslim students, the MSA empowers Muslim students with Islamic knowledge and competence to contribute to community needs, emphasising individual and collective efforts guided by the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah.

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- The MSA assists Muslim students in spiritual, social, and intellectual endeavours, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to addressing various aspects of students' lives.
- By avoiding practices contrary to Islamic laws, the MSA underscores its dedication to upholding Islamic principles and maintaining religious integrity in all activities and initiatives.
- Through its initiatives to promote unity and joint action, the MSA encourages collaborative efforts for the community's best interests, demonstrating collective action and cooperation to strengthen the Muslim student community and its outreach initiatives.
- Through non-discriminatory membership, the MSA welcomes all students without discrimination, reaffirming its commitment to diversity and inclusivity to create an environment welcoming students from diverse backgrounds.
- By organizing activities and events to make Islamic teachings known to both Muslim and non-Muslim students, the MSA fosters awareness, understanding, and dialogue about Islam within the university community, and uses these principles as a foundation on which student-centredness is promoted through student initiatives, and community engagement is achieved.

Structure and organization of the MSA

The MSA has a 15-member dynamic executive committee that is elected annually. The association is run and funded by students. The MSA's governance structure is depicted in Figure 1.
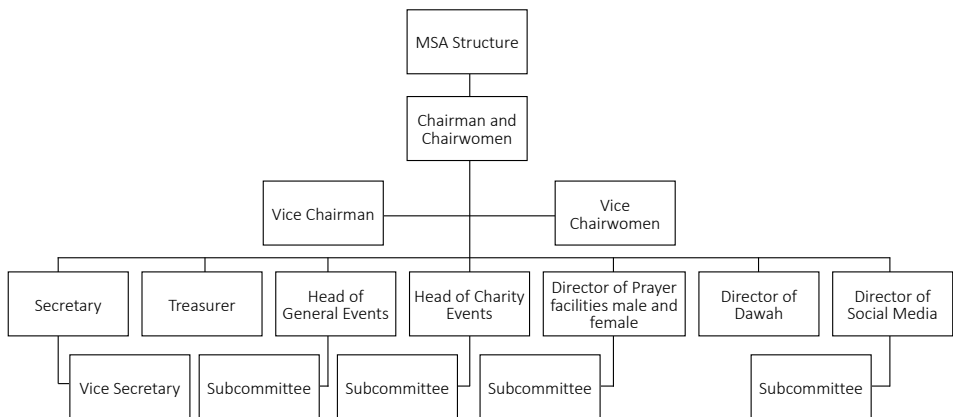
Figure 1: The Muslim Student Association (MSA) structure

As shown in Figure 1, the chairpersons (male and female) lead and represent the MSA within the university and in other organizations. The vice-chairpersons (male and female) serve as the MSA spokespersons and work closely with the chairpersons in decision-making. The secretaries (secretary and vice-secretary) are responsible for the administration of the MSA and ensure effective communication and documentation. The

head of charity events and subcommittee organize the charity drives and initiatives that contribute to the upliftment of disadvantaged communities in and around the campus. The head of general events and subcommittee organizes the MSA's activities and events. The directors of Jamā't Khana (male and female) maintain the prayer space and ensure its proper functioning. The treasurer ensures the financial stability and accountability of the MSA by maintaining records of all financial transactions and collecting/depositing funds. The director of Dawah promotes Islamic teachings and practices. The director of social media maintains close ties with the Muslim community and uses various social media platforms to unify and reach out to all students on campus to promote MSA initiatives.

The MAZLAQ network

To simplify communication between members and the executive committee, the MAZLAQ network was established by the executive committee in 2021. The seven-step procedure is a hierarchical network designed to avoid miscommunication and promote awareness of the MSA's initiatives, charity work and social activities. The MAZLAQ network is adapted from the constitution of MSA and elaborated upon in Figure 2.

Initiative idea by member	• Members present idea to head of committee or subcommittee
Idea presented to Exec	• Ideas will be brought to chairs or exec committee and reviewed
Planning and process of initiative	• Chairs provide approval and suggestions • Subcommittee to proceed
Media and marketing design and approval	• Head of committee/subcommittee to design posters with media communications team • Approval of posters by chairs
Posting and promoting	• Exec committee to promote and create awareness of initiative • Post on social media
Heads up and reminder	• Subcommittee to send reminder to exec committee and MSA members on WhatsApp • Remind general students of initiative
Event	• Event logistics discussed with exec committee and brief report compiled for recordkeeping

Figure 2: The MAZLAQ network of communication presented in the MSA constitution

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Author two's reflection of the MAZLAQ hierarchy

I believe that the MAZLAQ hierarchy aids the MSA in fulfilling its purpose to create a student-centred environment by adopting an inclusive approach for members to execute initiatives that will foster meaningful social interactions outside of academic activities. This reflection is supported by Astin (1993). The initiatives developed, promoted, and held by the MSA are classified into two categories namely: (1) initiatives that promote care and a sense of belonging and (2) community service initiatives. I believe that both categories of initiatives enhance a student-centred environment of students prospering both personally and academically.

The role of the MSA in promoting care and a sense of belonging

According to Cradit & Warwrzynski (2018), students partaking in initiatives of religious student associations have a stronger feeling of belonging. Hence, the MSA plays a crucial role in promoting care and, hence, a sense of belonging for its members within the larger student body. Care encompasses empathy, compassion, and support for individuals' emotional, academic, and spiritual well-being. From the analysis of 2022 and 2023 reports, and social media posts, the MSA, under reflection, creates a caring, nurturing, and inclusive environment for students through the various initiatives and activities offered by the society.

Further research suggests that student organizations play a role in fostering a sense of community and belonging on campuses. When the study of Nora & Cabrera (1996) investigated the role of perceived prejudice and discrimination in the adjustment of minority students in higher education, it was found that student organizations for minority groups help alleviate isolation, provide a platform to deal with any forms of prejudice, and create a supportive community of care. It is interesting that the MSA offers the same advantages to Muslim and non-Muslim students. Strayhorn (2012) further reveals that a sense of belonging on campus is needed for student success. Moreover, the direct feedback of the MSA students revealed how the MSA creates a sense of belonging and connection to the greater university environment (see section 5).

'Belonging' is a nuanced construct with varying aspects reported in the literature. The study of Baumeister & Leary (1995) considers the human need to belong and explores how the desire for interpersonal attachments is a fundamental motivation. The study also considers the psychological aspects of belonging and the adverse consequences of isolation that result if the need to belong is not fulfilled. The earlier study of McMillan & Chavis (1986) explores the sense of community, which is connoted with the concept of belonging. The study outlines four elements of belonging and sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Notably, the feedback received from the MSA students by the current authors (see section 5) indicates that each of these elements of belonging is being fulfilled by the MSA. Such belonging can aid the academic achievement of students (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and aid the overall health and well-being of students (Haslam et al., 2009).

MSA initiatives in promoting care and enhancing a student-centred environment
Author two's reflections of the effectiveness of the MSA's initiatives in creating care and hence a sense of belonging is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: MSA initiatives to promote care and belonging

Initiative/Activity	Implication	Reflection
MSA welcome event A welcome event was held in February 2022 to create awareness of the MSA and provide an opportunity for new and existing students to join and learn about the aims and goals of the MSA.	Emotional care	*Welcome events promote a culture of care and inclusivity, showing students that they are valued members of the wider community. By facilitating connections, fostering friendships, and facilitating information and knowledge about the MSA, welcome events create a sense of belonging and contribute to a supportive and nurturing environment for students (Rudisille et al., 2012).*
Eid letters The executive committee assist students in obtaining letters to excuse them from class or assessments that fall on religious holidays. The letters are sent to the respective lecturers by the MSA.	Academic care	*The MSA's initiative in facilitating the provisions for rescheduling classes and assessments during religious holidays creates a sense of belonging, in that it demonstrates that Muslim students' beliefs and holidays are respected by the institution. Islam et al., (2018) confirm this observation as similar provisions made for Muslim students in the study conducted felt a strong sense of belonging.*
Jamā't Khana maintenance The prayer and ablution facilities are constantly maintained by the MSA for all Muslim students and staff to use. The MSA ensures the facilities are cleaned and prayer gear for Muslim females is available.	Physical and spiritual care	*Islam et al., (2018) conducted a study into a sense of belonging for Muslim students in the UK. The study showed that the most important factor that made Muslim students feel a sense of belonging was primarily having a Prayer Room available on campus. Hence, the upkeep and maintenance of the prayer facilities are imperative not just for students' sense of belonging but academic and support Muslim staff as well.*
Ramadhan quiz and trivia night Recreational activities that enhance knowledge and understanding of Islam are endorsed by hosting an online Ramadhan quiz and a physical all-you-can-eat trivia quiz in April and October 2022 respectively.	Social and spiritual care	*The recreational activities comprising quiz and trivia nights provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers, facilitating social connections and a sense of community and belonging in the university (Stuart et al., 2009).*

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Initiative/Activity	Implication	Reflection
Islamic reminders Several social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp are used to educate and inform students of the following: • Hadeeth of the day • Islamic holidays • Weekly Jummah times and details • Ramadhan posts **Islamic talks** are organized by the MSA with learned individuals in different fields of Islamic knowledge and the talks are hosted online. The following talks were organized and presented: • Pursuit of Truth (14 March 2022) • Islamic week (28 March 2022)	Spiritual care	*Through religious education endeavours such as Islamic talks and education posts on social media, individuals gain knowledge about their faith, its values, and teachings, which in turn helps them develop a sense of identity and belonging within the greater student community. This reflection is supported by the study of Ansari (2018).*
Soccer tournament A recreational physical soccer tournament was organized by two MSA chapters at the campus under reflection and MSA at another university.	Social and physical care	*I believe that involvement in student engagement activities such as a sports team leads to a 'sense of belonging' whilst maintaining good physical care through exercise. This reflection is supported by Soria et al. (2022) and Humphrey & Lowe (2017). Additionally, the friendships formed in the team create personal engagement, inclusion and lifelong learning (Mann, 2001).*

Based on the findings and reflections presented, it is evident that the MSA plays a crucial role in promoting care and a sense of belonging among its members within the larger student body. The initiatives and activities offered by the MSA contribute to creating a caring, nurturing, and inclusive environment for students. Through events like the welcome event, students are invited into the sisterhood and brotherhood of the association. Specifically, welcome events contribute to the emotional care of students by providing an opportunity for new and returning students to connect with each other and form a community, which is crucial for emotional well-being (Lambert et al., 2013). The positive social interactions cultivated during welcome events contribute to positive emotional experiences, which play a vital role in overall psychological well-being (Fredrickson, 2001).

The MSA's facilitation of the provision of assessment and class exemptions on religious festivals demonstrates academic care and respect for Muslim students' beliefs and holidays. The maintenance of prayer facilities by the MSA ensures physical
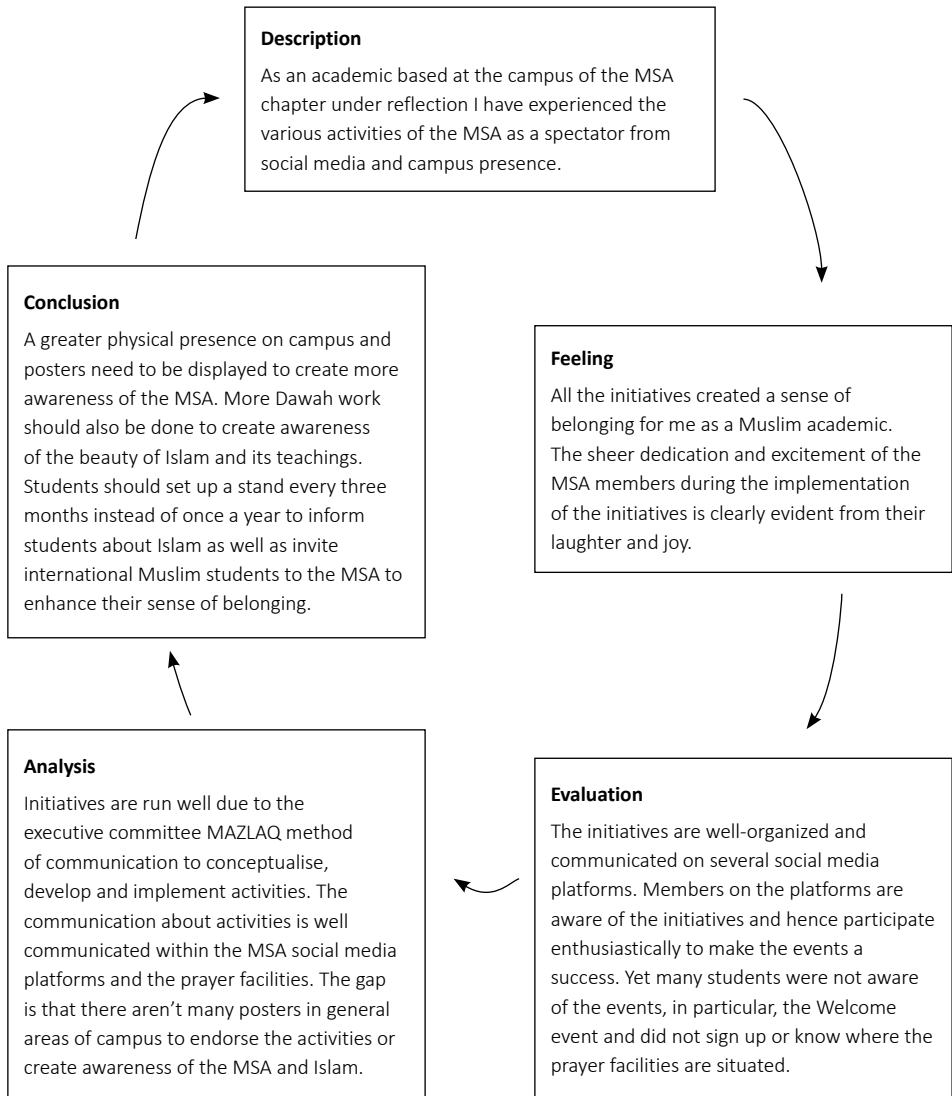
and spiritual care, which has been shown to be essential for Muslim students' sense of belonging. Recreational activities such as the Ramadhan quiz and trivia night provide social and spiritual care, promoting engagement and a sense of community. The dissemination of Islamic reminders through social media and the organization of Islamic talks contribute to spiritual care by enhancing students' knowledge and understanding of their faith. Additionally, participation in the soccer tournament fosters social and physical care, promoting a sense of belonging and well-being. Overall, the MSA's initiatives encompass various aspects of care, contributing to a student-centred environment that fosters meaningful social interactions, a sense of belonging, and a purpose beyond academic activities.

Author one's reflection of the MSA in promoting a student-centred environment
As a non-Muslim academic based at the campus of the MSA chapter, I believe that the MSA serves the significant purpose of helping develop young adults to balance their material and spiritual lives. By the MSA establishing itself for the students, and among the students, the participating students stand a greater chance to maintain their spiritual lives alongside their studies. When these students graduate and begin their careers, I believe that they will have a stronger chance of remaining spiritually connected due to the foundation provided by the MSA during their tertiary education years. I also believe that the relationships built by these students with other students (both Muslims and non-Muslims) and members of the community will transcend campus life, and support these students as they progress in their lives and careers. Additionally, I believe that such strong and meaningful connections are certain to add meaning and a sense of lifelong community in the lives of the students concerned.

Author two's reflection on the MSA's promoting a student-centred environment
Figure 3 shows the Gibbs reflective model that was utilised by author two, as a Muslim academic based at the campus of the MSA chapter under reflection, to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives and activities the MSA implemented in 2022 to create a sense of belonging and hence foster care amongst students that are members of the association. Based on these reflections, author two presents an action research plan for the MSA in the conclusion section.

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Description

As an academic based at the campus of the MSA chapter under reflection I have experienced the various activities of the MSA as a spectator from social media and campus presence.

Conclusion

A greater physical presence on campus and posters need to be displayed to create more awareness of the MSA. More Dawah work should also be done to create awareness of the beauty of Islam and its teachings. Students should set up a stand every three months instead of once a year to inform students about Islam as well as invite international Muslim students to the MSA to enhance their sense of belonging.

Feeling

All the initiatives created a sense of belonging for me as a Muslim academic. The sheer dedication and excitement of the MSA members during the implementation of the initiatives is clearly evident from their laughter and joy.

Analysis

Initiatives are run well due to the executive committee MAZLAQ method of communication to conceptualise, develop and implement activities. The communication about activities is well communicated within the MSA social media platforms and the prayer facilities. The gap is that there aren't many posters in general areas of campus to endorse the activities or create awareness of the MSA and Islam.

Evaluation

The initiatives are well-organized and communicated on several social media platforms. Members on the platforms are aware of the initiatives and hence participate enthusiastically to make the events a success. Yet many students were not aware of the events, in particular, the Welcome event and did not sign up or know where the prayer facilities are situated.

Figure 3: Gibbs reflective model for MSA initiatives address issues of sense of belonging and care

The role of the MSA in fostering community service activities and supporting disadvantaged communities

Upon evaluating the MSA yearly reporting document for 2022 and social media platforms, like WhatsApp and Instagram (2022 and 2023), it is evident that the association is involved in several community service and outreach projects. Through these projects, several impoverished communities in and around Johannesburg, namely

Vrededorp, Lenasia South, Klipspruit and Eldorado Park, are supported by the MSA outreach projects.

Community engagement activities of the MSA

Table 2 provides the community service activities established by the MSA in 2022 and continued in 2023. It presents the details of each initiative and the communities supported.

Table 2: MSA community service initiatives, and corresponding impacts

Community service activity	Details	Impact on community
Iftaar Drive	During the month of Ramadhan two drives were embarked upon. The first was to distribute a wholesome soup to disadvantaged communities to break their fast. The second is a feeding drive in which members came together to raise funds for ingredients and cooked the meals themselves for distribution to feed the poor to break their fast.	Soup drive – soup distributed to 150 people in Vrededorp Feeding drive 1 – food distributed to 150 people in Lenasia South Feeding drive 1 – food distributed to 150 people in Klipspruit Feeding drive 1 – food distributed to 150 people in Eldorado Park
Qurbani Drive	The MSA collects any meat donations from Eid-Ul-Adha for distribution to disadvantaged communities.	Qurbani meat collected was distributed in the community of Klipspruit
Winter Warmth	A donation drive was implemented in May 2022 to raise funds and items to create winter hampers for the homeless and poor. ZAR 33 685 was raised in monetary funds. Items collected for the 200 hampers included: • Soup packet • Blanket • Rice • A loaf of bread	Winter hampers were distributed by MSA members to the community in Klipspruit Soweto (4708 Klipspruit ext. 11 corner Buckingham and Union Road)
Abaya and Thobe collection	Abaya and Thobe collection box was placed in both the male and the female side prayer facilities to collect	Abayas and Thobes were distributed in the community of Klipspruit
Syria and Turkey Fundraiser – Cake Sale	A cupcake sale was set up on campus to raise funds for earthquake victims in Syria and Turkey	R50 419.00 was raised and sent to Turkey and Syria to fund projects aimed at helping the earthquake victims through the Gift of the Givers

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Community service activity	Details	Impact on community
Israeli Apartheid Week	A week-long awareness campaign was hosted at the campus by hanging up posters all over campus as well as ending the week by releasing the Palestinian flag in solidarity against war crimes in Palestine.	The entire university community came together to release the flag and create a Palestinian flag with the handprint of all students on campus.

Leadership is an integral part of the successful functioning of societies (Amirianzadeh et al., 2011). The development of social, scientific, cultural, artistic, empathetic and ethical leaders using universities and higher education institutions is essential (Amirianzadeh et al., 2011). Astin (1993) described membership and active involvement in university student association initiatives as crucial factors in students' leadership development. Reflecting on the MSA executive committee structure in Figure 1 and the roles of each member in the executive committee are enablers in developing leadership skills aligned with the national strategic plan and essential for the future leaders of South Africa (Cradit & Warwrzynski 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). The process of implementing a community service project encompasses considering a range of perspectives, developing a shared idea, creating awareness and efficiently executing the project whilst exhibiting regard for varying viewpoints and individual diversity, all skills that can be developed as a member of the executive committee of a student society (Cradit & Warwrzynski 2018). Through endeavours such as Israeli Apartheid Week, which highlights social-justice initiatives, MSA develops a future generation of social justice-oriented leaders (Cradit & Warwrzynski 2018). Astin (1993) found that involvement in associations could result in better student-to-student communication skills, such as the MAZLAQ hierarchy developed by the MSA in 2021 to improve communication in the association.

By attracting spiritualists from other cultures and faiths to participate in the universal charity drives, the MSA aids in interfaith engagement, cultural exchange, and diversity initiatives on campus. These activities help engage the MSA students with students from the larger university community. Such findings were observed in the work of Patel (2007) which explores interfaith engagement and the experiences of Muslim students on college campuses and provided anecdotal evidence to justify the MSA's success in connecting Muslim students to the larger university community. Such a connection of students from diverse backgrounds was found to have educational benefits by the Chang et al. (2006) study.

Overall, the MSA's effectiveness in creating a student-centred environment by fostering community service and supporting disadvantaged communities can also be shown through member engagement and empowerment in the outreach projects. I feel by providing opportunities for MSA members to actively participate in community initiatives, take leadership roles, and develop skills, the MSA creates a culture of social responsibility and empowers its members to make a meaningful difference.

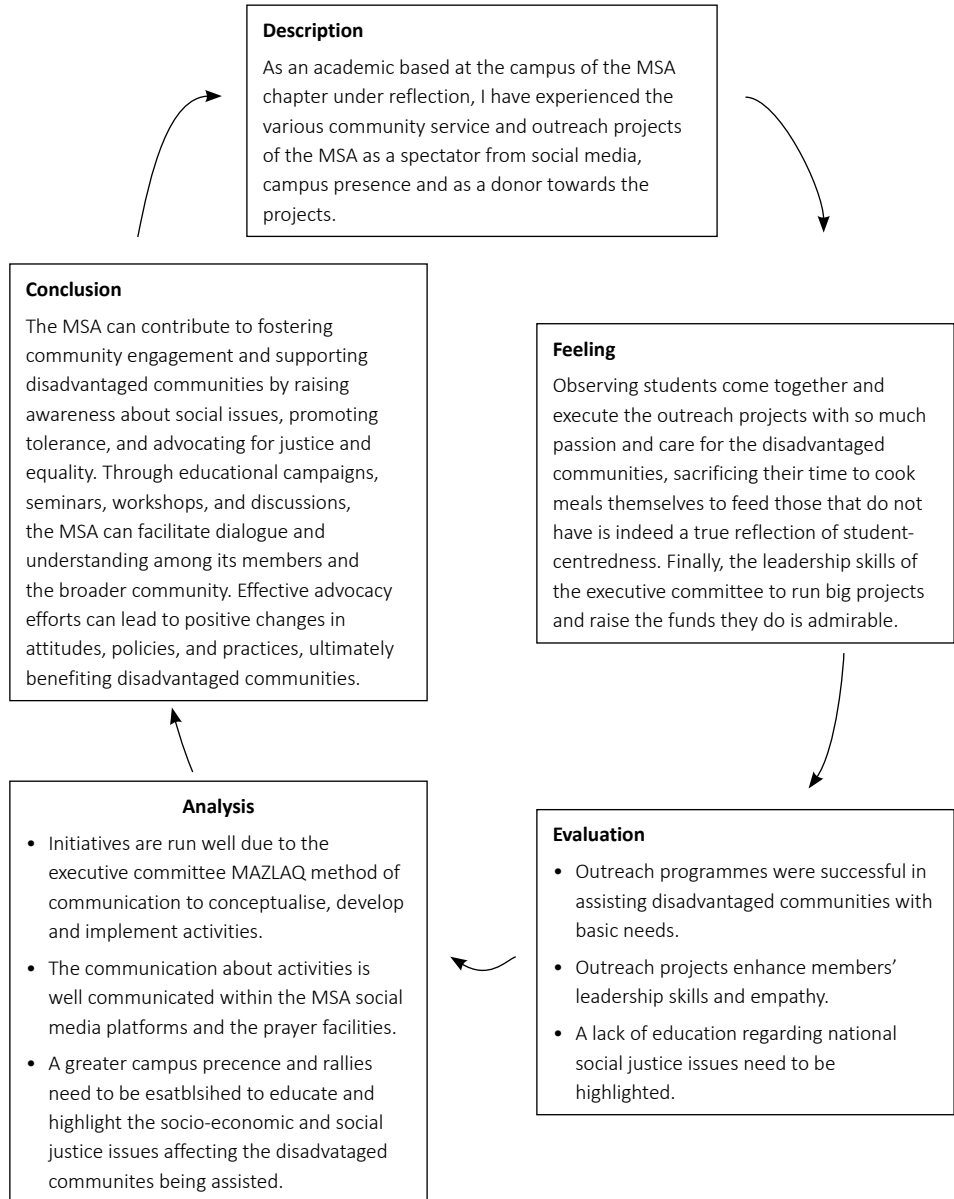**Author one's reflections on the MSA's community engagement initiatives**

The MSA forms a critical pillar of student support within the higher education landscape. As a non-Muslim spiritualist, I believe that the MSA strongly promotes a student-centred environment by providing support services for students in need (regardless of religion, race, gender, and other material aspects), and engaging students in activities to benefit the wider community. Such shared action strongly promotes a sense of community and belonging.

I consulted the MSA's social media (Instagram) page to identify its outreach programmes. I found that the MSA hosted various community engagement activities during 2022 and 2023 to support the local underprivileged communities surrounding the university. These initiatives included (but were not limited to) bake sales, fundraising to support the South African Islamic Medical Association's Cataract Project to raise funds for 100 cataract surgeries, winter warmth drives to support the underprivileged Klipspruit community, and Ramadhan feeding drives to feed the underprivileged Klipspruit community every Sunday during the month of Ramadhan. I believe that these activities directly support the local surrounding community in need by providing food, blankets and winter wear, funds, and medical support (cataract removal surgery) to those in need.

Considering that the MSA is open to all students (not just Muslim students), the MSA students are afforded opportunities to connect to and engage with other university students through MSA initiatives, such as movie nights and charity events. These occurrences would ensure that the MSA connects Muslim students to the wider university community.

Author two's reflections on the MSA's community engagement initiatives using the Gibbs reflective model

Figure 4 contains author two's reflections on the MSA's community engagement initiatives using the Gibbs reflective model.

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Description

As an academic based at the campus of the MSA chapter under reflection, I have experienced the various community service and outreach projects of the MSA as a spectator from social media, campus presence and as a donor towards the projects.

Conclusion

The MSA can contribute to fostering community engagement and supporting disadvantaged communities by raising awareness about social issues, promoting tolerance, and advocating for justice and equality. Through educational campaigns, seminars, workshops, and discussions, the MSA can facilitate dialogue and understanding among its members and the broader community. Effective advocacy efforts can lead to positive changes in attitudes, policies, and practices, ultimately benefiting disadvantaged communities.

Feeling

Observing students come together and execute the outreach projects with so much passion and care for the disadvantaged communities, sacrificing their time to cook meals themselves to feed those that do not have is indeed a true reflection of student-centredness. Finally, the leadership skills of the executive committee to run big projects and raise the funds they do is admirable.

Analysis

- Initiatives are run well due to the executive committee MAZLAQ method of communication to conceptualise, develop and implement activities.
- The communication about activities is well communicated within the MSA social media platforms and the prayer facilities.
- A greater campus precence and rallies need to be esatblsihed to educate and highlight the socio-economic and social justice issues affecting the disadvataged communites being assisted.

Evaluation

- Outreach programmes were successful in assisting disadvantaged communities with basic needs.
- Outreach projects enhance members' leadership skills and empathy.
- A lack of education regarding national social justice issues need to be highlighted.

Figure 4: Gibbs reflective model for MSA community service and outreach projects

But how well is the MSA functioning in promoting student centredness? What do the students say?

Current student feedback on the MSA's activities in fostering a student-centred environment was sourced from the MSA's chairperson. Regarding how students' involvement in the MSA impacted their sense of community and belonging on campus,

Student 1 responded: "*My involvement with (the) MSA has positively influenced my life on campus and impacted my sense (of) community as well, by creating a sense of belonging and a community of togetherness and support*".

Regarding the ways in which the MSA contributed to their personal growth and development as students and community members, two responses are shared:

> *Student 1: As a student it helped my communication and my social skills. I also managed to network very well with people from all of (the university) and with people from different departments and degrees. As a community member it allowed me to see the places in which I could contribute and where I could (help) my community.*

> *Student 2: The MSA contributed positively to my growth as a student, taught me to be adaptable and innovative as a student, and it has inspired me to be more proactive as a student and community member, to help anywhere you can.*

Concerning the extent to which the MSA fostered a sense of care and support among its members, particularly during challenging times or personal crises, two responses are illustrative:

> *Student 1: Being part of the MSA is like being part a family. Everyone is there for one another. Whenever you need help – whether it be personal or academic. We can always count on each other.*

> *Student 2: To a very large extent the MSA has fostered a very comforting sense of care, and the members are very supportive and understanding.*

Consequently, the students ranked the MSA's efforts in promoting community engagement, such as volunteering, charity work, and outreach programmes, as "good" and "excellent", respectively.

Regarding specific initiatives or changes that could be implemented by the MSA to create a more student-centred environment and better serve the needs and interests of its members, two responses are shown:

> *Student 1: Have more campus-based activities for students and interact more with the students.*

> *Student 2: Initiate or host more activities or programs on campus to benefit students or engage with students.*

Based on the evaluation of the MSA by the two students in the organization, the following conclusions can be drawn about the MSA's effectiveness in promoting a student-centred learning environment:

The MSA succeeded in creating a sense of community and belonging. Student 1 expressed that their involvement with the MSA has had a positive influence on their campus life, creating a sense of belonging and togetherness. Mentioning a "community of togetherness and support" suggests that the MSA has succeeded in fostering a supportive community atmosphere.

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Concerning the MSA's contribution to personal growth and development, both Student 1 and Student 2 highlighted positive impacts. Student 1 emphasised improvements in communication, social skills, and networking, both within the university and across different departments, while Student 2 mentioned that the MSA taught them adaptability and innovation, inspiring them to be more proactive as both a student and a community member. Furthermore, responses from both students indicate that the MSA succeeded in fostering a sense of care and support among its members. Student 1 described the MSA as a "family" where members are there for each other, providing support in both personal and academic matters, while Student 2 expressed that the MSA has created a comforting sense of care, and its members are supportive and understanding.

The students' ranking of the MSA's efforts in promoting community engagement as "good" and "excellent" suggests that the association is actively involved in volunteering, charity work, and outreach programmes. Such positive feedback indicates that the MSA is making meaningful contributions beyond its immediate membership. However, both students provided specific suggestions for improvement, emphasising the need for more campus-based activities and increased interaction with students. This could be an indication that the MSA is not having sufficient campus-based activities, or that students are not adequately informed of the planned activities. Either way, the improvement plan recommended by author two can address this suggestion.

Overall, based on the students' responses, the MSA appears to be effective in fostering a sense of community, contributing to personal growth, providing care and support, and engaging in community outreach. The suggestions provided by the students could be valuable for the MSA in further enhancing its student-centred initiatives. Overall, the feedback reflects a positive impact on the student experience at the South African university.

Conclusions and recommended actions

This article emphasises the significance of specialized student associations, particularly the MSA, in fostering a sense of belonging and community among students at higher education institutions. It highlights the importance of social inclusion and integration in promoting students' mental health, academic success, and retention. Student associations, such as the MSA, play a crucial role in addressing the needs of diverse student communities, providing safe spaces for meaningful interactions and shared interests. Islam et al. (2018) highlight in their work that the lack of an MSA at a UK small-medium higher education institution was the main reason for many Muslim students not feeling a sense of belonging in the university environment. This current article highlighted the importance of a religious/specialized student association in fostering care and, hence, a sense of belonging for its members in the wider student body. This sense of belonging and development of leadership skills are enhanced by the MSA chapter at one campus of a major university through several initiatives that bring society together for meaningful interaction.

The establishment and purpose of the MSA in South Africa showcase its commitment to serving the Muslim student community while upholding the principles of Islam. The MSA's structure and organization, with its elected executive committee and various leadership roles, demonstrate a student-centred approach to governance and decision-making. The MSA's constitution outlines its objectives, including creating brotherhood and sisterhood, empowering Muslim students, and providing spiritual, social, and intellectual support.

The MSA's activities, such as charity events, general events, and Dawah (spreading Islamic teachings), contribute to its mission of community service, knowledge sharing, and creating a sense of belonging. The MAZLAQ network, as a communication tool, ensures effective information dissemination and fosters awareness of the MSA's initiatives among its members, enhancing and developing leadership skills.

Finally, the MSA exemplifies the importance of student associations in creating inclusive environments, promoting social integration, and enhancing students' overall university experience. By providing a platform for students to connect, learn, and serve their communities, the MSA and similar associations play a vital role in supporting the holistic development and success of students in higher education.

Based on the authors' reflections and the feedback of the MSA students, the proposed action plan (Table 3) outlines how the MSA can be improved over time, such that it can attract new students, and improve its services to its current students, to enable and maintain a student-centred environment.

Table 3: Proposed action plan for the MSA

Step	Aspect	Description
1	Conduct a needs assessment	Engage with current MSA members to identify their needs and expectations and survey the broader student body to understand their interests, concerns, and expectations regarding the MSA. Thereafter, analyse the data collected to identify areas for improvement and strengths.
2	Define the vision and mission	Create a clear vision statement that reflects the desired future of the MSA. Develop a mission statement that outlines the purpose and goals of the MSA. Check that the vision and mission align with the expectations identified in the needs assessment.
3	Establish clear roles and responsibilities	Define specific roles and responsibilities for the MSA leader. Ensure each position has well-defined duties to avoid overlapping responsibilities. Encourage inclusivity by allowing interested students to apply for leadership positions on a regular basis.
4	Enhance communication and outreach	Develop a comprehensive communication plan to alert members about MSA activities, and opportunities. Utilise various communication channels. Actively engage with other student organizations, departments, and community groups to foster collaboration and partnership.

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Step	Aspect	Description
5	Organize regular events and programmes	Plan a variety of events and programmes that cater to the diverse interests and needs of the student body. Include educational, social, and spiritual activities to create a well-rounded experience for members. Offer workshops, seminars, and guest lectures on topics relevant to Muslim students and the wider community.
6	Provide support services	Establish mentorship programmes to connect new students with older members who can provide guidance and support. Offer academic support services. Develop initiatives to address the mental health and overall well-being of members.
7	Foster a welcoming and inclusive environment	Create a safe and inclusive space which welcomes all students, regardless of background or level of religiosity. Celebrate diversity by organizing events that highlight different cultures, traditions, and perspectives. Encourage open dialogue and discussions about important issues to promote understanding and tolerance among members.
8	Continuously evaluate and improve	Regularly assess the effectiveness of MSA activities, and programmes through feedback surveys and focus groups. Use the feedback to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments. Maintain open communication with members to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

Ethics statement

No ethical clearance was required, as the authors' reflections comprise the results and discussions in this reflective practice article. Being aware that reflections may be subjective, several measures were implemented to ensure the objectivity of the authors' reflections: (1) the literature was used to justify the authors' reflections and arguments, (2) the Gibb's reflective model was applied to maintain structure and objectivity, (3) information was sourced from the MSA's constitution and social media accounts to justify the authors' points, and (4) MSA students' perspectives were incorporated in the article for triangulation of the authors' views of the MSA.

Potential conflict of interest

There were no conflicts of interest involved in authoring this article.

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Campus Report

Korea hosted the 7th IASAS Global Summit in collaboration with KOSAF – Student affairs and government collaborate to advance student success

David Newman[1]

The International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) proudly announces the successful conclusion of its 7th Global Summit, held in collaboration with the Korea Student Aid Foundation (KOSAF). The event, which drew 250 attendees from 40 countries, was a vibrant forum for discussion, learning, and collaboration among student affairs professionals worldwide.

This year's summit, themed 'Educational Institutions and Student Affairs Driving Sustainable Change', featured two distinguished keynote speakers who captivated and inspired the audience with their insights and expertise.

Prof. Jouhaina Gherib, a leading scholar in the educational and international policy field, vice-president of the International Association of Universities (IAU), and lead, of the working group on Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD), IAU, as well as president of the University of Manouba, Tunisia, opened the summit with a compelling address on the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive environments for students across diverse cultural landscapes. Prof. Gherib emphasised the critical role of student affairs professionals in promoting global citizenship and intercultural understanding. She also focused on the the important role that leadership plays in advancing this work, emphasising that this role matters now more than ever.

Following Prof. Gherib, Prof. Birgit Phillips, an esteemed expert in AI and higher education innovation, delivered a keynote that highlighted the transformative power of AI, its risks and opportunities for higher education and student success. Prof. Phillips serves as the director of Higher Education Didactics and AI at JOANNEUM in Graz, Austria. Prof. Phillips shared successful case studies and strategies from her extensive experience, demonstrating how innovative practices can significantly enhance student engagement and academic success.

The summit's agenda included a series of paper presentations, panel discussions, and networking sessions, providing attendees with ample opportunities to exchange ideas and good practices. Topics covered ranged from mental health and wellness to the role of technology in enhancing student engagement and success. A key aspect of this Global Summit was the focus on collaboration, not only across regions and countries but also of HEIs with government, and students with staff.

1 David Newman, Vice-President, IASAS; Executive Director: Student Experience, University of Toronto, Canada. Email: david.newman@utoronto.ca.

Past IASAS president, Achim Meyer auf der Heyde, expressed his gratitude for the collaboration with KOSAF and the active participation of the international community. "This summit has reaffirmed our collective commitment to advancing social justice via student affairs and services globally. The diverse perspectives and innovative solutions shared here will undoubtedly shape the future of our field," said Mr Meyer auf der Heyde.

The partnership with KOSAF was particularly noteworthy, showcasing a model of international cooperation aimed at improving student support systems. KOSAF's involvement underscored the significance of collaborative efforts in addressing the financial and educational needs of students worldwide.

During the Summit, the new executive of IASAS was announced and the new president, Prof. Birgit Schreiber spoke enthusiastically about taking the Association forward. She emphasised the importance of locally attuned support with global awareness.

As the summit concluded, attendees departed with renewed energy and a wealth of knowledge to implement in their respective institutions. The connections forged and the ideas exchanged promise to drive continued progress and innovation in student affairs and services.

For more information about IASAS and future events, please visit iasas.global.

About IASAS:

The International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) is dedicated to the global advancement of student affairs and services, fostering collaboration and sharing of best practices among professionals to enhance student success and development.

About KOSAF:

The Korea Student Aid Foundation (KOSAF) is committed to supporting students through comprehensive financial aid programmes and initiatives, ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students in Korea and beyond.

Newman, D. (2024).
Korea hosted the 7th IASAS Global Summit in collaboration with KOSAF –
Student affairs and government collaborate to advance student success 183

Figure 1: The nearly 200 participants at the closing reception of the 2024 IASAS Global Summit

BOOK REVIEW

'Towards professionalization of student affairs across the globe' special issue edited by L. Bardill Moscaritolo & B. Schreiber (2023). *New Directions for Student Services*.

Reviewed by Jia Zheng[1]

The COVID-19 global pandemic and exacerbated social inequities across the globe have called upon many Student Affairs and Services (SAS) practitioners and professionals to rethink the purpose and goals of SAS. Positioned in what Perozzi and Shea (2023), as well as Schreiber and colleagues (2023), named a 'third space,' SAS – as an inter- , trans- and multi-disciplinary field – is developing as a global profession that integrates cultural relevance and global competence across the globe. The special issue, 'Towards professionalization of student affairs across the globe,' published in the *New Directions for Student Services*, Volume 2023, Issue 183, did an extraordinary job in introducing how SAS is professionalized in different regions and how to move forward in advancing the professionalization of SAS across the globe. Particularly, this special issue serves as an impetus for dialogues and conversations around professionalizing SAS among key stakeholders in global higher education, including staff, practitioners, professionals, faculty, student leaders, and policymakers.

The special issue comprises three parts. Part one provided an overview of the professionalization of SAS across the globe, relevant SAS competencies and standards, and key trends in higher education that shape the function and delivery of SAS. Part two is a monograph that highlighted perspectives from various regions across the globe and illuminated the role of professional associations and organizations in supporting professional development and capacity building in their regions, as well as underscored the critical role that the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) has been playing in facilitating the professionalization of SAS globally. Part three concluded the special issue by highlighting how the Global South significantly shaped SAS as a profession and directions for the future in advancing the professionalization of SAS nationally, regionally, and globally.

As a former student affairs practitioner working in a joint-venture institution in China and a faculty member mentoring the next generation of SAS practitioners in the United States, I found this special issue particularly helpful and timely! There are many things that I appreciate about this special issue. I appreciate the plethora of perspectives from different regions, including those from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, North America, and the Caribbean, Oceania, and South America, and the diverse representation of national, regional, and international associations and organizations in these regions as

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well as their role in shaping and advancing the profession within their own regions and across regions. These global perspectives are not only contextualised within different higher education systems in various regions, but also have global implications for SAS and students' access to services across the globe. The monograph also reflects a diverse range of models and frameworks that can be applied in different regions and can be transferrable/translatable to other regions based on different contexts and higher education systems. A shared theme that I found from reading all the monographs is the concerted commitment to supporting students and their development and those who support students as SAS professionals.

Additionally, this special issue has extended the knowledge on the professionalization of SAS globally as well as contributed to the overall conversations on pushing for socially just agendas through the practice of SAS across the globe. The diversity of global SAS perspectives, voices, and ways of knowing centred in this special issue disrupts the traditionally privileged way of understanding SAS praxis that is rooted in Western ideology and North American values and thinking. To professionalize SAS that is rooted in non-Western and non-North American values and knowledge bases, this special issue is a pertinent example of creating and highlighting knowledge from various global perspectives that disrupts this dominant narrative in the field.

Among all the articles, my favourite is Schreiber et al.'s (2023) piece on 'Looking back and looking forward'. The two key questions posed by Schreiber et al., including "For what purpose?" and "To whose benefit?" are critical questions that key stakeholders in higher education should ask when they consider the professionalization of SAS in a local and global context. The question "To whose benefit?" especially strikes the chord of power imbalances and cultural differences between the Global North and Global South and it is particularly important to consider when we work towards the overarching goal of SAS – advancing social justice for all. I also really appreciate Schreiber and colleagues' (2023) argument on the importance of context, care, inclusivity, respect, mutuality, reciprocity, and impact on local students and communities in the Global South as SAS professionals consider importing knowledge from the Global North to the Global South within the context of professionalizing SAS.

Given the richness of the models and frameworks, representation of associations and organizations, as well as the multitude of authors and perspectives from diverse regions and contexts, this special issue is a must-read for any administrators, staff, faculty, and student leaders whose work includes supporting student learning and development in higher education institutions, as well as policymakers whose work directly influences the function and services of SAS in higher education institutions across the globe. This special issue is not only a valuable resource for those who work in SAS in their own regions, but also for those who work in international sectors especially, given the internationalization of post-secondary education over the past decades. Given the nuanced voices and perspectives from authors from the Global South, this special issue is also a great teaching and learning material in SAS undergraduate and graduate programmes, and a great material to be utilised for professional development and capacity development in different regions across the globe.

Zheng, J. (2024).
Review of 'Towards professionalization of student affairs across the globe' special issue
edited by L. Bardill Moscaritolo & B. Schreiber (2023). *New Directions for Student Services*. 187

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Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, Vol. 13(2)
Guest-edited issue

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

Promoting holistic student success is increasingly recognised as a critical issue in African higher education. However, the role of well-being as a determinant of students' success is often overlooked. In light of this, the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) is inviting student affairs professionals and academic researchers to submit manuscripts for a special issue (13(2)) in 2025. This issue will focus on student success and emphasise the importance of well-being within the African context.

We are particularly interested in submissions that explore intrinsic factors such as hope, gratitude, and resilience; address interpersonal dynamics, including the value of engaging relationships; and examine contextual issues and societal influences, notably creating inclusive learning environments and establishing positive and engaging institutions. Submissions can use various methodologies, including theoretical frameworks, reflective analyses, and empirical studies.

All submissions will undergo a double-blind peer review process to ensure academic rigour and integrity. Authors are advised to adhere to the submission guidelines of the JSAA. Submissions need to be marked 'special issue student well-being' to be included in this issue due for publication in second semester 2025.

We welcome you to join us in enriching the academic community's understanding and dialogue on this pivotal topic. Your contributions are integral to the success of this special issue.

For further inquiries, please get in touch with Dr Henry Mason at <u>masonh@tut.ac.za</u> or <u>henrymason1006@gmail.com</u>, who is the guest editor of this special issue.

Author biographies

Katherine Bain is a clinical psychologist and associate professor in the psychology department of the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand. She teaches the clinical psychology master's and the psychoanalytic PhD by publications programmes. Her research areas include attachment theory and psychoanalytic understandings of human development and mental health, with a specific interest in the interfacing of cultural models in parenting and infant mental health.

Nabeelah Bemath is a registered research psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), and currently works as an academic coordinator and sessional lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand's Faculty of Health Sciences and Department of Psychology, respectively. Her research interests are primarily focused on public mental health, cognitive neuropsychology, and psychological assessment in the South African context. She is also engaged in research within other health science disciplines. Visit Nabeelah's ORCID profile for details on her prior work.

† Prof. Elmarie Costandius was an associate professor in Visual Arts at Stellenbosch University until her untimely death in January 2024. She was a visionary academic who pioneered the field of visual redress and was committed to arts-based engagements, critical citizenship, and social impact. Costandius held an extensive publication record, managed various research projects, secured substantial financial funding, and received multiple teaching awards, including the 2023 TAU Fellows Award.

Prof. Victor de Andrade is an audiologist and associate professor in the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology at the University of the Witwatersrand and assistant dean (research) for the Faculty of Humanities. Victor consults on deafness and assistive technology for the WHO and UNICEF. His research interests include, socio-cultural and contextual aspects of deafness, noise in learning environments, disability, sexuality, professional matters, ethics and bioethics, research methodologies, gerontological audiology, vestibular audiology, and assistive technologies.

Dr Gera de Villiers holds a doctorate in Visual Arts from Stellenbosch University, where she is currently project coordinator of the Visual Redress Project. In addition to authoring book chapters and academic journal articles, she co-edited the book *Visual redress in Africa from indigenous and new materialist perspectives* (2023) with Elmarie Costandius. Her interest lies in the role of arts and culture in the production of space and social justice.

Tasneem Hassem is a registered research psychologist and a lecturer in the psychology department at the School of Human and Community Development at the University

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Prof. Mpho P. Jama is a research fellow and an emeritus associate professor at the University of the Free State (UFS). She is also a Fulbright research fellow and exchange alumna, USA. Prior to this she was an HoD in the Division: Student Learning and Development in the Faculty of Health Sciences and a residence head in Student Affairs, UFS. Her research niche and scholarship has always been on student development and support, with a focus on programmes/strategies that promote a humanistic approach. Her current main project is writing a book titled 'Towards a humanistic pedagogy: Teaching students in complex and demanding academic environments'.

Prof. Jade Jansen is an associate professor in financial reporting at the University of the Western Cape. He has an MCom (Accounting Sciences) from the University of Pretoria where he is currently pursuing his PhD (Accounting Sciences). Jade's research interests include both accounting education and IFRS related topics.

Dr Bernadette Judith Johnson is the director of the Transformation and Employment Equity Office and a research associate at the Wits School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. Bernadette is passionate about contributing to the support and healing of our society. She has worked as the director of higher education planning in the South African government, for non-governmental organizations in areas such as sexual harassment, rural development, gender equity and research management in South and Southern Africa, and as an academic, and as an executive and senior manager at various universities in South Africa. She has taught executive leadership programmes in Burundi, South Sudan and Rwanda. She continues to supervise master's and doctoral students, guest lectures and offers capacity development in transformation, coaching, mentoring and leadership development. Her intellectual interests are related to social justice, higher education management, leadership, governance and change. She has served on three university councils and has also been the chair of the University Forum at Wits University.

Lucy Kibe is a tutorial fellow in the Department of Information and Knowledge Management at The Technical University of Kenya. Prior to this, she worked at the American Reference Centre, Nairobi, where she oversaw processing information materials. As an academic, she has authored journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers. Her current research interests include big data analytics, cloud computing, health informatics, bibliometrics, records management, indigenous knowledge, and knowledge sharing.

Angella Kogos is an assistant lecturer at The Technical University of Kenya where she teaches and researches in the wider field of information sciences as well as in publishing

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Prof. Tom Kwanya is a professor in the Department of Information and Knowledge Management at The Technical University of Kenya. He is currently also serving as the director of the School of Information and Communication Studies. Prior to joining academics full-time in 2013, he worked as a consultant on public information and knowledge management. He is an author of several peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, two university-level books, several conference papers and four edited books. He has also supervised and examined several postgraduate theses. He sits on the Information Science Services Technical Committee of the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS).

Prof. Sumaya Laher is a psychologist and academic, specializing in psychometrics, cultural psychology, and mental health. Based at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, Prof. Laher's research focuses on the intersection of culture and psychological assessment, advocating for culturally relevant psychometric practices. She is the editor of the *African Journal of Psychological Assessment*.

Azmatullah Latief is a development and assessment manager at the South African Institute of Professional Accountants and holds a postgraduate diploma in Accounting and BCom (Honours) (Accounting). He has extensive experience in teaching at the university and professional levels. Azmatullah's research interests include accounting education and curriculum development.

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Pulane Malefane is the head of Residence Life and College Communities at the University of the Free State (UFS). Overseeing student development programmes for on-campus and off-campus students and managing the residence heads team. She has been in

higher education since 2003, working in different student service and student support departments; financial aid at the Central University of Technology and UFS students finance in 2006 and joined student affairs in 2008. Pulane holds a Master of Science in Education: Student Affairs and Administration from the University of Wisconsin in the US. She also holds qualifications in finance, management, and leadership. She has presented different papers at conferences and published in the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. She serves in the ACUHO-I SAC executive committee, first as the deputy secretary and now as secretary-general for the current term (2020–2024). She is passionate about the student housing profession and the development of student affairs in South Africa. She was part of the Student Housing Training Institute group in 2013 for the Basic and Advanced, as a participant in 2014 and she has been faculty member since 2017. She has since got an opportunity to be a Global Faculty member at the first Global Student Housing Training Institute in Australia. It has been an excellent platform to engage with other student affairs and housing professionals globally. She completed the ACUHO-I Professional Standard Institute programme in Canada which allows her to be a professional student housing reviewer.

Dr Linda Meyer is the managing director at IIE Rosebank College. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy (RSA), Doctor of Business Administration (USA), Master of Business Administration (UK), Post Graduate Diploma in Management Studies (UK), BCom (Law), BBA and several other diplomas, higher certificates and professional certifications; and a serving member of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Board and Audit and Risk Committee, the QCTO-Occupational Qualifications, Assessment and Certification Committee (OQACC), and the CHE Community of Practice on Leadership and Governance. Dr Meyer has served on various governance structures (past and present), including the South African Magistrates Commission, South African Qualifications Authority, Higher-Health, Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, Services SET A, SA SMME Foundation, South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE), DHET, ETDP SETA. Some of the former positions she has held include head of operations at Universities South Africa (USAf), head of Justice College (DoJ&CD), chief operating officer (COO), executive dean, dean, academic executive, acting deputy director general, chief director, CCMA commissioner, and various other senior executive management and consulting positions. Dr Meyer is also a published author, thought leader, regular media guest, and speaker at industry conferences.

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

Prof. Ntombifikile G. Mtshali is a distinguished individual in nursing, renowned for her leadership, academic contributions, and research expertise, with a PhD from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is currently an adjunct professor in the School of Nursing and Public Health at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, after having left this institution to take another leadership role. She has supervised numerous postgraduate students and her list of publications is very long. Her research interests are aimed at strengthening the nursing and midwifery workforce in the AFRO region.

David Newman is the executive director: Student Experience at the University of Toronto. Previously, he has held other roles at U of T, including as Director: Student Life; Director: Centre for Community Partnerships; Director: Office of the Vice-Provost, Students; and as Assistant Director: Student Life. Prior to his time at U of T, David worked for several years at the University of Alberta in various capacities. David holds both a Bachelor of Arts (Anthropology/French) and Master of Education (Adult Education). In addition to his current role at U of T, David serves as vice-president for the International Association for Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) and was previously regional director for North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. David has also held several leadership roles nationally in Canada, including previously serving as president of the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS).

Prof. Sandiso Ngcobo is an associate professor and head of the Department of Communication at the Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). He holds a PhD in Linguistics from the University of KwaZulu-Natal which he obtained in 2011. He is a recipient of the MUT 2023 Research Silver Award, the MUT 2019 Best Established Gold Teacher Award, and the 2016 Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Award. Sandiso has throughout the years supervised postgraduate students and published several journal articles, chapters in books, and conference proceedings.

Erick Ogolla is an assistant lecturer at The Technical University of Kenya. He is also a researcher in the field of information sciences. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Information and Knowledge Management at The Technical University of Kenya. He holds an MA in Communication Studies from the University of Nairobi and a BSc in Information Sciences from Moi University, Kenya. He has taught in several academic institutions in Kenya. Previously, he worked as an editor for Pearson International, East African Educational Publishers and Oxford University Press Nairobi.

Claudia Onsare is a tutorial fellow in the Department of Language and Literary Studies at The Technical University of Kenya. She is also a doctoral student at University of Nairobi's School of Journalism. Her research interests include media, journalism and communication, digital media, literature, dance and indigenous knowledge. Before joining academia, she worked in media and corporate communications. When she is not in class, she is home, where she can be found on hiking trails and at literary festivals.

Dr Rishen Roopchund joined UJ in 2020 as a lecturer in the New Generation of Academics Program (nGAP). He holds a doctoral degree from UKZN (2021) and a postgraduate diploma in higher education from UJ (2023 – with distinction) and Professional Engineering (Pr. Eng) status with the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA). Teaching transfer processes and process design in chemical engineering, he integrates mediated learning theory to foster cognitive growth. With a background in engineering consulting and completing Eskom's graduate training programme, he values each student's potential. His research focuses on green construction materials using cellulose nanocrystals, reflected in journal articles and conference papers. He also presented innovative online teaching approaches through Blackboard at the WEEF GEDC conference in 2022. Dr Roopchund is dedicated to enhancing engineering education via action research for a better student experience. Some of Dr Roopchund's notable achievements include being selected among the 2023 cohort of the *Mail & Guardian*'s 200 Young South Africans, and as winner in the 'Education' category. Dr Roopchund was also nominated as the best second-year lecturer by the students in his department, which he attributes to his desire to innovate his teaching practices to ensure optimal learning.

Nina Rossouw is a senior lecturer: Teaching and Learning in the School of Management Studies, Faculty of Commerce at the Independent Institute of Education, Varsity College, Cape Town. She holds qualifications in accounting and law (Stellenbosch University), a PGDip in Higher Education (IIE) and a MPhil in Higher Education (Stellenbosch University). She is passionate about teaching and learning, reflecting on teaching practices and exploring more effective ways to teach students. She is an undergraduate lecturer in the field of accounting and business ethics, and a research lecturer and postgraduate supervisor. Her specific research interests are in curriculum design, pedagogical approaches (specifically in the fields of accounting and ethics education), the philosophy of education, and the hidden curriculum in higher education.

Prof. Birgit Schreiber is a consulting expert for the international higher education sector, has served in senior leadership positions, with expertise in sub-Saharan Africa and Europe higher education, with a focus on student success, leadership, digitalisation, DEI and gender. Birgit has worked with a range of national and trans-national bodies, notably Universities South Africa (USAf), 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. Her PhD is in psychology, and she is registered as psychotherapist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). Birgit has over 90 articles, chapters and books, on various themes around social justice, student affairs, student engagement and higher education leadership, gender and SDGs. She was the founding editor and is a member of the editorial executive of the *Journal for Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA). She is on the board of the *Journal of College Student Development* (JCSD) and is a column editor for the *Journal of College*

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Dr Naadhira Seedat joined the University of Johannesburg as a New Generation of Academics Program (nGAP) lecturer in 2019. She previously held a position as a lecturer at the University of South Africa and worked as a project engineer in the gas manufacturing industry before entering the tertiary education sector. She holds PhD, MSc and BSc degrees from the University of the Witwatersrand. She obtained several awards in her undergraduate studies, which she completed with distinction. She is currently enrolled in the postgraduate diploma in higher education at UJ. Her passion lies in engineering education, and she is currently involved in education research based on the pedagogy of care, facilitation and authentic learning and the inclusion of gamification to enhance teaching and learning methods in her classroom. Her focus is on establishing a student-centred environment in the classroom. Hence, she encourages an authentic and optimal learning environment for her students. Her core engineering research focuses on distillation design, biomass conversion, and waste valorisation, which have resulted in the publication of peer-reviewed articles. She has a passion for community service and has used her expertise to educate the youth of South Africa. She has been involved in numerous outreach programmes, such as the STEM MentHER programme and UJ-FoS-SCC Take a Child to Work Day, to inspire young people and women and promote the importance of STEM in society. She has a firm commitment to shaping a better future for South Africa and has shown that her academic skills and knowledge can be used to contribute to the country's development in various ways, from implementing sustainable technologies to educating the next generation of engineers.

Thembekile P. Skakane is a doctoral student registered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. At the commencement of the study, she was the principal at a nursing college in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, but has since taken employment in the Department of Health in Mpumalanga province. She has co-authored several research papers and hopes do more as a single author in the future.

Dr Leslie van Rooi has a PhD in Church Law and Church History, Stellenbosch University (SU), and completed the advanced management programme at INSEAD Business School in Fontainebleau, France. He has published numerous academic articles and book chapters, which focus on church polity, church history, social impact, transformation,

and visual redress in the higher education context. He is currently SU's senior director for social impact and transformation (since 2018).

Dr Jessica Versfeld is an HPCSA-registered counselling psychologist with a master's in Counselling Psychology and a doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of Pretoria. She practices part-time and serves as an academic advisor in the engineering department at the same university. Her work focuses on tailoring effective interventions for engineering students. Dr Versfeld has authored numerous papers and presented at various conferences on student success in the Global South context.

Caitlin Vinson is an HPCSA-registered counselling psychologist with a master's degree in Counselling Psychology from the University of Pretoria. She works part-time in private practice and as an academic advisor in the university's engineering department. Caitlin Vinson specializes in creating tailored interventions for engineering students, applying her expertise to enhance their academic and personal development.

Badrunessa Williams is a senior lecturer in financial reporting at the University of the Western Cape. She has an MCom (Accounting) from the University of the Western Cape, where she is currently pursuing her PhD. Badrunessa's research interests include accounting education with a focus on student success.

Dr Jia Zheng is an assistant professor in social justice at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Prior to this, she was a clinical assistant professor and program coordinator of the On-Campus Student Personnel in Higher Education at the University of Florida. Jia's scholarship focuses on using critical theories and methodologies to interrogate inequitable power systems in higher education by examining Asian American and Asian international students and race, academic partnerships at transnational programmes and institutions in the Global South, and college and graduate students' socialisation to principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice during politically challenging times. Jia's work has appeared in the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering*, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, and *Inside Higher Ed*. Prior to her role at the University of Florida, Jia served as an instructor for the undergraduate Leadership Studies Program at the University of Maryland College Park and has worked in various capacities as a student affairs practitioner, including housing and residential education at Duke Kunshan University in China and student conduct at the University of Maryland College Park. Jia received her PhD in the Higher Education, Student Affairs, and International Education Policy program at the University of Maryland, College Park, Master in Educational Policy at the University of Washington, and Bachelor of Education in English Education at the Education University of Hong Kong.

Submissions

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

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

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

Please note that different requirements apply:

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

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

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