# Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

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## Rethinking higher education: Public and private synergies for student success in Africa


AFRICAN MINDS

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# Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

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

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

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# Editorial team

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Editorial

# Rethinking higher education: Public and private synergies for student success in Africa

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

This issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* arrives at a pivotal time in the discussions around higher education and student success in South Africa and on the continent. The seismic global disruptions of recent years (like AI, geo-political madness and climate wars, and so on!), combined with the ongoing structural challenges within African post-school education systems, compel us to ask hard but essential questions: What kind of higher education systems do we need to serve our students and our societies better? And critically, can we afford to ignore the growing role of private higher education in that future?

Our feature article by Ahmed Bawa and Linda Meyer, 'Becoming more private: Broadening the base of South African higher education', courageously engages with these questions. It interrogates the long-standing public-private divide in the South African higher education sector and explores how declining government funding, siloed and ill-articulated institutions, and systemic socio-political inequality make the emboldened participation of private higher education not only viable but inevitable. The authors argue that a truly functional and future-oriented system must enable coordination, collaboration, and shared responsibility between all HE actors, public and private alike, toward a unified national learning agenda (and extending this into all Africa).

The rest of the issue builds on this theme of rethinking structures and support for student success across African higher education.

Jonker and Rues present a health and wellness intervention programme designed to help students navigate 'ICE' (isolated, confined and extreme) events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme integrates design thinking and the Nadler-Tushman model to improve student well-being, with recommendations in areas of communication, food security, and digital wellness tools, important contributions to building institutional resilience.

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Van der Walt explores what motivates students to participate in peer mentoring when financial incentives are removed. Based on experiences from the Vaal University of Technology, the study finds that esteem, altruism, and skill-building drive volunteer mentors; it also identifies morale challenges, suggesting changes to programme design and recognition practices.

Manatsa and Khumalo spotlight residence advisors (RAs) at the Durban University of Technology and their pivotal role in supporting student academic success. Although often untrained in academic advising, RAs function as first responders to students in distress. The authors advocate for structured training and recognition of these key student success agents within Living and Learning Communities.

Mtshweni investigates how a sense of belonging shapes first-year students' institutional attachment. The study finds that social adjustment partly mediates this relationship, while emotional adjustment does not, highlighting the importance of designing environments that foster community and identity from the first year.

Mabope et al. examine how individual counselling within a problem-based learning (PBL) programme can support at-risk pharmacy students. Focusing on a historically disadvantaged university, the authors show how proactive, personalised interventions can reduce attrition and improve performance, underscoring the power of targeted academic support in inclusive education contexts.

Phiri and Nalwamba look beyond the classroom to consider student activism and climate action. Drawing from Malawi and Zambia, their study introduces the concept of 'bounded agency' to explain how students, despite institutional and cultural constraints, find creative ways, through grassroots organising and digital platforms, to advance environmental advocacy.

Hilal explores student extracurricular activities in the GCC region, focusing on Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University. The study identifies wide disparities in implementation and motivation across institutions and calls for clearer policy frameworks to ensure these programmes are fully integrated into the student development agenda.

Campbell and Abrahams share insights from a WhatsApp-based character strengths intervention for South African university students. The low-cost, scalable programme showed strong impact in building students' self-awareness and goal alignment, pointing to the potential of digital micro-interventions to enhance student well-being and engagement.

Grayson et al. describe Gateway to Success, an extended orientation programme launched at Wits University in response to the challenges of COVID-19. Using agile project management and institutional collaboration, the programme has evolved into a cornerstone of the university's strategy to support new students academically and socially during transition.

We close with a book review by Dr Sibeso Lisulo, reflecting on *Widening university access and participation in the Global South: Using the Zambian context to inform other developing countries* by Edward Mboyonga. The book offers both case-based insights and transferable strategies for inclusion and equity that higher education leaders across the continent would do well to consider. In keeping with the subject's title, the book review, like parts of the article by Phiri and Nalwamba, focuses on the Zambian context and provides invaluable insight into this system, that offers many lessons for the rest of the continent.

As this issue illustrates, student success is not merely a matter of programme design, it is a systemic concern. This invites us to examine the assumptions, architectures, and power dynamics that shape our institutions. Whether we are talking about health, belonging, leadership, activism, or orientation, we must look not just at what we do within universities, but how our systems are organised, and how public and private actors can align for the broader public good. This alignment will necessarily raise questions about purpose, equity, access, and what kind of higher education architecture we need for a just and thriving Africa.

Rethinking higher education in Africa thus requires us to think across several levels or units of analysis – from the micro, individual level of student experience and student success, to support for different groups of students and rethinking the roles of residences, for example, in the academic and social engagement of students. It includes the meso level of institutional diversity and complementarity, and at the macro level, the purpose of higher education in Africa. We started this editorial with reference to the growing polarisation we see in the world – from “geopolitical madness” to conflicts around migration and increasing climate-change-related conflicts. Universities in Africa have to create transformative leaders (with the values, knowledges, attitudes, skills and networks) to respond to the fast-changing context and create peaceful, prosperous and equitable societies. Contributing to this as student affairs professionals, scholars and researchers, gives meaning to our work. And if our institutions fail to deliver on the promise of freedom, peace and prosperity, then they might as well be trade schools.

To return to this issue: We are proud to see our initiative of encouraging authors to publish their titles, abstracts and keywords in a second language bearing fruit. For the first time, we have such contributions in Arabic, isiNdebele, Nyanja, and Spanish, as well as again Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu, sePedi, and Shona, amongst others. We hope to grow herewith the academic vocabulary of higher education and student affairs in Africa.

Finally, an alert for the next issue: guest-edited by Dr Henry Mason, TUT, and another one coming up guest-edited by Dr Gugu Kanye, UFS – two great issues to look forward to.

Enjoy the read.
*Birgit, Thierry and Teboho*

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Research article

# Becoming more private: Broadening the base of South African higher education

## Ukuba ngabucala ngakumbi: Ukwandisa isiseko semfundo ephakamileyo yaseMzantsi Afrika

Ahmed Bawa[1] & Linda Meyer[2]

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### ABSTRACT

In an era marked by declining government funding for tertiary education, the South African PSET sector faces an existential crisis. The silo-fication of the system means that the options available to the growing demographic of youth entering post-secondary education are limited. This article explores how reduced government funding has strained public universities, leading to widespread student protests, increased dropout rates, and compromised educational quality. Our focus in this article is on the role of private higher education and, in its own right, collaborating with other parts of the PSET sector. What is needed is an HE system that facilitates much more coordination and collaboration, and for the components of the PSET sector to find ways of working together to create a coherent, integrated network to produce maximal learning opportunities for students and to support the objectives of the NQF Act. This article serves as a call for policymakers, educational leaders, government, and stakeholders to recognise and leverage the growth capacity of private higher education in shaping a resilient, integrated, and future-proof PSET sector in South Africa.

### KEYWORDS

*Private higher education, public higher education, post-school education and training (PSET) sector, higher education funding, National Qualifications Framework (NQF), enrolment planning, educational inequality, lifelong learning, public-private partnerships*

### ISISHWANKATHELO

Kwixesha elibonakalisa ukwehla kwenkxaso-mali karhulumente kwiziko lezemfundo ephakamileyo icandelo lemfundo nengqeqesho emva kwesikolo lijongene nengxaki ekhoyo. Ukwahlukahlukana kwenkqubo kuthetha ukuthi ukwanda kwamanani olutsha olungena kwimfundo elandela eyamabanga aphakamileyo lunemida engakwazi ukudlulela kuyo xa kufikwa kwimikhethe ebekwa phambi kwabo. Eli nqaku liphononongo indlela ukuncitshiswa kwenkxaso-mali karhulumente ethe yabeka ngayo uxinzelelo kwiidyunivesithi zikawonke-wonke, nto leyo ikhokelele kuqhankqalazo

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lwabafundi oluxhaphakileyo, ukunyuka kwezinga labo bathi bayeke phakathi bengekagqibi esikolweni nokuthotywa komgangatho wemfundo. Ugxininiso lwethu kweli nqaku lukwindima yemfundo ephakamileyo yabucala, nokusebenzisana namanye amacandelo ecandelo lemfundo nengqeqesho emva kwesikolo ngokwalo. Into efunekayo yinkqubo yemfundo ephakamileyo eququzelela ngakumbi ulungelelwaniso nentsebenziswano kunye nokuba amacandelo ecandelo lemfundo nengqeqesho emva kwesikolo afumane iindlela zokusebenzisana ukudala uthungelwano oluhambelanayo noludibeneyo ukuvelisa amathuba okufunda angawona aphezulu kubafundi kwaye axhasa iinjongo zomthetho woHlaka lweZiqinisekiso zeSizwe. Eli nqaku lihlaba ikhwelo kubaqulunqi bomgaqo-nkqubo, iinkokheli zemfundo, urhulumente kunye nabachaphazelekayo ukuba baqaphele kwaye basebenzise amandla okukhula kwemfundo ephakamileyo yabucala ekubumbeni icandelo lemfundo nengqeqesho emva kwesikolo elomeleleyo, elihlanganisiweyo nelinobungqina bexesha elizayo eMzantsi Afrika.

**AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO**

*Imfundo ephakamileyo yabucala, imfundo ephakamileyo yoluntu, icandelo lemfundo nengqeqesho emva kwesikolo (PSET), uxhaso lwemfundo ephakamileyo, uHlaka lweZiqinisekiso zeSizwe (NQF), ucwangciso lokufaka abafundi, ukungalingani kwimfundo, ufundo lobomi bonke, ubudlelwane phakathi kukarhulumente nemibutho yabucala*

## Introduction

By 2022, South Africa had approximately 1.1 million students in public universities (CHE, 2024); 241 667 in private higher education institutions; 518 584 in public technical and vocational education colleges (TVET); 71 856 in private colleges; 130 752 in community education and training colleges (CETC), with a total of about 2.1 million in post-school education (Wills et al*.,* 2024). Approximately 15.5 million young South Africans are between the ages of 10 and 25. On the one hand, this burgeoning demographic presents a conundrum: the necessity to accommodate these individuals in a post-secondary education system faced with diminishing funding at a time of declining public resources. On the other hand, it provides an opportunity for a developmental state that navigates through a post-1994 period with an adolescent democracy, stagnant economy, and myriad socio-economic challenges to capture what has become known as the demographic dividend. The work that led up to the Reconstruction and Development Programme understood the centrality of the need for an education system that directly addressed the ravages of Apartheid education and simultaneously laid the foundation for the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society. It is well established that institutions of higher learning are fundamental to the functioning of multilayered democracies and economies. As Hanushek and Woessmann (2015) conclude, after exhaustive studies in Latin America and Asia, sustained economic growth depends on creating a national, broad-based reservoir of cognitive skills. In this sense, universities and institutions that offer higher education are social institutions created and sustained by societies. In this context, it is worth noting that 6% of South Africa's population has a degree compared to 38% in the USA, 36% in Germany and 56% in Japan (OECD, 2024).

Unsurprisingly, the National Development Plan (Republic of South Africa, 2012) signposted for 2030 a target of 30% for the participation rate of 18–24-year-olds in higher education. In 2023, the participation rate languished at about 22%. This percentage represents a gap of more than half a million additional students in the HE system. South Africa's participation rate is significantly the lowest amongst its BRICS counterparts. Between 1994 and 2024, the participation rate grew from about 14% to 23%, whereas in China, the participation rate grew between 1990 and 2024 from 6% to more than 60%. The fact that graduate unemployment is at the level of about 10% – which is considerably lower than the general unemployment rate of more than 30% – is evidence that graduates are absorbed in what is a sluggish economy.

Regarding the current model of provision, the NDP target is no longer feasible. Within the current paradigm of enrolment planning and higher education funding, the public higher education system operates very much at capacity. There is minimal public fiscal space for the construction of physical facilities to expand access to the extent required, notwithstanding the announcement in 2023–2024 of plans for two new universities. Considering the plethora of other challenges facing South Africa's universities, such as stagnant state funding, insufficient student tuition funding and unacceptably high dropout rates, much has yet to be achieved to address the challenge of significantly widening access. If South Africa is to see the knowledge society as a key lever of its developmental agenda, then it has to find ways to build participation in post-school education towards the 50% mark. Structural, policy and fiscal constraints prevent any significant progress towards this target. It is also a failure of imagination, the apparent incapability to produce new solutions in the face of these constraints.

The burgeoning role of private higher education as part of the solution to this conundrum is already evidenced by the fact that the sector now accounts for close to 30% of the overall enrolment in higher education in South Africa. While public higher education enrolments have not increased over the last 5 years, private higher education between 2018 and 2022 grew by 17%. The key argument of this article is that consideration should be given to creating conditions that would allow private higher education institutions to grow sustainably. If this is the case, what does it mean for the future of private HE, its relationship with public HE and the future of access to higher education? Does this open up channels for rethinking how a differentiated, articulated PSET sector may be constituted and the philosophical underpinnings of such a system?

Tracking the dynamics of the growing influence of the private higher education institution sector (PHEI) and revisiting the ecosystem within which it operates provides insights into the potential of this sector to play a more decisive role in changing the trajectory of higher education access and thereby address the influence of higher education on South Africa's development imaginary. Improving access to higher education is a significant conundrum as South Africa heads into the fourth decade of its post-Apartheid journey.

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## The existing PSET landscape

The current PSET infrastructure comprises public universities, private higher education institutions, public and private technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges and community education and training (CET) colleges (CHE, 2023). These entities operate in isolation and are seemingly detached from the basic education sector. Consequently, the system is characterised by fragmented and compartmentalised components, which are not ideal for meeting the needs of a more flexible labour market or the challenges posed by the youth demographic surge. The issue is compounded by the historic preference of the university as a destination for students entering the PSET sector. Compared to countries like Germany and the USA, which have a robust TVET sector (Van Damme, 2023), the TVET sector in South Africa is under-imagined and therefore underfunded, under-resourced and underpopulated. In a cruel interpretation, it is an education sub-system conceived of as being necessary to fill a gap in the provision of post-school education and training; for students who have completed the National Senior Certificate but do not qualify for entry to a university education. On the one hand, the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) addresses the needs of young South Africans who were failed by the basic education system. On the other hand, the other qualifications offered by the TVET sector are aimed primarily at students who would have preferred to have taken up HE studies. Not surprisingly, this supply-side approach to the TVET sector critically stymies the organic development of company partnerships.

The public PSET system suffers from what might be referred to as an inverted pyramid, with more students in the HE sector than in the TVET sector and with an extraordinarily small CET sector. In the context of a substantial unemployment rate, hovering at about the 30% level, the CET sector should in effect be a very substantial system providing ongoing opportunities for skills development and alternative routes into the TVET and HE sectors at the local level.

While participation in the public higher education sector has been stagnant for the last 4 to 5 years at 21-23%, the private HE system in South Africa is growing at 6% per annum. It currently accommodates nearly 30% of the students in higher education study programmes in South Africa (CHE, 2023).

## International perspectives on private higher education

Even before the current crisis that has beset universities in the USA, in *The University in Ruins* (1999), Bill Readings eloquently plotted out the pressures that have been brought to bear on North American research universities (both public and private) by globalisation and its many and varied instruments. In particular, Readings argues that there has been a fundamental shift away from the original purpose of universities in building the character of the nation-state towards the idea of universities as instruments of globalisation. The most important shift, particularly regarding public universities, has been the impact of new funding models that have forced universities to seek local and global markets. The risk-laden dependence of universities in the United Kingdom and Australia on international students for their very existence is an example of the ways in which these funding models impact their core purposes. In the *Death of the Public University* (2017), Wright and Shore present a grim outlook in their description of the current state of public universities in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Denmark.

The for-profit higher education sector has not been without its controversies and challenges, the brunt of which often falls on the students. To illustrate this, a single example will be considered, albeit not representative of the entire international private higher education sector. The University of Phoenix (Schwartz, 2023) once dominated the online college market, boasting over 470 000 students. However, in 2019, it was compelled to reimburse USD191 million to the Federal Trade Commission. The institution was held accountable for disseminating numerous advertisements containing erroneous assertions, lowering the bar to entry and luring unsuspecting students into loans and debt. These advertisements insinuated that students enrolled in their – often two-year programmes – would seamlessly transition from course completion to securing lucrative positions with prestigious companies such as Microsoft and Google. Frequently, the programmes offered were of dubious quality, and over an eight-year period, graduation rates were between 27 and 51%. Today, it has been bought out by the University of Idaho, which is looking to expand its online offering. This example, even though extreme, in the context of the rising costs of post-school education for students and families, suggests the increasing prominence of private education as a means to generate revenue in a notably constrained sector. Considering this, it is essential to examine the extent to which the experiences outlined by Wright and Shore are mirrored within the context of private higher education in South Africa.

It should be acknowledged here that the funding model of public higher education in parts of the world, such as the UK, has, in essence, led to those institutions operating as private HE institutions (Czerniewicz & Cronin, 2023). This predicament primarily stems from an unrelenting decline in state funding for higher education, akin to the situation in South Africa. In South Africa, there is an additional twist. The Centre for Risk Analysis points out that the state subsidy to universities stands at 30.8% (ZAR44 billion) of the DHET budget at a time when the National Students Financial Aid System (NSFAS) budget is at 41.2% (ZAR51 billion) (CRA, 2024, p. 5). In the context of the sluggish economy, resources have been siphoned away from the FTE-based student subsidy system into the student grant system. According to Wright and Shore (2019, pp. 3-6), the unanticipated ramifications of the funding reduction have reverberated throughout the academic sector, engendering a series of radical measures, neoliberal reforms; profiteering from tax-funded student loans; instrumentalist expectations of universities to align their offerings with market needs; and global economic pressures. These consequences have led to research on the very idea of the purpose of universities (Badat, 2025; Bawa & Boulton, 2024). If nothing else, these new funding models influence the ways in which universities increasingly consider students as consumers and thereby constrain their relationship with universities.

Unlike South Africa, where NSFAS offers protection for the poorest students, some countries have primarily shifted the cost burden onto the student. In the USA alone, student debt stands at USD1.75 trillion, with USD28 950 owed on average by each student at public and private institutions (Hahn, 2023). Quintana (2023), writing for

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*USA Today* and drawing on federal data, indicates that the average debt of graduates of public four-year institutions was about USD26 100, slightly lower than the average USD29 000 debt of graduates of private for-profit universities. The average debt of graduates of not-for-profit private institutions was higher at USD35 700. Consequently, students face increased financial commitments and often find themselves ensnared in a debt trap. Historically, within the realm of higher education in the United States, there prevailed a belief that despite the accumulation of debt upon completing one's studies, such financial obligations would be settled by one's early thirties. Subsequently, an individual's earning trajectory was expected to experience a considerable upswing. However, the validity of this perception is increasingly being called into question. As Hahn (2023) points out, the highest levels of student debt belong to the 62 and over age group, who still owe, on average, USD49 375.[3]

Moreover, alongside this reduction in state spending has been the notable emergence of audit culture within public institutions globally. One symptom of this has been the implementation of performance measures that negatively impact the overall productivity of universities. These performance measures are also linked to the perceived importance of global rankings and the rise of internal measures that are most often described as serving to boost efficiency. In reality, these measures are usually linked to the rise of crass managerialism in the context of the rise of audit culture and neoliberalism (Bawa & Boulton, 2024). Another dimension in this trend is the rise of administrators. One sees the proliferation of administrators "devoted to marketing, diversity, disability, sustainability, security, environmental health, recruiting, technology and fundraising, and added new majors and graduate and athletics programs, satellite campuses, and conference centres" (Marcus, 2014, p. 6). According to Delluci et al. (2021, p. 5), there was a 452% rise in non-academic professional ("librarians, curators, and archivists; student and academic affairs and other education services") numbers between 1978 and 2018; far exceeding that of faculty over the same period. In South Africa, the national profile of university staffing demonstrates this, with more than 60% of total employment in the public HE sector now comprised of administrators and other non-academic staff (CHE, 2023). Moreover, as faculty numbers decline, their composition also changes, with permanent staff being increasingly replaced by part-time staff. Of most concern globally has been the rising impact of the gig-economy on university teaching. In the USA, for instance, slightly more than 20% of teaching staff are on a tenure track. In South Africa, in 2021 permanent staff made up 38% of the total academic staff. (CHE, 2023, p. 77). These developments further exacerbate the challenges faced by public universities in these nations.

In many respects, the unbundling of universities is a symptom of a shift in the business model of public universities (Czerniewicz, 2018). For Wright and Shore, new funding models have brought about the slide towards privatising public universities in the countries they reviewed, concomitantly reshaping their relationship to their societies. Beginning with the

3 This state of affairs has revived the debate on whether higher education is a common or a private good (for more on which, see Badat (2024) and Bawa and Boulton (2024)). A question that will be addressed later in this article.

need to become increasingly entrepreneurial, one observes the growing consumerisation of higher education. Depending on the funding model, universities approach their funding challenges in different ways. In the UK, for instance, the scramble is for international students who pay three times more in tuition fees than local students and are an essential commodity (Czerniewicz & Cronin, 2023). In essence, international students, many of whom are from poor nations, subsidise local students. Other universities aim to increase third-stream income of the kind that feeds back into the core operating budgets. The vast bulk of third-stream income is project-driven and therefore has little impact on the viability of universities. In the UK, coupled with a lack of legislation, "public higher education in England is thus being stealthily privatised – either through taxpayer-funded risk-free capitalism or by asset stripping – as global capital seeks out new sources of revenue and investment" (Czerniewicz & Cronin, 2023, p. 15). Because there are many moving parts in any higher education system, there are many ways in which these parts can be used to generate revenue. Instruments of globalisation, rankings, branding, outsourcing, etc, provide the infrastructure for this new form of higher education economics.

## The funding dilemma in South African higher education

The DHET recognises the challenges it faces, particularly in terms of funding and financial sustainability:

> *South Africa generally spends less on tertiary education compared to many other countries. For example, in 2017, South Africa's spending on tertiary education was 0.9% of its GDP, which was below the 1% recommended by the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education.* (DHET, 2021, p. 16)

The subsidy per full-time equivalent (FTE) has been relatively stagnant over this period. There are four reasons for this. First is slow but steady growth in students. University enrolment has more than doubled, from 495 348 in 1994 to 1 094 808 in 2020 (Cloete, 2024). Second is the growth in non-subsidy activities of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training, even though some may be directed at improving universities through centralised, 'earmarked' funding. Third is the higher education price index, which is consistently above CPI, and which does not feature in the way in which national budgetary allocations are made to higher education. Fourth is adopting the new NSFAS student funding model in December 2017, significantly impacting the state's subsidy funding to universities. In addition, burgeoning student debt, confirmed at a staggering ZAR16.5 billion in 2021 by the Director-General of the DHET to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee (PMG, 2023), poses a significant financial risk for South African public universities, threatening to undermine their financial stability and academic programmes.

Investing in higher education is crucial for equipping a significant demographic with the skills necessary for employment and enhancing the nation›s economic trajectory. The estimates of national expenditure detail a cabinet-sanctioned reduction of ZAR1.8 billion from the 2023 baseline to bolster Early Childhood Development (ECD), predominantly at the expense of university infrastructure grants, reducing that budget from ZAR3.5 billion in the previous year to a mere ZAR673 million, as reported by Sachs et al. (2023).

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As pointed out elsewhere (Fish & Meyer, 2023), it is all the more ironic that since the 2000 publication of *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* by the World Bank (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000), it has been a common cause that higher education offers the highest return on investment for any country. A more recent publication (World Bank Group, 2014) highlights explicitly the return-on-investment (ROI) for the sub-Saharan region: there was

> *an estimated 17% increase in earnings as compared with 10% for primary and 7% for secondary education. These high returns are even greater and more significant in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated 21% increase in earnings for tertiary education graduates.*

The IHME-CHAIN Collaborators' (2024) findings for the benefit of higher education are even more impressive. Their study underscores the importance of education as a key determinant of adult longevity and highlights the potential for education-focused interventions to improve population health and reduce health inequalities (IHME-CHAIN, 2024, p. 9). The study emphasises the need for international commitment and continued investment in higher educational institutions worldwide to counteract growing disparities in mortality. It also stresses the importance of applying the proportionate universalism principle to investments in education to address existing and increasing health inequalities.

So far, this article has reported on the decrease in available funding for higher education globally, which has forced global higher education to find ways to manage new funding regimes. Funding challenges come in different forms, and instances of privatisation (at least of aspects of the university) have increased to meet the fiscal crunch. South African public universities are not exempt from these pressures and responses, which in turn are likely to reshape the concept of public higher education and, in particular, to inform how to revitalise, reshape, and reimagine their role as a public good and in producing public goods.

## History and profile of the private HE sector in South Africa

The historical chronicle of private higher education in South Africa is essentially the story of higher education itself. The earlier history of higher education in South Africa emerged from initiatives and funding support for private entities. In some cases, such as in the founding stages of the University of Natal, the local city government played an important role. It was only at subsequent points that governmental intervention and funding were introduced, mainly due to the realisation that these establishments served a purpose beneficial, in one way or another, to the state's interests. "The roots of higher education in South Africa date back to 1829 with the founding of the South African College in Cape Town, a private college with its board of Directors and individual 'shareholders'" (Mabizela, 2002, p. 5).

The notion that government intentionally constructed these establishments to ensure skills development in a rapidly expanding nation is contradicted by the historical reality of the pioneering role of private higher education in each instance. The government had to catch up, allocate finances, and exercise greater control as it deemed appropriate. In 1940, for example, ML Sultan donated ZAR25 000 towards the founding of a technical college that was to be named after him. In 1946, the government recognised it as a technical college and granted it ZAR11 770 (Mabizela, 2002, p. 9). A racial bias favouring institutions offering higher degrees soon became apparent. Although black people would only be officially banned from participation in 'white universities' in 1959, it was clear early on that some of these university colleges were to be white bastions.

Several factors can be attributed to private higher education's persistence and quiet flourishing after the 1959 *Extension of University Education Act*.[4] According to the DHET, in 2001, there were 93 728 students enrolled in PHEIs. The new institutions differed from their early private counterparts in terms of their for-profit status. By 2023, their enrolment numbers had grown to 286 454, representing an average annual increase of 9.9% since 2022 (DHET, 2025). The government's heightened scrutiny of newly established university colleges primarily contributed to this phenomenon. This helped to address the perceptions that private higher education offered less academically rigorous qualifications, favoured vocation-oriented diplomas instead, and catered to a predominantly black student base (Mabizela, 2002).

*The Higher Education Act* of 1997 marked a pivotal moment in recognising private institutions within a policy and legal framework that included institutional registration and programme accreditation parameters. It was not merely an acknowledgement but rather an expectation that these institutions would adhere to standards comparable to those of their public counterparts and be subjected to equivalent policy scrutiny. Nevertheless, the underlying axiom persists, due to its private funding, private education frequently evades the onslaught of policies beleaguering public higher education. It remains more answerable to its shareholders than to the government. This does not imply that, following the 1994 elections and sporadically thereafter, PHEIs have not required government intervention. Indeed, over the years, there have been mostly diminutive educational establishments presenting a plethora of inferior courses to unsuspecting pupils. Consequently, these students have been frequently left bereft of any education or subjected to substandard instruction, having essentially been swindled by said institutions. It is worth noting that the DHET is generally unrelenting in pursuing and ultimately shutting down these criminal establishments (Muia, 2024).

## Compliance and PHEIs

There is a misnomer that PHEIs are subject to less rigorous checks and balances than their public counterparts. PHEIs are subject to regulations for accreditation and programme approval under the jurisdiction of the Council on Higher Education, qualification registration by SAQA on the National Qualifications Framework and licensing requirements enforced by the DHET. PHEIs are further subjected to annual reporting to the DHET and regular review cycles with the CHE. These DHET Annual PHEI reports, subsequently aggregated, ascertain compliance whilst identifying areas of concern both broadly and within specific institutions for requisite action. As the foreword to the consolidated 2025 DHET report on PHEIs attests:

4 Act number 45 of 1959, which also formalised Apartheid's higher education imaginary.

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> *There was a 95% level of compliance with the stipulated requirements for annual reporting. The most common areas of non-compliance were the submission of the financial guarantee and financial statements, followed by confirmation by SAQA on programmes registered on the NQF, the NLRD, and the record of Directors as issued by CIPC. However, and most importantly, the number of Institutions that fail to comply has significantly dropped from the previous years.* (DHET, 2025, p. 18)

The *Annual Report on the Compliance of Private Higher Education Institutions with Regulations* (DHET, 2025) serves two functions. The first is to assess the compliance of 125 PHEIs as measured against a set of criteria. The second is to aggregate that information into a composite picture of the private sector.

Of the 286 454 students in the PHEI sector in 2023, there was a healthy growth of 6.3%, an average maintained over the previous seven years. The race composition within the student population, while not representative of the national demographic, presents a relatively balanced distribution, with black African individuals comprising 63%, those of coloured descent at 9%, Indians representing 7%, and whites constituting 15%. Of the total 286 454 students, 15 965 students hail from the rest of Africa and beyond (DHET, 2025).

One of the most remarkable findings in these statistics lies in the revelation that over the preceding 11 years, the proportion of females has experienced an upsurge, growing at about 6% per annum: “the main growth in the PHE sector has been among African females” (DHET, 2023c, p. 25). The most significant expansion within the female population is observed amongst black Africans – a striking exhibition of gender and racial transformation. While the figure closely mirrors the gender percentage within the PSET sector (approximately 61.4%), the trajectory of private institutions demonstrates a persistent increase in female representation. This growth occurs despite a decline of 10 202 in female enrolments within the PSET sector during the same year (DHET, 2023b, p. 5). Possible reasons for this could be that private institutions often market themselves as providing high-quality education, focusing on smaller class sizes, better facilities, and more individualised attention. This reputation can particularly appeal to female students who prioritise a supportive and safe educational environment. Safety concerns are a significant factor for female students when choosing an institution. Private universities may offer more secure campuses and a safer overall environment, which can be a decisive factor for parents and students.

In 2021, the majority of students were enrolled in programmes offering bachelor’s degrees, followed by diplomas and higher certificates. In total, 76.4% of students in the PHEI sector studied business, commerce, and management. Physical planning, construction, agriculture, and nature conservation were the least popular areas. That same year, 54 551 students graduated from these institutions (DHET, 2023a, p. 32).

## The demand for HE

There are several key drivers for the growth of higher education in South Africa. The developmental state’s priority is shifting its economy from a primary, extractive base to a knowledge-based economy; hence, its continued focus is on building a growing PSET system. It is central to building the necessary knowledge and human capacities for such a complex transformation of its economy. As has been mentioned earlier, several studies explicitly show the importance of universities in constructing such economies. Second, HE remains a key driver of social mobility in one of the world's most unequal societies, which is partially why it is such a contested terrain. Third, South Africa, like other parts of the African continent, is experiencing a demographic youth bulge, which will continue to pressure the sector's growth. Fourth, universities are engines of development and growth. Societies need them to produce experts, professionals, artists, etc. And fifth, broad-based HE is essential to the functioning of complex, multilayered democracies and the continuing project of nation-building. Higher education institutions are essential to the national project of producing an educated/educating populace. The question is whether these are the prerogative of public higher education institutions or whether the private for-profit sector also plays these roles.

There are significant, multidimensional questions about the size and shape of the PSET sector. For instance, the current size of the TVET sector compared to the HE sector is sometimes described as an inverted pyramid, which has to be righted. In the context of the extraordinarily high unemployment rates in South Africa, the CET sector is minuscule; it is a gaping hole in the PSET sector. According to the DHET (2024), "In 2022, enrolment in CET colleges was 130,752, which represents an 8.6% (12,279) decline compared to the 143,031 enrolments in 2021". There are also questions about the undergraduate–postgraduate mix of the HE sector and the spread across different knowledge domains.

The enrolment planning process that universities and DHET engage in is driven primarily by three factors: (1) the capacity (both physical and human) of universities, (2) labour market demands, and (3) the subsidy affordability condition that the state must meet. Notwithstanding the importance of the first two, the last of these is the key driver restricting growth in the public HE system. This is an affordability issue. The growth capacity of the public HE system is tightly constrained.

What growth model options are available? There are many, and they should be considered to act in concert with each other. First, revisiting the inverted pyramid is one approach that broadens the PSET sector's base, leading to greater access by ensuring that it is the least expensive part of the sector that grows (Bawa, 2013). To maximise the impact of this approach may have far-reaching implications for the structure of the PSET system, such as the possible construction of new institutional types that structurally link the colleges and universities with qualifications designed for articulation (Bawa, 2013). Second, among the many lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic experience is that modalities of delivery are many and fluid depending on circumstances, and these are potentially able to reshape the costing structures of delivery through the use of technology on the one hand and the idea of flexible use of physical infrastructure on the other hand. Third, we are at the dawn of the emergence of new approaches to lifelong learning, including the expanded building of MOOCs, micro-credentialing, the fusion of learning across different platforms, etc.

In some sense, this could be the counterproof to Kenneth Rogoff's (2018) observation that while universities have been exceptional in producing disruption in other industrial

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sectors, they've been hopeless at disrupting themselves. In the South African context, as is the case in other parts of the continent, one of the key opportunities to develop access to the extent that it would have a significant impact on the HE participation rate could be revisiting the potential and organisation of private higher education as an integral and integrated part of the national PSET system and in particular, its folding into the enrolment planning processes.

## The public good role of private higher education

It is argued that public universities are a public good, and they produce public goods (Stiglitz, 1999). They are a public good in the sense that they contribute to the strengthening of democracy, nation-building, and the production of a better-educated populace. They are the places where graduates are taught to engage in honest, tolerant intellectual encounters. However, these institutions also produce public goods, such as new knowledge and graduates who serve society as intellectuals, professionals, artists, and experts. Needless to say, they also produce private goods in the sense that graduates are afforded the opportunity to earn better salaries and attain a better quality of life. Whether universities perceive themselves as fulfilling these roles currently is questionable, primarily due to the kinds of changes they have undergone. Recently, Bawa and Boulton (2024) have argued that universities need to return to their public good fabric.

What about the for-profit private higher education sector? The common assertion that private higher education serves as a private good in the sense that shareholder interests drive it is indeed correct. Ultimately, the financial bottom line is the acid test of its success and its sustainability. However, private higher education in the South African context is subjected to the same kinds of programme accreditation processes of the Council on Higher Education as their public counterparts; the programmes and qualifications offered there must satisfy the expected outcomes. Graduates of these institutions serve society in the same way as graduates of public institutions, and it is clear, on that score, that even though they serve shareholder interests, PHEIs produce public goods to the benefit of all of society. The same may be said of the research produced by these institutions, as limited as that may be at the current time. The regulatory framework requires them to play this role.

The commitment to reforms aligned with the academic priorities captured in the *Higher Education Act* of 1997, which in turn are built into CHE's processes, is crucial to safeguarding the interests of current and future students and serving as a cornerstone for an integrated higher education system that includes both public and private institutions (CHE, 2023). Closely aligned with this understanding, Czerniewicz and Cronin (2023) focus on the public good produced within the halls of the university dedicated to fostering an educational environment that serves the broader interests of society, promotes inclusive and diverse knowledge, and is committed to long-term, sustainable and ethical practices. This vision for higher education is a response to contemporary challenges, including the aggressive use of social media in furthering misinformation and disinformation and the rise of right-wing ideologies, by providing a framework for education that emphasises collective well-being, ethical engagement, and social justice.

A familiar chaos ensues at public higher education institutions at the commencement of every academic year and the opening of in-person registration. Higher education institutions are inundated with a deluge of student applications that significantly surpass available space. In 2024, 337 158 National Senior Certificate students matriculated with a bachelor's pass and another 188 748 with a diploma pass, adding up to just under 526 000 students who achieved the minimum requirement for entry into higher education. But the total number of places available for first-time entering (FTEN) students in the public higher education system was 202 000, while the public TVET sector had places for approximately 170 000; a total of 372 000. This number represents a growing disjuncture between supply and demand for post-school education and training in the public realm. The crux of the issue lies in the fact that the demand for public higher education has exceeded its limited capacity.

Clearly, this supply-demand tension, and its resolution, is complex and must be dealt with through multiple approaches, as described above. One key approach must be to strengthen the role of private higher education to address this conundrum. With 124 accredited private higher education institutions and enrolments growing at a rate of about 6% per annum, this sector presents an interesting and compelling opportunity to increase the participation rate of 18–24-year-olds in higher education.

## Agility in response to labour market shifts

The prevailing notion suggests a distinct demarcation between private and public higher education institutions; however, this has not always been the case. In the early 1960s, the Institute for Marketing Management (IMM) collaborated with public universities by offering portions of their programmes (Mabizela, 2002, p. 13), particularly in disciplines such as marketing, where public institutions may have lacked the requisite capacity at the time. These kinds of partnerships were shaped along strict business lines, with the private institutes being paid for the courses they taught, and the public institutions receiving fees and subsidy income for the registered students. In some cases, the outsourced teaching was done by staff members who set up institutes to provide these services to more than one public institution, primarily in areas of scarce skills like accounting.

IMM's pioneering marketing education exemplifies the agility of PHEIs in exploring disciplines that may not be fully developed in the public sector. Presently, PHEIs have introduced programmes and qualifications in such fields, playing an important role that public universities may not be able to enter because of financial and other constraints, at a time when cross-subsidisation between faculties at public universities is frowned upon. Advertising, film, and television are examples of areas that have unsatisfied demand within the broader market.

The main distinction between public and private education is that private education must be demand-led to be a sustainable enterprise. This means that private for-profit institutions are unlikely to embark on teaching enterprises that society may need but are not easily profit-generating. Private education aims to anticipate and meet future educational needs, as long as these make business sense. If not, taking them up is left to public institutions. This is why a national higher education system should foster both

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forms of higher education provision. A society without space for undergraduate and postgraduate explorations of theoretical physics and analytical philosophy will be the poorer for it.

## Remaking the South African higher education system

The Human Resource Development Council's Draft Master Skills Plan (MSP) (2024) is currently out for comment but actively criticises the NPPSET (discussed below), among others, as follows:

> *South Africa is overladen with industry master plans, economic recovery plans, Presidential job plans, sector skills plans, school plans, post-school education and training plans, and national, provincial, metropolitan and municipal plans. Hence, there is a need for an overarching MSP that streamlines the efforts of all role-players in the skills ecosystem.* (Human Resource Development Council, 2024, p. 4)

It reads like a breath of fresh air, though the HRDC's track record itself is quite dismal. The focus of the MSP rests on lifelong learning, centralising it within the entire skills milieu. The emphasis has shifted from coordinating various sub-sectors to homing in on the skills vital for South Africa's economic recovery and future stability. The skills showcased are broad enough to encompass the offerings of all educational institutions, from the CET sector to universities and private institutions, identifying those skills in high demand. On the other hand, it also presents the real danger of instrumentalising the PSET sector for some or other economic development model, which will not be neutral in its societal impact (Visvanathan, 1999). In the case of higher education, it would have to be read in the context provided by the *Higher Education Act* of 1997.

The National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (NPPSET) 2021–2030 was released in 2023. This document was meant to lay out a development plan for the period 2021–2030. It clearly lays out the challenges of addressing increased access and success and the importance of mobilizing resources for this purpose:

> *Implementing this Plan will require increased funding and much better use of available funding. Considering the 2030 goals and targets of the White Paper, all post-school education and training (PSET) sectors are chronically underfunded, and funding will need to significantly be reprioritised and improved if increased access is to be accompanied by enhanced success, especially given the threats to the fiscus because of COVID-19.* (DHET, 2023c, p. 85)

Since then, funding for the public PSET sector has been shuffled, but subsidy levels have declined. This fact, together with the strictly enforced inflation-linked increases in tuition fees, has placed universities on the backfoot regarding innovation and development.

What the NPPSET does not address is the possible creation of a single, integrated higher education system that encompasses both public universities and private for-profit higher education institutions, considering the importance of addressing the challenges of demand for higher education outstripping its supply. With the larger-than-expected number of qualifying students in 2025, one sees a crisis of access looming. It's not that the NPPSET does not contemplate this. It does. But it fails to follow through on the idea as a new imagination. It says:

> *The higher education (HE), technical and vocational education and training (TVET), sector education and training (SET) and community education and training (CET) management information systems will be linked, and the collection, curation and analysis of data from and by all PSET providers institutions, including private institutions, SETAs and employers, will be streamlined and simplified, and processes put in place to ensure reliability, accuracy and quality.* (DHET, 2023c, p. 18)

## Rethinking the place of private higher education in the higher education ecosystem

Many routes must be explored to address an impending crisis from the surge in demand for higher education. These must address modes of delivery and affordability. Since private higher education is growing substantially per annum, its place in the PSET and higher education ecosystems must be properly examined to understand how best to maximize its role in addressing the demand. In what follows, several issues are explored, opening the way for some level of rethinking of the PSET ecosystem and how it hinders progress.

One of the intransigent challenges facing the PSET sector highlighted in the NPPSET is its balkanisation into subsectors and the related failure to produce a unified, articulated system. This is mostly addressed in the context of the disarticulation between the public TVET and HE systems. The private–public split in the HE sphere presents the danger of limiting the migration of students across these sectors as they progress through their studies, taking courses towards qualifications in both subsectors. This constraint, in principle, should be easily dealt with because of the unified accreditation system. But other parts of the ecosystem are not so kind. HEMIS, for example, has datasets of public institutions only. We could, for example, see cross-teaching and co-badging of qualifications where this makes sense, with significant implications for collaborative efforts across the subsectors to cultivate diverse skills and foster a more inclusive learning environment.

Articulation does not make sense without thoroughly understanding the differentiation between institutions. The HE institutions are de facto differentiated in the public sector, and both the DHET and DSTI funding systems address the need for differentiation. Currently, PHEIs are predominantly teaching institutions, and one can imagine the need for such institutions because they work with young South African citizens to be included in DHET programmes such as the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), perhaps on a rand-for-rand basis.

Such a differentiated model also provides the opportunity to create a national system that links the PHEIs and the universities in national or provincial postgraduate education and research networks, requiring new approaches to managing public research funding and the DHET Research Output Subsidy. One thinks, for example, of the Graduate Centre at the City University of New York, which serves all of its 19 colleges in terms of doctoral education.

## NSFAS and the DHET bursary programme

In a young democracy like South Africa, it is untenable that a young South African who qualifies to study at a university is not accepted for affordability reasons. The DHET bursary system, administered by NSFAS, is a grant system in the sense that it addresses the issue of access to students from poor and working-class backgrounds. It creates the opportunity for universities to contribute to social mobility and broaden the economic base. Since this bursary system is a grant system for students as citizens, it should not matter where students choose to study. It has been argued above that PHEIs, by producing graduates, produce public goods (and private goods) which are sought by society and contribute to social mobility. If a student decides to study at a PHEI, then they should have the choice of doing so, particularly if places are scarce in public universities. A web-based survey of institutions indicates that the tuition costs at PHEIs are less than those at public institutions for comparable programmes. It may be argued that it is discriminatory for this bursary facility to be unavailable to students who wish to begin their studies at a private higher education institution.

## Building trust

In the context of experiences in other parts of the world and in South Africa's private post-school education and training institutions, it is clear that there are challenges. The fact that PHEIs fall under the remit of the DHET and that their programmes are accredited by the CHE using the same principles and procedures as those of public universities is essential in that they provide the basis for building trust. Yet, reports of failing private sector institutions are concerning. In March 2024, four institutions were deregistered for failing to meet regulatory reporting conditions (Muia, 2024). They have been re-accredited by the DHET in 2025 on humanitarian grounds, notwithstanding widespread media reporting of non-compliance and questionable academic practices. For whatever reason, this kind of failure needs to be addressed. This is not to say that public university programmes have not been de-accredited. Those contribute to distrust of the higher education system as well.

As noted earlier in this article, private for-profit higher education institutions are profit-driven businesses that ultimately speak to the interests of their shareholders. An ongoing engagement would be required to determine the extent to which this condition impacts the nature of the academic enterprise and to update their governance models to ensure sufficient segregation of governing duties. These are complex challenges that need to be engaged with.

## Some concluding thoughts

The number of National Senior Certificate students in 2024 who attained the minimum requirements for university entry exceeded expectations and exceeded the number of first-time-entering (first-year) places available in the public and private PSET system, resulting in demand exceeding supply. New approaches must be adopted to increase the capacity of the already overstretched system. The public higher education system is already operating at capacity, with limited fiscal and physical space for expansion to bridge this gap. There is a need for a more integrated approach that leverages both public and private higher education institutions to increase access and ensure the system's resilience.

The future of higher education in South Africa hinges on the ability to innovate and adapt to changing economic and technological contexts. Collaboration between the public and private sectors will be critical to building a resilient and inclusive education system. This integrated approach will help address current challenges and leverage opportunities to enhance the role of higher education in societal and economic development.

**Ethics statement**

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**Potential conflict of interests**

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A health and wellness transformation programme to ensure optimal student performance and well-being within ICE environments

## ’n Gesondheid- en welstandtransformasieprogram om optimale studenteprestasie en -welstand binne ICE-omgewings te verseker

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### ABSTRACT

International research has identified numerous impacts of the COVID-19 circumstances on students, such as decreased activity, food insecurity and self-reported poor mental health. This article proposes an intervention programme that universities could apply to prepare for similar future situations. Design thinking and project management processes were integrated towards a proposed intervention to respond to the challenges found in the mixed method research study. Strategies were developed within two areas, awareness and communication, and resources. In the awareness and communication category the following strategies were suggested: increasing communication, awareness campaigns, developing skills/knowledge and ensuring adequate capacity. The resources category consisted of a wellness software application, an adequate, accessible food relief programme, and a wellness support programme. The proposed programme should be implemented according to the Nadler-Tushman (NT) model of congruence. The programme is adaptable, enabling institutions to respond in alignment with their specific contexts and ensure congruence amongst all elements. A programme is proposed to institutions through reflection on their current support service structures, and amendment thereof to suit the specific circumstances. The proposed programme serves as a point of departure for institutions aiming to ensure student health and wellness, as well as academic performance during future isolated, confined and extreme (ICE) events. Furthermore, this programme contributes towards the third sustainable development goal: good health and well-being.

### KEYWORDS

*COVID-19, higher education, transformation, design thinking, project management, Nadler-Tushman model*

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**OPSOMMING**

Internasionale navorsing het verskeie impakte van die COVID-19-omstandighede op studente uitgelig, insluitend verminderde fisieke aktiwiteit, voedselonsekerheid en selfgerapporteerde swak geestesgesondheid. Hierdie artikel stel ’n intervensieprogram voor wat universiteite kan gebruik om beter voor te berei vir soortgelyke toekomstige situasies. Ontwerpdenke en projekbestuursprosesse is geïntegreer met die doel om ’n toepaslike intervensie te ontwikkel om die uitdagings aan te spreek wat tydens ’n gemengde-metode studie geïdentifiseer is. Strategieë is ontwikkel binne twee sleutelareas: (1) bewusmaking en kommunikasie, asook (2) hulpbronne. In die eerste kategorie is die volgende strategieë voorgestel: verbeterde kommunikasie, bewusmakingsveldtogte, vaardigheids- en kennisontwikkeling, en voldoende kapasiteit. Die hulpbronkategorie het bestaan uit ’n welstand-sagtewaretoepassing, ’n toeganklike en genoegsame voedselhulpprogram, en ’n omvattende ondersteuningsprogram vir studente se welstand. Die voorgestelde program behoort geïmplementeer te word volgens die Nadler-Tushman (NT) kongruensiemodel. Hierdie model maak voorsiening vir aanpasbaarheid, waardeur universiteite die program volgens hul unieke konteks kan aanpas en kongruensie tussen alle elemente kan verseker. ‘n Program word aan universiteite voorgestel deur besinning oor hul huidige ondersteuningsdiensstrukture, en wysiging daarvan om by die spesifieke omstandighede te pas. Die voorgestelde program dien as ‘n vertrekpunt vir universiteite wat daarna streef om studentegesondheid en -welstand te verseker, sowel as akademiese prestasie tydens toekomstige geïsoleerde, beperkte en ekstreme (ICE) gebeurtenisse. Daarbenewens dra die program by tot die derde volhoubare ontwikkelingsdoelwit: goeie gesondheid en welsyn.

**SLEUTELWOORDE**

*COVID-19, hoër onderwys, transformasie, ontwerpdenke, projekbestuur, Nadler-Tushman-model*

## Introduction

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) resulted in a global pandemic. To contain the spread of the virus, various far-reaching regulations were enforced. These regulations varied from the closing of non-essential businesses to movement restrictions and isolation (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). Therefore, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic involved far more than merely being infected by the virus itself. The regulations that were applicable during the pandemic resulted in an isolated, confined and extreme (ICE) environment that impacted the lives of many (Suedfeld & Steel, 2000).

Higher education institutions had to conform to certain regulations during the pandemic, such as vacating campus residences and reverting to online learning (Van Schalkwyk, 2020). As a result, students had to cope with both the negative effects of the ICE environment and the challenges of remote, online studying. Global research has identified numerous negative impacts of the COVID-19 circumstances and resultant ICE environment on students, including decreased physical activity, changes in diet, weight gain, food insecurity and poor mental health (Jehi et al., 2023; Bughrara et al., 2023).

As a result, an overarching mixed methods research study investigated food security and related wellness indicators of Health Sciences students in South Africa during

COVID-19 and to propose a programme to higher education institutions toward alleviating the impact of ICE events. The current article utilised findings from the mentioned study to suggest a programme of interventions and strategies to the higher education sector in South Africa. Research studies like the present are particularly important in developing nations, like South Africa, due to the socio-economic challenges students face in these countries (Bethea, 2019).

Prior to the pandemic, higher education institutions offered mainly in-person psychosocial support to students (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020) and some type of nutritional support (Wegerif & Adeniyi, 2019). During the pandemic, such services had to be expanded to enable support for the increased and altered needs of students. Before the pandemic, the specific institution investigated in the current study offered support services in the form of meal vouchers and face-to-face counselling sessions to students. These services were expanded during the pandemic by means of financial assistance and mobile counselling services. According to the current study's findings, these support services were not adequate to ensure students' food security, nor their health and wellness. There was, therefore, a need for a higher education programme to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 circumstances, and for institutions to review their student support services. Hence, the higher education programme is recommended to be implemented via a change model with the potential to assist institutions transform the serviced they offer to meet the needs of students in ICE environments/conditions.

## Methodology

The overarching research study was a concurrent, exploratory mixed methods study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) that utilised online survey and focus group discussions to examine food security and related wellness indicators of a cohort of students in central South Africa. The first section of the survey investigated food security status with the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (Coates et al., 2007) and dietary intake with the SA Demographic and Health survey (Department of Health, Medical Research Council, OrcMacro, 2007). The second section of the survey assessed health and wellness indicators with the questionnaire to assess adherence to diet and exercise advice (Dubasi et al., 2019) and mental health by means of the self-reporting Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale of 21 Items (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). It should be noted that the results on the mental health survey section were not diagnostic but rather self-reported challenges. Focus group discussion probes were aligned to encourage discussions on food security, dietary intake, health and wellness, mental health, and institutional support services during COVID-19.

Ethical clearance to conduct this overarching study was obtained from the University of the Free State Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (reference no.: UFS-HSD2021/0762/21). The study population for both the survey and focus group discussions were the same and comprised of Health Sciences students in their final years of study during 2021 at a university of technology in the Free State province of South Africa. No sampling was performed for the survey and the entire population was included and invited to participate. Systematic random sampling was utilised to select eight participants for each of the six focus group discussions. A total of 148 complete questionnaires were obtained and 17 students participated in the six focus group discussions. Based on findings from the overarching mixed methods study, the current article proposes a programme with interventions and strategies.

This article uses design thinking and project management principles as methodology to develop interventions and strategies for higher education to limit the negative impacts of ICE environments/conditions on students (see Table 1). In addition, the NT congruence model was then utilised to discuss and interpret the proposed interventions and strategies. This model is a management model used in organisational transformation based on identifying the problems around performance (outputs) and how to address them to improve that performance (Cameron & Green, 2019).

Design thinking is a methodology that facilitates innovative solutions to problems and operates at the interface of human values, business, and technology. This is a well-researched method for non-design trained professionals to solve problems, find solutions and design an action plan (Stanford University, 2023). The current study utilised the Stanford Design Thinking Model that was originally proposed by Hasso-Plattner and is popular within the higher education environment (Stanford University, 2023; UCT, 2023). The five phases in the Stanford design thinking process include empathise, define, ideate, prototype and test. Despite the mentioned strengths of design thinking in problem-solving, it was anticipated that the addition of some project management principles could add value to the design process, providing a more comprehensive design model within the context of the research study. Therefore, the design thinking method was integrated with five phases of project management as described by the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK).

**Application and adaptations of the design thinking and project management phases**

The Stanford design thinking and project management processes were adapted and applied within the context of a study where the researcher was the designer and project manager. The students were the users and beneficiaries in these processes. The adapted design process consisted of six phases that were applied to this study (Table 1) as follows.

- In the initiation and planning phases the research problem was identified: "How did the ICE environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic impact the nutritional health and wellness of students?" Should this impact be determined, a programme with preventative strategies and interventions could be developed to ensure optimal performance of students when experiencing ICE environments.

**Table 1. The integrated design thinking and project management model**

| Five project planning phases | | Stanford design thinking phases | Research methods | Offered institutional support | Problems/challenges | Solutions/recommendations |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Project initiation and**<br>**2. Planning** | **4. Monitor and control** | | Identify project and compile a proposal with aim, objectives, methods, etc. | | | |
| | | 1. Empathise | Literature and document reviews | Food relief.<br>Financial assistance.<br>Psychological counselling. | | |
| **3. Execute** | | 2. Define | Qualitative and quantitative data assist with defining the challenges/impacts of ICE on students | | Food insecurity worsened.<br>Dietary intake changed.<br>Weight gained.<br>Physical activity decreased.<br>Self-reported poor mental health. | |
| | | 3. Ideate | Interpretation of data and brainstorm ideas for solutions to identified challenges – by means of integrated model phases. | | | Brainstorm for broad set of solutions. |
| | | 4. Prototype | Discussion and interpretation of interventions and strategies (solutions). | | | Propose programme for higher education as illustrated in mind map below (see Figure 1) to be implemented according to the NT model (section 4.2). |
| **5. Project closure** | | | Concluding research project, present limitations, finalising thesis, publish articles to communicate findings. | | | Recommend areas for future research. |
| | | 5. Test | Postdoctoral phase (outside the scope of this study). | | | |

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- Various actions were taken to empathise with the users that included conducting literature and document reviews on the higher education context during COVID-19, as well as surveys and focus group discussions to gather data to gain insight into the behaviour and preferences of Health Sciences students during the pandemic. More specifically, the behaviour and preferences relating to food security, dietary intake and related health and wellness indicators were investigated.
- The execution and define phase involved data collection and the interpretation thereof. Data were collected by means of survey and focus group discussions. The quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group data were interpreted against literature to define the core challenges. These challenges referred to the identified impacts of the ICE conditions during COVID-19 on food security, dietary intake and health and wellness of students. These challenges led to the creation of a meaningful and actionable problem statement: Based on information generated in this study, what future strategies and recommendations may be proposed to the higher education fraternity, to limit the impact of probable future ICE incidences on student well-being and performance?
- The ideation phase focused on the transition from identifying problems to considering viable solutions for mitigating the impact of ICE environments on students. This ideation phase had already commenced during the data collection phases, where students were requested to suggest support and other solutions. Additionally, this phase entailed considering and integrating the findings regarding the pandemics impact on students' food security, dietary intake and related health and wellness indicators. Finally, the researcher constructed a wide set of viable solutions by means of brainstorming.
- Once all the ideas were generated, the ideas were streamlined and integrated to create a prototype of solutions. This prototype included a food security and wellness programme captured in a mind map (Figure 1). The interventions and strategies from the prototype were interpreted according to the NT congruence model (section 2.2).
- During the last project closure phase, the research project was completed and reflected upon. The monitor and control principles of project management were not a phase on its own but were integrated into all six phases to monitor aspects of the study. An example was the ethical clearance process that ensured that the project adhered to ethical standards prior to execution.

### The change model

The NT congruence model of change highlights how gaps can result from inadequate inputs and transformation functions that fail to work coherently, as well as how gaps in the output can lead to identification of problems in the inputs and transformation functions. Moreover, in this NT model the environment has a strong impact on the process itself, as well as the inputs and outputs of the system (Cameron & Green, 2019). Therefore, the NT congruence model was deemed suitable for higher education institutions to identify gaps in their support service offerings and implement changes from the gap analysis and recommendations of this study.

The NT congruence model is an elementary framework used to analyse the key drivers of performance in an organisation and to improve the drivers to all work in congruence with one another. The NT model is based on the principle that an organisation can only succeed when the following four elements are congruent: work, the people who do it, the organisational structure, and the culture.

Considering the strengths of the NT model, it was projected for implementation within the higher education context, and, provided that the relevant institutional stakeholders collectively work on this study's proposed health and wellness programme, it may contribute to successful, desired outcomes for the students.

## Results

The execution and define phase entailed data collection and defining of an actionable problem statement which enquired about future strategies and recommendations for the higher education fraternity to limit the impact of probable future ICE incidences on students. Moreover, this was informed by the challenges students experienced which emerged from the findings of the study (Table 2).

**Table 2. An overview of the main findings from the overarching study**

| Overarching concepts investigated | Main findings |
|---|---|
| **Food security** | • 16% of survey participants were food secure<br>• 54% experienced mild food insecurity<br>• 28% experienced moderate food insecurity<br>• 2% experienced severe food insecurity including hunger |
| **Dietary intake** | • Survey participants followed healthier diets with less intake of sugary and salty snacks<br>• Focus group participants reported less poor dietary habits such as increased starch and binge eating |
| **General health** | • Students reported deterioration of their general health |
| **Weight trajectories** | • 57% perceived weight gain during COVID-19<br>• 33% of students were overweight<br>• 26% of students were obese |
| **Physical fitness** | • Low levels of physical activity reported |
| **Mental health (self-reported challenges)** | • Poor mental health was experienced by students<br>• Participants' anxiety levels were often extremely severe |
| **Student support services** | • 82% of students were unaware of existing support services<br>• Less than 5% of students utilised available support services<br>• Students expressed a need for:<br>◦ Comprehensive, accessible food aid.<br>◦ Healthy lifestyle guidelines such as healthy diets and exercise routines.<br>◦ Expansion of services to accommodate the high number of students in need. |

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The following challenges were identified in relation to food insecurity. Food insecurity existed amongst students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students experienced a lack of money for food and for resources to prepare food. Some students reverted to binge eating in response to emotions experienced during the pandemic. During COVID-19, the dietary intake of some students changed to a healthier quality diet, with evidence of a decreased intake of food high in salt, sugar, and fat. However, some controversies regarding dietary intake emerged between survey and focus groups findings. Some students changed to healthier diets and others to less healthier diets, which may be due to circumstances relating to food access and availability in student homes away from campus. However, students expressed a need for healthy, cost-effective dietary guidelines to assist them in pursuing healthier diets.

Furthermore, the overarching study investigated health and wellness indicators that included perceived general health, weight trajectories, physical fitness as well as mental health. Students perceived their general health to have decreased and they fell ill more often. Students perceived weight gain and numerous students were overweight or obese according to BMI categories. Low levels of physical activity were evident, and students suffered from poor mental health as per self-reported survey results. Anxiety levels were reported to be extremely severe. Lack of caretakers to assist students with household management and challenges related to online learning were two of the prevalent contributing factors to the self-reported poor mental health.

Findings regarding students' awareness and utilisation of institutional support services highlighted the following challenges. Few students were aware of the existence of support services at the institution. Food insecurity existed despite available food parcels and meal vouchers. Although these services were limited and aimed at the most severe form of food insecurity, namely hunger. Students had trouble accessing food relief support due to a tedious application process or feelings of embarrassment. This highlights the importance of the university changing the application process and ensuring that those that do receive food aid are not known to other students (confidentiality). The self-reported survey revealed the prevalence of poor mental health, despite the availability of counselling services. Although counselling services expanded during COVID-19, students expressed concern that counselling services did not have the capacity to attend to all students in need of assistance – thus indicating a lack of resources. Students expressed a need for more accessible and confidential support services that address health and lifestyle matters including exercise guidelines and eating habits. Correlation findings showed that students who resided in rural areas experienced higher levels of food insecurity. Moreover, students who experienced food insecurity showed a larger prevalence of poor mental health from the self-reported survey, especially increased anxiety.

## Discussion

The objective of the current article is to propose a programme for higher education institutions. This programme serves as the prototype/solution and contains interventions and strategies that emanated from the aforementioned challenges. The prototype of solutions is illustrated in the mind map below (Figure 1) based on the change model of

NT. The recommended interventions and strategies represent the strategy element of the original NT model.

**The proposed programme as strategy**

The interventions and strategies of the proposed food security and wellness programme (Figure 1) were considered in two categories: 'awareness and communication' and 'resources'. The communication and awareness category was mainly aimed at improving support services and empowering students. The resources category was aimed at increasing certain resources at the institution to better assist students.

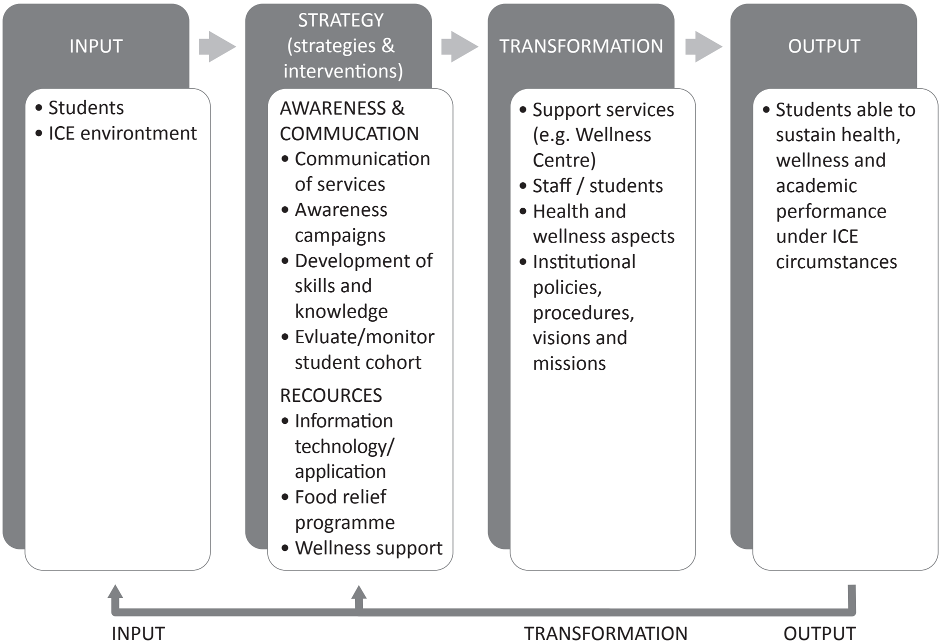


**Figure 1: Proposed food security and wellness programme as strategy in a Nadler-Tushman model**

This proposed food security programme should be implemented as soon as possible under normal circumstances, and not only during ICE environments, for institutions to be prepared should ICE conditions arise. Although this research study collected data during COVID-19 to determine the impact of the resulting ICE environments on students, no comparisons could be made with students' health and wellness prior to the pandemic because no data were available on the specific student cohort prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is possible that the challenges identified by students during COVID-19 may have existed under normal circumstances. In which case such students could benefit from immediate implementation of the proposed programme.

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### *Communication and awareness*

The communication and awareness interventions and strategies entailed the following: communication of services, evaluation/monitoring of students, awareness campaigns and development of skills and knowledge (Figure 1). Communication about support services on offer (Figure 1) should be increased by means of marketing which will increase student awareness. It is essential that marketing is structured in a way that it can continue under ICE conditions, for example, in the form of bundle mobile messages to students. Considering ubiquity of mobile technology usage among students, mobile-based communication methods are well suited (Johnson & Kalkbrenner, 2017). Important aspects to be included in this communication should be the purpose, access locations (on and off campus), and elaboration of the different services available (Roberts et al., 2018). Not all students were aware of the purpose of counselling services. For example, they were not aware that this division could assist them with anxiety coping strategies. Moreover, few students knew that such services were available to them free of charge; thus, a fear of financial implications is likely to have hindered the utilisation thereof. Lastly, students were unaware of the variety of services offered. This lack of awareness could have resulted in the poor utilisation of services. For example, some students were aware of the counselling services but not the social services which could have assisted to them in alleviating socio-economic issues (e.g. money for food).

When students are aware of all the available support services, their individual purposes and how to access them, they utilise them to attend to challenges relating to mental health and food insecurity (Roberts et al., 2018). When students are aware of services prior to experiencing ICE conditions, they are more likely to seek the necessary assistance. Furthermore, the food insecurity–mental health vicious cycle would be prevented, as less food insecurity results in improved mental health (Block et al., 2011). Moreover, optimum mental health prevents poor dietary habits (e.g. binge eating) that may occur due to emotional challenges (Mukigi et al., 2018). Improved mental health also improves physical health as it may result in improved immunity and less illnesses (Mukigi et al., 2018). Lastly, improved academic performance may be experienced by students once mental health improves due to the link between these two factors (Raskind et al., 2019).

In addition to communicating the availability of support services, awareness campaigns (Figure 1) can also be useful amplifiers of such messaging, as suggested by Stoltenkamp et al. (2007). The institution should explore innovative presentations for awareness campaigns during ICE conditions (e.g. social media campaigns). Social media platforms, like Facebook, can be effective marketing tools for business and education institutions. This type of social media marketing should not be unsystematic and should be preceded by the development of coherent strategies and goals (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). Furthermore, awareness campaigns can serve as informal means of reaching out to students who may be too embarrassed to seek assistance (Hyun et al., 2006). Additionally, these awareness campaigns can inform students about health risks such as anxiety and obesity. This would address students' lack of knowledge regarding obesity and could assist with motivating students to maintain healthy body weight (Harring et al., 2010).

Development of skills and knowledge is another strategy within the communication/ awareness category. The identified challenges indicated that students need to be empowered with the following knowledge (Figure 1): healthy, cost-effective dietary and exercise guidelines. Empowering students with knowledge on dietary guidelines will support them to follow healthy diets and to prevent possible nutrient deficiencies. Nutrient deficiencies may compromise immunity and health (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021), and therefore this strategy may also improve students' general health, with less frequent illnesses. Moreover, a healthy diet will address the high levels of obesity (Lofgren, 2015). The following considerations are necessary when empowering students with knowledge on healthy eating, especially within South African: directly address prevalent misconceptions about healthy eating practices; increase self-efficacy regarding the purchasing and preparation of healthy food; represent diverse cultural traditions and consider the issues of affordability and availability of food (Everett-Murphy et al., 2015). It must be acknowledged, however, that knowledge does not necessarily lead to improved practices when barriers exist, such as poverty. Therefore, innovative, cost-effective ways of eating healthily should also be included to factor in the economic statuses of less fortunate students. Similar to other strategies, empowering students with skills and knowledge can be conducted by means of face-to-face initiatives on campus but might need innovative strategies to empower them during off-campus periods. As mentioned earlier, mobile communication is a suitable means of communicating (Johnson & Kalkbrenner, 2017).

Besides knowledge on dietary intake, students expressed the need to receive knowledge on exercise routines. Knowledge must include the health benefits of exercise and innovative routines that do not necessitate expensive equipment or large exercise space, to enable students to be physically active despite financial issues or movement restrictions. This knowledge may increase physical activity, which in turn may decrease overweight, and improve general and mental health (Harring et al., 2010).

The need for skills such as stress and time management was also identified. These skills can be taught by the Student Support Division in the form of workshops, mentorship programmes, or can be included in curricula. Various studies have documented the benefits of including interventions such as stress management into curricula (Butcher et al., 2021). Stress management skills may improve mental health, prevent deleterious habits, and improve academic performance. Moreover, time management assists students in coping with household demands while studying online. This coping mechanism will alleviate stress and improve mental health (Keogh et al., 2006). According to the correlation findings of the current study, certain factors increased the tendency of the following challenges: food insecurity and poor mental health. Food insecurity was more prevalent amongst students from rural areas, and food insecure students suffered more from poor mental health. This information can assist the institution to identify vulnerable students and to communicate relevant support services to those at-risk students, especially during ICE conditions. Additionally, the institution can also have an indication of the probable future student requests for specific services which can assist to plan resources and make provision for such student requests. Such provision will in turn ensure that support services have adequate capacity to support all the students in need.

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### *Resources*

The second category of the intervention and strategy programme referred to resources (Figure 1). This is a critical category that relates to expansion of existing support services which may have substantial financial implications to the university. This category includes information technology, the development of a food aid programme, and wellness support. These three resource-related strategies aim to address a wide variety of challenges.

The information technology intervention (Figure 1) is based on development of a health and wellness application (app) for students. Development of such apps involves in-depth research which could not fit into the scope of this study. However, software applications are popular amongst younger generations and are useful within the health and wellness sector, where they are often combined with artificial intelligence (AI) (Global Market Insights, 2024). Suggested functions to be ideally included in the app are self-reporting surveys to analyse various aspects of health (e.g. BMI) to determine weight status, specific training needs, mental wellness to identify areas of concern, food intake to identify dietary needs, supplementations, or food insecurity. Survey findings should be made available to students automatically on completion thereof to inform them of health risks relating to the aspect analysed in the respective survey. This will assist students to realise when to seek assistance from available support services. Furthermore, this will assist the university in identifying students in the direst circumstances such as those that are hungry or suffer from mental health issues. The application should also automatically reply with the relevant support service contact details to students in health risk categories. Alternatively, the app could make use of AI to provide knowledge and guidelines to students in need (e.g. suggest possible food types to consume to improve a nutrient deficiency. The application must contain a knowledge database with information leaflets such as weight loss programmes, at-home exercise programmes and breathing exercises for managing anxiety. Another useful function could be sending automated requests to support services to contact the student in need of assistance. This would especially be useful to assist students without mobile data/airtime to contact support services during ICE conditions, as well as reaching students who are too embarrassed to approach support services. The suggested app could have two primary benefits for the institution: it would enable the institution to assist students remotely and alleviate pressure on staff as resource. It is recommended that such an app be researched and developed for the institution, as the app may deal with many of the challenges that the students experienced.

A second resource that should be implemented as an intervention at the institution is a comprehensive food aid programme (Figure 1). Despite the meal vouchers that some students received from the institutions, food insecurity still existed, and students expressed that access to the offered support was challenging. Therefore, the institution should invest in a food aid programme with easy access. A food aid programme would necessitate innovative ideas to be viable during ICE conditions, as providing fresh food can be impossible at such times. Moreover, the available resources for students to prepare or collect food should be considered. Therefore, providing students with non-perishable, convenient and nutritious food products like fortified maize meal/

shakes to prevent nutrient deficiencies would be ideal (Romero-Garcés et al., 2023). This could limit fresh food waste, while the students could benefit from maintaining food security and acquiring the recommended daily allowances for nutrients. As mentioned earlier, strategies to mitigate food insecurity could also positively influence students' immunity, mental health, and academic performance (Ruegsegger & Booth, 2018).

Wellness support was the last intervention in the resource category (Figure 1). This intervention refers to expanding the capacity of current services, as well as including additional support services. The institution should expand the counselling services of its Wellness Centre either by appointing more counsellors or by utilising other methods of counselling assistance, such as AI included in the suggested student support app. Expansion of current counselling services would address the challenge of insufficient capacity during an ICE occurrence. Additionally, students reported a need for nutritional and fitness support, which should be added to the current services, either by employing professionals like dieticians, or providing such assistance by other means (e.g. online support). The implementation and sustainability of the mentioned appointments would be reliant on financial resources, which the Student Support Division or the university should be able to provide. Therefore, it is suggested that dedicated staff be appointed to secure external or institutional funding to support these appointments, as well as to ensure the provision of adequate services (e.g. comprehensive food relief). The addition of such services would be especially beneficial to younger students who, in pursuing their post-school studies away from home, are in the process of transitioning into independent life (LaFountaine et al., 2006). Moreover, these services could attend to the high obesity levels amongst students, as well as the lack of physical activity (Asselin et al., 2005).

**Three-step gap analysis based on the Nadler-Tushman congruence model**

The implementation of the aforementioned interventions, which represent the strategy in the Nadler-Tushman congruence model, would necessitate institutions to review their current student support practices. Such a review would serve as gap analysis to guide transformation of student support to mitigate the impacts of future ICE. This gap analysis process should be performed according to the three-step process, as described by Filipovic et al. (2020), and based on the NT model. The three steps of this gap analysis include: first, identifying and analysing the elements; second, analysing the relationship between the elements; and third, developing and maintaining congruence (Filipovic et al., 2020).

***Step 1: Identifying and analysing the elements***

The original NT model consists of six elements that include (1) input (strategy, resources, and environment), (2) work, (3) culture, (4) structure, (5) people, and (6) output (organisational, team and performance). When this model was applied within the context of the current study, the elements of the model were represented as follows: the students under ICE circumstances represented the input and maintaining their health, wellness, and academic performance in this ICE setting was the output. Furthermore, the strategy was represented by the proposed programme that includes strategies and interventions for institutions (Figure 1). The elements involved in the transformation

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include support services (e.g. the Wellness Centre) that represented the work, health and wellness aspects, culture, institutional regulatory code that represented the structure, and the staff/students that represented the people. A brief analysis of each element within the transformation of support services area will be provided.

Support services is the institutional department that was responsible for supporting students' health and wellness, often referred to as a wellness centre. The investigated institution included medical assistance, psychological counselling, and social services as support services. Study findings suggest these support services should be expanded to also cover nutritional and physical fitness guidance, as well as development of skills and knowledge amongst students, regarding health and wellness (e.g. weight management). As result, a person/division should be appointed to seek funding from external entities to assist with the awareness campaigns and expansion of support services. Moreover, the division should increase its visibility and create awareness by means of communicating its available services, the purposes thereof and means of access. It is important that this communication, as well as the support services provided, can be conducted during ICE circumstances when students are off campus. Under normal circumstances (i.e. prior to ICE events), the support service department should evaluate students to detect those possibly at risk, to whom support service offerings should especially be communicated.

The health and wellness aspects (culture/informal process) referred to the areas that were investigated in the current study and include: food security, dietary intake, general health, weight management, physical fitness, and mental well-being. As is evident from the literature, these aspects are interconnected and should be in synergy to ensure optimal health (Kruger, 2019). For example, food insecurity results in poor mental health, as was evident in the findings. Similarly, good mental health can foster poor dietary habits like binge eating. Therefore, when these aspects of health and wellness are in synergy – unlike in the current study's findings – they can help individuals achieve optimal health and well-being, the output. The institutional regulatory code is imperative in the transformation process (Figure 2); however, this study did not examine the institution's existing code. Instead, the proposed recommendations are grounded solely in the empirical findings. Hence, it is suggested that the institution review its regulatory code against the proposed transformation model to identify if the relevant code is sufficient to obtain the desired output.

The staff at the investigated institution's support services included social workers, nurses, and counsellors. However, the number of counsellors must be increased to ensure adequate capacity to assist all students in need. Moreover, staff should be appointed to provide additional services, such as dieticians and fitness instructors. Alternatively, the staff component can be relieved with an information technology app containing AI that could provide some of these services. The students in need of support did not all approach support services for help and strategies should be implemented to increase the utilisation of support services (Figure 1).

### *Step 2: Analysing the relationship between the elements*

The support service department influences staff, students, health, and wellness, as well as the institutional regulatory code. Additional support services would necessitate an increase in staff to facilitate services. If the support service division increases its visibility/awareness and ensures easy access, there could be an increase in service utilisation. Furthermore, should the additional services be included in the division, the health and wellness aspects could improve and result in synergy. Lastly, if the support services department increased types of services, number of staff, communication as well as improved access and capacity, it is imperative that the institutional regulatory code provide support by means of policies, procedures, vision, mission, as well as resources.

The health and wellness aspects (food security, dietary intake, general health, weight management, physical fitness, and mental well-being) influence each other when they are not in synergy. Therefore, when one aspect of health and wellness is not optimal it will not only increase the need for support regarding the specific aspect, but due to disrupting the synergy between the aspects, other aspects will also be negatively impacted resulting in further needs. For example, conditions of food insecurity result in not only a need for food relief, but may also lead to poor mental health, which creates an increased need for counselling.

In addition to the interconnectedness of health and wellness, aspects of health and wellness can impact the other three elements of the transformation (Figure 1). One suboptimal aspect of health and wellness may result in a student needing assistance which should be provided by the support service department and its staff. Moreover, the institutional regulatory code should make provisions for all aspects related to students' health and wellness in its vision and mission, as well as policies and procedures to reach the output.

The institutional regulatory code (structure/formal process) (see Figure 1) has an impact on all the elements in the transformation section due to the roles thereof in resource management, policy, and procedures. The institutional regulatory code should inform resource allocation for the implementation of the proposed programme and will thus have an impact on the staffing, health, and wellness aspects, as well as the support services on offer. Adequate staff should be employed in the support service division to ensure sufficient capacity to serve all students in need, especially during ICE situations. Adequate money should be available for providing food relief to prevent food insecurity, as a health and wellness aspect. Similarly, the necessary funding should be made available to the support services department for it to function at the required capacity, as well as to provide the variety of support services required (e.g. physical fitness support). It is suggested that the university and/or support services division should seek external funding to assist with the aforementioned financial implications. Furthermore, the regulatory code should include policies and procedures to enable easy access to support services and continuation of support services during ICE situations.

Staff ensure the functioning of the support services department, which in turn ensures synergy within the health and wellness element. Furthermore, staff employment and functioning are regulated by the institutional regulatory code. Students in need justify the existence of a support services department. Furthermore, should such students in need use the support service it will improve their health and wellness. Hence, institutional regulatory codes should provide procedures that will enable students to access the available support services.

***Step 3: Developing and sustaining congruence***

The congruences of the elements' relationships are referred to as sustainable congruence. As a result, when higher education institutions execute the proposed programme's strategies and interventions, they should analyse each element and implement transformation processes to remedy any incongruence between elements. If all elements and sub-elements (for example, aspects of health and wellness) are congruent, the odds of successfully obtaining the output improve. An example is to identify the number of students from rural areas. This number will serve as an estimate of students in need of food relief during ICE conditions (student element).

The institution should then ensure that enough resources (institutional regulatory code element) are made available to sustain a food aid programme (support services) and to prevent food insecurity (health and wellness element). If such congruence exists, food insecurity will be addressed which could have negatively impacted the health and wellness, as well as the academic performance of students during an ICE situation (output). This congruence is equivalent with the Stanford Model of Professional Fulfillment (Bohman et al., 2017). According to Bohman et al. (2017), this model conceptualises well-being/fulfilment as being influenced by three components: (1) culture of wellness, which refers to the supportiveness of the environment which is the support services division in this case; (2) efficiency of practice, which refers to the institutional regulatory code that makes it easier or more difficult to complete the work, referring to support in this case; and (3) personal resilience, which refers to individual self-care – in this case the actual health and well-being of students. Important to note from this equivalent model is that it emphasises that personal resilience (health and wellness) cannot make up for sustained exposure to a negative culture and inefficient processes, thus, stressing the essential role of the institution, including its support service division and regulatory code in the endeavour towards the well-being of students (Butcher et al., 2021).

Lastly, the output resulting from the transformation should be evaluated to reflect on the efficiency of the transformation process in mitigating the negative impact of the ICE conditions on the health and wellness of the student cohort. If the output is successfully obtained, it will influence the input because the output would have resulted in healthier students during ICE circumstances. For example, if the students obtain knowledge and skills from the support services department about coping skills for anxiety, their mental health will be supported, and the output will be students with sustained mental health and academic performance. However, should these students, who are now empowered with these coping skills, enter another ICE environment, the input would be different as they would be more prepared than prior to the initial transformation. Conversely, if the output is not successfully realised and negative impacts on the students' health and wellness are identified, the institution should determine viable solutions to amend strategies proposed in this study. The solutions can be designed by using the suggested design model illustrated in Table 1. Moreover, it is suggested that students be involved in this designing of solutions, similar to the solutions of the current study.

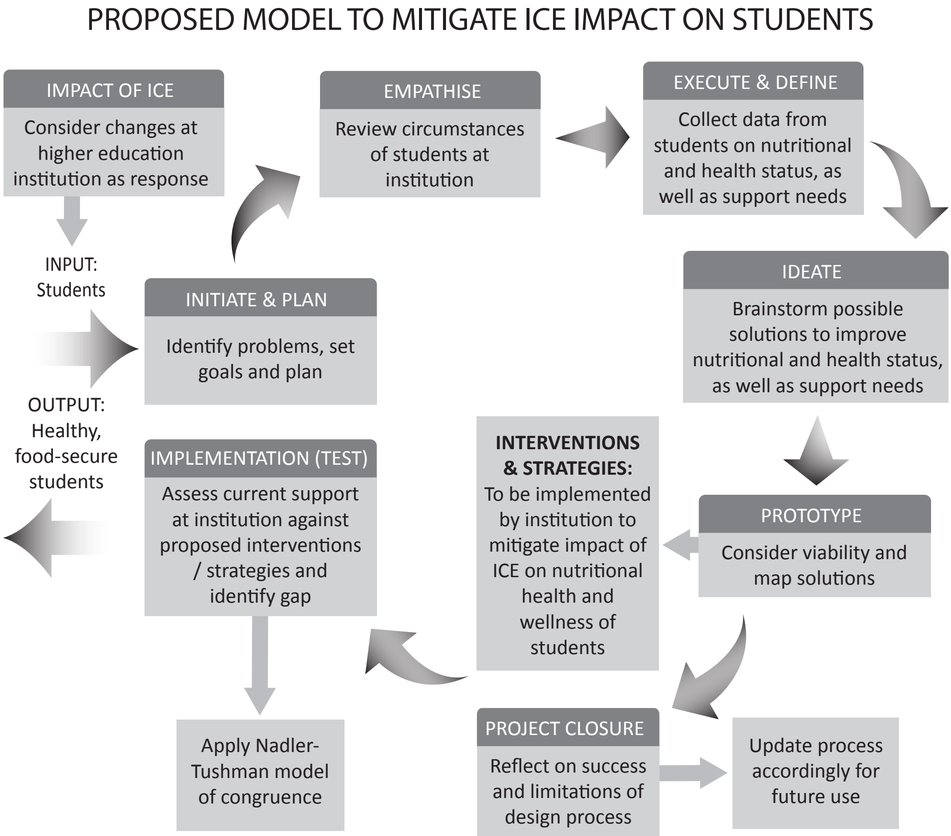


**Figure 2: Overview of the process proposed to mitigate the impact of ICE environments on students' nutritional health and wellness**

Student involvement has two benefits within this context: they have first-hand experience of their needs and utilisation of services. Second, involving them as co-creators will increase awareness and a sense of agency in the wider university community (Baik et al., 2019). It is anticipated that if a specific higher education institution makes amendments to the proposed programme, together with sustaining congruence between the elements in accordance with the specifications of the institution, the proposed programme can be adapted to suit the circumstances of the specific institution. In this way, the findings of this research study can be extrapolated to other institutions where maintaining student health and wellness during ICE conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is necessary.

In conclusion, the findings of the overarching research study confirmed the need for higher education institutions to implement strategies and interventions to alleviate the negative impact of ICE environments, like COVID-19 circumstances, on the health and wellness of students. Design thinking and project management principles were integrated as methodology to develop strategies and interventions as a proposed programme (prototype) for higher education institutions (Figure 2).

This integrated process consisted of six phases which were applied to design interventions and strategies (Figure 2) that emanated from the challenges (identified from the study's findings). The strategies and interventions were streamlined into a mind map and categorised into awareness and communication, and resources. It was recommended that the proposed programme be implemented by higher education institutions according to the NT model of congruence (Figure 2). Implementation based on this model entails a process of transformation at the institution to reach the output: students with maintained health and wellness, as well as academic performance under ICE conditions. The applied model is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and institutions must implement the model cognisant of their specific contexts and ensure that congruence exists between all the elements of the model. Furthermore, the output is not guaranteed with implementation of the programme, and institutions must reflect on the output to amend the strategies to suit their specific circumstances. Therefore, the proposed model of strategies and interventions serves as a point of departure for institutions wanting to extrapolate the findings to their contexts. Furthermore, such a programme would contribute towards the third sustainable development goal, namely: good health and well-being.

Some strategies and interventions were proposed, while the solution options were not exhausted. In some instances, the proposed strategies lacked detail specifically with strategies that necessitate in-depth research and development, for instance the student health and wellness app. Therefore, it is recommended that future research studies investigate the feasibility of the proposed app.

## Authors' contributions

Jonker planned the study, collected data, provided analysis, and drafted the article. Lues supervised the study. Walsh supervised the study and revised the article.

## Data availability

The data of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and protection of participant privacy. However, the corresponding author, Jonker, could make the data available upon reasonable request.

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**Ethics statement**

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) at the University of the Free State, which serves as the designated ethics committee for the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences at the Central University of Technology. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines, and approval was granted under ethical clearance number UFS-HSD2021/0762/21.

**Potential conflict of interests**

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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**Disclaimer**

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Student motivation for volunteering in a peer mentorship programme at a university of technology in South Africa

# Tlhohleletšo ya baithuti ya boithaopi lenaneong la bohlahli bja baithutimmogo yunibesithing ya theknolotši ka Afrika Borwa

Corneli van der Walt[1]

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing demand and competition for funding for student academic development and psychosocial support programmes in South African higher education is a reality. The peer mentorship programme at a university of technology in South Africa changed from being incentivised to voluntary in 2021 to expand its reach. Volunteer mentors were able to develop skills, expand social networks, boost employability, and increase life satisfaction in serving others. However, changes in the programme structure contributed to low morale and a higher dropout rate among mentors. This article reports a qualitative study that explored volunteer mentors' motivations to propose programme enhancements. Data were collected from eight purposefully selected peer mentors who participated in focus groups. The findings indicated esteem enhancement as the strongest motivator for the participants, followed by value expression or altruism and a desire to increase their knowledge and skills. The participants' motivation for volunteering contrasts with the findings of global and local research studies on student volunteering. Implications for peer mentorship programme design, marketing, recruitment, selection, engagement, and remuneration strategies are discussed. Avenues for further research are proposed.

## KEYWORDS

*Dropout, first-year student, functional approach in psychology, incentives, motivation, need satisfaction, peer mentor, volunteering*

## SENAGANWA

Nyakego le phadišano tše di oketšegago tša thušo ya ditšhelete tša tlhabollo ya thuto ya baithuti le mananeo a thekgo ya monagano le tša leago ka thutong ya godimo ya Afrika Borwa ke nnete. Lenaneo la tlhahlo ya baithutimmogo Yunibesithing ya Theknolotši ka Afrika Borwa le fetogile go tšwa go go putswa go ya go boithaopo ka 2021 go katološa phihlelelo ya lona. Baeletši ba baithaopi ba ile ba kgona go hlabolla bokgoni, go katološa mararankodi a tša leago, go godiša go thwala le go oketša kgotsofalo ya bophelo ka go hlankela ba bangwe. Lege go le bjalo, diphetogo

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thulaganyong ya lenaneo di bile le seabe go maikwelo a tlase le tekanyo e phagamego ya go tlogela ga baeletši. Sengwalwa se se bega nyakišišo ya boleng yeo e ilego ya hlahloba ditutuetšo tša baeletši ba baithaopi tša go šišinya dikaonafatšo tša lenaneo. Datha e kgobokeditšwe go tšwa go baeletši ba baithutimmogo ba seswai bao ba kgethilwego go ka tšea karolo dihlopheng tše di nepišitšwego. Dikutollo di laeditše go godiša tlhompho bjalo ka tlhohleletšo ye maatla go batšeakarolo, gomme ya latelwa ke go bontšha boleng goba go se be le boithati le kganyogo ya go oketša tsebo le bokgoni bja bona. Tlhohleletšo ya batšeakarolo ya boithaopi e fapana le dikhwetšo tša dinyakišišo tša lefase ka bophara le tša selegae ka ga boithaopi bja baithuti. Ditlamorago tša tlhamo ya lenaneo la tlhahlo ya baithutimmogo, papatšo, go thwala, kgetho, go tsenela, le maano a moputso di ahlaahlwa. Ditsela tša nyakišišo ye nngwe di šišintšwe.

**MANTŠU A BOHLOKWA**

*Go tlogela, moithuti wa ngwaga wa mathomo, mokgwa wa mošomo ka thutong ya monagano, meputso, tlhohleletšo, go kgotsofatša hlokego, mohlahli wa moithutimmogo, go ithaopa*

## Introduction

Peer mentorship programmes, which offer social, intellectual, guiding, and mental health support, are important initiatives that assist first-year students with the transition, adjustment and enculturation into university life (Lunsford et al., 2017; McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2022; Waite, 2021). The concept of peer mentorship refers to a relationship in which more experienced students provide information, guidance and support to less experienced students, increasing their chances of success (McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2022). Amongst others, peer mentorship relationships promote a sense of belonging, support identity formation, and aid in developing social-emotional skills while also driving learning outcomes and accountability and enhancing general well-being (McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2022; Waite, 2021). Whereas mentorship offers valuable benefits to mentees, those who assume mentorship roles also benefit from greater self-development, career awareness, self-efficacy, and organisational and communication skills (Hayman et al., 2022; McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2022; Swart et al., 2019). Hence, both mentors and mentees benefit from the mentoring relationship.

This article focuses on a specific University of Technology in South Africa (UoTSA), where it became evident that its remuneration structure for a peer mentorship programme (referred to hereafter as 'the Programme') limited its reach. The Programme transitioned from a paid structure where mentors were remunerated for services offered (pre-2020) to incentivised (2020) and then to a volunteer programme (2021 to 2023). The Programme custodians argued that mentors would benefit from volunteering by developing their skills and social networks, improving their employability profiles, and experiencing life satisfaction while serving others. In turn, more first-year students could potentially benefit from a better educational experience, while the institution benefitted from increased student retention and success. Therefore, the Programme was marketed as a volunteer initiative toward the end of 2020. Efforts were made during the recruitment and selection processes to emphasise the volunteer nature of the mentor role. The shift in the Programme structure from paid to incentivised in 2020 widened its reach. However, upon closer inspection, it became apparent that the structural adjustment from a paid to a volunteer initiative contributed to lower morale among mentors and higher mentor dropout rates from the Programme. The COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on academic activities worldwide, also affected the Programme.

### The impact of COVID-19 on the Programme

In December 2019, the first COVID-19 cases were identified in Wuhan, China, and soon resulted in a global pandemic, infecting and affecting people across nations (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The measures taken to mitigate the spread of infection resulted in mandatory social isolation practices among mentors and mentees participating in the Programme. Consequently, the Programme moved from face-to-face interaction to utilising online and social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Zoom. Emergency remote teaching was a priority, necessitating the reallocation of university funds to facilitate the speedy transition to online learning and teaching. Due to slow institutional processes, mentors were forced to use their cell phone data to support their mentees during the early stages of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Mentors' dissatisfaction started manifesting through complaints and dropping out of the Programme due to various issues, such as insufficient cell phone data, no stipends, and perceived injustice. The COVID-19 lockdown also frustrated the mentors' need to connect physically with their mentees and peers (Phillips et al., 2022). Consequently, their senses of community, belonging and acceptance were negatively affected. Although they were recruited as volunteers, some mentors were dissatisfied with the limited compensation for their services. Their dissatisfaction stemmed from a perceived injustice in tutoring being a paid peer-to-peer service, whereas their work was rendered voluntary only, and a belief that the Programme needed to be better understood. As the COVID-19 social isolation began to ease, some mentors became dissatisfied with the lack of identifying attire, which signified a loss of personal and group identity.

The COVID-19 restrictions also prohibited mentors from accompanying their mentees to their respective industries as part of their career development. Similarly, changing the year-end certificate ceremony to a virtual event impacted the mentors' need for social interaction and validation. The combined changes contributed to mentors' dissatisfaction, low morale and dropout. Hence, restabilising the disrupted Programme was essential to retaining mentors and meeting the specified goals and targets. Measures were taken to manage these changes and create a more positive volunteer experience. The measures included improved communication with mentors, consistent communication regarding the Programme's funding limitations and the benefits of peer mentoring and increased reach.

### The present study

Before the Programme's remuneration structure changed, mentors would drop out for better economic opportunities (e.g. working as a tutor at the UoTSA or taking up formal employment elsewhere). The sense of unfairness that emerged among some mentors about working as volunteers whilst tutors were paid highlighted their political awareness.

Those mentors regarded volunteering as free labour and a practice perpetuating structural inequality among varying peer supporters at the UoTSA.

Mentors' unhappiness called for reflection on the view of student volunteering as inherently noble and good, albeit preparing them for work and civil engagement, while enhancing their personal development and well-being (Joseph & Carolissen, 2019). Hawksley and Georgeou (2019) argue that volunteering supports sections of the economy that are socially vital but too costly to operate at market rates. They suggest that volunteer peer mentors fill gaps and contribute to reducing expenses in higher education (HE) services by providing low-cost or free labour. The authors argue that this practice could encourage normalisation of apolitical volunteering, which doesn't address the root causes of societal inequality. Consequently, these scholars' argument raises questions about volunteer peer mentors in the HE sector.

Nevertheless, individuals' motivations to volunteer are complex and multifaceted. Scholars (see Grönlund et al., 2011; Joseph & Carolissen, 2019; Patel et al., 2007) warned against presuming individuals' motives to volunteer without considering their unique contexts since various factors influence volunteer behaviour, such as a country's socio-political-economic context, religious and related values, and collectivistic versus individualistic cultural backgrounds.

Against this background, the researcher did a literature exploration on the academic search engine Google Scholar using keywords (e.g. 'Clary's functional approach', 'HE', 'student volunteerism', 'Africa') that yielded approximately 3 430 results. The search was then refined by systematically searching various databases (e.g. Ebscohost, Taylor and Francis, JStor). The researcher found only a few South African studies on student volunteerism that utilised Clary et al.'s (1992) framework (Joseph & Carolissen, 2019; Patel et al., 2007; Van den Berg et al., 2015). The researcher found no study on peer mentor volunteerism in South African HE. Hayman et al. (2022) argued that although peer mentorship programmes in HE have been researched, the peer mentor perspective has been neglected. Similarly, McConney and Fourie-Malherbe (2022) call for more research centring the peer mentor perspective in South African HE.

The present study aimed to enhance the Programme custodians' understanding of student motives for volunteering in the Programme at UoTSA and promote sustained participation in mentoring activities. The study was guided by the following question:

> What motivates students to volunteer as peer mentors in the UoTSA Programme?

The study's theoretical framework, literature review and methodological approach are presented next, followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings. The article concludes by recommending strategies and interventions for practice, highlighting limitations and suggesting avenues for further research.

## Theoretical framework and literature review

This section discusses theoretical aspects relevant to the qualitative study reported on. Findings are also presented from the literature review on volunteer motivations within Clary et al.'s (1992) framework; concluding with a summary of the empirical findings.

## Theoretical framework

The functional approach in psychology provided a lens for uncovering student motivations behind their decisions to volunteer in the Programme (Clary et al., 1992). Proponents of the functional approach argue that reasons for volunteering are complex, dynamic, and context-specific (Clary et al., 1992). The functional approach revolves around five assumptions, namely:

1. Individuals engage in volunteer work to meet important personal and social goals;
2. Individuals participating in the same volunteer activity in a specific context may have vastly different motivations for volunteering;
3. People could attempt to address or satisfy two or more personal needs through volunteering,
4. Motivations are malleable, and tend to change over time; and
5. Successful volunteer recruitment, satisfaction, and retention correlate positively with the capacity of the volunteer experience to fulfil volunteers' important motives or needs.

Volunteering fulfils several psychological needs, including expressing humanitarian and altruistic values, gaining knowledge and skills, and promoting personal growth and self-development (Clary et al., 1992). It provides career-related experience, strengthens social relationships, and offers a means to manage individual issues and mitigate negative emotions, thereby enhancing overall well-being (Chacón et al., 2017; Clary et al., 1992).

Understanding the motivational needs of peer mentors at UoTSA from Clary et al.'s (1992) perspective can offer valuable insights into effectively addressing these needs. By doing so, the Programme can create a more supportive learning environment for first-year students, ultimately contributing to the overall success of HE in South Africa.

## Literature review

South Africa has a rich history of volunteering that promotes citizenship and civic responsibility (Patel et al., 2007). Volunteering is regarded as serving others without receiving significant financial recompense (Joseph & Carolissen, 2019). The altruistic value of wanting to help others is recognised as a critical motivator for volunteering (Chacón et al., 2017; Gage & Thapa, 2011; Grönlund et al., 2011). Altruism is motivated by humanistic values and involves self-initiated and self-sacrificing helping behaviour without concern for external reward (e.g. remuneration, praise) (Phillips & Phillips, 2011).

Maslow (Green, 2000) proposes five categories of motivational needs that are satisfied sequentially. In ascending order, the categories are (1) physiological, (2) safety and security, (3) love and belonging, (4) esteem and (5) self-realisation. The categories are divided into lower-order or deficiency needs (physiological, safety, love and belonging) and higher-order or growth needs (esteem, intellectual, creative, artistic) (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). Maslow's (Green, 2000) earliest work suggests that a lower-order need must be fulfilled entirely before a higher-order need can be satisfied. He later acknowledges that need satisfaction is not absolute (Rojas et al., 2023). Individuals can progress to satisfying higher-order needs once lower-order needs are partially fulfilled.

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Mawere et al. (2016) maintain that human motivation in Africa comprises four aspects, namely (1) seeking out connections, (2) the community's strengthening, (3) recognition of authority, and (4) speaking up and avoiding embarrassment. Disinterest develops when these motivations are not satisfied. Common to motivation and volunteering in Africa is the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Within *ubuntu*, all interactions are orientated towards the common ground or helping to create a better life for all (Mawere et al., 2016; Patel et al., 2007).

A cross-cultural study of student volunteer activities throughout North America, Europe, the Middle East, and the South Pacific region indicated that altruism was the most important motivator for student volunteers, followed by a need to increase their knowledge and skills to enhance their employability (Grönlund et al., 2011). Van den Berg et al. (2015) conducted a study to compare the motives and constraints of South African and Australian sports students who engaged in voluntary activities. The findings revealed that participants from both countries agreed on the importance of learning and developing skills and helping others (Van den Berg et al., 2015). Patel et al. (2007) conducted a study in Africa and found that volunteering adolescents were motivated to develop knowledge, improve their skills, and gain work experience and possibilities. According to Chacón et al. (2017), self-enhancement and professional advancement are the least essential motives for volunteering worldwide. However, volunteers under 40 place a higher value on job advancement and learning new skills (Chacón et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Hawksley and Georgiou (2019) argue that under neoliberalism, where individual behaviour is seen as a mere cost-benefit analysis, even volunteer work has become commodified. Higher education specifically has also been impacted, with sharp declines in government funding of the sector seen worldwide. Consequently, universities have had to manage their operations more businesslike and entrepreneurially (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). This is exemplary of how market ideology has pervaded all facets of life, from human rights to university administration to social justice to the individualisation of culture and the prioritization of individual and economic growth at the expense of others and the environment.

In summary, the empirical literature findings reported above indicate that volunteering is often driven by altruism, where individuals help others without expecting financial reward, a humanistic value. Cross-cultural studies highlight that altruism and the desire to gain knowledge, and skills are critical motivators for volunteering, particularly among younger volunteers who value job advancement and skill development. Scholars also call attention to how neoliberalism undermines higher education's social contract by reducing the sector's operations to transactional cost-benefit anaylses whereby market logic and humanistic value, volunteerism and social justice are forced into uneasy coexistence.

## Method

An exploratory qualitative research design was adapted to conduct the study. The qualitative study design allows the researcher to engage with participants and develop a nuanced understanding of their subjective realities (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of this study, which entailed developing an understanding of the motivational and psychological needs of student mentors, can be studied through an interactive methodology.

## Study context, population and sample

The study was conducted at a UoTSA, a public university that enrols approximately 20 000 students annually (UoTSA University Capacity Development Programme 2024 – 2026 Funding proposal, 2024). Of these, approximately 5 000 to 6 000 are first-year students. The university's composition is representative of the broader South African population in terms of demographics.

The study population constituted 97 senior students who were appointed as peer mentors. The study sample comprised eight criterion-based, purposively selected mentors. To ascertain experience with the different programme structures (e.g. incentivised and volunteer), mentors had to have worked in the Programme for at least two years to be included in the study (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Eight mentors (six males and two females between the ages of 20 and 24 years) who volunteered to participate comprised the sample. Hennink et al.'s (2019) saturation parameters (the study purpose, type of codes, group stratification, and desired type and degree of saturation) for focus group studies were utilised to estimate the number of sessions. In the case of the current study, this amounted to two.

## Data collection

The researcher examined the Programme from 2020 to early 2023 (Kleinheksel et al., 2020) within Clary et al.'s (1992) framework. The examination aimed to develop insight into (i) Programme implementation, (ii) the mentors' service level agreement, (iii) critical Programme decisions that bear on the mentors, and (iv) developing a use case to better understand volunteer peer mentors' motivations and experiences. Additionally, two focus groups were conducted with the participants to explore their motivations for volunteering. The participants consented to the focus group being audio recorded before data collection commenced. Microsoft Teams was utilised to conduct the 60-minute focus groups. The researcher transformed the recorded data into text using the Microsoft Word transcription tool. The accuracy of the transcriptions was confirmed by comparing the transcribed texts whilst listening to the recordings.

## Data analysis

The qualitative content analysis method aided data analysis of the focus group data and allowed for consideration of both the participants and the context. A basic assumption is that the technique can uncover valuable information about a phenomenon, like volunteer motivations, through systematic descriptions of the meaning thereof (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Schreier, 2012). Qualitative content analysis "is done by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame" (Schreier, 2012, p. 1). The texts were organised into related categories to find similarities and differences, patterns, and linkages, both on the surface and implicitly (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). Clary et al.'s (1992) framework guided the data analysis and the data organisational processes. The study's trustworthiness was enhanced by triangulating multiple data sources for richer analysis and interpretation. Ongoing engagement with the data until no new meanings emerged

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further strengthened the trustworthiness (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). The researcher kept a journal to record assumptions, biases, and decisions while reflecting on the process.

### Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the research ethics committee of UoTSA (CREC 24/08/2021-001). All participants provided informed consent, and the study was conducted in line with internationally and nationally accepted ethical norms. The participants agreed to keep the personal information shared by others confidential.

## Findings and discussion

This section presents the main findings after examining the Programme using Clary et al.'s (1992) framework. The main themes identified from the focus group data analysis are then presented, namely enhancement, value and understanding. Lastly, the findings are discussed in an integrated way.

### Peer mentorship programme

Examining the Programme within Clary et al.'s (1992) framework allowed for uncovering the critical functional elements and challenges. Table 1 presents an outline of the critical Programme elements for satisfying the mentors' motivational needs (Clary et al., 1992).

Table 1 shows that the Programme can fulfil the motivational needs of volunteer peer mentors. Altruistic helping behaviour is typically self-initiated and undertaken without expectation of external reward (Phillip & Phillip, 2011). The Programme's changed remuneration structure suggests that volunteer mentoring was not self-initiated and that not all students who applied to mentor first-year students had strong altruistic needs. Altruism is generally considered "the most obvious motive for acting for the common good" (Phillips & Phillips, 2011, p. 25). Self-service or egoism is central to rational economic decision-making and contradicts selfless behaviour or altruism. The tension between egoistic and altruistic needs could have motivated some applicants to the Programme to disguise egoism as altruism during the recruitment and selection processes. This dynamic underscores the need for intentionally recruiting and selecting peer mentors with specific characteristics (Clary et al., 1992; McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2022). The focus group study findings are presented next.

**Table 1. Functional elements of the Programme (Clary et al., 1992)**

| Value function | Knowledge function | Esteem function | Social function | Career function |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Complex interactions between the various psychological functions* | | | | |
| Senior students applied to participate in the Programme.<br><br>The applicants expressed a need to assist others. | The mentors gained increased knowledge through ongoing training sessions.<br><br>The mentors developed their skills by providing psychosocial support to mentees. | The mentors received feedback from their mentees.<br><br>The programme coordinator provided feedback on the mentors' practices. | The mentors established and nurtured their relationships with mentees. | The mentors developed skills by supporting their mentees.<br><br>Some mentors and mentees undertook career development projects and industry visits. |
| | The programme coordinator provided feedback on the mentors' work with mentees.<br><br>Some mentors and mentees undertook career development projects and industry visits. | The mentors assisted with student life events external to the Programme.<br><br>The mentors were acknowledged for their service and contribution at the year-end certificate ceremony. | The mentors networked with their peers and other stakeholders, such as faculty and industry. | The programme coordinator serves as a referee in mentors' curriculum vitae.<br><br>The mentors were acknowledged for their service and contribution by receiving a year-end certificate of achievement. |

### Focus group study

The enhancement function was the most important motivator for the participants who volunteered at the UoTSA, followed by the value, understanding, career, and social functions (in that order). The participants regarded the protective function as unimportant, consistent with global and local research on volunteer motivation (Clary et al., 1992; Van den Berg et al., 2015). The participants' strongest motivators, enhancement, value and understanding, are now presented.

#### *The enhancement function*

The esteem enhancement function as the most important motivator for the UoTSA participants contradicts global research findings on volunteering, including studies on South African student volunteers (Chacón et al., 2017; Gage & Thapa, 2011; Grönlund et al., 2011; Van den Berg et al., 2015). This finding emphasised the participants' need for respect and appreciation. Esteem needs are fulfilled when volunteers participate in activities that make them feel important, wanted, and good about themselves (Clary et

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al., 1992). Maslow (Green, 2000) holds that esteem comprises both lower and higher needs. Respect, acknowledgement, and appreciation from others, as well as status and dignity, satisfy lower self-esteem needs.

On the contrary, feelings of confidence, competence, adequacy, achievement, mastery, independence, and freedom satisfy higher-esteem needs. The analysis revealed that the participants' lower esteem needs were unmet. The lack manifested when Participant 8 said, "*[A]s we communicate with our lecturers, some of them tend to tell us that 'I see you as a student*'". Not being recognised by lecturers was interpreted as undervaluing the mentor role, suggesting an implicit loss of role status and self-worth. Likewise, Participant 3 indicated, "*It would have been nice to be appreciated by the institution, [for them] to see how we help the first-year students, to see our work.*" A perceived lack of appreciation for the function of mentors is obvious. Lecturers or the institution's non-recognition of the peer mentor role contradicts Mawere et al.'s (2016) view of community building as essential to Africans' motivation. The participants' unsatisfied lower esteem needs may have contributed to unhappiness, discouragement, and inferiority, which could have manifested as low morale, disinterest and dropout. However, the satisfaction of higher esteem needs was apparent when Participant 1 said: "*... if [first-year students] can trust me now to be their mentor, then it is an amazing feeling. I feel good about myself. I feel good about the things that I can do.*" Likewise, Participant 8 held that "… *volunteerism is something that helped me … [with] self-confidence, uplifting my self-esteem [and] my life satisfaction […]*."

Satisfaction of the participants' higher esteem needs may have resulted in feelings of self-worth, worthiness, strength, capability, and being valuable and necessary in the world (Maslow, 1943, as cited in Green, 2000). Higher needs fulfilment generated a sense of confidence, competence and self-respect in most participants. Self-respect is regarded as a healthy ego state or identity because it is more difficult to lose than to lose esteem from others (Boeree, 2006; Green, 2000). Meeting the participants' higher esteem needs influenced their willingness to keep volunteering despite the challenging programme conditions and discouraging experiences at the UoTSA.

### *The value function*

The second most important function for most participants was the value or altruistic function, which was consistent with the findings of Van den Berg et al. (2015). Participant 2 said, "*I just love helping. I just love being there for others. I just love seeing others prosper in whatever they do*", demonstrating concern for first-year students. However, others, like Participant 5, held different views:

> *I knew from the start that we were volunteering, but I did expect we would get a little bit of something to support ourselves. I had a kind of expectation [regarding] finances because previous mentors told us there is a certain [amount of] money.*

Similarly, Participant 2 stated that mentors' desire for stipends increased because they knew "*Friends and cousins at other universities are getting stipends and all those things, so they are no longer into volunteering [..]. It is very concerning.*" These views reflected the participants' normative tension about volunteering as mentors (Clary et al., 1992). In a market world, money is a valued commodity, and work is not for free. Therefore, "the price of something or someone's efforts is a proof of value, [which] is expressed in money" (Kampen et al., 2019, p. 994). Hence, volunteering in a market world has reduced the value of the mentor role at the UoTSA, implying a loss of role status or prestige and self-worth.

Moreover, scholars argue that volunteer motivations based on esteem, understanding, career, and social functions are egoistic (Clary et al., 1992; Van den Berg et al., 2015). They contend that egoistic reasons drive volunteers to enhance their psychological self, increase their knowledge and skills, and enrich their experiences and CVs. As a result, participants may have been motivated to volunteer by egoistic reasons. Nevertheless, because people are complex creatures, altruistic and egoistic motivations for volunteering are often not mutually exclusive (Van den Berg et al., 2015). Participant 3 demonstrated this coexistence of such seemingly contradictory motivations: "*When you get into the Programme, you already know that you are doing it for free, doing it voluntarily, doing it for others, and you are doing it for yourself.*"

Furthermore, there were indications that most participants' perspectives on volunteering may have changed. Participant 5 mentioned, "*You do not always get what you wish for, but you sometimes get enough of what you want to get out of whatever you do.*" This statement underscored that sufficient need satisfaction was required to continue volunteer behaviour (Clary et al., 1992). Kampen et al. (2019, p. 1001) regard volunteer actions as a spontaneous and internalised feeling of passion, suggesting that inspired volunteer actions are motivated by "a desire to create, and certainly not by money".

### *The understanding function*

Participant 5 demonstrated that the understanding function is the third most important motivator for participants, stating that being a mentor "*gave us nice networking skills and experience*". Similarly, Participant 2 mentioned, "*I wanted to get better communication skills and some other skills, and I improved a lot.*" The understanding function contrasts with the findings of previous studies on African youth and student volunteers, where the understanding function is regarded as the strongest motivator for volunteering (Patel et al., 2007; Van den Berg et al., 2015). In South Africa, where youth unemployment is higher than the national average and economic opportunity is limited, skills development and gaining experience are promoted to enhance employability (Dhliwayo, 2023). This difference is of interest and calls for further investigation.

## Discussion

The functional elements of the Programme that contributed to the satisfaction of the participants' motivational and psychological needs were identified. Examining the Programme's design elements uncovered greater emphasis on the knowledge and career functions and less on the value or altruistic function (Clary et al., 1992). Tension between differing values (e.g. altruism versus egoism) was indicated. The focus group results indicated that self-enhancement or esteem was the strongest motivator for the participants, followed

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by value expression or altruism and a desire to increase their knowledge and skills. The motivators reported by the participants contradict the findings of global and local research studies on student volunteering.

Global self-esteem is an individual's overall feeling of personal worth (Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Social self-esteem is a dimension of global self-esteem derived from how individuals perceive themselves concerning other people and incorporate those views into their self-concept (Terblanche et al., 2020). The way peer mentors are handled by lecturers, or how contextual factors impact their self-worth, is significant. Therefore, paying attention to mentor-lecturer interactions is necessary to promote mentors' self-esteem and sustained mentoring activities. Similarly, it is crucial to consider the influence of contextual factors (e.g. market-driven ideologies, structural disposition of the Programme and institutional expectation of altruistic behaviour) on mentors' self-worth.

Another important finding was that despite the challenging programme conditions, the volunteer peer mentor experience strengthened most participants' healthy ego functioning, as evidenced by their insights, readiness to adopt new ideas, acceptance of change, compassion for their mentees, self-directedness, purpose, increased agency and self-esteem. Needs fulfilment culminates into self-realisation, inner potential, growth and meaning (Maslow, 1943, as cited in Green, 2000). Seeking meaning is essential to identity development processes (Van der Walt, 2019). The participants' healthy ego functioning, or identity, contributed to a meaningful peer mentor experience. Meeting most participants' motivational needs could have been critical to their continued volunteering efforts. Mentor needs should therefore be considered when recruiting, selecting, and designing mentorship programmes and remuneration structures.

These findings serve as a basis for developing strategies and interventions that can be implemented in similar programmes and universities. To encourage sustained mentoring efforts, student affairs practitioners may consider the following recommendations:

- Increase advocacy for the Programme by developing focused marketing strategies that require faculty, mentors and first-year students to understand the Programme's goals and benefits better.
- During the recruitment and implementation stages, highlight aspects of the Programme designed to meet mentors' motivational and psychological needs. Intentionally select mentors to enhance the Programme goals (Clary et al., 1992; McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2022).
- Meet the mentors' need for incentives and rewards (both symbolic and material) per the Programme goals and develop an affordable incentive and reward structure based on their needs (e.g. data contracts, identifying attire, mentor of the year award, and monetary incentives throughout the service period). Appreciation letters from faculty, programme heads and first-year students may also be considered incentives.
- Interventions should be developed to enhance peer mentor purpose and meaning in life, which may indirectly strengthen their ego and aid identity development and perseverance (Van der Walt, 2019).

### *Limitations and future directions*

There were some limitations to the current data. From the viewpoint of a single university, the results offer a partial understanding of student motivators for volunteering as peer mentors. Different qualitative conclusions could have been reached if the study sample had included volunteer peer mentors who had left the Programme. The Programme coordinator assisted with the fieldwork, which could have unintentionally influenced the participants' responses, for example, by introducing social desirability bias and the study participants giving more socially acceptable responses than their true beliefs or actions.

Mawere et al. (2016) critiqued the application of Maslow's Western-centric theory in some African contexts based on contrasting motivational ideologies (e.g. individualistic versus collectivistic cultures). The applicability of Maslow's theory to student populations at UoTSA needs further investigation. Contextual factors (e.g. neoliberalism, market ideology, university as a market, social justice, socio-economic development, and advancement) were not explored and could have impacted students' ideological motivations and volunteer behaviour. A study exploring the motivational ideologies of contemporary HE students has the potential to contextualise their views on volunteerism further.

## Conclusion

This study offered insights into student motivations in volunteering as peer mentors in the Programme at UoTSA and promoting sustained participation in mentoring activities. The strongest motivators were enhancing esteem, value expression, and desire to develop knowledge and skills. The participants' sustained mentoring efforts were encouraged by the partial fulfilment of their motivational needs, growth, self-worth, and finding meaning as volunteer peer mentors.

The complexity of peer mentorship programmes, mentors' needs, and the influence of context on mentor behaviours and programme implementation in a market-driven world were highlighted. The findings can serve as a beacon for enhancing peer mentorship programme design, marketing, selection, engagement and reward strategies across various university landscapes. Meeting peer mentors' needs – either altruistic, egoistic or both – can result in increased efforts and benefits not only for them as volunteers but also for first-year students and the university itself. Therefore, student affairs practitioners should assist peer mentors in developing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, ego strength, and identity to persevere, grow, and find purpose and meaning in circumstances of plenty or scarcity.

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**Ethics statement**

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**Potential conflict of interests**
There is no known conflict of interests for the author to declare.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The role of residence advisors in student academic advice and success: Insights and experiences from a university of technology

## Basa rinoitwa nevachengeti vevana kukurudzira dzidzo: Nzwisiso nezviitiko kubva yunivhesiti etekinoroji

Isheachida Manatsa[1] & Mzwandile Khumalo[2]

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## ABSTRACT

The traditional role of student accommodation has evolved significantly in recent years, transforming from simple housing to dynamic Living and Learning Communities (LLCs) that foster both personal and academic growth. As more institutions are housing their own students, these spaces have become central to the university experience. To advance student success, continuous enhancements in academic support services and interventions have been introduced within higher education institutions (HEIs). Initiatives like academic advising increasingly emphasise an interconnected approach, acknowledging the significant impact of out-of-class learning environments on student accomplishments. However, there is limited research on the connectedness between LLCs and student support, particularly academic advising. Informed by the validation theory, this study sought to explore the connectedness of LLCs to academic advising with a specific focus on the contributions of residence advisors (RAs). Thirteen (n=13) RAs from the Durban University of Technology responded to an online open-ended questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Data indicated that the RAs functioned as a primary point of contact for students experiencing psychosocial problems affecting their academic work. They also performed vital roles offering academic guidance and counselling, significantly influencing the academic progress of students residing at respective facilities. However, the RAs had received minimal or no formal training on academic advising. The study recommends that RAs get training in academic advising for improved efficacy of their critical role on student support and success in HEIs.

## KEYWORDS

*Student housing, academic advising, residence advisor*

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**NHANGA NYAYA**

Basa repano gara vadzidzi rashanduka zvakanyanya mumakore apfuura, kushanduka kubva padzimba dzeku rara kuita dzimba dzino kurudzira magariro akanaka nekukura kwemunhu mudzidzo. Nekuda kwaizvozvo nzvimbo dzedzidzo dzakuita dzichipa vadzidzi vadzo vose peku gara panzvimbo imwe izvi zvinova zvaka kosha kuma yunivhesiti. Kuti chinhanho ichi chive chino endeka, masevhisi ano fambisa mberi kubudirira kwevadzidzi pamwe neku simudzira matanho ano tsigira dzidzo akuita achi kurudzirwa mumasangano edzidzo epamusoro. Matanho akaita sekupa mazano edzidzo, ari kuwedzera kushandiswa achipa simbiso yekuva nehu shandira pamwe achi tondera kukosha kwezvimwe zvifundo zvisinga itikire mukirasi izvo zvino simudzira vadzidzi. Nekudaro, tsvakiridzo ishoma yaka nangana nehu kama hwuri pakati kwenzvimbo dzino gara vafundi pamwe rutsigiro runo pihwa vadzidzi nekurairwa kwedzidzo runo itika panzvimbo idzi dzavano gara. Tichiziviswa nevalidation theory, chidzidzo ichi chakatsvaka hukama hunga wanikwa wepano gara vadzidzi neru tsigiro hwedzidzo runo itwa nema Residence Advisors (RAs). MaResidence Advisors ano svika gumi nenhatu (n=13), vekuDurban University of Technology vakapindura mibvunzo kuburikidza neGoogle Forms. Zivo yakaratidza kuti maRA ndo vano nyanyo kutanga kuwonekwa nevadzidzi vane matambudziko, anokanganisa dzidzo. Pamusoro pazvo maRA aka wonekwa kuti vane basa rakakosha rwekupa mazano anobatsira zvakanyanya vafundi kuti vawane kufambira mberi muzvidzidzo. Zvisineyi hazvo, zvakaonekwa kuti maRA ayinge asina kupihwa dzidzo kana ruzivo rwaka kwana kuti tsika yekupa mazano muzvidzidzo ino fambiswa sei pa univhesiti. Chidzidzo ichi chinokurudzira kuti maunivhesiti ave anopa maRA dzidzo yekuti vanopa mazano edzidzo sei kuva dzidzi vavanenge vaka pihwa kuti vagare navo. Izvi zvichi ita kuti basa ravo rive raka vandudzika pakupa parutsigiro kuvadzidzi nekubudirira muzvikoro zvedzidzo yepamusoro.

**MAZWI AKAKOSHA**

*Imba yevadzidzi, kuraira kwedzidzo, chipangamazano wemugari*

## Introduction

The massification of South African higher education institutions (HEIs) has been both a social justice issue and a notable milestone. A multitude of endeavours has been initiated to augment the massification and academic performance of South African students underprepared for tertiary education (Hugo, 2021). Significantly, a proportion of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) student body hail from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds characterised by inadequate educational resources, limited economic means, and multifaceted social challenges, adversely affecting their readiness for university life and subsequent academic performance (Pather et al., 2020; Pirthiraj, 2017). As a result, progressive academic performance initiatives that embrace a holistic and interrelated paradigm, acknowledging the central significance attributed to formal and informal extracurricular learning settings, are key in shaping student achievement. The dearth of research on the connectedness of academic advising (AA) and LLCs prompted the present study (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). The study sought to explore the link between LLCs and academic advising, specifically focusing on the contributions of residence advisors (RAs). The study conforms with the institutional Siyaphumelela ('We succeed') Project whose mandate is improving South African university models to ensure student success using data analytics. The undertaking is a response to the DUT's Envision 2030 systems and processes pillar whose goal is the development of state-of-the-art infrastructure, providing contemporary work, learning and living spaces for its students in university owned, leased and privately owned accommodation in Durban.

Over the years what constitutes student housing has evolved from merely being a place where students sleep and reside. Student housing is a living and learning space, serving the dual purpose of integrating living arrangements with learning goals (Fields, 2011). Student housing, staff accommodation and other support facilities have been found to be directly and indirectly pertinent to fostering a successful living and learning environment (Abdullahi & Wan Yusoff, 2018; Abisuga et al., 2019; Gruber et al., 2010). Focusing on expectation and satisfaction, the positive impact of quality student accommodation has been documented in several studies (Amole, 2009; Cross et al., 2009; Hassanain, 2008; Nimako & Bondinuba, 2013; Oke et al., 2017; Simpeh et al., 2018). Considering this, Simpeh et al. (2018) identified LLCs as playing an important role towards the provision of quality higher education in HEIs. Groenewald (2017); Kerr and Tweedy (2006); and Wawrzynski et al. (2012) connected informal interactions and co-curricular activities within LLCs as significant contributors to student development and learning.

Navarez (2017) reiterated that quality education expands beyond classroom experience but extends to student interaction with housing accommodation. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) commented that constructive interactions between students and faculty outside of the classroom, particularly within residences, had a positive impact on student retention. Sheehan (2012) maintained that residence heads, also known as RAs, played a key part in promoting student achievement in out-of-class environments. Similarly, Van Schalkwyk et al. (2012) observed a positive impact resulting from RAs providing out-of-class support to first-year students residing in Stellenbosch University residences. Kuh (2011) pointed out that RAs dedicate a considerable amount of time engaging students in co-curricular and out-of-class environments, affording them a diverse range of experiences and opportunities to address various factors that can facilitate or hinder student attainment and participation. In addition, Navarez (2017) explained that RAs provide support for students' academic, personal, social, professional development, and make referrals to campus resources and services.

In short, RAs play roles similar to that of academic advising. AA responsibilities include curriculum guidance, advice on academic matters, facilitating seamless integration into the educational institution, providing guidance on programme selection, conducting orientation programmes, offering elements of mentorship, collaborating with various institutional support services, providing psychological support, fostering engagement with both academic faculty and administrative personnel (Hawthorne et al., 2022). AA within the DUT is conceptualized as a mechanism for supporting students throughout their academic journey, emphasising an integrative approach to their development. Academic advising seeks to support students and ensure overall success. Additionally, academic advisors assist students who are struggling to find the best ways to proceed to their end

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goals and those failing to adapt to university life (Antoney, 2020). Similarly, Wyner (2021) states that AAs help students stay academically engaged thus promoting persistence to eventually graduate. In this regard, RAs serve multiple roles that are directly related to the objectives of student affairs and university housing in which they are employed (Harris, 2021; Wyner, 2021). As such the Department of Higher Education and Training (2011) mentioned LLCs as strategic tools to promote student success and create sustainable living and learning environments (Xulu-Gama, 2019).

As the number of students attending universities has increased significantly, so has the number being housed by HEIs. Hence, there is a pressing need to understand the experiences of residence advisors (RAs) and their impact on student success outside the campus environment. According to the Statista Research Department (2023), South Africa's gross tertiary enrolment ratio has risen by 0.4% since 2019, reaching a peak of 24.24% in 2020. This massification has caused student support resource systems like student housing and residence life, critical components of university systems, to continuously transform and develop. For example, at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), the pressure has been felt as the number of students seeking accommodation soared to an estimated 14 000 in 2023. Therefore, this study is both timely and necessary as it aims to document the experiences of RAs in providing academic advising, as well as outline the future role of RAs in the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) within the broader context of the Envision 2030 framework. To assist students, Kanyumba and Shabangu (2021) recommend that higher learning institutions upskill their staff in this post-pandemic era.

## Theoretical framework

The validation theory is useful in understanding the role of RAs in university residences. This theory posits that RAs are typically responsible for creating a supportive and inclusive living environment for students and its principles of validation are instrumental. Rendon (1994) explained that the validation theory is enabling, confirming that support processes initiated by in-class and out-of-class agents foster academic and personal development. Rendon (1994) proposed two types of validation offered by the in-class and out-of-class agents namely (1) academic and (2) personal endorsement in achieving academic success amongst students. The present discourse expounds on a conceptual framework comprising six core elements related to the validation process in student development (see Rendon, 1994).

1. Residence advisors (RAs) are responsible for initiating contact with students and offering institutional support within the confines of LLCs.
2. The significance of self-worth and feeling competent, engendered through validation.
3. The importance of constant validation by RAs as a catalyst for growth in students residing in LLCs.
4. Continuous validation in both in-class and out-of-class contexts.
5. Validation is an ongoing developmental process that unfolds over time and facilitates a multifaceted student experience.

6. The profound impact of early validation during the transition phase into higher education on student personality development.

## Research methods

This study utilised a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of residence advisors (RAs) in DUT LLCs. 40 open ended questionnaires were sent to the Outlook email addresses of the RAs. Thirteen (n=13) completed questionnaires were submitted. The data were analysed using thematic analysis; the findings are presented next in this article. The study aimed to gain insight into RA experiences in academic advising through a qualitative lens, which Bezuidenhout et al. (2014) advocate in exploring the depth of human experience and arbitrary interpretations associated with specific incidents. The study involved participants from diverse fields of study employed by the Housing and Residence Life Unit of the DUT.

## Findings

This section outlines the thematic findings derived from the open-ended questionnaires. The analysis encompasses six key themes: (1) current experiences, (2) experiences in academic advising, (3) challenges in providing academic advising, (4) RA capacity in providing academic advice, (5) the importance of RA academic advising proficiency, and (6) resources RAs need to provide academic support.

### Theme 1: Current experiences

This theme, drawn from data collected in April 2023, provided insight into the general experiences of being a residence advisor at DUT residences. The participants shared the high points and difficulties of the job, the value of preparation, and the necessity of providing students with both academic and personal assistance. The participants recognised that the RA position came with some psychological complications. Challenges experienced in respective residences revolved around the issue of infrastructure and student wellness. The participants' experiences were reflected in the following statements:

> P1: "*… stressful. Always solving problems because the students come to you for everything.*"

> P2: "*… moderately challenging, with most of the issues based on maintenance and illness of the students.*"

> P4: "*… I have managed to deal with all issues generally well. However, maintenance of my Res has been a priority struggle. I have dedicated most of my time at Res at resolving these issues with the support of my landlord …*"

> P11: "*I am having issue with maintenance in the res. Roommates' conflicts, but I managed to resolve.*"

A subset of the RAs conveyed a sense of gratification stemming from their involvement in the study, attributing it to their contribution to societal well-being. Notably, it was discovered that the participants derived enjoyment from these experiences, leading to personal growth in their cognitive capacities.

> P4: "*I have though implemented a few programmes that touched the students' heart[s], and I have set up a good network of student leaders at my Res to fulfil roles of HC, GCI, Insika and Qakaza; all leaders are working very well with me to support my students' needs and generally keep the peace at our home.*"

> P6: "*It has been both exciting and overwhelming. Exciting because you get to learn a lot about the students and yourself.*"

> P10: "*I connect well with my students ...*"

**Theme 2: Experiences in academic advising**

The primary objective of the enquiry was to ascertain whether RAs had provided academic support to students and to explore their corresponding experiences. The findings revealed that students actively sought academic consultation from the RAs. Indications by eight out of the thirteen RAs confirmed instances of students approaching them with the intention of seeking academic advice. Interviewees highlighted their experiences as academic advisors as a key area as evident from the excerpts:

> P1: "*I assisted the student with an assignment. The module was not in my field of expertise but I assisted with the technical part of the assignment.*"

> P4: "*Yes, it was an experience where I was confronted with a student struggling to meet workload demands. I engaged with the student at length in my office at Res ...*"

> P5: "*Yes some students ask to assist them with accounting.*"

> P11: "*Yes, and I referred the student to the Writing Centre.*"

It also emerged that some RAs were not sure what was meant by academic advising. This suggests that some RAs were helping students not knowing that what they were engaging in was classified as academic advising. One participant had this to say about their understanding:

> P6: "*I am not sure if it is academic advising, but I have discussed with students how best they can manage their time and how they can answer questions that require them to discuss or elaborate.*"

**Theme 3: Challenges in providing academic support**

The study recognised the challenges encountered by RAs in delivering academic support within their assigned residential areas. RAs were observed to adapt and employ improvised approaches to the provision of academic assistance, driven by their diverse areas of expertise. It was observed that most of the RAs were postgraduate students and qualified academics. However, the challenge stemmed from the fact that students in the halls of residence represented various fields of study. The allocation process by the housing department did not account for field of study when assigning residents to halls. The following excerpts shed more light on the issue:

> P1: "*Our expertise. We are allocated students who are in different field from ours*."
>
> P2: "*Sometimes I'm not aware of other course demands, sometimes it becomes difficult to provide academic advice …*"
>
> P6: "*I am not well equipped.*"
>
> P7: "*Not having full information on the requirements of each course.*"
>
> P8: *"Some issues may be general and easy to deal with, however, some issues require one to understand the course of interest so you can advise accordingly …*"
>
> P11: "*Lack of understanding other field/s of study.*"

**Theme 4: RA capacity in providing academic advice**

The issue of whether RAs were adequately equipped to offer academic advice within their assigned residences was examined and deliberated on. Participants expressed the belief that RAs were well-suited to provide academic guidance based on their academic achievements and experiences. The perception was that their notable academic achievements positioned them to offer some form of academic advising, given their expertise and knowledge in their respective fields. The sentiments are captured by the excerpts below:

> P1: "*Not in all aspects but to some extent yes, as RA are also qualified scholars. Therefore, they to some degree have an understanding of the academic environment.*"
>
> P4: "*Yes, if they get the required training because most of the RA's are senior postgraduate students.*"
>
> P5: "*Yes. If they have been students and lectures themselves then they can provide some degree of academic advantages.*"
>
> P10: "*Yes, most of them are studying towards their Masters and PhDs, therefore their seniority must be given back to the juniors.*"
>
> P11: "*Yes, they interact with students more than lecturers or academic departments.*"

**Theme 5: The importance of RA academic advising proficiency**

The participants unanimously recognised the significant value of RAs possessing knowledge and skills in academic advising. They expressed a shared sentiment that RAs held great importance in being reliable student counselling resources. It was acknowledged that students regarded RAs as their primary point of contact when encountering difficulties or challenges. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the need for RAs to be well-versed

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in academic advising to effectively support and assist students in navigating academic concerns. The participants shared their views:

> P1: "*It is crucial. A lot can be done in the residence instead of seeking help elsewhere.*"

> P2: "*Because students' believe in RAs, and they are tasked a monumental job to create a space that assist the students to excel academically.*"

> P8: "*It is highly important, as students really look up to RAs to provide useful guidance with every challenge they go through, and academic advising being the one that is at the top in an institution of higher learning.*"

> P14: "*Very important. Most often lecturer is limited in terms of time and they need to deliver on the academic program to numerous students but RAs on the other end have lot of time with students at Residences.*"

### Theme 6: Resources RAs need to provide academic support

The participants emphasised the necessity of university departments facilitating capacity development for RAs. Specifically, they highlighted the need for the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching to play a more active role in organising and conducting academic advising training workshops. Additionally, some participants expressed the requirement of essential resources like computers, whiteboards, and reading materials to enhance their capacity to provide effective academic support within their respective roles as RAs. These needs were underscored in the responses:

> P1: "*Computers, printers, internet access.*"

> P2: "*The residence advisor must be knowledgeable of other units within the university that can assist in supporting the students to excel academically such as CELT, library, computer labs etc.*"

> P3: "*We need Academic Development Workshop and Provision of relevant materials in order for us to be able to assist students.*"

> P10: "*RAs need guidance and support from CELT.*"

## Discussion

This study sought to explore the connectedness of LLCs to academic advising with a specific focus on the contributions of residence advisors (RAs). The DUT is fully dedicated to fostering a supportive LLC atmosphere for students despite some challenges that include maintenance issues and limited resources. In the context of this study, this commitment was conceptualized as a supportive educational environment that enhances student outcomes. Previously, university residences were primarily regarded as mere accommodation for students to reside, with the added benefit of proximity to campus. However, this perception has since evolved, now they are recognised as settings where students both live and engage in learning, facilitated by various programmes offered by the university. The Durban University of Technology (DUT), for example, has implemented numerous facilities to support students in their pursuit of academic success. These include flexible bus transportation, libraries, computer laboratories, leadership programmes, networking initiatives, and entrepreneurial programmes.

While RAs have traditionally been assigned by the university to ensure the maintenance of law and order within residences, other miscellaneous duties arise from the role (Kanyumba & Shabangu, 2021). The study perceived that the role of RAs had evolved as it also encompassed psychosocial and academic support. This was reflected in the testimonials provided by residence advisors (RAs) during data collection. The subject of academic advising on campus has been explored, whilst its off-campus counterpart has not, despite its critical role to student success. And there is where the impact of RAs on student success beyond campus life can be observed, specifically through their provision of academic advice, which surpasses the RA role in upholding institutional policies.

Due to their academic merit, RAs are responsible for offering institutional support within residences (Rendon, 1994). The study found that RAs at the DUT were required to at least hold a master's degree to qualify for the position; with some of the RAs being university staff and registered postgraduate students. Their level of education and work experience allowed RAs to share academic tips and services they used within the institution with the students under their care. This placed them in an ideal position to facilitate academic support programmes. However, a large number expressed doubts about the capacity of RAs to address the departmental academic requirements for each course, and this imposed limitations to their academic advice skills. Nonetheless the findings revealed that a majority of the participants believed that providing academic advising was part and parcel of RA responsibilities given their experiences.

Further revelations were that RAs served as the initial point of contact for students facing psychosocial and academic difficulties. Students often expected RAs to be able to solve any problem they encountered, including academic and other individual matters. The validation theory highlights that constant validation from RAs could be a catalyst for student growth (Rendon, 1994). Kanyumba and Shabangu (2021) found that first-year students look to their seniors for support and encouragement. Consequently, RAs are expected to possess a broad range of academic skills and psychosocial knowledge base, regardless of whether or not they specialize in their students' specific fields of study. This underscores the importance of re-evaluating and broadening the responsibilities of residence advisors (RAs) to promote inclusivity and amplify their influence in bolstering student support. It may also warrant considering the appointment of RAs whose qualifications align with the academic needs of the students residing in a particular residence.

Finally, the RAs viewed academic advising as a prescriptive task, suggesting that advisors possess a superior understanding of all aspects of student challenges. These data showed that RAs believed that they could execute the role of academic advising in their respective residences efficaciously. To carry out this role successfully at the DUT, Ras need to attend academic induction programmes hosted by staff development departments such as the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

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## Conclusion

The DUT has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to creating a sustainable living and learning environment for its students, with the aim of nurturing their academic success. Previously, university residences were primarily viewed as basic accommodation, but this perception has evolved over time within the context of the DUT. Residences are now acknowledged as essential factors in students' overall development, offering a wide range of programmes and human resources to support their academic aspirations. The present study centred on the role of residence advisors (RAs) in academic advising. Traditionally, RAs were primarily responsible for maintaining order and discipline within the residences, but over time, they have assumed additional roles, particularly in the provision of academic advice and support. Students residing in these accommodations now turn to RAs as trusted sources of assistance and guidance in their academic pursuits. In this regard they are enabling agents who foster academic and personal development (Rendon, 1994).

The roles of residence advisors (RAs) within university residences extend beyond the realm of maintaining order, as they play a fundamental role in the provision of guidance to students through their professional experience and academic qualifications. Many RAs at the DUT are concurrently employed by the university while pursuing postgraduate studies at either master's or PhD level. Given their dual roles and established networks, offering academic advice is a task well within their capabilities due to their wealth of experience. This exemplifies their potential to provide valuable academic guidance to students who may be at risk academically. Therefore, the influence of RAs on student development is indisputable. It is advisable to broaden the responsibilities and promote inclusivity and amplify RA impact in fortifying student support by offering them specialized training in academic advisory services.

It is imperative for relevant departments, including the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, to provide training to residence advisors (RAs) in the domain of student support and development. Although there are existing academic peer support advisors who collaborate with students on campus, RAs can also be empowered with the capacity to offer such skills. This is particularly advantageous since RAs spend a significant amount of time with students in university residences. Such an approach would establish an around-the-clock support system for students when they face academic challenges, thereby contributing to the enhancement of student retention and the reduction of attrition rates at DUT.

### Limitations and recommendations

The study recognises certain inherent limitations: notably, its confinement to the Durban University of Technology (DUT), which is one of four universities in KwaZulu-Natal. This limitation was largely due to the diverse institutional research ethics across different universities, which necessitated the selection of the DUT's Living and Learning Communities (LLCs) as the focus of the research. Insights from residence advisors (RAs) at other institutions could have provided valuable perspectives for comparative analysis. Based on these findings, two key recommendations are proposed: all incoming and current RAs in other institutions should (1) undergo academic induction and (2) participate in academic training programmes facilitated by the staff development units within their respective institutions before commencing duties.

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**Ethics statement**
The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Review (IREC) Reference number: Ethics Clearance Number: IREC 087/23.

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

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Can a sense of belonging influence institutional attachment among first-year university students? Assessing the moderated mediation effects of social and emotional adjustment

# Ingabe ukuzizwa wamukelekile kunemithelela ekunamatheleni ngokuthanda isikhungo sefundo kubafundi bomnyaka wokuthoma emayunivesithi? Ukuhlahluba imiphumela yemahluko phakathi kwamatjhebiswano wokuzamukela kanye namakghono wokusebenzisana kuhle nabanye

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment and the moderated mediated effects of social and emotional adjustment. The sample comprised 209 first-year university students from a South African university (mean age = 25.42 years; SD = 6.19 years). Using a quantitative research approach to enquiry, the multiple linear regression and moderated mediation analyses showed that sense of belonging significantly predicated institutional attachment. Additionally, the results showed that social adjustment partly and significantly mediated the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment. Furthermore, the results revealed that the moderated mediation effects of social and emotional adjustment in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment were statistically insignificant. The results suggest that sense of belonging is crucial for enabling institutional attachment to the university, underscoring the importance of striving for university environments that are belonging-centred to help first-year students identify with their learning contexts.

## KEYWORDS

*Emotional adjustment, first-year students, higher learning, institutional attachment, sense of belonging, social adjustment, university*

## IBUTHELELO

Isifundwesi siphenye ngetjhebiswano phakathi kokuzizwa wamukelekile kanye nokunamathela ngokuthanda isikhungo kanye nemiphumela yemahluko phakathi kwamatjhebiswano wokuzamukela kanye nokusebenzisana kuhle nabanye. Isampula esetjenzisiweko beyimumethe

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inani elima-209 labafundi bomnyaka wokuthoma eyunivesithi yeSewula Afrika (i-avareji yeminyaka yama-25.42, weminyaka, ukusuka Emgomeni Ojayelekileko = 6.19 weminyaka). Kusetjenziswe umhlobo werhubhululo lekhwantithethivu, indlela ye-mulitiple linear regression kanye nendlela yokuhlahluba imiphumela yemahluko yamatjhebiswano eveze bona ukuzizwa wamukelekile, kutjho kucacise khudlwana ukunamathela ngokuthanda isikhungo. Ngaphezu kwalokhu, imiphumela ibuye yaveza bona ikghono lokusebenzisana kuhle nabanye, ngokwencenye begodu nangendlela ebonakalako kuveza imiphumela yemahluko phakathi kokuzizwa wamukelekile kanye nokunamathela ngokuthanda isikhungo. Godu, imiphumela iveze bona ikghono lokusebenzisana kuhle nabanye ngokwencenye begodu nangendlela ebonakalako, kuveza imiphumela yemahluko phakathi kokuzizwa wamukelekile kanye nokunamathela ngokuthanda isikhungo. Kwamaswaphela, imiphumela iveze bona imiphumela yemahluko phakathi kwamatjhebiswano wokuzamukela kanye namakghono wokusebenzisana kuhle nabanye phakathi kokuzizwa wamukelekile kanye nokunamathela ngokuthanda isikhungo, ngokweembalobalo akukaqakatheki. Imiphumela ikhanyisa khulu bona ukuzizwa wamukelekile kuqakatheke khulu ukwenza iinkhungo zinanyathelwe ngokuthanda bafundi, lokhu kuphakamisa ukuqakatheka kobana amabhoduluko wemayunivesithi ahlelwe ngendlela yokusiza abafundi bomnyaka wokuthoma eyunivesithi bona bahlaliseke kuhle kumajamo wabo wezokufunda.

**AMAGAMA AQAKATHEKILEKO**

*Ukuzamukela, abafundi bomnyaka wokuthoma, ifundo ephakemeko, ukunamathela ngokuthanda isikhungo, ukuzizwa wamukelekile, amakghono wokusebenzisana kuhle nabanye, iyunivesithi*

## Introduction

Attending university comes with several challenges that can pose a threat to students' attachment to their institution. Institutional attachment is regarded as students' general satisfaction with the university they attend (Malau-Aduli et al., 2021). It reflects the extent to which they are committed to and buy into the goals of the institution. Institutional attachment plays a crucial role in academic success (Kurland & Sigel, 2020). Students who show high levels of attachment to the institution are inclined to perform better and succeed academically, while those who show less attachment do not (Kurland & Sigel, 2013). Additionally, students who struggle with attachment to the institution are likely to drop out of their studies (Tinto, 1975). Hence, an enquiry into factors influencing students' attachment to university is essential as it could encourage appropriate support interventions for reinforcing attachment and ultimately, student retention and academic success.

While the experience of attending university is generally challenging, it can be more challenging for first-year students (Awung et al., 2024; Mulaudzi, 2023). This is because the first year of university is marked by simultaneous transitions, such as being exposed to a new and an unfamiliar learning environment, separating from old friends and establishing new friendships (Megbowon et al., 2023; Nghiem et al., 2021; Picton et al., 2017), exercising independence and managing new freedoms. First-year students also face new academic demands and financial stressors (Hussey & Smith, 2010; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020). Duffy et al. (2019) report that transitioning to university is associated with a high likelihood of exposure to psychosocial stressors, developing significant mental health issues and maladaptive coping behaviours. Due to the transitional challenges, first-year students tend to have institutional attachment issues (Dlamini et al., 2020). For example, Belay Ababu et al. (2018) found that first-year students struggle with institutional attachment due to factors such as difficulty socialising, time management challenges and study difficulties. Additionally, Belay Ababu et al. (2018) demonstrated that the institutional attachment problem was the most common disorder among first-year undergraduate students. Hence, it is important that first-year students form an attachment to their institution since institutional attachment difficulties have been found to influence academic failure by way of university dropout (Mtshweni, 2022).

Having a sense of belonging, reportedly, can ameliorate institutional attachment problems (Strayhorn, 2012, 2016). Sense of belonging in the academic context refers to the "perception of feeling valued and respected by other students and feeling like a valued part of the university context" (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020, p. 377). It is a feeling of being accepted and included by other students as a member of the institutional community (Goodenow, 1993). Sarı and ve Bükün (2023) showed that sense of belonging or identifying with the university was positively linked to institutional attachment. Additionally, sense of belonging was found to have a positive effect on institutional attachment factors (Yildirim et al., 2021). Sense of belonging is not the only factor related to institutional attachment. Other factors linked to institutional attachment include social and emotional adjustment. For example, Mtshweni (2022) found that social and emotional adjustment significantly related to institutional attachment. Similarly, Sarı and ve Bükün (2023) argued that the social context is important for generating emotional connection to a place, suggesting that social and emotional adjustment could influence institutional attachment. Social adjustment pertains to the ability to deal with a new social environment effectively as shown by positive friendships that one can establish and by being involved in university social activities (Sevinc & Gizir, 2014). Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) posit that social adjustment reflects an integration into the social life of the learning context. On the other hand, emotional adjustment refers to psychological well-being during the university adjustment process that is characterised by the ability to cope with stressors (Baker & Siryk, 1999; Zhao et al., 2022).

Research hints that a sense of belonging, social and emotional adjustment are related to institutional attachment (Blake, 2023; Pedler et al., 2022). Nonetheless, studies investigating the influence of sense of belonging, social and emotional adjustment on institutional attachment are limited. This study aimed to investigate the influence of sense of belonging on institutional attachment. Additionally, the study sought to examine the mediating effect of social adjustment in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment. Moreover, the study aimed to investigate whether there would be statistically significant moderated mediation effects of social and emotional adjustment in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment.

Institutional attachment is crucial because it is linked to positive academic outcomes such as academic performance and persistence (Kurland & Sigel, 2013; Suditua & Saftaa, 2023; Tinto, 1975). For first-year students transitioning to university, institutional attachment

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problems could lead to dropout (Bumbacco & Scharfe, 2023). Hence, investigating explanatory factors that may strengthen students' commitment to the institution is warranted because it could attract appropriate student support responses from universities through cultivating belonging-centred institutional contexts. Institutional settings that are belonging-centred, according to Strayhorn's (2012) theory of sense of belonging, contribute to students' social and emotional well-being. Ultimately, this could enhance students' affinity with the institution, add to a positive learning experience, contribute to retention and academic achievement (Strayhorn, 2012).

## Theoretical framework

In higher education institutions, attachment-related behaviours have important implications for academic success (Robey, 2019). This study used Ainsworth and Bowlby's attachment theory to understand the concept of attachment among first-year students (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The theory has been widely used to understand students' attachment behaviours in higher education (Philips, 2007; Schneider & Schneider, 2024; Tagay & Karataş, 2012). The attachment theory rests on the notion that relationships established with parents or caregivers from infancy affect the formation of relationships with other individuals in the future (Tagay & Karataş, 2012). Additionally, the theory proposes four attachment styles that form during infancy, influenced by an individual's relational patterns with their parents or caregivers. These include secure, preoccupied, dismissive and fearful attachment styles.

- A secure attachment style is characterised by a strong self-concept and high level of trust in others;
- A preoccupied attachment style is characterised by a weak self-concept and high level of trust in others;
- A dismissive attachment style is characterised by a strong self-concept and low level of trust in others;
- While a fearful attachment style is characterised by a weak self-concept and low trust in others (Schneider & Schneider, 2024).

The ability to attach to the institution depends on students' attachment styles. For example, Lopez (1997) and Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found that a secure attachment style was linked to positive social outcomes such as stronger social integration and connectedness to the institution, while preoccupied, dismissive and fearful styles were associated with social insecurity and weaker feelings of involvement in/with the university community. Philips (2007) argues that attachment styles are linked to the emotional adjustment and social competence of students during the transition to university. Hence, social and emotional adjustment were found to have a predictive effect on institutional attachment (Maunder, 2018; Drath, 2017). While attachment styles remain stable into adulthood (Robey, 2019), environmental influences can mould attachment style (Picardi, 2020). A secure attachment style is considered important to help students navigate higher education, establish friendships and attach to the institution (Lopez, 1997). Therefore, students need to learn behaviours inclined towards a secure attachment style such as developing trust in others and identifying personal strengths to cultivate a positive self-concept and forge strong attachments to their institution. This, however, needs to be complemented by institutions of higher learning that are student centred and inclusive to encourage feelings of belonging that have been linked to social and emotional adjustment (Jain & Sharma, 2022; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

## Literature review

### Sense of belonging and institutional attachment

Despite a sense of belonging being considered a basic human need (Maslow, 1954), Peacock et al. (2020) argue that studies exploring a sense of belonging in higher education are limited. Sense of belonging is a crucial component of students' mental health and overall academic functioning (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Additionally, the scholars found that sense of belonging increased institutional attachment factors (Yildirim et al., 2021). Sarı and ve Bükün (2023) demonstrated that an increase in sense of belonging was linked to an increase in institutional attachment. Jain and Sharma (2022) posit that a sense of belonging reflects students' integration into the learning environment and that higher feelings of belonging are associated with institutional attachment. On the contrary, Fabris et al. (2023) opine that a low sense of belonging can indirectly influence institutional attachment, suggesting that belongingness plays a critical role in forging feelings of institutional attachment in the learning environment. Similarly, Strayhorn (2012) stresses the need to cultivate a sense of belonging for students to establish strong bonds or attachments with their institutions; therefore, hinting that a sense of belonging could influence institutional attachment.

### The mediating role of social adjustment

Sense of belonging helps students acclimatise to the institutional environment (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). Pittman and Richmond (2008) are of the notion that a sense of belonging is an important component to be featured in a model that predicts university attachment. Related to this, Ostrove and Long (2007) found a statistically significant relationship between sense of belonging and social adjustment, while Cornelissen (2022) found sense of belonging to be a strong predictor of social adjustment. Similarly, research shows that social adjustment has important links to institutional attachment. For example, Drath (2017) found a statistically positive relationship between social adjustment and institutional attachment, suggesting that high social adjustment is linked to high institutional attachment. Maunder (2018) also found that students who reported strong relations with peers in the university demonstrated higher levels of institutional attachment while those who struggled with relationships with peers reported lower levels of institutional attachment; thus, hinting at the importance of social adjustment in strengthening institutional attachment among students.

### The moderating effect of emotional adjustment

Research has shown that social adjustment is linked to institutional attachment. For example, studies found that social adjustment significantly predicted and positively

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related to institutional attachment (Drath, 2017; Mtshweni, 2022; Ostrove & Long, 2007); suggesting that social adjustment may be a precursor to institutional attachment. While this may be the case, emotional adjustment could influence the relationship between social adjustment and institutional attachment. For example, Sarı and ve Bükün (2023) opine that the social context, characterised by positive relationships, is important for creating emotional connections and facilitating attachment to a place. Similarly, Mtshweni (2022) also found that social and emotional adjustment were positively associated with institutional attachment among undergraduate students. Nonetheless, a study found that first-year students are emotionally immature and encounter challenges with adjusting to university life (Dlamini et al., 2020), suggesting that emotional adjustment challenges could pose institutional attachment challenges, more so if students struggle with social adjustment problems.

## Research hypotheses

Considering the discussion above, the following hypotheses were tested in this study (see Figure 1):

H1: Sense of belonging significantly predicts institutional attachment.

H2: Social adjustment mediates the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment.

H3: There will be statistically significant moderated mediation effects of social and emotional adjustment in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment.

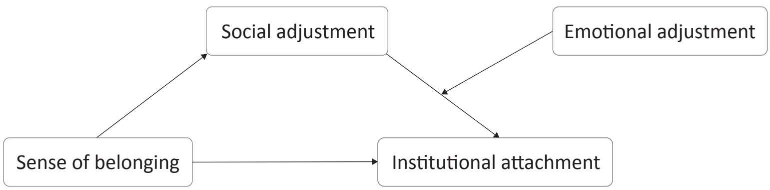


**Figure 1: Hypothesised model**

## Methods

### Research procedure and participants

The study was conducted with first-year undergraduate students at a South African university. The participants were sampled conveniently, and data were collected using the SurveyMonkey tool. The survey was distributed to approximately 70 000 potential participants by the university's ICT department. About 1 384 responses were received, however, 1 175 were excluded from the analysis for the following reasons: the surveys were partly completed; participants were below the consenting age (i.e. <18 years); or had completed their first year of study. A total of 209 eligible participants was considered for the analysis. The sample comprised 154 (73.7%) females and 55 (26.3%) males. The racial composition of the sample included 146 (69.9%) black, 17 (8.1%) coloured, 11 (5.3%) Indian, 30 (14.4%) white, and 5 (2.4%) identified as "other" races. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 49 (mean = 25.42 years; SD = 6.19 years).

## Measures

### *Sense of belonging*

An 8-item Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale developed by Goodenow (1993) was used to examine sense of belonging in this study. The scale comprised items such as "I feel proud to belong to my university" and "There is at least one lecturer that I can talk to in my university if I have a problem". The scale items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 ('not at all true') to 5 ('completely true'). The PSSM scale had a reliability coefficient of α=.83.

### *Social adjustment*

A 4-item subscale of the Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ) developed by Baker and Siryk (1986) was used to measure social adjustment. The subscale included items such as "I have several close ties at university" and "I feel that I fit in well as part of the university environment". The scale items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). The social adjustment subscale yielded a reliability coefficient of α=.80.

### *Emotional adjustment*

A 14-item subscale of the SACQ was used to examine emotional adjustment (Baker & Siryk, 1986). The subscale comprised items such as "I worry a lot about my university expenses" and "I have been nervous lately". The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). The emotional adjustment subscale had a reliability coefficient of α=.86.

### *Institutional attachment*

A 6-item subscale of the SACQ was used to measure institutional attachment (Baker & Siryk, 1986). The subscale featured items such as "I sometimes find myself thinking about taking a break from my studies" and "I wish I were at another university". The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with options 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). The institutional attachment subscale had a reliability coefficient of α=.80.

## Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee. The survey contained written informed consent which participants signed electronically before participating in the study. The survey also contained an information letter that stated the purpose of the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The right to withdraw participation from the study before submitting responses was also guaranteed.

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### Data analysis

The IBM SPSS version 28.0 was used to analyse the data. Bivariate analysis was conducted to test the relationships between sense of belonging, social adjustment, emotional adjustment and institutional attachment. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to test whether sense of belonging could significantly predict institutional attachment. Mediation analysis was conducted to test for possible mediating effects of social adjustment in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment using Hayes's (2013) model 4. Additionally, a test of moderated mediation was performed to examine for potential moderated mediation effects of social and emotional adjustment using Hayes (2013) model 14. The 95% confidence intervals (CIs) and 5 000 bootstrap samples were used to determine the statistical significance of moderating and mediating variables (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017).

## Results

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations**

| Variable | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sense of belonging | 3.30/5 | 0.90 | - | | | |
| Social adjustment | 3.31/5 | 0.81 | 0.74** | - | | |
| Emotional adjustment | 3.09/5 | 0.72 | 0.44** | 0.46** | - | |
| Institutional attachment | 3.87/5 | 0.84 | 0.65** | 0.68** | 0.48** | - |

*Note: **$p < 0.01$*

Table 1 presents the descriptive and bivariate correlations of sense of belonging, social adjustment, emotional adjustment and institutional attachment. The results reveal that sense of belonging positively and significantly correlated with social adjustment ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.01$), emotional adjustment ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$) and institutional attachment ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the results reveal that social adjustment positively and significantly correlated with emotional adjustment ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) and institutional attachment ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the results demonstrate that emotional adjustment positively and significantly correlated with institutional attachment ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$).

### Predicting institutional attachment from sense of belonging

The study tested whether sense of belonging could significantly predict institutional attachment (H1). The results of a multiple linear regression analysis after controlling for the effects of social and emotional adjustment revealed that sense of belonging ($B = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) significantly predicted institutional attachment. These results indicate that sense of belonging could, potentially, influence institutional attachment. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, supported.

**Table 2. Regression coefficients with regard to effects on institutional attachment**

| Outcome variable | Predictive variables | B | *SE* | β | *t* | *p* | 95% CI Lower Upper |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Institutional attachment | Sense of belonging | .61 | .049 | .655 | 12.469 | .001 | [.51., .70] |
| | Social adjustment | .41 | .076 | .401 | 5.477 | .001 | [.26., .56] |
| | Emotional adjustment | .19 | .063 | .170 | 3.135 | .002 | [.07., .32] |

*Note: 95% confidence interval (CI)*

**Mediation of social adjustment in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment**

The study assessed whether social adjustment could mediate the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment (H2). The results revealed that sense of belonging had a statistically significant indirect effect on institutional attachment through social adjustment (*B* = 0.31; 95% BCa CI [0.21, 0.43]). The direct effect of sense of belonging on institutional attachment was also found to be statistically significant (*B* = 0.29; 95% BCa CI [0.16, 0.43]). These results suggest that social adjustment partly mediates the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment. Thus, hypothesis 2 was partly supported.

**Table 3. Mediation effects of social adjustment on the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment**

| Model relationships | *B* | *SE* | *T* | *p* | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → M (*a*) | 0.67 | 0.04 | 16.28 | 0.0001 | [0.58, 0.75] |
| M → Y (*b*) | 0.46 | 0.07 | 6.25 | 0.0001 | [0.31, 0.61] |
| X → Y (*c'*) | 0.29 | 0.06 | 4.34 | 0.0001 | [0.16, 0.43] |
| X → M → Y (c – *c'*) | 0.31 | 0.05 | - | - | [0.21, 0.43] |

*Note: 95% confidence interval (CI)*

**Moderated mediation**

The study assessed the moderated mediation effects of social and emotional adjustment in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment. The results indicated that sense of belonging had a statistically significant effect on social adjustment (*B* = 0.67; 95% BCa CI [0.58, 0.75]). In turn, social adjustment had a statistically significant effect on institutional attachment (*B* = 0.59; 95% BCa CI [0.19, 1.00]). Additionally, sense of belonging was found to have a statistically significant effect on institutional attachment (*B* = 0.25; 95% BCa CI [0.12, 0.38]), while emotional adjustment had a statistically insignificant effect on institutional attachment (*B* = 0.38; 95% BCa CI [-0.02, 0.79]). The results further revealed that the interaction between social and emotional adjustment was statistically insignificant (*B* = -0.05; 95% BCa CI [-0.18, 0.06]).

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Moreover, the index of moderated mediation was found to be statistically insignificant (Index = -0.03; 95% BCa CI [-0.13, 0.05]). Hypothesis 3 was, therefore, not supported.

**Table 4. Summary of moderated mediation effect analysis**

| **Model relationships** | *B* | *SE* | *T* | *p* | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sense of belonging → Social adjustment | 0.67 | 0.04 | 16.28 | 0.0001 | [0.58, 0.75] |
| Social adjustment → Institutional attachment | 0.59 | 0.20 | 2.90 | 0.0041 | [0.19, 1.00] |
| Sense of belonging → Institutional attachment | 0.25 | 0.06 | 3.76 | 0.0002 | [0.12, 0.38] |
| Social adjustment X Emotional adjustment | -0.05 | 0.06 | -0.94 | 0.3466 | [-0.18, 0.06] |
| Index of moderated mediation | -0.03 | 0.04 | - | - | [-0.13, 0.05] |

*Note: 95% confidence interval (CI)*

## Discussion

The results showed that sense of belonging significantly predicted institutional attachment. This is consistent with previous research, which has found students with a strong sense of belonging to have an attachment to their university (Khaidzir & Ahmad, 2023), suggesting that a sense of belonging can help facilitate and strengthen students' feelings of connection and attachment towards their institution. In the same way, previous research stated that learning environments require students to have a sense of belonging as this can contribute to greater connections with others (Krafona, 2014) and likely, institutional attachment. Hence, Tinto (2017) highlights that developing a sense of belonging early in the first year of study is critical for engendering student engagement in learning.

Social adjustment partly and significantly mediated the relationship between a sense of belonging and institutional attachment. While there is no evidence of previous studies testing this hypothesis, research shows that a sense of belonging is closely related to and strongly predicts social adjustment among students (Hagerty et al., 1996; Ostrove & Long, 2007). Additionally, prior research found social adjustment to have a statistically significant relationship with institutional attachment (Mtshweni, 2022), whereas factors related to social adjustment such as social attachment to peers significantly predicted institutional or university adjustment (Gan et al., 2019). The results suggest that first-year students with a greater sense of belonging also had a greater social adjustment to the institutional environment. In turn, higher levels of social adjustment contributed to higher levels of institutional attachment. This explains why students with a higher sense of belonging tend to be fully engaged in teaching, learning and academic affairs (Strayhorn, 2022).

There was no evidence of moderated mediation in the relationship between sense of belonging and institutional attachment. These results could be explained by the fact that sense of belonging is a basic human need and plays a critical role in buffering emotional and mental health problems (Maslow, 1954; Sargent et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2012). Similarly, sense of belonging has been shown to contribute towards lessening psychological distress and leading to fewer mental health problems among first-year students (Tholen et al., 2022). This corresponds with Strayhorn's (2012) theory of belonging, which predicates that sense of belonging takes on a heightened importance in learning contexts and is key for reducing psychological distress. In the context of this study, the interaction between social and emotional adjustment could not have influential effects due to the overreaching influence of sense of belonging, which was shown to have a direct and indirect influence on institutional attachment. The results suggest that first-year students should strive to attain belongingness to their learning environment to find adjustment for enhanced institutional attachment (Hoffman et al., 2002).

**Implications for research**

Research has shown that first-year students are inclined to struggle with institutional attachment problems (Tom, 2015). In addition, first-year students tend to experience adjustment problems characterised by maladaptive emotional responses to stressful situations in the learning environment (Anbesaw et al., 2022). Research has demonstrated that developing a stronger sense of belonging is crucial for boosting students' positive emotions, involvement, higher academic participation (Rehman et al., 2023; Strayhorn, 2012), and thus institutional attachment. This means universities need to cater to first-year students by fostering institutional environments that are welcoming and belonging-centred.

One way of satisfying the need to belong is to encourage students to actively take part in extracurricular activities. This could include, for example, taking part in sporting activities, arts and creativity events, academic clubs and community engagement or service projects. Research has shown that carefully planned and designed extracurricular activities can serve as an effective approach to cultivating a sense of belonging (De Sisto et al., 2022). Further, extracurricular activities contribute to favourable perceptions of social-emotional security and increase students' attachment to the learning context (Martinez et al., 2016). This means that universities need to invest resources in directorates for student affairs and extracurricular activities to make first-year students feel that they belong.

Mntuyedwa (2023) found that first-year students who participate in peer groups have a higher sense of belonging. This is because peer groups provide a space for students to connect and establish mutual interests and struggles. Universities need to encourage first-year students to join university peer groups as an alternative strategy for creating a sense of university belonging. Mntuyedwa (2023) confirms that this could make students feel valued and accepted by their peers and enhance their sense of belonging.

The first year of university is challenging because it requires students to be attuned to several factors in the institution to find belongingness and institutional attachment. Special university programmes for first-year students could be important strategic initiatives for fostering a sense of belonging in new university students. For instance, Blyth (2022) found that a special programme (i.e. transition programme) dedicated to first-year students helped them understand university requirements, acquire new forms of cultural capital and most importantly, improve their sense of belonging.

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The attachment theory revealed that a secure attachment style predicted greater ease in forming friendships for students (Parade et al., 2010). In the same way, having relationships that are built on trust is important for university students because it leads to "stronger feelings of social integration and connectedness within the university community" (Lopez, 1997, p. 271). Hence, first-year students should invest in friendships that are based on trust to enhance their feelings of belonging and strengthen their levels of attachment to the learning context. Additionally, university councils should adopt student support policies that mandate student representative organisations to establish annual orientation programmes for first-year students as a strategy to help them integrate into university life.

### Limitations and future studies

The limitations of this study are as follows: first, the study used a cross-sectional design; thus, not affording the researcher adequate time to assess participants over a lengthy period. Future studies should consider replicating the study using a longitudinal design. Second, the study used self-report measures which are susceptible to self-report bias. Future studies should consider replicating the study using other data collection techniques to eliminate the possibility of self-report bias. Lastly, the study was conducted at a single higher education institution in South Africa, therefore, its results cannot claim generalisability. Future studies should consider replicating this study focusing on multiple institutions to enhance generalisability.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that sense of belonging plays a crucial role in influencing institutional attachment, directly and indirectly through social adjustment. The findings draw attention to the importance of developing a sense of belonging among first-year students to eliminate emotional adjustment problems and boost social adjustment and institutional attachment. Further, this study contributes to understanding the theory of attachment and its potential significance in helping universities address emotional and social problems among first-year students. The findings, therefore, encourage universities to invest in initiatives aimed at transforming institutional cultures and creating a welcoming space for first-year students to feel homely and find their belonging niche.

### Ethics statement

The study was approved by the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences Ethics Review Committee.

### Potential conflict of interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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Research Article

# Individual student support and counselling for undergraduate pharmacy students at an historically disadvantaged institution

## Apoyo individual al estudiante y consejería para estudiantes de farmacia de pregrado en una institución históricamente desfavorecida

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**ABSTRACT**

Many students who meet higher education admission standards struggle in their respective programmes because they lack the necessary skills and/or abilities to navigate complex higher education institutions. This study aimed to determine individual counselling's role in pharmacy students' academic performance in a problem-based learning (PBL) programme at a South African university. Students identified as 'at-risk' of failing were the focus, and the study was retrospective, cross-sectional and quantitative. This article presents possible individualized remedial measures that can be applied to reduce the attrition rate and stimulate success among a diverse student body in the BPharm programme. Early monitoring and evaluation of 'at-risk' students across all year groups ensure the long-term success of activities and plans in a diverse atmosphere, effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability to the stakeholders.

**KEYWORDS**

*BPharm students, problem-based learning programme, at-risk, counselling/support, individual pass rates*

**RESUMEN**

Muchos estudiantes que cumplen con los estándares de admisión a la educación superior enfrentan dificultades en sus respectivos programas porque carecen de las habilidades y/o capacidades necesarias para desenvolverse en instituciones de educación superior complejas. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo determinar el papel de la consejería individual en el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes de farmacia dentro de un programa de aprendizaje basado en problemas (ABP) en una universidad sudafricana. Se

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centró en los estudiantes identificados como "en riesgo" de reprobar, y el estudio fue retrospectivo, transversal y cuantitativo. Este artículo presenta posibles medidas remediales individualizadas que pueden aplicarse para reducir la tasa de deserción y fomentar el éxito entre un cuerpo estudiantil diverso en el programa de BPharm. El monitoreo y la evaluación temprana de los estudiantes "en riesgo" en todos los años de estudio aseguran el éxito a largo plazo de las actividades y planes en un ambiente diverso, así como su efectividad, eficiencia y responsabilidad ante las partes interesadas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE**

*Estudiantes de BPharm, programa de aprendizaje basado en problemas, estudiantes en riesgo, asesoramiento/apoyo, tasas de aprobación individuales*

## Background and introduction

Expanding access to higher education is one achievement; ensuring that those who have access to this level of education can succeed is another challenge (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2015). Improving throughput rates is a major concern faced by African institutions of higher learning, due to a complex interplay of factors that may affect individual students at different levels of study (CHE, 2013). Measures to improve education quality include an enhanced curriculum, effective assessment practices and relevant teaching methodologies. However, these measures are not sufficient to increase student throughput unless students who are 'at-risk' of failing are adequately supported (Masino & Nino-Zarazua, 2016).

The secondary education system has a crucial role to play regarding the preparedness of first-time university entrants and, subsequently, the quality of graduates produced (Najimi et al., 2013). Students face various difficulties at university due to their diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds (Mngomezulu et al., 2017), language challenges (Makoe & McKinney, 2014; Ngwenya, 2004), and lack of maturity and motivation to perform (Lake & Boyd, 2015). Students often come to university with unrealistic expectations regarding both learning and the social environment in which they may find themselves (Smith et al., 2012). It is well recognised that students enter university being unprepared for the academic demands of higher education (Oduaran & Bechuke, 2018). At the university entry stage, it often becomes evident that a knowledge and skills gap exists, placing students at a disadvantage from the start.

Sub-optimal academic performance or failure could be the result of various factors and behaviours. The occurrence of negative situations at any stage of a student's life results in a direct financial burden on the budgets of different state sectors and communities. These factors may affect each student's performance differently. They may lead to poor academic or social outcomes, with subsequent failure that requires repetition of a year, or dropout before completion of studies within the prescribed time (Balfanz & Chang, 2013; Khalid & Mehmood, 2017). Specific interventions are required to assist students to succeed considering these factors.

Factors affecting students' academic performance are commonly grouped into three categories (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012; Najimi et al., 2013): (1) individual or personal factors, which include goals, motivation, anxiety, study methods, intelligence, attention, planning, effective mental conditions, class attendance and interaction among students; (2) internal organisational factors which include professional characteristics of instructors, space, proper facilities and equipment, teaching strategies, academic and social systems of university; and (3) external organisational factors affecting students including parents' educational level and their approach to dealing with a student's academic failure, the socio-economic status of families, unclear and uncertain occupational prospects.

Academic failure and dropout not only result in psychological, social and family problems for students, but also lead to wasted time and financial resources for the university, students, parents and the country (Najimi et al., 2013). This situation creates personal and social problems (Hazavehei et al., 2003). Africa needs an improved, quality education to produce well-qualified graduates for social cohesion and economic development (CHE, 2013).

In South Africa, the dropout rates of students between 2000 and 2014 were high. Although less than half (42.0%) of first-time entering undergraduate degree cohorts never graduated during this period (Higher Education Management Information Systems [HEMIS], 2017), these figures highlight the need for higher education institutions to identify interventions to ensure greater efficiency in the system.

The risk of student attrition occurs across the student life cycle. Thus, early monitoring, tracking of students' performance, and referral for support are essential and cannot be a once-off occurrence (CHE, 2015). Given the challenges faced by a diverse student body in terms of personal finances and adjusting to new academic demands, individual universities must put systems in place to identify students at risk of failing or dropout. Individual universities must develop early tracking, monitoring and evaluation support programmes to enable students to complete their studies within the required time (Steyn et al., 2014). Despite the pressure from internal and external stakeholders to increase access to higher education, there is no purpose in doing so if adequate support for students is not provided or effective, as the policy and goals of equity of access and outcome will not be achievable (Shay, 2017).

Student success requires certain efforts, including intensive student support initiatives such as personal counselling to understand individual needs to improve the higher education system as a whole (Scott, 2018). Student counselling utilises interpersonal relationships to enable students to develop confidence and the necessary skills to succeed. It requires students to learn how to examine their own performance, strengths, weaknesses, and areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and to be able to make changes in their lives (Renuka Devi et al., 2013).

Evidence obtained from developed countries has shown that additional support from universities does have a significant effect on students' academic or social performance and retention (Tinto, 2014). Research has shown that students who receive counselling report higher self-rated academic, social and emotional adjustment than comparable groups who do not (Choi et al., 2010; Lockard et al., 2012). Furthermore, those who attended more counselling sessions demonstrated greater improvement than those who attended fewer counselling sessions (Renuka Devi et al., 2013). Further, targeting individual students was shown to have important implications for the development of appropriate intervention strategies (Smith et al., 2012). Improved success rates require intentional, structured, proactive, systematic action applied in a coordinated way (Tinto, 2014).

It is necessary to develop early intervention strategies specific to the needs of individual students who are struggling while simultaneously also developing the student. Students usually do not voluntarily seek help when they experience academic or social challenges, while some only seek assistance when their challenges are advanced (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009). Because referral of an at-risk student is voluntary, some may not use the opportunity (Czyz et al., 2013) and may subsequently leave the registered academic programme for another programme within the university or elsewhere. Strategies to minimise non-progression and non-completion rates are essential for quality assurance in education (Norrish et al., 2014). For students with a low chance of graduating on time, such strategies are necessary to ensure resource effectiveness and efficiency and to prevent wastage of human potential and parents' investments in the children.

The DHET (2013) identified the improvement of undergraduate throughput rates as a key strategy to increase graduate output, to instil skills needed by the economy, and ensure larger numbers of students available for postgraduate study. Thus, the institution needs to find and develop institutionalised measures that can be used within or outside the institution, to address and contribute to better educational outcomes. The institutional aim should be to produce competent graduates with valuable attributes, skills and knowledge at the required time to meet the needs of the country (CHE, 2015).

There is a dearth of information regarding the role of individual counselling in pharmacy students' academic performance in a problem-based learning (PBL) programme with a diverse student body and from a historically disadvantaged university. The objectives of this study were therefore to (i) identify factors affecting students with academic difficulties; (ii) describe strategies identified by students to improve their academic performance; (iii) describe recommended referral for support by university structures as agreed by students; and (iv) to determine the pass rates of students at risk of failing who received individual counselling.

## Methodology

### Context and setting of the study

The 4-year Bachelor of Pharmacy (BPharm) programme offered by the School of Pharmacy at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU) in South Africa departs from the traditional teaching methods for a dynamic pedagogy. These teaching methods consist of a hybrid problem-based learning (PBL) approach, which contributes to developing knowledge, skills and attributes for success. The model chosen was adopted from the McMaster University in Canada, and has been implemented in various countries, including the University of Makerere in Uganda (Galukande, 2015), and the University of Cape Coast's School of Medical Sciences in Ghana (Amoako-Sakyi & Amonoo-Kuofi, 2015). This model emphasises that a PBL educational programme can be effectively implemented despite its cost implications. The language of instruction is English, and the academic content is presented in an integrated, thematic, semester and modular-based format, with most of the learning taking place in small groups (Mabope & Meyer, 2014).

At the time of this study, SMU was known as the University of Limpopo, Medunsa Campus, and the BPharm programme was offered in partnership with the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) (Mabope & Meyer, 2014). Most students admitted to the BPharm programme are first-time applicants from diverse culture, race, language, academic level, aptitude, expertise, social status and socio-economic backgrounds (Mabope, 2007; Mabope & Meyer, 2014). Most of the students' secondary education is based on traditional methods of passive teaching and learning, which is different from the PBL BPharm programme where learning is self-directed. Very often, the language of learning and teaching is also different from that to which students have been exposed during their secondary education.

At SMU, the BPharm students' performance is monitored using individual student counselling as one of the strategies to improve students' success and evaluate the programme's effectiveness. Assessment methods that are aligned with the skillsets of intended learning outcomes include tests, end-of-module and practical examinations, problem-solving exercises, assignments and oral presentations. Tests and end-of-module examinations include true/false and multiple-choice questions, where negative marking is used to prevent students from guessing, matching type questions, short answer questions and longer essay-type questions. Results from these assessments are monitored regularly. Personal behaviour during small group and tutorial sessions and attendance during formal learning activities are also monitored. A minimum of 80% attendance in academic activities is a requirement for access to summative assessment (SMU, 2020).

Standard procedures are followed to identify students 'at-risk' of academic failure and such students are subsequently provided with individual counselling. Once assessment results are published, students who failed an assessment or those identified as at-risk are requested in writing to meet with the school's student support officer to discuss their performance, during which possible factors are identified that led to unsatisfactory performance. This process facilitates the identification of support services and the development of an academic plan that articulates strategies and resources that a student can use to improve their academic performance. Such counselling sessions are individualized and take place in a private room. During the counselling session, documents reviewed include results sheets of all assessments as evidence of academic performance, attendance registers as evidence of class attendance, and staff members' observational notes, based on their encounters with the particular student in small group or tutorial sessions (psychosocial behaviour).

During these one-on-one counselling sessions, the student is interviewed to assess and understand the challenges or needs that might have affected their academic performance. A student counselling guide is used during each session to gain an understanding of the students' challenges (see appendix). The following main questions are posed to the student:

- Are you satisfied with your own performance?
- What problem(s) do you experience that might be interfering with your study?
- How do you study (methods)?

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Responses to these questions are manually recorded by the student support officer and used to guide the discussion. The specific needs of each student determine the duration of their counselling session.

Confidentiality is assured during these sessions so that the student is free to express their academic and personal challenges. Students receive a sympathetic ear and are offered encouragement and possible solutions depending on the challenge at hand. At the end of the session, the student is asked what they are going to do to improve their performance and requested to write down their plan of action on the counselling sheet. After this, the student support officer provides comments as appropriate. Information obtained during these private sessions allows the student support officer to identify and suggest specific interventions or referral for support appropriate for the particular student (e.g. financial, psychosocial and welcoming support). Support is, therefore, tailor-made to meet the needs of each student and by agreement with the student. At the conclusion of each session, the document is signed by both the student and the student support officer to confirm agreement about what has been discussed and the proposed strategies to improve academic performance. Students' progress is monitored in subsequent assessment cycles.

An overview of the procedures used in the BPharm programme to identify and support at-risk students is demonstrated in Figure 1.

### Study design and study population

This was a quantitative descriptive study based on a retrospective document review. This study was part of a larger tracking project where two cohorts of students, enrolled for the first time in 2008 and 2009, were tracked over a period of nine years until completion of the pre-registration examination to practice as a pharmacist in the country. To complement the larger project's results, the study population for this study included all students registered in the BPharm programme, from first to fourth-year level, during the two calendar years of 2008 (n=198) and 2009 (n=217). The final sample included all students identified as at risk of failing from these two groups.

### Data collection and analysis

Retrospective data on students' academic performance were obtained from the School of Pharmacy database. Information on students identified as at-risk and who received counselling was collected from completed individual counselling feedback sheets. This included students' responses to the questions posed to them during the student counselling sessions, subsequent comments and notes made on the sheets by the student support officer during individual counselling sessions, and hand-written strategies proposed by the students themselves at the end of the counselling sessions to improve their academic performance. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for overall pass rates, for at-risk students who were counselled, and for pass rates of students who received individual counselling.

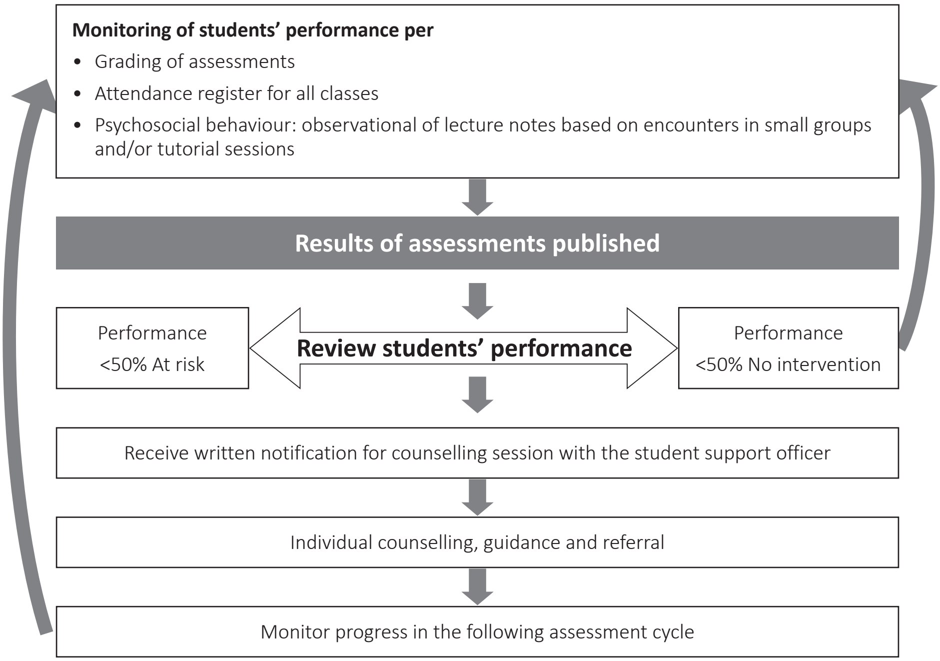


**Figure 1: Standard procedures used to identify and counsel 'at-risk' students in the BPharm programme**

### Ethical considerations

The research and ethics committee at SMU granted ethical clearance for the study (MREC/H/173/2014). Permission to access student records was obtained from the Dean of the School of Pharmacy. Students had the right to confidentiality to protect their interests and ensure that relationships based on trust can be developed and maintained. Consent was sought before the commencement of counselling; sharing of information with whom and how was explained. All records are kept secure with access controlled and are only available to members of the relevant team on a need-to-know basis. Confidentiality and anonymity, while collecting, analyzing, and reporting data for the counselling sessions, had to be maintained

## Results

Students in the BPharm programme who obtained less than 50% (minimum pass rate) for a particular assessment in a module were identified as at risk to fail the particular module and subsequently the year and received individual counselling. Table 1 shows a summary of the students' pass rates in the two study groups per calendar year (2008 and 2009) and per study level of the 4-year BPharm programme, distributed by overall pass rates and pass rates for at-risk students who received counselling. More than a third of the students from the two groups received individual counselling because of their

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poor academic performance (178/415; 42.9%), of whom the majority (153/178; 86.0%) succeeded in their respective years.

From Table 1, it is evident that in 2009 more students were counselled than in 2008. In both instances, a smaller proportion of first-year students required individual counselling, however, the pass rate for those students at the first-year level who received counselling was lower compared to students from the second-year level onwards. A larger proportion of the final year group in 2009 experienced challenges compared to the other year groups, as 81.5% (44/54) of the students were identified as at risk and had to receive individual counselling and support. The vast majority (43/44; 97.7%) of them passed their final year successfully.

Results from the students' self-reflection during the individual counselling sessions regarding their academic outcomes showed that most of them were aware of their poor academic performance in the identified assessments (170/178; 95.5%) and rated their academic performance as average (9/178; 5.1%) or below average (169/178; 94.9%).

**Table 1. Overall pass rates and pass rates for students who received counselling per calendar year and per study year (n=415)**

| Year | BPharm 1 (n=126) * | | | | BPharm 2 (n=101) * | | | | BPharm 3 (n=95) * | | | | BPharm 4 (n=93) * | | | | BPharm 1-4 (178) * | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All students | | Students "At-risk" n (%) | | All students | | Students "At-risk" n (%) | | All students | | Students "At-risk" n (%) | | All students | | Students "At-risk" n (%) | | All students | Overall Students "at-risk" | |
| | n | Pass rate (%) | Counselled (n) | Passed | n | Pass rate (%) | Counselled (n) | Passed | n | Pass rate (%) | Counselled (n) | Passed | n | Pass rate (%) | Counselled (n) | Passed | n | Counselled (n) | Passed |
| **2008** | 56 | 82 | 11 (19.6%) | 8 (72.7%) | 48 | 83 | 16 (33.3%) | 14 (87.5%) | 55 | 96.4 | 10 (18.2%) | 8 (80.0%) | 39 | 97.4 | 12 (30.8%) | 10 (83.3%) | 198 | 49 (24.7%) | 40 (81.6%) |
| **2009** | 70 | 81 | 31 (44.3%) | 21 (67.7%) | 53 | 87 | 35 (66.0%) | 31 (88.6%) | 40 | 80.0 | 19 (47.5%) | 18 (94.7%) | 54 | 96.3 | 44 (81.5%) | 43 (97.7%) | 217 | 129 (59.4%) | 113 (87.6%) |
| **Total** | **126** | **82** | **42 (33.3%)** | **29 (69.0%)** | **101** | **85** | **51 (50.5%)** | **45 (88.2%)** | **95** | **88** | **29 (30.5%)** | **26 (89.7%)** | **93** | **97** | **56 (60.2%)** | **53 (94.6%)** | **415** | **178 (42.9%)** | **153 (86.0%)** |

*Note: *The sample size for each calendar year level included all students in each class for that particular year, irrespective of whether they were repeating a year or not*

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Table 2 provides a summary of these at-risk students' own reasons for and factors contributing to their poor academic performance, as identified during the individual counselling sessions. Most of them (95.5%) experienced financial difficulties, followed by challenges with personal relationships and family problems (91.6%) and emotional and anxiety problems (87.1%). The most common factors related to the academic and institutional environment were insufficient time to study (84.3%) and poor understanding of questions (78.7%).

**Table 2. Summary of factors contributing to poor academic performance as identified by 'at-risk' students (n=178)**

| Factors contributing to poor academic performance | Number (%) of students |
|---|---|
| **Personal factors** | |
| Financial difficulties | 170 (95.5%) |
| Relationships, family problems (peers, parents, partners) | 163 (91.6%) |
| Emotional and anxiety problems | 155 (87.1%) |
| Lack of motivation | 120 (64.4%) |
| Lack of concentration | 80 (44.9%) |
| **Academic and institutional factors** | |
| Insufficient time to study | 150 (84.3%) |
| Poor understanding of questions | 140 (78.7%) |
| Poor study methods | 100 (56.2%) |
| Multiple-choice questions | 99 (55.6%) |
| Lack of ability to recall information during exam | 70 (39.3%) |
| Workload | 50 (28.1%) |
| Group dynamics | 45 (25.3%) |
| Absenteeism | 25 (14.0%) |

At the end of each individual counselling session, at-risk students had to indicate in writing what their individual strategies were in terms of a way forward to improve their poor academic performance. Table 3 shows a summary of the strategies identified by at-risk students, including recommended referral for support by the university. All the students (100%) agreed that they needed to work harder and schedule specific study sessions, followed by improving their time management (89.3%). More than half of the students attending individual counselling sessions (56.2%) opted to improve their performance after the session by using their support structure, such as studying in a group, and having consultative sessions with their mentors or lecturers within the BPharm programme.

**Table 3. Strategies identified by 'at-risk' students and student support officer to improve academic performance (n=178)**

| Strategies identified | Number (%) of students |
|---|---|
| **Students' plan of action** | |
| Hard work and schedule study sessions | 178 (100%) |
| Improve time management | 159 (89.3%) |
| Support structure (e.g. study in group or with another student, consult with mentor or lecturers) | 100 (56.2%) |
| **Student support officer's recommendations for referral in agreement with student** | |
| Financial assistance | 170 (95.5%) |
| Psychologist for professional counselling | 165 (92.7%) |
| Wellness through the Centre for University Teaching and Learning (e.g. goal setting, time management, study skills, examination preparation) | 110 (61.8%) |

Table 3 shows that most of the at-risk students who had received counselling saw the value of additional support, as they agreed to be referred to relevant university supporting structures. Referrals were made according to students' specific needs and challenges and included financial support (95.5%), psychosocial (92.7%) and wellness support (61.8%) from the Centre for University Teaching and Learning, focusing on improving students' life skills such as goal setting, time management, study skills and examination preparation.

## Discussion

Understanding the key factors that affect student success gives instructors a proposition to empower students to take heed of their risk factors and progress academically. In this study, the majority (95.5%) of students who did not obtain the 50% required pass rate, identified as at-risk of failing the particular module, were aware of the decline in their academic performance as they all rated their performance as either average (5.1%) or below average (94.9%). A limited number of students (4.5%) was satisfied with their performance, despite having obtained between 40% and 49% for an assessment. This could be because they considered the university's sub-minimum examination entry mark of 40% as adequate (SMU, 2020).

The overall pass rate for the two groups of students (2008 and 2009) in the BPharm programme at SMU was 87.7%, exceeding the DHET target of 79%, stipulated in the *Ministerial Statement on Student Enrolment Planning for 2014/15 to 2019/20*, which was an increase of 3% in 2012 (76%) (DHET, 2014). The support programme of monitoring and subsequently identifying students at risk of failing at an early stage showed encouraging results as 86.0% of those identified as at-risk eventually passed their respective module assessments and subsequently their year (level) of study. Similarly, exposure to counselling of underprepared first-year students in a public university in the Northeast region of the United States was positively associated with improved grade point average (Cholewa &

Ramaswami, 2015). Mouresh et al. (2014) echo that student support and academic or personal development is a crucial role player for assisting graduates in developing the meta-level of generic competencies required to succeed in their studies, which are also the competencies required to succeed in the world of work (CHE, 2015). However, one must acknowledge that, apart from individual counselling, other factors could have contributed to the good pass rates, including the selection procedures for BPharm candidates (e.g. interviews, potential and pre-academic performance), the PBL and teaching approach.

Institutions of higher education need to achieve high pass rates and, subsequently, high throughput rates. Low throughput rates are putting further strain on inadequate resources at these institutions, as throughput rates are used in the subsidy formula of the DHET in its funding allocation to higher education institutions in South Africa (Barnard & Fourie, 2013; DHET, 2015). Furthermore, low pass and throughput rates also contribute to students' financial and emotional challenges (Barnard & Fourie, 2013). From our study, 95.5% of the at-risk students identified financial challenges as contributing to their poor performance, and 87.1% of them experienced emotional problems and anxiety.

Despite the various external and internal challenges at-risk students face, the vast majority realised that they had to work harder and apply themselves better. Students have to develop responsibility for their own learning and apply themselves fully by attending classes and studying. At-risk students also identified poor understanding of questions during assessments (78.7%) and multiple-choice questions (55.6%) as factors contributing to their poor academic performance. This could be explained by the fact that both poor understanding of questions and guessing answers could lead to incorrect answers. In the case of the BPharm programme, negative marking is applied when multiple-choice questions are used. Compared to secondary education, where negative marking is not applied, students find negative marking to be challenging, especially first-year students who are in the process of adjusting to higher education and have not encountered negative marking before (Romm et al., 2019). Studies have shown that the existing articulation gap for many students entering higher education causes difficulty throughout the years of study, resulting in poor overall academic performance (McGhie, 2014).

Another possible contributing factor is insufficient English language proficiency, which can hinder generic skills acquisition and professional development (including information handling, managing learning and critical thinking) (McLean et al., 2013). The medium of instruction at SMU is English, and underprepared students struggle with academic performance in universities and professional courses where the medium of instruction is English (Kumar, 2014). Previous research amongst students in this programme has shown that such changes may result in some students taking an extended period to acclimatise to a university environment (Mabope, 2007). Ideally, such students would be referred to the English Department for additional support to obtain language proficiency in both receptive language (understanding concepts) and expressive language (speaking and writing) skills. Instead, students in the BPharm programme at SMU were referred to CUTL for life skills such as examination preparation, study skills and time management.

In this study, the vast majority of the students indicated interpersonal challenges (91.6%) (i.e. strained relationships with their parents, peers and partners), and anxiety

(87.1%) as factors contributing to their poor performance. In addition to 84.3% who identified not having sufficient time to study as a reason for poor performance, 89.3% also identified improving their time management as a strategy to improve their academic performance. Poor time management and emotional challenges experienced by students in this study could be associated as previous research has shown that poor relationships with parents, partners, friends, and siblings can contribute to a student suffering academic stress (Kim & Lee, 2013). Furthermore, the literature has shown that emotional or anxiety problems and lack of motivation can lead to phobia of examination rooms or assessments, leading to post-traumatic stress disorder and lack of time management (Afolayan et al., 2013). Low self-esteem and disengagement can also lead to high academic anxiety and stress (Sharma & Jagdev, 2012). Students' psychological factors are notable, as 92.7% requested and agreed to be referred for assessment and counselling by a professional psychologist at the university. This kind of referral is essential to minimise anxiety and stress levels, which, if not addressed in time of need, may limit educational and professional development and promotion through the educational system (Fazel et al., 2014) or result in students leaving the programme without completion (Afolayan et al., 2013).

In this BPharm programme, most of the students are first-time university entrants, as required by the selection criteria (SMU, 2020). Previous studies have shown that first-year students experience challenges as they make the transition to university life (Bexley et al., 2013; Brinkworth et al., 2013; King et al., 2015; Nelson, 2014). The reasons for this could be attributed to students' academic and social background, acclimatising to teaching and learning pedagogy expectations and adjustment to university life. Students struggle to develop habits such as time management, study skills, language, and prioritisation; they experience relationship challenges and are not familiar with high-level technology (Diab et al., 2015). These challenges would warrant further investigation amongst students in this BPharm programme. Interestingly in our study, a smaller proportion of first-year students (33.3%) needed counselling, compared to the senior years, which ranged from 50.5% in the second year to almost double the proportion (60.2%) in the final year (Table 1). These statistics call for further investigation, considering other possible contributing factors, including the PBL methodology.

Students in this study confirmed that factors such as poor study skills, time management, lack of concentration and the inability to recall information impacted their academic performance. Such factors can negatively affect student motivation, including teacher and/or parent inability to care, resulting in increased absenteeism (Senyametor et al., 2018). Commitment, motivation, self-discipline, resilience, teaching and learning strategies in conjunction with peers and lecturers at the university (Pather et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975; Zepke, 2013) and time management are some of the underlying values for the success of individual counselling sessions. The student support officer in this programme is invaluable for identifying those who need intervention, referral to the CUTL and assigning mentors to assist these students.

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## Recommendations

Based on the experience from the individual counselling process used in this BPharm programme, the results showed that at-risk students are distributed across all the programme levels. The students themselves identified various reasons for poor performance and the required supportive strategies. Therefore, the BPharm programme would benefit from a more structured student support and mentoring programme, considering these factors. Academic and personal performance should be tracked periodically at an early stage of the student's academic life to allow referral for professional support, whether financial, psychosocial or wellness where appropriate. Measures should be in place to ensure a timely turnaround time to optimise these efforts. In addition, those referred for support should be monitored to ensure they are attending their sessions. Students should seek assistance from an earlier stage in their academic programme to prevent the identified challenges affecting their senior years' performance. Hence, such a programme should also include pathways for the students themselves to obtain support from peers, mentor(s) and teaching staff at an early stage or whenever the need arises. Academic staff should be sensitive and accessible when students approach them, as these students considered at risk are epitomised as individuals with specific needs and special issues (Mngomezulu et al., 2017).

In promoting a structured student support programme, the university should design and implement enhancements to their information management information system, which will allow early identification of at-risk students and notify the individual students and relevant student support officer in the various schools. The student support officer should then identify and explore specific challenges through personal interviews with the identified students and recommend appropriate action and referral.

Interim recommendations based on this study's results include regular and coordinated workshops for all students targeting study skills, time management, and preparation for examinations across all levels of study. English is the only medium of instruction at SMU for a diverse student population. Although students in the BPharm programme complete a foundational module in English during their first year of study, the results indicate a need to review the contents of the English module with the responsible provider to address the concerns, especially regarding the understanding of questions.

Lastly, considering the results of this study, further qualitative research is required to better understand the challenging factors identified by students in this study, and to determine students' perceptions about the current individual counselling process and support system used in the BPharm programme for the development of a structured student support programme.

## Limitations

We are aware of some of this study's limitations. The results should be considered with caution as the findings are not intended to be generalised beyond the target population due to the relatively small sample size and the fact that the study was confined to a single programme. This was not a controlled study, as it would have been unethical to exclude certain students from counselling sessions that could have benefitted them. Determining the actual impact or effect of the individual counselling sessions on students' academic performance was, therefore, not possible in this study but should be considered in future studies. However, considering students' pass rates across an entire programme, this individual support programme shows great promise and provides guidance for future initiatives and studies.

## Conclusions

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the role of individual student counselling in the academic performance of pharmacy students within a PBL programme in the African context. The results suggested that individual counselling and support in this BPharm programme contributed to students' positive academic outcomes at this historically disadvantaged institution, as students' pass rates in this programme were high and exceeded higher education pass rates at a national level. However, considering the programme's nature, there may be other contributing factors that need to be explored. It was evident that an individual student monitoring and evaluation approach plays a crucial role as an early identification and warning system that forms part of student tracking, which is essential to provide appropriate support to specific students as soon as required. This study's findings are consistent with those of other studies and afford some confirmation of the variables that should be monitored with a view to potential interventions. The multifaceted factors identified by at-risk students as affecting their academic performance and their requested referral for assistance or support require coordinated efforts by staff and students. A one-size-fits-all approach to student support is not suitable in such a diverse student population, which calls for the development of a more structured and comprehensive student support programme. Additional qualitative research to better understand the identified factors contributing to poor academic performance and strategies identified by students to address these would be necessary to develop a responsive student support programme.

### Author contributions

Lindi A. Mabope (LAM), Johanna C. Meyer, Beverley Summers and Anna-Marie Wium developed the concept and designed the study. LAM collected and analyzed the data. All authors interpreted the data and LAM drafted the initial manuscript. All authors participated in the manuscript's critical review for intellectual content and contributed significantly to the final manuscript.

### Ethics statement

The research and ethics committee (REC) granted ethical clearance for the study. Permission to access student records was obtained from the Dean of the School of Pharmacy. Participants' right to confidentiality and consent were developed and maintained.

### Potential conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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## Appendix: BPharm – Student counselling/support form

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. **Student Details** | | |
| Full Name: | | **Signature:** |
| Number: | | **Date:** |
| | | |
| 2. **Questions to Student** | | |
| **Q1: Are you satisfied with your own performance so far?** | **A1:**<br><br>*(Student to state whether they are aware of the problem or not. Staff member to state that the student's performance is not satisfactory because marks are below average/sub-minimum, dropping, or not improving.)* | |
| **Q2: What problems do you experience that might be interfering with your studies?** | **A2:**<br><br>*(Staff member to delineate possible factors for poor performance such as attendance, lack of concentration, motivation, finances, emotional matters.)* | |
| **Q3: How do you study (methods)?** | **A3:**<br><br>*(Staff member to state whether study methods are good or bad.)* | |
| 3. **Concluding Remarks** | **Student's Plan of Action** | **Comments by Staff Member** |
| **Since you now know the reasons why your performance is not satisfactory, what are you going to do to improve your performance?**<br><br>*(Provide necessary advice and guidance to the student on the plan of action.)* | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. | *(Staff member to state what the School of Pharmacy can possibly do to assist the student.)* |
| 4. **Staff Member** | **Signature:** | **Date:** |
| **Full Name:**<br>**1.**<br>**2.** | | |

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Navigating bounded agency in exercising climate action: Insights from Malawian and Zambian university students

# Momwe ophunzira akuyunivesite amachepesela ziphinjo zomwe amakumana nazo pogwila ntchito yosamalira zachilengedwe: Zidziwitso zochokera ku Malawi ndi Zambia

Chimwemwe Phiri[1] & Daizy Shoma Nalwamba[2]

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## ABSTRACT

The pressing issue of climate change has galvanized a global movement, with young people at the forefront as advocates for environmental action. However, various structural and institutional factors often constrain the ability of university student environmentalists to translate their concerns into meaningful action. Using the concept of bounded agency within the capability approach, this qualitative study explored the perspectives of students from two universities, one in Malawi and one in Zambia, to better understand the challenges and opportunities they encounter in their efforts to translate their environmental concerns into tangible outcomes. The study reveals that while participants are deeply committed to environmental concerns, they encounter significant obstacles, including a lack of institutional support and resources, sociocultural norms, and university power structures that marginalize their voices. Despite these challenges, students employ strategies such as building cross-institutional collaborations with NGOs, leveraging social media, and engaging in grassroots advocacy to navigate their bounded agency. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that shape the landscape for student environmentalists' climate action efforts in the Global South, highlighting the resilience and resourcefulness of student environmentalists in overcoming barriers to drive environmental sustainability.

## KEYWORDS

*Climate action, students, bounded agency, capability approach*

## CHIDULE

Nkhani yofunikira kwambiri yakusintha kwanyengo ikupangisa maiko ambiri kutengapo gawo pantchito zosamalira chilengwedwe. Mwa ena, achinyamata nawo akuonetsa chidwi chochuluka

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potengapo gawo polimbikisa ntchito zosamalira chilengedwezi. Ngakhale izi zili choncho, achinyamatawa akukumuna ndi ziphinjo zosiyanasiyana kuti akwanilise maloto awowo. Pogwilitsa ntchito tsanamira za kuunikila zothekela mwa munthu muntchito zosiyanasiyana, kafukufukuyu anaunikila maganizo a achinyamata ochokela musukulu za ukachenjede ziwiri, ina yaku Malawi ndipo ina yaku Zambia kuti timvese bwino ziphinjo zomwe achinyamatawa amakumana nazo musukuluzi akafuna kupititsa patsogolo ntchito zosamalira chilengedwe. Zotsatira zakafukufukuyu zaonetsa kuti ngakhale achinyamata akutenga gawo pa ntchito yosamalira zachilengedwe ndipo akudzipereka kwambiri pantchitoyi, amakumananso ndi mavuto osiyanasiyana monga: kusowa kwa chithandizo chochokera ku utsogoleri wamasukulu awo, kusowa kwa zinthu zogwiritsa ntchito pogwira ntchito imeneyi, zikhulupiriro za anthu a zikhalidwe zosiyanasiyana komanso kupondelezedwa ndi anthu a udindo m'sukulu zaukachenjedezi. Ngakhale pali mavuto amenewa, ophunzirawa amakhazikitsa njira zosiyanasiyana zothetsela mavuto awo monga: kukhazikitsa ubale ndi mabungwe omwe si aboma kuti azipeza thandizo la zida zogwilira ntchito, kugwiritsa bwino ntchito masamba a mchezo pofalitsa ntchito zawo, komanso kukhala nawo mmagulu a anthu olimbikitsa za kasamaliridwe kachilengedwe. Zotsatira za Kafukufukuyu zikutsindikiza nsanamira zosiyanasiyana zomwe zingathandize achinyamata kutengapo gawo posamalira zachilengwedwe ku maiko akummwela kwa Afrika polimbikitsa kupilira komanso kuthekela komwe achinyamata ali nako popititsa patsogolo ntchito zosamalira chilengedwe.

**MAWU OTSOGOLERA**
*Kugwila ntchito zosamalira chilengedwe, ophunzira, kuthekela, kuchepesa ziphinjo*

## Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the defining challenges of our time, with far-reaching consequences for the global environment, economies, and human well-being (Leal Filho, 2023a; McCowan, 2020; IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2019). Young people, particularly university students, have been at the forefront of the environmental movement, advocating for immediate and decisive action to address this crisis (Owojori et al., 2022; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2018). For example, students have organised climate strikes and protests to raise awareness and demand policy changes from governments and institutions (Gorman, 2021; Prendergast et al., 2021). They have also initiated campus-based sustainability projects, such as renewable energy installations, waste reduction initiatives, and sustainable food programmes (Leal Filho, 2024; Benayas et al., 2010). With the number of students expanding exponentially in the Global South, where climate impacts are mostly felt (Reimers, 2024), student environmentalists, with their passion, energy, and fresh perspectives, have played a crucial role in mobilizing their peers and communities to advocate for climate action and demand climate justice and sustainable solutions (Lozano et al., 2013).

Despite their efforts, this student action remains not fully recognised in higher education in terms of how the sector can effectively advance climate action initiatives through diagnosis, research, and action (Gorman, 2021; Prendergast et al., 2021). Even worse, students often encounter obstacles to fully achieving their goals and aspirations, including a lack of institutional support, limited resources, and resistance from some university administrators (McCowan, 2020). These challenges often limit their ability to effectively advance climate action initiatives. Unsurprisingly, given the wide range of student roles in advancing sustainable environmental actions, climate education is also a gradually increasing challenge in higher education, especially in sustainability-related fields (McCowan, 2020). Universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate institutional commitment towards sustainable community well-being, necessitating the active engagement and empowerment of students as key stakeholders in the fight against climate change (Ojala, 2016; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2018). However, the capacity or agency of these young advocates to translate their concerns into meaningful and lasting change is often constrained by various structural and institutional factors, a term referred to as bounded agency in the capability approach. Bounded agency sheds light on this complex dynamic, highlighting how individual agency is shaped and limited by the social, political, and economic contexts in which it is exercised (Evans, 2007). This is particularly relevant in sustainable environmental actions, where student environmentalists navigate a web of institutional barriers, resource constraints, and entrenched power dynamics (Ojala, 2016).

In this article, we explore the perspectives and experiences of student environmentalists from two public universities, one in Malawi and one in Zambia. Our aim is to understand the limitations and constraints these individuals or groups face in their efforts to enact change, even when they are motivated and willing to do so. The research questions are as follows:

- What factors shape student climate actions?
- How do students navigate the constraints of bounded agency, and what strategies do they employ to advance climate action despite these challenges?

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics surrounding student environmentalism in the Global South. Understanding the factors that shape students' climate actions will illuminate the various social, economic, and cultural influences at play, revealing both the opportunities and barriers they encounter. Additionally, examining how students navigate the constraints of bounded agency will shed light on their resilience and resourcefulness in overcoming challenges. The strategies they employ to advance climate action can inform educators, policymakers, and organisations seeking to empower young advocates, ultimately enhancing support systems and fostering a more robust movement for environmental sustainability.

Following this introduction, the next section reviews relevant literature on climate change and students action in that regard. The theoretical underpinning of this article, drawing on the concept of bounded agency, is then discussed. We then describe the methodological approach before delving into the pertinent findings of the study. Lastly, we provide recommendations and a conclusion.

## Literature review

### Climate action and its determinants: Knowledge, norms and values

In climate change discourse there are varying perspectives regarding the factors that motivate students to adopt climate-sensitive behaviours such as advocacy and activism, eco-conscious consumerism, knowledge and awareness, adoption of sustainable practices, etc., and actions. Kolenatý et al. (2022) emphasise knowledge as a primary driver for climate action. Their research highlights that awareness and understanding of climate change positively influence individuals' willingness to act, their actions, and their sense of efficacy in addressing climate issues. This aligns with the premise that climate-related education is essential for fostering proactive behaviours among individuals. The acquisition of knowledge not only empowers individuals but also paves the way for broader national initiatives and commitments to combat the climate crisis (UNESCO & UNFCCC, 2016). Conversely, other studies present a more nuanced view. Research by Koessler et al. (2022) and Busch et al. (2019) indicate a weak correlation between knowledge and concern, or behaviours related to climate action. These findings suggest that while knowledge is important, it may not be a strong determinant of climate-conscious behaviours among young people. In their effort to construct an empirically supported theoretical model for youth engagement in climate action, Busch et al. (2019) argue that social norms are more significant predictors of climate-conscious behaviours than knowledge itself. Literature further supports this notion, showing that social factors like political affiliation and identity, in terms of how individuals perceive climate change and their willingness to act based on their sense of self and their connection to social, cultural, or political groups, significantly influence individual actions concerned with climate change (Fielding & Hornsey, 2016). Additionally, individuals who engage in discussions about climate change with peers and family tend to develop a heightened sense of concern regarding their environmental impact (Koessler et al., 2022).

Another substantial body of literature suggests that individuals' values are pivotal in determining climate-conscious action. Values, defined as the goals and desires individuals strive to achieve, can vary significantly in their endorsement across individuals (Hanel, 2018; Schwartz, 2017; Maio, 2016). In the context of climate action, values help shape how individuals prioritize environmental concerns in relation to other personal or societal goals. For example, individuals who hold 'biospheric values' – those that emphasise concern for nature and the well-being of the planet – are more likely to see themselves as environmental stewards and take actions aimed at mitigating climate change. These values become a core part of their identity, influencing their attitudes, behaviours, and even social affiliations. Steg (2014) and Dietz (2015) identify four distinct types of values that influence the extent to which individuals engage in climate action: biospheric, altruistic, egoistic, and hedonic.

- Biospheric values reflect a general care and concern for the environment.
- Altruistic values indicate a concern for the well-being of others.
- Egoistic values focus on personal status and economic possessions.
- Hedonic values pertain to the pursuit of comfort and pleasure.

While biospheric and altruistic values are often seen as conducive to positive environmental actions, the literature suggests that egoistic and hedonic values also play a significant role in shaping individuals' decisions to act – or not act – on climate issues (Bouman et al., 2018; Steg et al., 2014).

**The role of education in climate action**

Education is a crucial determinant of climate action, shaping students' understanding and engagement in environmental initiatives. Akrofi et al. (2019) indicate that students' knowledge about climate change significantly influences their involvement in sustainability efforts. Furthermore, the integration of climate education into university curricula enhances students' comprehension of environmental issues and empowers them to act (Leal Filho et al., 2023a). A study by Leal Filho et al. (2022) emphasises the importance of integrating sustainability into curricula across various disciplines. The authors argue that when students are equipped with knowledge about environmental issues, they are more likely to engage in activism.

Similarly, research by Chawla and Cushing (2021) suggests that experiential learning opportunities, such as fieldwork and community projects, enhance students' understanding of climate issues and empower them to act. These educational experiences foster a sense of agency, enabling students to believe their efforts can lead to meaningful change. However, challenges persist within current educational frameworks. For instance, environmental curricula often overload students and lack practical relevance, hindering their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world challenges (Ishaque et al., 2025). This disconnect between theory and practice can diminish students' agency and effectiveness in climate action (Rieckmann et al., 2021). Liston and Devitt (2020) articulate this concern by comparing the classroom experience to a passive environment, akin to being in 'church,' where students are mere recipients of information rather than active participants in their learning journey. This observation emphasises the need for more interactive and experiential learning opportunities that can stimulate students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

**A rationale for climate action among student environmentalists?**

Scholars have recognised that the expectations to respond to climate change encompass a wide range of economic, social, technological, political, and individual factors (Rieckman et al., 2021; Vargas-Callejas et al., 2018). Among these factors, one primary motivation for student environmentalists is their desire to create a sustainable future and express deep concern about the long-term implications of climate change, not only for their own lives but also for future generations (Kelsey et al., 2022). This sense of urgency is often fuelled by personal experiences with environmental degradation, such as extreme weather events and local pollution (Sullivan et al., 2021). The drastic increase in climate-induced disasters in recent years has heightened awareness among youth regarding the critical need for sustainability. This awareness stems from the belief that the current generation will bear the brunt of climate change's adverse effects (UNDP, 2023). Consequently, climate action, manifested through various forms of activism and personal endeavours, has evolved significantly over time.

University students have increasingly become active participants in responding to the climate crisis globally. Leal Filho et al. (2023b) note that universities possess an unparalleled potential to equip students with knowledge about climate change and foster their engagement in climate action. This involvement is crucial, especially considering the undermining influence of climate change on achieving long-term sustainability (Haq & Ahmed, 2020; Mugambiwa & Dzomonda, 2018). Furthermore, research by Hsu and Ritchie (2023) highlights that students are increasingly motivated by a moral obligation to address climate injustice, particularly as marginalized communities disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental harm. As students' attitudes and behaviours regarding sustainability are influenced by the knowledge they possess about climate change (Akrofi et al., 2019), the expectations for student environmentalists to drive climate action continue to grow.

**Issues affecting climate action among students**

A foundational issue affecting climate action among students is the level of awareness and understanding of climate change. According to Hine et al. (2021), many students exhibit a limited understanding of climate science, which can lead to apathy and disengagement. The authors further argue that educational institutions must prioritize comprehensive climate education to foster informed activism. Similarly, McCright and Dunlap (2018) emphasise that misinformation surrounding climate change can skew perceptions and reduce the urgency for action among students. Other scholars have highlighted motivation as a critical factor in driving student engagement in climate action. According to O'Brien et al. (2020), feelings of helplessness and despair regarding climate change can inhibit student activism. They suggest that fostering a sense of agency – where students believe their actions can make a difference – is essential for motivating climate action. Furthermore, research by Dempsey et al. (2022) indicates that peer influence significantly impacts students' willingness to engage in climate initiatives, highlighting the importance of social networks in fostering a culture of activism.

Socio-economic background significantly influences students' capacity to engage in climate action. A study by Esakkimuthu and Banupriya (2023) found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face barriers such as lack of access to resources, time constraints, and competing responsibilities, which limit their ability to participate in climate initiatives. The authors argue that addressing these disparities is vital for inclusive climate action. Additionally, research by Pahl et al. (2021) highlights that financial concerns can deter students from participating in sustainability programmes, suggesting that institutions need to provide more accessible opportunities for engagement.

Institutional support is another critical factor affecting student climate action. According to a study by Leal Filho et al. (2022), universities that actively promote sustainability through policies, funding, and dedicated programmes see higher levels of student participation in climate initiatives. The authors emphasise the need for institutions to create supportive environments that encourage student-led sustainability projects. Conversely, lack of institutional support can lead to frustration and decreased motivation among students, as highlighted by Gough et al. (2023). Studies show that partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and access to funding significantly enhance students' capabilities to implement meaningful environmental projects (Bennett, 2022). For example, collaborations with local organisations can provide students with the necessary tools, mentorship, and networking opportunities to translate their environmental advocacy into actionable plans. However, many students face bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient support from their universities which can stifle their motivation and engagement (Sule, 2024).

## Conceptual framework

In this study, we draw upon the conceptual perspectives of the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) which provide a nuanced understanding of the concept of bounded agency as experienced by student environmentalists in Malawi and Zambia. In the context of this study, the capability approach underscores the need to consider the multidimensional factors that enable or constrain the agency of student environmentalists in exercising their rights and freedoms to advance climate action initiatives. The concept of agency in the capability approach emphasises that individuals should actively participate in driving change rather than being passive recipients of it (Sen, 1999). Alkire (2010) adds that the different opportunities for agency empower people to promote the common good, giving them a voice and the ability to engage in processes that impact their lives. Therefore, students' agency in participating in climate and environmental action can be seen in terms of their freedom or accomplishments, depending on how they utilise opportunities for climate action. This perspective sheds light on the structural, institutional, and sociocultural barriers that can limit the agency of student environmentalists, thereby restricting their ability to participate fully in the process of human development and environmental sustainability.

As such, bounded agency highlights the complex interactions between individuals and the structures in which they exist and function. It points to the consideration of people as having a sense of ability to engage in things they regard as meaningful, but being shaped by different realities (Róbert, 2012). Therefore, the concept of bounded agency, as applied in this study, acknowledges that the ability of student environmentalists to exercise their agency is not an absolute or unconstrained phenomenon. Rather, it is shaped by the interplay of individual, institutional, and societal factors that enable or constrain their capacity to translate environmental concerns into meaningful action. Their perspectives and experiences should be understood within the broader context of their capabilities, access to resources, and the structural and institutional environments in which they operate.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perspectives and experiences of student environmentalists in Malawi and Zambia. These countries, situated in sub-Saharan Africa, face unique challenges in addressing climate change, with limited resources, infrastructure, and institutional capacity to support environmental initiatives (IPCC, 2022). This article draws on the empirical findings of two PhD projects that focused on environmental sustainability and climate action. The study conducted in Malawi, titled *University Community Partnerships for Climate Change Adaptation in Malawi: A Human Development Perspective*, was undertaken between 2021 and 2023 with Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) as a case study. It focused on engaging university stakeholders, including staff and students, as well as community members, to explore how partnerships for climate adaptation can be operationalized to promote sustainable community well-being. This study aimed to bridge the gap between academic institutions and local communities by fostering collaborations that address climate-related challenges and enhance resilience through collective action. Meanwhile, the study in Zambia, titled *The Role of Environmental Education in Fostering Agents of Environmental Sustainability in Zambia*, was carried out between 2022 and 2024 and focused on the University of Zambia (UNZA). This research engaged students, university staff, and government stakeholders to investigate the influence of environmental education on both past and present students of the university. The study specifically examined how environmental education shaped students' agency and capacity to drive positive environmental change and sustainability efforts. By focusing on the transformative potential of education, the study sought to understand the extent to which environmental education equips individuals to act as agents of change in addressing pressing environmental issues.

Both studies employed qualitative research methodologies to collect and analyze data. In Malawi, qualitative data provided insights into the dynamics of university-community partnerships and their potential to foster sustainable development, with a particular focus on students' agency in advancing climate action. Similarly, in Zambia, qualitative methods allowed for an in-depth exploration of the impact of environmental education on students' attitudes, behaviours, and actions toward environmental sustainability. Together, these studies contribute valuable knowledge on how academic institutions, through partnerships and education, can play a pivotal role in supporting students navigate challenges in advocating for climate action. In this article we draw from the key findings in the two research papers to highlight what can be learnt from the two converging cases because they explored interrelated issues. The findings presented in this article provide an in-depth understanding of the contextual factors that shape the climate action efforts of these young advocates.

**Participants and recruitment**

We explicitly targeted students from the two selected universities who had been actively involved in environmental organisations or initiatives during their studies. We identified 20 participants (all undergraduate students), 10 from each university, using a purposive sampling technique to ensure diverse representation in terms of gender, academic discipline, and level of involvement in environmental activities. The students who participated in the study were drawn from environmental education and environmental science programmes. These programmes were selected because they share similarities in their curriculum design, with both emphasising foundational knowledge in climate change, environmental sustainability, and ecological conservation. The overlap in content across these programmes provided a robust basis for understanding how students from different but related academic disciplines approach climate action. We defined students' environmental actions broadly, encompassing various activities, initiatives, and advocacy efforts undertaken by students to promote sustainable environmental practices, raise awareness, and enact positive change. Some of these initiatives include but are not limited to campus-based initiatives that directly reduce the environmental footprints of their educational institutions, community engagement initiatives and policy, advocacy and research initiatives. The decision to target these two universities was based on the relevance of the institutions in environmental scholarship and the geographical location as the two are neighbouring countries in Southern Africa, sharing similar socio-economic and environmental challenges.

Recruitment and participation of the participants was voluntary and was facilitated by department heads sending participation requests through class representatives, allowing students to make informed and voluntary decisions to participate. Targeted students were those involved in environmental clubs which among other things provide opportunities for students to engage in sustainable initiatives and environmental advocacy. The voluntary nature of the recruitment process and the targeting of students involved in environmental clubs ensured that the participants were self-motivated and actively engaged in environmental issues, which was important for the study to capture the nuanced perspectives and experiences of student environmentalists.

**Data collection**

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for the exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and the contextual factors that influenced their agency in addressing climate change. The interview guide was developed based on the conceptual framework and the key themes of the capability and human development approaches. Some of the key questions included were: "What factors have influenced your decision to engage in climate action initiatives, and how have these factors shaped your approach to addressing environmental challenges?" and "What challenges or barriers have you faced in your efforts to promote climate action, and what strategies have you employed to overcome these challenges? We conducted the interviews in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' availability and location. Table 1 contains the details of the students who participated in the interviews (n=20). The participants were given pseudonyms to secure their identities and any sensitive personal information that could compromise confidentiality has been omitted. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants. In terms of transcription, the authors uploaded the recordings on notta.ai and then carefully listened to each recording while reading what had been translated and correcting where necessary. The centrality of this process was to translate and transform all recorded sounds into comprehensible text.

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### Data analysis

The analysis of the interview data adhered to the principles of reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The analysis process involved familiarising oneself with the data, making initial annotations, reflectively developing themes, establishing connections, and revising the themes. Coding was based on the research questions and N-Vivo was employed to refine the key themes and develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences. The authors discussed the emergent themes including self-reflexivity, choice of narrative frame, and final naming. Consensus was reached by the authors

**Table 1. Respondent characteristics**

| Name | Age, country, gender | Programmme of study | Years of climate action engagement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nanji | 18, Zambia, Female | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 3 |
| Mel | 17, Zambia, Female | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 2 |
| Yoke | 16, Zambia, Female | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 1 |
| Liston | 19, Zambia, Male | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 4 |
| Levi | 17, Zambia, Male | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 4 |
| Gracian | 19, Zambia, Male | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 3 |
| Mary | 18, Zambia, Female | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 2 |
| Cheyi | 17, Zambia, Female | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 2 |
| Fanny | 16, Zambia, Female | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 3 |
| Eddie | 18, Zambia, Male | BSc Environmental Education and Management | 4 |
| Vee | 20, Malawi, Female | BSc Environmental Science | 2 |
| Aga | 17, Malawi, Female | BSc Environmental Science | 1 |
| Divine | 21, Malawi, Female | BSc Environmental Science | 2 |
| Lameck | 18, Malawi, Male | BSc Environmental Science | 3 |
| Lubby | 17, Malawi, Female | BSc Environmental Science | 3 |
| Clement | 20, Malawi, Male | BSc Environmental Science | 2 |
| Heather | 19, Malawi, Female | BSc Environmental Science | 4 |
| Timo | 17, Malawi, Male | BSc Environmental Science | 3 |
| Rute | 16, Malawi, Female | BSc Environmental Science | 2 |
| Ian | 18, Malawi, Male | BSc Environmental Science | 4 |

## Findings and discussion

### Factors that shape students' climate action

#### *Education and awareness*

Being environmentally knowledgeable may appear to influence one's actions, as highlighted by Misra and Panda (2017). However, data from the study revealed that higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping students' understanding of climate and environmental issues. This understanding, gained through education, directly impacts their decisions to engage in sustainability actions. Furthermore, higher education also influences the extent to which students are willing and able to pursue these sustainability efforts. Such findings align with the conclusions of Weckroth and Ala-Mantila (2022), which indicate that higher education positively influences individuals' intentions to engage in climate-related activities and increases the number of such actions they are likely to undertake. Participants affirmed that a curriculum that integrates these topics not only informs them about the state of the planet but also equips them with the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions. By engaging with subjects such as ecology, renewable energy, and sustainability practices, students grasp the complexity of climate change and its multifaceted impacts. For instance, Gracian (19, Zambia, Male) shared that the foundational knowledge empowers them to act, whether through personal lifestyle changes or active participation in community initiatives:

> *... I never fully understood the gravity of climate change until I joined Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, (LUANAR). Learning about the effects of deforestation and the importance of renewable energy opened my eyes to the challenges our planet faces. I remember a project where we had to analyze local water sources and their pollution levels. It was shocking to see how our actions directly impacted our community's health and the environment. This knowledge inspired me to join the environmental club where we could advance recycling initiatives at our school and organise clean-up days in our neighborhood. I realised that even small actions could make a difference. Education gave me the tools to not only understand the issues but also to feel empowered to advocate for change, both in my life and in my community.*

Aside from classroom knowledge, which the students appeared to have been sufficiently taught, students further shared that participating in social clubs such as the environmental club strengthens their critical thinking and problem-solving skills which encourages them to develop innovative solutions to environmental challenges, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency in addressing climate issues. Rute (16, Malawi, Female) exemplifies this point below:

> *Participating in our school's environmental club has been a game-changer for me. In addition to learning about climate change, our school's environmental club encouraged us to critically think about the problems we face. For our final project, we had to identify an environmental issue in our community and propose a solution. We chose to focus on beekeeping and entrepreneurial activity to help our group and communities generate income from the sales of honey. We also came up with a plan to create an awareness campaign on campus on recycling. This experience taught me that we can't just complain about problems; we need to actively seek solutions. It made me realise that I have the power to make a difference and that responsibility drives me to keep advocating for my community.*

The above reflections suggest that education and awareness serve as foundational elements in shaping students' understanding and actions regarding climate change. Students' insights

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underscore the transformative potential of an integrated curriculum that not only imparts knowledge but also fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills. While students like Gracian and Rute demonstrate a growing sense of agency through their educational experiences, it is essential to recognise that their ability to effect change is influenced by the resources and support available to them. Their narratives illustrate a shift from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in environmental advocacy, highlighting the role of education in expanding their capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). Moreover, education is not just a means to an end but a fundamental component of human flourishing and societal progress (Tilbury, 2011). Further, the collective approach to environmental challenges, as exemplified by students collaborating and devising solutions that benefit themselves and communities, reflects the interconnectedness of human development and sustainability, reinforcing the idea that empowering individuals through education can lead to broader societal change (UNESCO, 2017).

### *Peer influence*

In light of the ongoing literature on how peer influence shapes and enhances learning outcomes (Shao et al., 2024; Filade et al., 2019; Lubbers et al., 2006), this study further established that social dynamics among students significantly impacted their engagement in climate activism. In both countries, participants shared that friends and social networks often serve as powerful motivators, encouraging individuals to participate in collective actions such as environmental campaigns which involve sweeping and cleaning campus premises. The following narrations provide further insights:

> *It was inspiring to see how our enthusiasm for climate action ignited a spark in others. One of my friends, Sarah, had been hesitant about joining any activism before, but when she saw us rallying together for a campus clean-up event, she couldn't resist. She motioned to me that is 'If you're doing it, I want to be part of it too'.* (Nanji, 18, Zambia, Female)

> *I remember sitting in the cafeteria when a couple of my friends started discussing the need for bigger bins on campus and who was responsible for that and how the university should assist with installing bigger ones. Their conversation quickly turned into a passionate debate, and one of my colleagues I was sitting next to joined in. We ended up approaching the student council to ask management to address the issue.* (Yoke, 16, Zambia, Female)

> *When I just arrived at LUANAR, I joined an environmental club, and it was eye-opening to see how continuing students influenced my perspective. One afternoon, while discussing our upcoming projects, my friend Lucy shared her story of participating in a local tree-planting event. Inspired by her experience, I decided to join the next event. It was amazing to see how her passion not only motivated me but also encouraged others in our group to get involved.* (Lubby, 17, Malawi, Female)

The students' narratives above illustrate the social dynamics at play, where peer influence catalyzes individual involvement in climate action. For instance, Nanji's transformation from hesitation to active participation reflects how supportive social environments can enhance personal agency, allowing individuals to overcome barriers to engagement

(Robeyns, 2005). Similarly, the collaborative efforts to address campus issues demonstrate that when individuals come together, they can advocate for systemic changes, thereby improving their collective capabilities. Ultimately, these insights underscore the importance of fostering supportive peer networks to enhance individual and collective agency in pursuit of sustainable development goals (Pelenc et al., 2016). Such findings further resonate with existing literature that highlights the role of social networks in fostering environmental engagement among youth (Koessler et al., 2022; Fielding & Hornsey, 2016). The collective enthusiasm among peers not only fosters a sense of belonging but also amplifies the impact of individual actions, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of climate initiatives.

***Access to resources and institutional support***

The availability of resources has enhanced students' ability to engage in efforts and movements aimed at addressing and combating climate change and its impacts. With the support of materials such as educational materials, funding from NGO projects, and platforms for organising events, most participants acknowledged that they now were embarking on a combination of climate action interventions within and beyond the university. In the case of LUANAR, this study found that students from the Bunda Environmental Club partnered with the Jesuit Centre for Ecology and Development (JCDE) and Trocaire to empower young people and foster their passion for environmental conservation. It further emerged that through such partnerships, students accessed additional resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities, empowering them to implement meaningful changes within their communities. The following excerpts provide further insight into this:

> *Having access to vital resources has transformed us from passive observers into active participants in the fight against climate change.* (Eddie, 18, Zambia, Male)

> *With the support of networks and funding opportunities, we've been able to turn our environmental passions into tangible actions that really resonate in our communities.* (Vee, 20, Malawi, Female)

In addition to resources, students shared that the universities actively prioritize environmental stewardship by granting them access to university space to conduct awareness campaigns and other activities.

Therefore, the availability of resources enhances students' capabilities from passive observers into active participants, thus contributing to the broader literature that emphasises the importance of empowerment in driving climate action (Bennett, 2022; Salvador Costa et al., 2022). From the excerpts, the availability of resources enables students to initiate a diverse range of climate action interventions within and beyond their university settings. Such integration of resources and support systems is essential for fostering student-led environmental initiatives, as it empowers and inspires them to lead impactful actions (Mathie & Wals, 2022; O'Brien, 2020, 2019; Wals, 2019). Moreover, the concept of bounded agency, discussed by Giddens (1984), suggests that available resources and opportunities influence individuals' actions. The partnerships

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formed by students illustrate how access to additional resources can expand their agency, enabling them to implement meaningful changes within their communities.

### *Personal experience of disaster events*

Interviews with participants revealed that direct experiences with the impacts of climate change profoundly shaped their motivations to advocate for change. Students primarily from rural areas, who had firsthand experience with events such as recent cyclones, floods, and droughts, reported that these experiences served as wake-up calls, prompting them to recognise the reality of climate issues. This was common in Malawi, where students indicated that such personal encounters often led to a heightened sense of urgency and a desire to act, whether through grassroots organising, community service, or educational outreach:

> *After the cyclone IDA hit our village, I saw the destruction firsthand. Homes were washed away, and families lost everything. It was a wake-up call for me. I realised that climate change is not just a distant issue; it's affecting us now.* (Heather, 19, Malawi, Female)

The excerpt above highlights that when students witness the consequences of climate change first-hand, it can transform their understanding, fuelling their passion for advocacy and engagement in sustainability efforts. These experiences transform abstract concepts of climate change into immediate, personal realities, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility and a need for action.

## Navigating challenges: Students' resilience in advancing climate action

### *Institutional barriers*

In their climate activism pursuits, students frequently encounter significant institutional barriers that impede their agency and limit their capacity to undertake desired climate actions. Many students reported facing bureaucratic hurdles that slow down or obstruct their initiatives, creating a frustrating environment for climate action. For instance, lengthy approval processes to use university premises for proposed projects often stifle momentum, leading to disillusionment and reduced engagement. Additionally, a lack of financial resources further constrains their efforts; students highlighted the challenges posed by insufficient funding to support essential interventions, such as community workshops or sustainability initiatives. This financial shortfall is compounded by inadequate administrative and technical support, which leaves students feeling unsupported in their endeavours.

As Aga (17, Malawi, Female) articulated, *"Without the backing of NGOs that have been funding most of our initiatives, it feels like we are fighting an uphill battle."* Such barriers diminish students' motivation and highlight the need for systemic changes within educational institutions to empower youth-led climate action effectively. Other students shared concerns about backlash from administration or peers potentially deterring students from participating in climate action. For instance, Vee (20, Malawi, Female) mentioned that garnering support for advocacy from fellow students can be a challenge, especially those who study economics as they often prioritize short-term profitability and growth over long-term sustainability. This suggests the need to integrate interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the gap between economic priorities and sustainability goals, fostering a holistic understanding of how both can coexist and complement each other. Consider the excerpt below:

> *They are taught to chase numbers and profits. Climate change feels like an afterthought in our discussions.*

In navigating the bureaucratic hurdles, students shared that they often resort to grassroots organising and coalition-building, leveraging peer networks to amplify their voices and create collective pressure for climate action. This aligns with Sen's capability approach, as it highlights the importance of creating opportunities and removing barriers that enable individuals to exercise their agency and achieve valuable outcomes. It demonstrates that empowering students with the freedom to mobilize resources, build networks, and act collectively is critical for enhancing their capacity to address climate challenges effectively. Further, it aligns with the findings of Robeyns (2005), who emphasises that social networks can enhance individual agency by providing support and resources. Moreover, students have sought alternative funding sources, such as crowdfunding and hosting fundraising initiatives or partnerships with local NGOs, to finance their initiatives. This adaptability illustrates their ability to navigate constraints creatively, reinforcing the idea that bounded agency does not equate to a lack of agency but rather highlights the dynamic nature of agency within restrictive environments. Ultimately, while institutional barriers present significant challenges, students' agency in navigating these constraints underscores the potential for transformative action within the bounds of their agency. Thus, students must learn to work within these constraints while leveraging their creativity and adaptability to maximize impact. Bounded agency does not signify powerlessness; rather, it emphasises the need to develop skills such as strategic thinking, collaboration, and resourcefulness. For instance, in navigating institutional bureaucratic challenges, students mentioned that they engage informally with faculty and staff to seek support from those sympathetic to their cause(s), who can advocate for student initiatives within the institution.

***Time as a barrier***

Students cited limited time as a significant barrier that impedes their agency and ability to undertake climate actions. Over half of the interviewed students expressed the challenge of balancing rigorous academic commitments with their passion for environmental action, often feeling overwhelmed by the demands of coursework, exams, and extracurricular obligations. As one student (Ian, 18, Malawi, Male) noted, "*It's hard to dedicate time to climate action when I'm constantly juggling assignments and studying for tests.*" This struggle is compounded by other factors, such as part-time jobs and family responsibilities, which further constrain the time they have for activism. Research by Sule (2024) indicates that time constraints can significantly affect youth engagement in social movements, highlighting the need for supportive structures that allow students to integrate activism into their lives without compromising their

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educational goals. Consequently, addressing these time-related challenges is crucial for fostering a more supportive environment for student-led climate action.

Despite these limitations, students shared that they navigate their circumstances with creativity and determination, often seeking to integrate their activism into their existing schedules. For instance, some students reported organising study groups that double as platforms for discussing climate issues, thereby merging their academic and activist pursuits. This adaptive strategy reflects the notion of agency as a dynamic process, where individuals actively seek to maximize their impact within the constraints they face (Sen, 1999). Students also shared that they utilise time management techniques and prioritization strategies to carve out spaces for climate action. As highlighted by Sule (2024), effective time management can enhance individual agency, allowing students to engage meaningfully in their studies and advocacy efforts. Others shared that they collaborate with peers to share responsibilities, forming collective action groups that distribute the workload and create a supportive network. This aligns with the idea that social connections can bolster agency, enabling individuals to tackle challenges more effectively (Robeyns, 2005). Ultimately, while time limitations present significant barriers, students' resourcefulness in navigating these challenges reflects a proactive engagement with their circumstances, highlighting the potential for meaningful involvement in climate action despite the pressures they face.

### *Curriculum mismatch*

Students reported that curriculum in their institutions is highly multidisciplinary, offering a broad range of subjects. While this diversity can enhance employability and specialization opportunities for future environmentalists, it also presents significant challenges in terms of harnessing their practical skills for climate action. This was attributed to the experience that during academic semesters, the transition of courses is not progressive, as students are introduced to new courses almost every semester. Thus conceived, it diminishes the opportunities for the students to gain deeper understanding of course content and how to apply it practically to real-world settings. Many students expressed concerns that the curriculum is overloaded and overly academic. One student articulated this sentiment:

> *The programme is generally good, but sometimes we feel the courses are too many and mostly not progressive. It is like new concepts and content each new semester. I think if it were specialised and had a systematic flow, our learning would be more impactful.* (Aga, 17, Malawi, Female)

While the multidisciplinary nature of the curriculum offers a breadth of knowledge, it often lacks depth and contextual relevance. Another student noted:

> *The content is usually wide, but I think it lacks a concentration on our real-life environmental issues. It is more general rather than specific to the Zambian context. So, we learn but it doesn't really expose us to relatable knowledge or the opportunity to gain realistically relevant skills.* (Cheyi, 17, Zambia, Female)

The disconnect between academic content and real-world applicability reflects the limitations of students' agency. In both universities, the curriculum's failure to address local environmental challenges restricts students' ability to develop the competencies required for effective climate action. Such issues around curriculum overload have been identified as hurdles to enhancing proficiency and effective learning (Akhtar, 2023).

Related to the issue of curriculum was contextual relevance. While the environmental programme is deemed advantageously multidisciplinary, students were of the view that the content is not contextually relevant. These content/context inconsistencies were mainly attributed to power structures within and outside the university which characterise the development and implementation of the environmental curriculum.

While acknowledging such gaps, students shared that they navigate the challenges posed by an overloaded and contextually irrelevant curriculum by proactively seeking supplementary learning opportunities outside the formal educational framework even though this adds to their already demanding work schedules. This often involves engaging in community projects through school outreach clubs and collaborating with local organisations focused on environmental issues. Such initiatives not only allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings but also foster a sense of agency and empowerment in their climate activism. Consider, for instance, the experience of a student named Mary (18, Zambia, Female):

> *Participating in local clean-up campaigns and tree-planting initiatives has been transformative for me. It's one thing to learn about environmental issues in class, but seeing the impact of our actions in the community makes it real. These experiences have helped me understand how I can contribute to climate action, even with the limitations of our curriculum.*

Engaging in extracurricular activities provides a critical platform for students to bridge the gap between theory and practice. By engaging directly with their communities, students gain invaluable skills and insights that are often overlooked in their formal education (Phiri, 2024; Mazinga, 2021; Mtawa, 2017). This hands-on experience not only enhances their understanding of environmental challenges but also equips them with practical tools to address these issues effectively. Consequently, such initiatives empower students to exercise their agency, allowing them to become proactive contributors to climate action, despite the constraints of their academic programmes.

### *Pedagogy*

Connected to the curriculum are pedagogical issues, which encompass the content delivery process within university spaces. Empirically, the predominant method of teaching within the two universities is the teacher-centred approach. However, students were of the view that over-dependence on the lecture method for practical environmental programmes diminishes the opportunities for practical learning experiences to stimulate students' agency for action. Liston (19, Zambia, Male) in his forthright expression of his learning experience as being as though he is in church, exemplifies the strong sentiments about pedagogical issues. He explained:

> *From the programme name, one assumes there is a lot of practical experiences, but unfortunately, we learn more in class rather than outside of it. And it is usually the lecturer just dictating notes while we sit and write as though we are in 'church'.*

Liston's account shows a sense of the need for not only a practical experience in learning but also the centrality of active engagement within the learning process. This commentary resonates with the findings of scholars who have noted that student-centred pedagogies can enhance positive learning outcomes and deeper engagement in the learning process (Phiri, 2024). However, these environmental students felt reduced to mere recipients or consumers of academic content by their learning experiences. This in many ways affects not only their assimilation of academic content but their agency as potential contributors to the learning process. Moreover, with a teacher-centred approach students' capacity for agency is diminished. According to Sen's "agent-oriented view", these students ought to have opportunities to be "active participants rather than passive and docile recipients" (Sen, 1999, p. 281) if they are to thrive as agents. In reflecting on issues raised by students, it was empirically observed that while other factors such as lecturers' attitudes towards teaching (their agency) and other learning needs of different individual students influence the environmental learning process, many of these issues are escalated by limited institutional resources and bureaucratic issues. According to the students, the inclination towards non-practical modes of learning was because there were insufficient resources to allow students to go on field trips or conduct practical environmental activities. Without opportunities to fully acquire knowledge, skills and cultivate a sense of attachment to real life environment issues learning becomes limited. This further impacts students' capacity to fully comprehend environmental issues or function as key players within climate action spaces.

Students shared that they navigate such constraints by actively seeking supplementary learning opportunities that extend beyond traditional classroom settings, utilising a variety of resources to enhance their understanding of environmental issues. For instance, many students turn to online platforms such as YouTube, where they access educational videos and documentaries that provide real-world examples of climate action and environmental sustainability. They shared that channels dedicated to environmental education often feature experts discussing innovative solutions, case studies, and practical strategies that students can apply in their communities. Additionally, students frequently engage with social media platforms, where they follow environmental activists and organisations that share valuable insights and resources. This digital engagement allows them to stay informed about current environmental challenges and initiatives, fostering a sense of global connectedness and urgency. For example, one student from Malawi (Ian, 18, Malawi, Male) shared that platforms like Instagram and Twitter are rich with campaigns that encourage youth participation in climate action, providing students with ideas for grassroots initiatives they can implement locally. According to Hase and Kenyon (2000), these informal learning experiences can significantly enhance learners' motivation and engagement, allowing them to take ownership of their education. Similarly, Houghton and Sheehan (2021) emphasise that digital platforms can serve as vital resources for students seeking to supplement their formal education, enabling them to connect theory with practice. Hence, students effectively navigate the limitations of their educational environments, reinforcing their roles as active contributors to climate action.

### Opportunities for further research

While this study provides interesting and relevant results, we highlight the following as limitations and opportunities for further research that need to be acknowledged. First, while the study provides valuable insights into the experiences and strategies of student environmentalists, it does not capture the viewpoints of those in positions of authority within the universities who play a crucial role in shaping the institutional environment. Future research could benefit from including these institutional voices to develop comprehensive strategies for overcoming barriers and fostering collaboration between students and university authorities in pursuit of environmental sustainability. Second, the study provides a snapshot of student climate action at a particular time but does not consider how these efforts and institutional responses evolve over time. A longitudinal approach could offer insights into the sustainability and impact of student-led initiatives.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the notion of bounded agency in view of climate action in Malawi and Zambia. Owing to the crucial potential of youth to advance climate action, we explored the perspectives and experiences of student environmentalists from two public universities in Malawi and Zambia. We sought to understand the factors that particularly shape student environmentalists' agency in climate action. Three research questions guided this study: What are the perspectives and preferred climate action traits of student environmentalists? What factors shape students' climate actions? How do students navigate the constraints of bounded agency, and what strategies do they employ to advance climate action despite these challenges? We discussed the factors that shape students' climate action under the following themes: education and awareness, peer influence, access to resources and institutional support, and personal experience. The study found that alongside their motivations and desires to enact change in their preferred and meaningful ways, students in Malawi and Zambia face limitations and constraints.

These limitations include inadequate or lack of institutional support and resources from their universities. In many ways, this results in their inability to effectively organise and implement climate-action oriented initiatives. Additionally, students are further inhibited from exercising their climate consciousness by structural issues related to power within the university as well as the influence of sociocultural norms. In their perspectives, students' ability to drive change through voice and meaningful efforts are predominantly marginalized and their efforts are undermined. However, amid all these limitations, students in the study demonstrated a sense of agency through various strategies they employ to navigate their bounded agency. The strategies include building cross-institutional collaborations with NGOs and other stakeholders, leveraging social media platforms to amplify their message, and engaging in grassroots advocacy and community-based projects.

The perspectives on how students navigate their bounded agency for climate action were discussed under the following themes: institutional barriers, time as a barrier, curriculum mismatch and pedagogy.

This article provides critical insights into the lived experiences of environmentalist youth in pursuit of positive environmental change through climate action. We have unpacked the barriers and opportunities for climate action in Malawi and Zambia, prompting reflections on how supportive structures can be impactful in advancing youth action. The voices of student participants in both countries illuminate the resilience they demonstrate to foster environmental sustainability. Significantly, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that shape the landscape for climate action efforts of student environmentalists in the Global South.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Students’ extracurricular activities programmes: Prospects and challenges in Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) universities

# برامج الأنشطة الطلابية اللاصفية: الآفاق والتحديات في جامعات دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي

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## ABSTRACT

This article introduces the prospective benefits of, and anticipated challenges faced by the student extracurricular activities programmes in some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) universities. There is limited data and relatively little research on such programmes, and little reliable information is available on the websites of some of the national universities in the GCC region. For this reason, the study restricted itself to examining two institutions, Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, as case studies. These two universities were chosen due to their significant engagement in student extracurricular activities and their substantial student enrolment numbers. Indeed, the student extracurricular activities programme is a growing section in some GCC universities, with different orientations, foci, and comparative advantages to be found among them. Nonetheless, these programmes may face several expected challenges within the GCC setting due to the disparities in rules, practices, and objectives across different universities. The current study aims to explore the ways in which the two GCC-region universities are effectively integrating their extracurricular activities programmes as essential components of their educational and development policies; the motives of Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in engaging in student extracurricular activities programmes; and consider the challenges these programmes are likely to confront at the two universities. Addressing these study concerns necessitates an explanation of the policies and practices that inform and impact the development of the student extracurricular activities programme as a valuable initiative.

## KEYWORDS

*University student extracurricular activities, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), student organisation, theory of student involvement*

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**ملخص**

تقدم هذه الورقة آفاق البرامج الطلابية للأنشطة اللاصفية في بعض جامعات دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي والتحديات المتوقعة التي تواجهها. توجد بيانات محدودة وأبحاث قليلة نسبيًا حول هذه البرامج، وتتوفر معلومات موثوقة قليلة على مواقع بعض الجامعات الوطنية في منطقة مجلس التعاون الخليجي.لهذا السبب، اقتصر البحث على دراسة مؤسستين فقط—جامعة قطر وجامعة السلطان قابوس في سلطنة عمان—كحالات دراسية.تم اختيار هاتين الجامعتين بسبب مشاركتهما الكبيرة في الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب وأعداد الطلاب الكبيرة الملتحقين بهما. في الواقع، يعد برنامج الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب قسمًا متناميًا في بعض الجامعات الخليجية، مع توجهات مختلفة وتركيزات ومزايا نسبية يمكن العثور عليها في هذه الانشطة الحيوية. ومع ذلك، قد تواجه هذه البرامج عدة تحديات متوقعة في إطار دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي بسبب التباينات في القواعد والممارسات والأهداف بين الجامعات المختلفة. سؤال البحث الاول: كيف تدمج جامعة قطر وجامعة السلطان قابوس في منطقة الخليج العربي برامج الأنشطة اللاصفية بشكل فعال كأجزاء أساسية من السياسة التعليمية والتنموية؟ السؤال الثاني: ما الذي يحفز جامعة قطر وجامعة السلطان قابوس على الانخراط في برامج الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب؟ السؤال الثالث: ما هي التحديات المتوقعة التي ستواجه هذه البرامج في الجامعتين؟

معالجة هذه المخاوف الدراسية تتطلب توضيح السياسات والممارسات التي تشكل وتؤثر على تطوير برنامج الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب كمبادرة مهمة وذات قيمة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية**

الأنشطة اللاصفية لطلاب الجامعة، مجلس التعاون العربي الخليجي، المنظمات الطلابية، نظرية مشاركة الطلاب.

## Introduction

University student extracurricular activities are defined in two broad ways: (1) in a traditionally narrow sense as involvement by students on campus, either voluntarily or through the encouragement of their faculties or administrators, in different organisations, associations, programmes, initiatives, or clubs that are distinct from their academic curricular programme; and (2) as any social, physical, or psychological energy devoted by students on campus to the academic experience as a whole (Ahmad et al., 2019; Astin, 1999; Posner, 2009). Therefore, extracurricular activities fluctuate in structure and policy between universities due to variations in each institution's educational and sociocultural priorities, as well as their aims for improving student engagement beyond the classroom. What is apparent from the literature and the two case studies below is that extracurricular activities are no longer considered truly 'extracurricular' in nature and are instead increasingly perceived to be an integral part of the academic experience. As Astin (1999, p. 518) emphasised, "Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience".

Consequently, students' extracurricular activities can now be characterised and coupled with academia because "extracurricular activities are part and parcel of [the] modern day's academic curriculum" (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 41). In fact, extracurricular activities are intended to take place outside of the classroom within the universities' campuses to nurture students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, physical well-being, and personal development (Ahmad et al., 2019; Posner, 2009; Posner & Brodsky, 1992). Furthermore, the student extracurricular activities programme has the capacity to transform students from passive to active agents on the university campus (Veronesi & Gunderman, 2012). Thus, students' extracurricular activities are likely influenced by varying institutional objectives across universities, as these activities may be structured or unstructured regarding functions, domains, participation, and political, cultural, or social orientations and preferences.

## Methodology

The major objective of this study is to present the prospects and discuss the expected challenges likely to confront student extracurricular activities programmes at GCC universities, with a particular emphasis on Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman as case studies. This reflective study is classified as a qualitative analytical study, utilising pre-existing secondary material sourced from books, journal papers, and statements from the official websites of the two universities. Therefore, it was completed primarily through desktop research. This reflective study complies with ethical standards in the design, presentation, analysis, and documentation of data as mandated by scientific research protocols.

## Conceptual and theoretical perspectives

The paramount and perpetual concept used by educational and learning theorists to define and develop the comprehension of student extracurricular activities is 'involvement'. This is because the involvement concept has a likeness with and the capacity to convey what these theorists have conventionally described as 'vigilance' as well as 'time-on-task' (Astin, 1999). However, there is a tendency among critics and other theorists to disarticulate the meaning of 'involvement' from 'vigilance' and 'time-on-task' because these two meanings are too precise for such a broad and all-encompassing notion as 'involvement'. Instead, there is a compelling group of theorists who favour the concept of 'effort,' because it is much narrower and it is more synonymous with the concept of involvement (Astin, 1999). As Astin (1999, p. 519) confirmed, "It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement".

In comparison to the other pedagogical theories, such as that of subject matter, the resource theory and the individualized (or eclectic) approach, Astin (1999) proposed that the most appropriate theory with which to approach student extracurricular activities in universities is the student involvement theory. This is because, first, the student involvement theory argues that "a particular curriculum, to achieve the effects intended, must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development" (Astin, 1999, p. 522). Second, "the most important hypothesis in the theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (Astin, 1999, p. 529). Furthermore, the author demonstrated that the student involvement theory has the following five basic postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects.
2. Involvement occurs along a continuum – that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational programme is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that programme.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (Astin, 1999, p. 519)

Hence, the theory of student involvement encourages administrators as well as educators to focus all efforts on what students do rather than concentrating on what they think or feel. Shifting the efforts to what students do is exemplified by two pillars (Astin, 1999): first, is the degree of efforts exerted to encourage and motivate students; and second, is the calculation of time and energy the student allocates to the learning and studying process. Furthermore, the student involvement theory "assumes that student learning and development will not be impressive if educators focus most of their attention on course content, teaching techniques, laboratories, books, and other resources" (Astin, 1999, p. 522).

While other theories focus mainly on developmental outcomes (the *what* of student development), the theory of student involvement is more concerned with the techniques and methods that have the capacity to alleviate inertia, boredom, anxiety, low self-confidence, or other barriers to engagement and accelerate student development (the *how* of student development). This is because the most precious and important factor in advancing student development is the time spent in involvement by the student (Astin, 1999). Therefore, administrators and educators alike, instead of preoccupying themselves with the allocation of tangible fiscal resources, should dedicate themselves to their most significant institutional resource: student time (Astin, 1999). As Astin (1999, p. 523) asserted, "The theory of student involvement explicitly acknowledges that the psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite".

The student involvement theory suggests the following areas, forms, places, and programmes for involvement on university campuses: in campus residences, because it provides an opportunity to develop student leadership and athletic activities due to proximity and accessibility; honors programmes, because they construct faculty-student relationships; student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom; and athletic involvement and student participation on their representative organisation board (Astin, 1999). Therefore, "instructors can be more effective if they focus on the intended outcomes of their pedagogical efforts: achieving maximum student involvement and learning" (Astin, 1999, p. 526). Furthermore, the student involvement theory offers an opportunity to enhance the academic performance of students with academic difficulties (Astin, 1999; Baker, 2008; Fischer, 2007; Hawkins, 2010). This objective can be achieved by investigating the reasons students are distracted from realising their academic potential. Simply put, the theory is useful in understanding the primary objects on which students focus their energies rather than studying and learning (Astin, 1999). In addition, the student involvement theory predicts that students who are involved in extracurricular activities frequently thrive in their exams, continue attending their classes, and develop a better understanding of their abilities and traits (Ahmad et al., 2019).

## Student extracurricular activities: Prospects

A student organisation is defined as a well-established entity in the university that registers students in a legitimate extracurricular activity with defined objectives and a recognised structure. It is the most popular locus of participation, taking the initiative in attracting students to participate and get involved in extracurricular activities on university campuses (Kuk et al., 2008). Besides the student organisation, there are different types of clubs and associations on and around university campuses, such as sports, cultural, social, political, debating, photography, and extempore speech clubs (Kuk et al., 2008; Posner & Brodsky, 1992). Furthermore, there are well-established entities developed by the universities to blend or function in parallel with the student organisations to deliver specific and focused services, such as students' representative boards, student employment programmes, and student leadership programmes (Ahmad et al., 2019; Kuk et al., 2008; Posner, 2009; Posner & Brodsky, 1992).

Above all, the leadership programme offered to students as a practical extracurricular activity on campus has the ability to substantially increase the rate of students' participation and engagement in leadership opportunities or behaviours in the near future as well as over time (Posner, 2009). Furthermore, such a programme benefits students and the university alike by creating a culture of responsibility, vitality, service, empowerment, and community (Veronesi & Gunderman, 2012). It is important to note that there is a misconception in evaluating the utility of student organisation by type or function, because there is no organisational type that is either positive or negative for all students (Baker, 2008).

Accordingly, as Gholson (1985) demonstrates, student extracurricular activities generate a positive impact on student success and skills improvement that is projected out into nonacademic settings such as employment; marriage; social, cultural, and political engagement; and other domains. Moreover, it has been shown that students' extracurricular activities are predicted to be a positive factor in improving students' personality, attitudes, and success during and beyond their academic careers (Joekel, 1985; Stephens & Schaben, 2002; Veronesi & Gunderman, 2012). In addition, it has

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been concluded that "students who participate in extracurricular activities generally benefit from having better examination results, having higher standardized test scores and higher educational attainment, attending class more regularly and having higher self-concept" (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 45). Besides, there is an indisputable connection between emotional/social health factors among students on university campuses and their academic performance, and in particular their retention (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

Likewise, students who participate in extracurricular activities develop and foster a sense of community on campus. This community spirit is propelled by academic interactions with peers; deeper interactions with peers; and social and deeper life interactions with faculty/staff (Sriram et al., 2020).

## Student extracurricular activities: Prospects in the GCC context

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) consists of six states: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. These states are commonly identified as 'rentier states' because of their vast wealth and profits from oil and gas export (Ewers, 2015). However, in their efforts to make the transition to becoming less oil-dependent, these states are sincerely planning to diversify their economies in order to sustain the wealth and higher income they enjoy. In this, education becomes an essential strategy and not merely a choice (Ewers, 2015), making the subject of the current study a timely one. The GCC states have experienced the sort of changes in their societies that are produced by economic growth, due to the abundance of the natural resources oil and natural gas (Ewers, 2015). In order to reform their economies, the GCC states documented their strategies for reforms and classified them as visions and plans. For example, both the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Sultanate of Oman's Vision 2040 emphasise the role of human development and education in transitioning to knowledge-based economies (General Secretariat For Development Planning-Government of State of Qatar, 2008; Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit-Government of Sultanate of Oman, 2021).

For example, at Qatar University, the student activities programmes have gained greater attention and support from the university's higher administration, in particular from the contemporary student affairs division. It is evident that the university is succeeding in making the student extracurricular activities programme into a viable and highly prioritized part of its educational and developmental policy. This is demonstrated by the wide range and inclusive nature of programmes introduced to enrich students' university experience at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in parallel with the country's national vision for 2030. The student affairs division overseeing the student activities programmes consists of different sections and departments that are intended to harmonize and implement the policies and agendas proposed in the national vision document, producing a diversified and vibrant set of programmes and initiatives (Student Activities–Qatar University, 2023). According to the official webpages of the student activities section at Qatar University, student activities include a variety of co-curricular and extracurricular programmes, such as skills development, problem-solving, critical thinking, innovation, entrepreneurship, communication, goal setting, fiscal management, marketing and promotion, and many others (Student Activities–Qatar University, 2023). Likewise, the mission statement of the student activities section reads: "Serve as [a] catalyst involving students in learning opportunities to make student life at QU interesting, educational, engaging, and memorable" (Student Activies–Qatar University, 2023). Hence, the student activities section at Qatar University holds straightforward objectives, targeting their students by focusing on four thought-provoking components: making the campus and student experience (1) interesting, (2) educational, (3) engaging, and (4) memorable. Moreover, since the student extracurricular activities programme is expected to contribute to the human development that is proposed in the national vision, Qatar University is unequivocally attracted to it and has afforded it the necessary support and consideration to make it sustainable. Furthermore, the introduction of the student leadership and community service programme, which is vital in supporting the student activities programme, states that:

> *Student Leadership and Community Service seeks to provide a positive university environment that supports your learning and develops your leadership skills to contribute effectively to both the local and the university community. That is [achieved] by providing volunteering opportunities, training programs, and extracurricular activities that enrich your student experience and contribute to your personal, professional, and academic growth.* (Student Leadership and Community Service–Qatar University, 2023)

In the Sultanate of Oman, the largest and most prominent university is Sultan Qaboos University. Its student activities programme is one of the most vibrant in all the GCC universities. The university's Deanship of Student Affairs is the division responsible for implementing the extracurricular activities programme. However, the office of the Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities is key to advancing the programme. As stated on the division's webpage: "The Office [of Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities] inspires its vision, mission, and goals from the fact that the student is the main pillar of the sustainable development the Sultanate is experiencing" (Sultan Qaboos University, Assistant Dean for Guidance and Students Activities, 2023). As can be seen, the Office of Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities is implementing the proposed sustainable development objectives for the sultanate. Two observations can be made: first, this commitment is supported by various initiatives that are intended to see student extracurricular activities flourish at the university. Second, the aforementioned proposed objectives and their programmes and initiatives clearly reflect the country's national vision for 2040 (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit-Government of Sultanate of Oman, 2021).

According to the official webpages of the student activities section at Sultan Qaboos University, student activities extend to a range of extracurricular domains, such as volunteering, leadership enablement, cultural and sporting activities, religious counselling, and innovation (Sultan Qaboos University, Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities, 2023). Likewise, the mission statement of the Dean of Student Affairs reveals the specific objectives of having a student extracurricular activities programme, stating that "Providing a university environment that contributes to the promotion of the human and community values in the hearts of the students achievements" (Sultan

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Qaboos University, D. of S.A., 2023). Simply put, the deanship office holds the upper hand in creating opportunities for enriching student university experiences by acting as a catalyst for student involvement. Thus, the extracurricular activities programme reflects the university's unwavering commitment to human development and the transition to a knowledge-based economy. As a result, the university's ultimate goal is to reach the previously mentioned objectives as well as render them sustainable.

As previously mentioned, relatively little research exists that explores the effectiveness of student extracurricular activities programmes in GCC universities. This study aims to address the research question regarding the presumed challenges associated with such programmes by aligning theoretical and practical perspectives on these challenges, elucidating the significance of student extracurricular activities, and providing explicit recommendations. These proposals aim to illuminate the theoretical strengths and future possibilities of the programmes, seeking to integrate theory and practice. Furthermore, it is essential to identify the anticipated challenges in the execution of student extracurricular activities programmes at GCC institutions. To that purpose, officials and educators at both Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University need to acknowledge the following:

- Identifying the proper concept with which to analyze the effectiveness of their student extracurricular activities programme is the first step, because both the concepts of 'task-on-time' and 'effort' are correlated with the realm of cognitive learning outcomes, while the concept of 'involvement' is related to the realm of the learning process. "[From] the standpoint of the educator, the most important hypothesis in the theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (Astin, 1999, p. 529). Therefore, it is crucial for the student affairs divisions in the universities to distinguish between the learning process and learning outcomes.
- The student affairs divisions should focus on the students' motivation and behaviours rather than the traditional pedagogical approaches such as technique and subject matter. This is because, "according to this [the subject matter] theory, student learning and development depend primarily on exposure to the right subject matter" (Astin, 1999, p. 520), rather than concentrating specifically on the students' motives.
- Administrators and educators in universities should recognise that the student's time is the most precious resource, rather than institutional resources. Despite the abundance of institutional resources, the student's time is limited (Astin, 1999). Making optimal use of it is one of the most productive strategies a university can adopt.
- It is essential to establish consistent rules and processes to assess the student extracurricular activities programme, including all initiatives, departments, and programs, by employing the concept of 'involvement' as the primary criterion for analysis and evaluation (Astin, 1999).
- Given that the student extracurricular activities programme is elective, certain projects and programmes within the programme ought to be rendered

mandatory for students. Moreover, several projects within the extracurricular activities programme might extend into aspects of the academic curriculum. The objective is to connect academic and nonacademic realms by fully utilising the student extracurricular activities programme.

## Conclusion

This study examines the prospective advantages of the extracurricular activities programmes for university students. The emphasis was on how these initiatives could facilitate national transformation by using the potential of students and youth to achieve national objectives. Extracurricular activities at a university may appear inconsequential; yet studies have demonstrated that they are, in fact, a crucial component of national transformation and progress.

Significant focus has been devoted to explaining the most pertinent ideas and the conceptual frameworks of these programmes. A comprehensive argument has been presented on the significance of student engagement theory and the concept of 'involvement'. The study delineates the potential prospects and expected challenges student extracurricular activities programmes may face at two GCC universities. This reflective study explains the extracurricular activities programmes available to students at Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in Sultanate of Oman as case studies. Extracurricular activities programmes for students is an evolving aspect of these two GCC universities, distinguished by diverse approaches and relative advantages across universities. Both universities are enacting policies that promote human development and the shift to knowledge-based economies within their student extracurricular activities programmes. In addition, both the universities' policies seem to have originated from the national development visions of each country, which may bolster the feasibility and practicality of such programmes in both institutions.

It behooves administrators and educators to recognise and capitalize on the human resources potential such programmes offer by familiarising themselves with the pertinent theory and engaging in appropriate praxis. The study has offered recommendations for improving the alignment between current extracurricular initiatives and programmes at both universities in the GCC region, and their potential as assessed through revised theoretical and practical perspectives in the literature. These recommendations act as potential deterrents of challenges, expected or unexpected, to the programmes in the near future at either university.

### Ethics statement

The study reported on in this article did not involve human participants and therefore did not require ethics clearance.

### Potential conflict of interests

The author declares no competing or conflicting interests existed in the production of this article.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Exploring character strengths among South African university students: Insights from a WhatsApp-based intervention

# Exploration des forces de caractère chez les étudiants sud-africains : enseignements d'une intervention WhatsApp

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## ABSTRACT

Character strengths, such as resilience, justice, and appreciation of beauty, play a key role in student well-being and academic engagement. This study explores the strengths profiles of 302 students at a South African university and evaluates the effectiveness of a six-week WhatsApp-based intervention designed to enhance self-awareness and strengths application. Using the VIA Character Strengths Survey, we found 'kindness', 'love of learning' and 'fairness' were the most highly endorsed strengths, while 'zest', 'bravery' and 'self-regulation' were lowest. Daily reflective prompts encouraged students to apply their strengths in different contexts. Post-intervention survey results from 55 participants indicated that most found the course beneficial for increasing self-awareness (90%) and understanding how to apply their character strengths in daily life (87%). Additionally, 93% of respondents reported that the daily messages helped them understand how to use their strengths to achieve their goals. Findings are discussed in relation to South Africa's social and cultural landscape, highlighting the potential of low-cost, digital interventions to support student development. While limited to a single institution, this study suggests promise for culturally responsive, strengths-based courses in higher education.

## KEYWORDS

*Character strengths, positive psychology, student well-being, higher education, university students, strengths-based interventions, WhatsApp, self-awareness, personal development, South Africa*

## RÉSUMÉ

Les forces de caractère, telles que la résilience, la justice et l'appréciation de la beauté, jouent un rôle essentiel dans le bien-être et l'engagement académique des étudiants. Cette étude explore les profils de forces de 302 étudiants d'une université sud-africaine et évalue l'efficacité d'une intervention WhatsApp de six semaines, conçue pour améliorer la conscience de soi et l'application de ces forces. L'enquête VIA sur les forces de caractère a révélé que la gentillesse,

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l'amour de l'apprentissage et l'équité étaient les forces les plus fréquemment citées, tandis que l'enthousiasme, le courage et l'autorégulation étaient les moins mentionnées. Des réflexions quotidiennes ont encouragé les étudiants à mobiliser leurs forces dans différents contextes. Les résultats de l'enquête post-intervention menée auprès de 55 participants indiquent que la majorité a trouvé le cours bénéfique pour accroître la conscience de soi (90 %) et mieux comprendre comment appliquer leurs forces de caractère au quotidien (87 %). De plus, 93 % des répondants ont déclaré que les messages quotidiens les avaient aidés à comprendre comment utiliser leurs forces pour atteindre leurs objectifs. Les résultats sont analysés à la lumière du contexte social et culturel sud-africain, soulignant le potentiel des interventions numériques à faible coût pour soutenir le développement des étudiants. Bien que limitée à un seul établissement, cette étude ouvre des perspectives prometteuses pour des cours d'enseignement supérieur culturellement adaptés et centrés sur les forces.

**MOTS-CLÉS**

*Forces de caractère, psychologie positive, bien-être étudiant, enseignement supérieur, étudiants universitaires, interventions axées sur les forces, WhatsApp, conscience de soi, développement personnel, Afrique du Sud*

## Introduction

The well-being and success of university students are central goals for higher education institutions worldwide, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, where education continues to play a crucial role in societal transformation (Soudien, 2013). South African universities face the challenges of addressing historical inequalities, promoting inclusivity, and supporting students who often face socio-economic hardships and mental health challenges (Walker, 2019). Programmes to enhance resilience and personal growth promise to empower students to navigate academic and life challenges more effectively.

We draw inspiration from the positive university framework (Oades et al., 2011), which is grounded in Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, emphasising positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment as key components of student flourishing. Expanding on the five domains outlined in the positive university framework, we introduce a virtual space in the form of a WhatsApp group. Within this space, we implemented a character strengths programme delivered through WhatsApp text messages during the summer vacation, designed to enhance student well-being in a structured yet accessible way.

Character strengths – defined as positive traits that contribute to one's ability to thrive – are increasingly recognized as valuable for students' personal and academic development (e.g. Wagner et al., 2020). Prior studies show that awareness and application of character strengths can enhance students' resilience, well-being, and motivation (Park & Peterson, 2009), and character strength recognition can contribute to a positive university (Oades et al., 2011). In South Africa, character strengths like perseverance, fairness, and appreciation of beauty may hold particular relevance due to the nation's social and cultural context, where justice, reconciliation and diversity are promoted. However, limited research exists on character strengths among South African university students, leaving a gap in understanding how these strengths may be expressed and nurtured within this context.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the character strengths of South African university students and assessing the impact of a brief, WhatsApp-based character strengths intervention. The research examines both the character strengths profile of students and their responses to the intervention, seeking insights into how character strengths support well-being and academic engagement in a uniquely South African setting.

## Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the character strengths model, developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), which categorizes 24 character strengths into six core virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. This model offers a scientifically validated framework for assessing character strengths across diverse populations, enabling individuals to identify their unique strengths profiles. Research shows that cultivating and applying these strengths is linked to numerous positive outcomes, such as improved life satisfaction, mental well-being, and resilience (Niemiec, 2012; Park & Peterson, 2009). In educational contexts, the character strengths model has been used to promote student engagement, promoting personal growth, and supporting academic resilience (Green, 2024).

However, research on character strengths within South Africa is limited, leaving a gap in understanding how South African students' unique sociocultural and historical context influences their character development and expression. South Africa's legacy of Apartheid, combined with current socio-economic inequalities, presents unique challenges to students in higher education. Character strengths like resilience, social intelligence, and fairness may hold particular importance for these students, given the demands for perseverance in the face of structural challenges, and a need for empathy and inclusivity in navigating a diverse society. Previous studies have found that character strengths can be deeply contextual, reflecting cultural values and historical experiences (Browning et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2020). This study builds on this literature, investigating character strengths within a South African university setting to examine how the nation's social and political history may shape students' strengths profiles.

The VIA Character Strengths Survey serves as the primary tool for measuring character strengths in this study. This self-report survey provides a structured means of identifying individuals' top strengths, offering insights into the personal qualities that South African students find most relevant and meaningful. The VIA survey has been validated globally, including in diverse cultural contexts (McGrath, 2014), making it a suitable tool for exploring character strengths among South African students.

In addition to assessing students' strengths profiles, this study introduces a brief WhatsApp-based intervention designed to activate and support students' character strengths. The intervention consists of daily messages encouraging reflection on specific strengths and their application in daily life. This approach draws on theories of positive psychology and behaviour change, which suggest that regular engagement with strengths-based content can reinforce self-awareness and increase well-being (Niemiec, 2018). The use of WhatsApp, a widely accessible and familiar platform, aligns with research indicating that strengths interventions are more effective when they are integrated into participants' daily routines and conducted through familiar, accessible media (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

## Research context and objectives

The dual goals of the study are: (1) understanding the character strengths profiles of South African university students within their sociocultural context, and (2) exploring the impact of a low-cost, accessible intervention on students' awareness and application of their strengths. This study aims to fill critical gaps in the literature by contributing to the limited body of research on character strengths in African higher education settings and by examining the effectiveness of a digital, strengths-based intervention in enhancing well-being and engagement among students.

## Methods

### Participants and measures

Participants for this study were recruited through an open call to students and staff organized by the Department of Student Affairs at the University of Cape Town, a major research-intensive university in South Africa with approximately 30 000 students and 5 000 permanent staff members. Participation in the course was voluntary and free of charge. A total of 611 individuals (98.5% students) initially registered for the six-week character strengths course. Ethical considerations included informed consent emphasising the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the participants› right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

The two main measures used for data collection were:

1. The **VIA Character Strengths Survey**: At the start of the course, participants completed the VIA Character Strengths Survey, a validated 120-item self-report assessment. This survey is widely used to measure 24 character strengths across six virtues, as conceptualized by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The VIA survey provides each participant with a personalized profile of their top character strengths, which served as a baseline for understanding the strengths that participants brought into the course.
2. The **Post-Intervention Survey**: After completing the course, participants were invited to complete an evaluation survey assessing their experience and the perceived benefits of the intervention. The survey link was distributed via WhatsApp. The survey included Likert-scale items to quantify their self-reported increases in self-awareness, understanding of character strengths, and perceived impact on well-being. In addition, open-ended questions allowed participants to share qualitative feedback on their experiences and the practical applications of character strengths in their daily lives.

### Intervention overview

The six-week WhatsApp-based character strengths course was designed to encourage daily reflection and practical engagement with individual strengths. Each morning, participants received a brief, structured WhatsApp message focusing on a specific character strength, followed by an evening affirmation message. The messages were intentionally concise to ensure ease of engagement and included a short prompt to encourage self-reflection and active use of the highlighted strength, for example, participants might be asked to reflect on a time they demonstrated kindness or to apply curiosity by exploring something new in their surroundings. Some messages included questions or challenges, encouraging participants to consider how they could use each strength in future situations.

Since the course ran over the summer vacation, when many participants are not on campus and might have to pay for data through mobile networks to participate, the WhatsApp group was set up to be unidirectional, with only the administrator able to send messages. Optional weekly discussion sessions were held on MS Teams, providing an opportunity for participants to ask questions and discuss the strengths introduced during the week.

### Data collection and analysis

Quantitative and qualitative approaches provide a comprehensive view of participants' experiences and the course's impact.

#### *Quantitative analysis*

On sign-up, participants received a project-specific link to the VIA Character Strengths Survey. The survey results were downloaded and analysed on a spreadsheet. Character strengths were ranked from highest to lowest mean scores and the most common top five and bottom five strengths were calculated. The post-intervention Google Form survey automatically calculated percentages for Likert-scale item responses and displayed results on pie charts.

#### *Qualitative analysis*

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used on the 55 responses to the open-ended questions in the post-intervention survey. Both authors independently read and grouped responses into codes and then themes. Consensus was reached through email exchange between the authors, and a final summarised list was compiled. For example, "*Have mini quizzes at the end of each week as a reflection exercise*" was a recommendation submitted for the course's improvement. This was coded as 'engagement' and 'mini-activities' and grouped with other codes in two themes: 'community, support, and interaction' and 'additional resources and learning tools'.

## Results

### Character strengths distributions

The overall highest ranked strengths when averaging over the 302 students at a South African university were 'kindness' (with an average score of 4.07), 'love of learning' (4.01),

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'fairness' (4), 'perspective' (3.97) and 'humility' (3.96). Lowest ranked strengths were 'zest' (3.31), 'bravery' (3.34), 'self-regulation' (3.4), 'perseverance' (3.43) and 'leadership' (3.54). The average scores for all 24 character strengths are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Character strength average scores (n=302)**

| Character strength | Average score |
|---|---|
| Kindness | 4.07 |
| Love of learning | 4.01 |
| Fairness | 4 |
| Perspective | 3.97 |
| Humility | 3.96 |
| Appreciation of beauty and excellence | 3.93 |
| Honesty | 3.91 |
| Spirituality | 3.91 |
| Judgment | 3.91 |
| Curiosity | 3.88 |
| Prudence | 3.85 |
| Hope | 3.83 |
| Social intelligence | 3.81 |
| Gratitude | 3.75 |
| Teamwork | 3.7 |
| Forgiveness | 3.68 |
| Creativity | 3.67 |
| Love | 3.64 |
| Humour | 3.64 |
| Leadership | 3.54 |
| Perseverance | 3.43 |
| Self-regulation | 3.4 |
| Bravery | 3.34 |
| Zest | 3.31 |

Table 2 shows the average values of clusters of strengths grouped by virtues. The virtue of wisdom (comprising the strengths of 'creativity', 'curiosity', 'judgement', 'love of learning', 'perspective'), was the highest ranked virtue with an average score of 3.89, while the virtue of courage (comprising 'bravery', 'honesty', 'perseverance', 'zest') was lowest ranked with an average score of 3.50. Courage ranks far below the other virtues: the difference between the average score for courage and the second lowest virtue, temperance, (3.72 − 3.50 = 0.22) is greater than the differences between temperance and the top-ranked virtue, wisdom (3.89 − 3.72 = 0.17).

**Table 2. Average values of clusters of strengths grouped by virtues**

| Character strengths | Virtue | Average |
|---|---|---|
| Creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning, perspective | Wisdom | 3.89 |
| Love, kindness, social intelligence | Humanity | 3.84 |
| Appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality | Transcendence | 3.81 |
| Fairness, leadership, teamwork | Justice | 3.75 |
| Forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation | Temperance | 3.72 |
| Bravery, honesty, perseverance, zest | Courage | 3.50 |

'Kindness', 'spirituality' and 'fairness' were most frequently ranked in the top five strengths of the 302 participants. 'Zest', 'bravery' and 'self-regulation' were most frequently ranked in the lowest 5. Every strength appeared in the top 5 and lowest 5 for some participants, with frequency ranging from 3% to 52% of participants.

The top 10 strengths, based on the frequency of their appearance in participants' top 5, are 'kindness' (41%), 'spirituality' (41%), 'fairness' (38%), 'love' (31%), 'honesty' (31%), 'love of learning' (30%), 'humour' (27%), 'humility' (26%), 'perspective' (25%) and 'appreciation of beauty and excellence' (24%).

Similarly, the lowest 10 strengths, based on the frequency of their appearance in the bottom 5, are 'zest' (ranked 20 to 24 by 52% of participants), 'bravery' (45%), 'self-regulation' (45%), 'leadership' (36%), 'perseverance' (34%), 'humour' (27%), 'teamwork' (25%), 'love' (24%), 'forgiveness' (23%), 'prudence' (21%).

**WhatsApp character strengths intervention analysis**

The codes and themes emerging from the qualitative responses to the evaluation survey are given in the appendix. The findings are summarised below.

***Self-awareness and strengths identification***

A key outcome of the intervention was the increased self-awareness participants gained regarding their character strengths. Many reported moments of self-discovery, realising strengths they had not previously recognised. The process of naming and reflecting on their strengths provided clarity on personal growth areas and allowed them to apply these strengths more effectively in different contexts.

This qualitative insight is strongly supported by the survey results, where 90.9% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the course increased their self-awareness of character strengths. The structured nature of the intervention, including daily messaging and guided exercises, played a crucial role in fostering these realisations.

***Application of strengths in daily life***

Participants highlighted how the course helped them use their strengths more deliberately in various aspects of life. Many reported improved emotional regulation, resilience, and decision-making as they became more mindful of when and how to apply their strengths. The structured exercises were particularly valuable in translating theoretical concepts into practical strategies, especially in managing relationships and navigating personal or professional challenges.

Survey data reinforces this theme, with 87.3% of participants agreeing that the course increased their understanding of how to use character strengths in different situations, and 92.7% indicating that they gained a clearer understanding of how to use their strengths to achieve goals. These findings suggest that the intervention effectively bridged the gap between self-awareness and practical application.

### *Personal growth and confidence*

A recurring theme across participant reflections was the link between self-awareness and personal growth. Many described a shift in perspective, viewing their weaknesses not as fixed limitations but as areas for development. This mindset shift contributed to greater self-acceptance and confidence. Some participants also noted that their strengths had evolved over time, influenced by life experiences and personal challenges.

These insights align with the reported benefits of the intervention's structure. The combination of guided reflection, strengths-based messaging, and interactive discussions created an environment where participants could recognise their growth and build confidence in their abilities.

### *Course structure and engagement*

The intervention's format was widely appreciated for its accessibility and ease of engagement. Participants valued the bite-sized content, daily WhatsApp messages, and structured reflection activities. Many found that these elements made the learning process manageable and effective, allowing them to integrate new insights without feeling overwhelmed.

The survey results confirm this positive reception: 89.1% of participants agreed that the daily morning messages were useful and contributed to their well-being, while 83.6% found the evening character affirmation messages beneficial. While most participants found the structure effective, some suggested improvements in pacing and flexibility, with a preference for more interactive elements to enhance engagement.

### *Practical application and reflection*

While participants appreciated the opportunity for self-reflection, many expressed a desire for deeper guidance on applying their strengths in real-world situations. Suggestions included incorporating more structured exercises, concrete examples, and opportunities for peer interaction. Some participants noted that while group discussions were helpful, a balance needed to be maintained for those who preferred a more independent learning experience.

The intervention's strengths-based approach was particularly effective in helping participants explore and apply different character strengths. Many found that structured check-ins and scheduled feedback sessions provided valuable opportunities to learn from others' perspectives. Additionally, participants noted that short expert blogs and external articles reinforced key concepts and enriched their learning experience.

### *Recommendations for improvement*

While the intervention was well-received, participants identified areas for enhancement. Specifically, they suggested incorporating:

- Short video clips to complement the text-based materials.
- Incentives for attending review sessions to encourage deeper engagement.
- Quizzes and assessments to reinforce learning and track progress.

Despite these suggestions for refinement, the intervention was overwhelmingly endorsed by participants, with 100% stating they would recommend the six-week WhatsApp course to a friend.

## Discussion

### Cultural and social context of findings

The VIA Character Strengths results align with characteristics that may be especially meaningful in the South African context. For instance, the high scores for 'kindness' and 'fairness' could be influenced by the *ubuntu* philosophy common in African cultures (Kamwangamalu, 1999), which emphasises human co-dependence and is associated with hospitality, sociability, sharing and sympathy, among others. Given the country's diverse and vast resources of natural beauty, appreciation for beauty and excellence might reflect a broader coping strategy among students who use this strength to find solace and positivity in their surroundings.

At the low end of the ranking are the character strengths of 'zest' and 'bravery' (in the virtue of courage) and 'self-regulation' (temperance). A possible explanation for this placement is that the education system does not give much flexibility or choice to students who aim to study at university. High academic performance is essential for students who need to find bursaries to study and their determination to succeed by obediently completing tasks set out for them leads to a deprioritization of 'zest' and 'bravery'.

### Implications for student development and academic engagement

The WhatsApp-based intervention demonstrated promise in enhancing students' self-awareness and application of character strengths. The structured daily prompts allowed students to reflect on their strengths, helping them recognise how specific traits could support their academic journeys and well-being. The feedback indicates that students benefitted from the simplicity and accessibility of the intervention, suggesting that mobile-based interventions may be particularly suitable for higher education settings in South Africa, where students often seek flexible, digital solutions for self-development.

### Practical implications

The low-cost, text-focused WhatsApp intervention gave the greatest opportunity for participation by students who had no access to Wi-Fi connectivity during the summer vacation and relied on data to participate. Making the group closed for posting apart from the administrator meant that participants could budget for the data cost and expected time to keep up with the daily messages. For those with limited bandwidth or connectivity,

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the optional MS Teams meetings could not be attended. Recordings or meeting summaries could allow asynchronous catch-up when in areas that offer free Wi-Fi.

To better meet individual preferences for the timing of posts (e.g. twice or once daily, only on weekends, during vacations or semesters), different versions of the course can be offered to allow students to engage in a way that suits them. While this may increase the administrative load and initial setup, most resources would be shared. To sustain the course in the long term, volunteers could be trained to manage groups. Volunteers might be leaders in student organizations and could guide the modification of the course for their context. Bespoke groups could be set up for participants in a common residence, or who would like to have in-person discussion groups on character strengths, or who would like to practice using strengths in teamwork activities such as sports, crafts or games.

## Limitations and future research

Among the study's limitations is, first, the drawing of the sample exclusively from a single university, which may affect the generalisability of the results to other institutions or regions. The self-report nature of the VIA Character Strengths Assessment introduces the possibility of response bias, as students may overestimate socially desirable traits.

Future research could expand on this study with larger, more diverse samples and by employing complementary qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, to validate and expand upon the findings. A qualitative approach could provide a richer understanding of how the South African sociopolitical landscape shapes character strengths. Statistical analyses could search for correlations between strengths and self-reported benefits. Future research could explore questions such as: Are there trends from self-reported benefits that suggest which students might benefit most from such an intervention (e.g. those with love of learning as a top strength), and which may do better with a different form of intervention?

The design of the WhatsApp intervention aimed to keep data costs low by restricting interactivity and sticking to text-based messages instead of videos, voice-notes and live calls. Different formats, such as in-person meetings, weekly quizzes on strength identification, a WhatsApp discussion group for peer support, reflective journaling, varied engagement levels for participants, and the use of different platforms could be tested in future studies.

## Conclusion

This innovative intervention provided students with a low-cost, accessible way to explore and apply their character strengths. Delivered at low cost over six weeks during the summer vacation, the course attracted 611 sign-ups, with 302 students completing the VIA Character Strengths Survey and 55 participating in the post-intervention survey. The most frequently reported strengths were 'kindness', 'love of learning', and 'fairness', while wisdom and humanity emerged as the top virtues. The results also highlighted a diverse distribution of strengths, with each strength appearing among both the top and lowest five for different students. This provides a valuable South African benchmark for international studies on character strengths.

The WhatsApp-based approach proved to be a scalable and cost-effective model for fostering self-awareness and well-being among university students. The use of one-way text messages – rather than data-heavy formats like voice-notes or videos – allowed for broad participation, particularly during vacations when Wi-Fi or mobile data access can be limited. This model can be adapted for other low-cost educational and well-being initiatives, delivering structured content, affirmations, and reflection prompts in a simple yet effective format.

Student affairs professionals at African universities could tailor this approach to support co-curricular or extra-curricular programmes aimed at student well-being. Future research can build on these findings to develop culturally relevant, strengths-based interventions that enhance student thriving in diverse educational settings.

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**Ethics statement**
This study adhered to ethical guidelines established by the UCT Senate Ethics in Research Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances that participation was entirely voluntary and that responses would remain confidential. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

**Potential conflict of interests**
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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## Appendix 1: Codes and themes from qualitative analysis

### Table 3. Codes and themes on 'The course increased my self-awareness of my own character strengths'

| Theme and Insight | Codes |
|---|---|
| 1. **Increased self-awareness** – *Many participants realised strengths they hadn't previously recognised or had taken for granted.* | self-awareness, realisation, strengths identification, self-discovery |
| 2. **Naming and understanding strengths** – *Participants found value in putting names to their strengths, which helped them understand and apply them better.* | naming strengths, vocabulary, understanding strengths |
| 3. **Self-reflection and introspection** – *The course encouraged self-reflection, leading to deeper insight into personal traits and areas for growth.* | reflection, introspection, self-examination |
| 4. **Strengths as a foundation for growth** – *Some participants shifted their mindset to view weaknesses as areas for development rather than limitations.* | growth, mindset shift, development, overcoming weaknesses |
| 5. **Increased confidence and self-acceptance** – *Participants reported feeling more confident, fulfilled, and at ease with their strengths and weaknesses.* | confidence, self-acceptance, personal growth |
| 6. **Application of strengths in daily life** – *Participants learned how to use their strengths practically in different situations.* | practical application, daily use, real-world relevance |
| 7. **Impact of assessment and exercises** – *The structured approach of the course, including assessments and reflection exercises, was instrumental in self-discovery.* | assessment, structured learning, guided discovery |
| 8. **Realising change over time** – *Some participants noted personal growth over time and how their strengths had evolved due to life experiences.* | personal growth, change over time, evolving strengths |
| 9. **Overcoming personal challenges** – *Participants who faced identity crises or self-doubt found the course helped them regain clarity and confidence.* | identity, self-doubt, clarity, overcoming challenges |
| 10. **Spiritual and emotional awareness** – *A few participants became more aware of strengths related to spirituality and emotional resilience.* | spirituality, emotional resilience, faith |

### Table 4. Codes and themes on 'The course helped me understand how to use my character strengths in different situations'

| Theme and Insight | Codes |
|---|---|
| 1. **Awareness and understanding of strengths** – *Recognising and applying strengths requires mindfulness of their usage and balance.* | recognising and identifying strengths, learning when and how to apply strengths, understanding strengths in relation to weaknesses, developing mindfulness about strength usage, balancing strengths' overuse/underuse, mindfulness of past behaviour |

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| Theme and Insight | Codes |
|---|---|
| 2. **Emotional and behavioural regulation** – *Strengths help in managing emotions, resilience, and decision-making.* | managing emotions through strengths, using strengths for resilience and problem-solving, resilience through strengths, managing anger through strengths, strengths for emotional regulation |
| 3. **Strengths in relationships and social contexts** – *Applying strengths fosters better communication, empathy, and interpersonal growth.* | strengthening relationships through character strengths, using kindness, empathy, and fairness, enhancing communication and interpersonal skills, understanding others' strengths, learning to listen and seek help |
| 4. **Personal growth and self-development** – *Leveraging strengths builds confidence, decision-making skills, and self-awareness.* | gaining confidence and self-expression, becoming a better decision-maker, overcoming personal challenges using strengths, strengthening self-awareness and self-reflection |
| 5. **Course structure and learning methods** – *Practical exercises and research insights enhance understanding and application of strengths.* | practical exercises helped apply strengths, research findings provided valuable insights, course materials deepened understanding, engaging in polls and reflections, effectiveness of polls/tasks varies |

**Table 5. Codes and themes on 'The course material was relevant and engaging'**

| Theme and Insight | Codes |
|---|---|
| 1. **Engagement and accessibility** – *The material was easy to follow, well-structured, and engaging in a daily, manageable format.* | easy to follow, bite-sized format, clear and relatable, engaging structure, well-organised layout, daily format |
| 2. **Relevance to personal development** – *The course supported self-reflection, personal and academic growth, and character development.* | personal growth, self-reflection, self-discovery, character development, practical examples |
| 3. **Diversity of learning methods** – *The varied content, interactive elements, and structured topics kept the material engaging.* | varied content, interactive elements, structured topics, visual aids, multiple formats |
| 4. **Opportunities for interaction and improvement –** *More interactive elements and format variety could enhance engagement.* | group chat engagement, more interaction needed, video preference, repetitive format, timing issues |

**Table 6. Codes and themes on 'The course helped me understand how to use my character strengths to achieve my goals'**

| Theme and Insight | Codes |
|---|---|
| 1. **Understanding oneself and building confidence** – *Emphasises the importance of self-awareness and confidence-building through recognising one's strengths and weaknesses.* | self-awareness, identifying strengths and weaknesses, understanding strength purpose, self-reflection and introspection, self-confidence and self-esteem, affirmations and motivation |

| Theme and Insight | Codes |
|---|---|
| 2. **Applying strengths strategically** – *Focuses on how individuals can actively use their strengths in various aspects of life, from goal-setting to daily tasks, and adapt them as needed.* | using strengths strategically, aligning strengths with goals, developing underused strengths, viewing strengths as adaptable skills |
| 3. **Goal setting, perseverance, and progress** – *Highlights the connection between character strengths and achieving goals, emphasising perseverance, discipline, and the continuous development of strengths over time.* | vision boards and goal setting, strengths supporting academic and career goals, aligning strengths with goals, overcoming challenges, discipline and focus, still working on applying strengths, developing underused strengths |

**Table 7. Codes and themes on what worked well and suggestions for improvements**

| Theme and Insight | Codes |
|---|---|
| 1. **Daily messages and affirmations** – *Regular, structured messages helped participants stay engaged, motivated, and reflective, but some suggested refining their timing, length, or frequency to prevent overload.* | daily messages, morning messages, evening messages, affirmations, motivation, encouragement, structured communication, reminders, consistency |
| 2. **WhatsApp as a learning and engagement platform** – *WhatsApp was a highly accessible and convenient tool, but some participants suggested additional platforms or ways to manage message flow for better engagement.* | WhatsApp messages, accessibility, convenient platform, internet-friendly, structured group chat, multiple platforms, alternative communication options, engagement |
| 3. **Course structure, pacing, and content delivery** – *The structured and spaced-out format was helpful, but some participants wanted adjustments in pacing, flexibility, and message timing to better fit their schedules.* | well-structured, spaced-out messages, digestible content, concise communication, not overwhelming, scheduled feedback, check-ins, group discussions, timing of messages, flexibility |
| 4. **Reflection, self-discovery, and application** – *The course encouraged self-reflection and personal growth, but some participants wanted more guidance on applying what they learned in real-life situations.* | self-evaluation, personal growth, character strengths, exploring values, reflection, deeper understanding, self-awareness, practical application, relevance to daily life, behavioural change |
| 5. **Community, support, and interaction** – *Many valued the sense of community and support, but some suggested increasing participant interaction while maintaining balance for those who preferred a more independent experience.* | group participation, shared experiences, peer support, teamwork, engagement, discussions, facilitator encouragement, interaction, accountability, balance between personal and group learning |
| 6. **Additional resources and learning tools** – *Extra learning materials were appreciated, but some participants wanted more variety, better organisation, or more practical exercises to reinforce concepts.* | external articles, blogs, character strength diagrams, feeling wheel, mini-activities, additional reading, interactive content, deeper learning, supplementary materials |

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

# Gateway to Success: An integrated academic and student life orientation programme for new first-year students

# Gateway to Success: Uhlelo lokufunda nokufundisa olumayelana nempilo yabafundi abenza unyaka wokuqala

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## ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to university is widely recognised as challenging for many students under normal circumstances. It was especially challenging for students who experienced almost two years of disrupted schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) ran a one-week first-year orientation programme. In mid-2021, as the severity of the pandemic was easing, it was clear that new students would need more than one week to adjust not just to university life but also to in-person interactions. As academic affairs and student affairs leaders we therefore undertook to design and implement an extended, integrated academic and student life orientation programme that would be compulsory for all 6 500 new first-year students in 2022 called Gateway to Success (GTS). Rapidly changing circumstances meant we had only four months to do this. In this reflective practice article we discuss the design of GTS and explain how we could plan it so quickly by utilising a networking approach combined with a modified agile project management approach we had been developing since 2019. We then provide student evaluation results from 2022, and discuss how GTS was modified in 2023 when pandemic-related restrictions were lifted. We conclude with a discussion of how GTS has been embedded in university structures and processes and contributes to our institutional commitment to student success.

## KEYWORDS

*First year transition, student success, network of people, agile change management*

## ISIFINYEZO

Ushintsho losuka esikoleni samabanga aphezulu kuya enyuvesi luhlonzwe kabanzi njengalelo oluyinselelo kubafundi abaningi, kanti lube yinselelo kakhulu kubafundi abahlangabezane

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nokuphazamiseka kweminyaka emibili yokufunda ngesikhathi sobhubhane lwe-COVID-19. Ngaphambi kobhubhane, iNyuvesi yaseWitwatersrand (Wits) kade yenza uhlelo lokuzijwayeza/lokwamukela abafundi abasha abenza unyaka wokuqala oluye lube isonto elilodwa. Kanti kuthe maphakathi no-2021, njengoba ubucayi bobhubhane budamba, kwacaca ukuthi abafundi abasha bazodinga isikhathi esingaphezu kwesonto elilodwa ukuze bazijwayeze impilo yasenyuvesi yize kwakungekhona lokho kuphela kodwa nokuxhumana nabantu uqobo. Njengabaholi bezindaba zezemfundo kanye nabaholi bezindaba zabafundi siye sazibophezela ukuhlela nokusebenzisa uhlelo olwandisiwe, oludidiyelwe lwezemfundo kanjalo nokufundisa ngempilo yabafundi oluzoba yimpoqo kubo bonke abafundi abasha abenza unyaka wokuqala abangu-6 500 ngonyaka ka-2022 olubizwa ngokuthi i-Gateway to Success (GTS). Izimo ezishintsha ngokushesha zaphoqa ukuthi sinezinyanga eziwu-4 kuphela ukwenza lokhu. Kulombiko wephepha sidingida ukwakheka kwe-GTS, siphinde sichaze ukuthi singayihlela kanjani ngokushesha kangaka ngokusebenzisa indlela yokuxhumana ehlanganiswe nendlela yokuphathwa kwephrojekthi ebesilokhu siyithuthukisa kusukela ngo-2019. Sibe sesihlinzeka ngemiphumela yezimvo zokuhlolwa kwabafundi kusukela ngo-2022, sidingide nokuthi i-GTS yashintshwa kanjani ngo-2023 lapho imibandela ehambisana nobhubhane isuswa. Siphetha ngokudingida ukuthi i-GTS ifakwe kanjani ezinhlakeni nasezinqubweni zasenyuvesi kanye negalelo lokuzibophezela empumelelweni yabafundi esikhungweni sethu.

**AMAGAMA ANGUKHIYE**

*Uguquko ekufundeni konyaka wokuqala, impumelelo yomfundi, ukuxhumana kwabantu, ukuphathwa kwezinguquko ngendlela esheshayo nenobuhlakani*

## Introduction

It has been well-established that the transition from high school to university is challenging for many students (Barefoot, 2000). For South African students, this transition presents particular challenges, in part because of the nature of schooling. In contrast to students in high-income countries, many South African high school students experience a didactic teaching style and a learning environment that discourages independent thinking and personal agency, and are increasingly being drilled to pass school-leaving examinations in response to the government’s focus on pass rates. The discontinuity between the requirements for learning at university, in particular self-regulation, independence and resourcefulness, and learning at high school have contributed to concerning completion rates at South Africa universities in minimum (regulation) time, which, while increasing slowly, remain low (Council on Higher Education, 2022). There are also socio-economic factors that make students’ transition to university challenging, including high levels of poverty in many students’ homes and communities and being the first in their families to attend university.

In order to ease the transition into university, universities across the world have created some form of structured First Year Experience (FYE). The University of South Carolina organises an annual FYE conference, held in 2024 for the forty-third time,[4]

4 For more on which, see: https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/events/conferences/first-year_experience/index.php

which is an indication of the importance attributed to such programmes by many institutions. Extensive research has shown that First Year Experience (FYE) programmes are one of several “high impact practices” (Kuh et al., 2013, p. 49) that positively affect student success.

In South Africa, although the low and racially biased university completion rates had been a concern since the dawn of democracy in 1994, an explicit national focus on ‘student success’ is more recent. In 2014 the Kresge Foundation launched the Siyaphumelela[5] (‘We succeed’) student success project. Also in 2014, the Council on Higher Education launched the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), a national project to systemically improve student success, defined as, “enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable” (Council on Higher Education, 2014, p. 13). In 2017 the Department of Higher Education and Training produced a ministerial statement on the establishment of the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017), to be supported by the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG). One of the stated purposes is, “High levels of success for undergraduate and postgraduate students”, using the QEP’s definition of student success (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017, p. 7). The document states that, “The UCDP seeks to support a structured, integrated approach to improving student success” (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017, p. 10), and makes explicit reference to FYE programmes as one such approach. UCDG funding was therefore made available to support the South African National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC).[6]

A key component of many FYE initiatives is an orientation programme. Vincent Tinto (Tinto, 2014) argues that the integration of students into both the social and academic fabric of the university is key to a student’s retention and eventual success. An orientation programme is the first point of engagement between a university and its students. It supports the student’s experience in three dimensions: (1) transition process, (2) academic integration, and (3) personal and social integration. It sets the tone for the student and their family’s expectations of the university they have chosen, and it is through orientation that new students begin their journey of integration into the university culture.

In this reflective practice article, we describe the reconceptualization of the first-year orientation programme at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) over five years in order to better support students with changing characteristics and needs while responding to disruptive external events.

## First-year orientation at Wits

Prior to 2019, the Wits orientation programme, dubbed O-week, comprised largely informational and social activities. This changed with the appointment in early 2018 of Jerome September as the new Dean of Student Affairs and Diane Grayson as Senior Director: Academic Affairs, who undertook to collaborate to promote a holistic,

5 https://siyaphumelela.org.za/about.php
6 https://www.sanrc.co.za/

institutional approach to student success. This included moving to a more values-based approach and involvement of a greater range of stakeholders, academic and support staff and students, in the planning and implementation of O-week, as recommended by Robinson et al. (1996, p. 61):

> *The best orientation experience occurs when there is a total campus commitment to the process, resulting from collaborative efforts of students, senior administrators, faculty, and the broad spectrum of student affairs and educational support programs. A spirit of campus cooperation and commitment to student learning and professional development projects a strong sense of the campus as a learning community to incoming students.*

The orientation programme lays the foundation for the students' total experience of the campus, and the ongoing year-long FYE programme builds on this. At the July 2018 meeting of the FYE committee, September proposed that he form an Orientation Coordinating Working Group comprising staff and students, which would agree on a set of principles and work together to design an orientation programme that would better project Wits as a learning institution, with student success at the core. This he did over the next few months, engaging stakeholders, and student leaders in particular, in robust discussions, about what the new O-week would comprise, moving from a predominantly social event to a more holistic preparation for university life. The result was a very different O-week in February 2019, comprising a mixture of faculty-led, student affairs-led and student-led activities.

In parallel with the reconceptualizing of O-week, Grayson produced a concept document in late 2018 arguing for an institutional approach to student success to provide a framework for the many student support initiatives at Wits. In 2019 she convened a multi-stakeholder task team, including September and Brenner. This marked the beginning of a networked way of working across institutional siloes at Wits, which aligns with research showing that campus networks are a core element in creating a context that enables collaboration (Kezar, 2005). The task team developed a student-centred model for holistic student support and produced the *Wits Institutional Framework for Student Success*, guided by systems thinking (Grayson, 2020) and approved by Senate and Council in late 2019. The reconceptualized O-week was now part of a more coherent institutional approach to student success.

In February 2020, the new O-week ran again, with incremental improvements based on feedback from 2019. Six weeks later, South Africa went into hard lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and students were sent home. Emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) in an online mode was implemented to enable students to complete the academic year. In February 2021 South Africa was still under lockdown and orientation was carried out online.

As 2021 progressed lockdown regulations eased, and it appeared that students could come back to campus in 2022. By mid-year the Senior DVC: Academic expressed concern about how new first-year students would adjust to university life. How had the pandemic impacted teaching and learning at high school? How prepared would high school learners be for the first year of student life at university after almost two years of disrupted schooling?

A need was identified for an extended orientation programme that would support students to transition not only from high school to university but also from the largely remote learning they experienced during the pandemic to the blend of on-campus and online learning and teaching that Wits would offer in 2022. It was also hoped that some of the academic challenges students would face arising from two years of reduced teaching and learning time would be addressed. This led to the conceptualization of Gateway to Success (GTS).

## Design and planning of GTS

In normal times, initiating, designing and planning a new programme for 6 500 first-time first-year students would take a long time. But nothing was normal about the COVID-19 pandemic period. The rapidly changing external environment required rapid responses.

In July 2021, as a first step in determining how best to help the 2022 cohort of new first-year students make the transition, Grayson phoned several Deans and Assistant Deans: Teaching and Learning to brainstorm ideas. She and September then discussed the idea of running an extended, compulsory orientation programme in 2022 that would integrate both academic and student life components, which they would co-lead. They also had discussions with the registrar to see whether it would be possible to run a 4-week orientation programme in February between the release of the 2021 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination results and the beginning of the academic year. This opportunity arose because the late release of the 2020 NSC results had a cascading effect on the start and end of the 2021 academic year and the planned start of the 2022 year. The registrar thought it could be done. Grayson and September presented the concept to the Senior Executive Team (SET) in August, who, while supportive of the idea, did not think it could be implemented in time. Nonetheless, SET agreed to let them present the idea to the executive committees of the five faculties. In August and September virtual 'roadshows' were held, during which they presented the idea and listened to suggestions and concerns. Ultimately, support from the faculties for the extended orientation programme was obtained on condition that it could be done in time. The proposal, revised after input from the faculties, was taken back to the SET and approved.

Funding as a special project was approved during the annual budgeting process in October, with support from the Senior DVC: Academic, based on a 'bare bones' budget. Since most staff would be on duty during the planning and implementation of GTS anyway, running GTS did not require a large budget. This was important because the University did not want students to be charged extra fees for GTS, especially as those students who were most likely to need the programme would be least likely to afford an additional financial cost.

The following purposes of GTS were identified:

- To help new first-year students experience a seamless transition from high school to the first year of university.
- To promote social and academic integration into the university and cultivate a sense of belonging and community among students.

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- To help students make a strong start to the academic year by providing structured academic support, both content and skills development.
- To help students begin to develop life skills that will help them succeed at university and beyond.
- To familiarise students with the campus, the various supports and the wide range of extracurricular offerings available.

To plan the programme a modified agile project management[7] approach was used, combined with Wits' now well-established networked way of working (Grayson, 2023). A similar approach had been used in early 2021 when the whole university transitioned from one Learning Management System (LMS) to a new one in two months (Grayson, 2021). The approach involved setting up a multi-stakeholder project committee comprising representatives from key stakeholder groups, academic and support staff and students, and task teams to focus on specific cross-cutting aspects of the programme. The project committee comprised the Assistant Dean and one faculty student advisor from each faculty, and representatives from ICT, Student Affairs, Campus Housing, Student Academic Development, Institutional Research, the Student Enrolment Centre, Communications, Marketing, Facilities, and student leadership. It was co-chaired by Grayson and September. Unspent funds from Grayson's budget were used to pay Brenner, a retired Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning, to be logistics project manager and part of the committee.

The following task teams were established, each convened by a member of the project committee:

- Marketing and Communication: to coordinate all information on GTS, including on the University website, social media, and through emails and letters to students and staff.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: to devise and implement short- and medium-term monitoring and evaluation plans.
- Logistics: to coordinate the administrative and physical logistics, including ensuring that venues that had not been used for two years would be clean and COVID-safe.
- Mentoring: to select, train and coordinate senior students who would serve as mentors for groups of about 10 FY students during GTS and for the rest of the year.

The project committee met (online) eight times between 15 October 2021 and 26 January 2022. At each meeting, stakeholder representatives responsible for components of the programme reported on progress and task team convenors provided information and updates. The representation of key stakeholders on the project committee ensured that programme components were well-coordinated, there was an effective flow of correct information, and queries, challenges and concerns were addressed. Task teams met (mostly online) as often as needed, and members also communicated frequently by email and WhatsApp.

Responsibility for the components of the GTS were divided among academic affairs (led by Grayson), student affairs (led by September) and faculties. Since South Africa still

7 https://www.apm.org.uk/resources/find-a-resource/agile-project-management/

had lockdown regulations in place that limited venue occupancy, Wits, and therefore GTS, had to utilise a blend of on-campus and online activities, with limited numbers of students on campus at a time.

The academic components, comprising both content and skills focused activities, were conducted fully online using Wits' Learning Management System (LMS), ulwazi (Canvas), which served to familiarise students with the system. The courses and the number of notional hours were:

- *Climate Change and Me*, a writing-intensive (Nichols et al., 2023) interdisciplinary course that integrated content and academic skills (25).
- *Digital Abilities*, an introduction to computer literacy, digital skills and digital literacy (20).
- *Academic Integrity*, dealing with ethical issues and avoiding academic misconduct (5).
- Faculty specific courses to address key content (20).

*Climate Change and Me*, in addition to addressing a vitally important topic, includes two high-impact practices identified by research – providing a common intellectual experience and strengthening academic writing.[8] *Digital Abilities* goes beyond computer literacy and introduces several components of the JISC Digital Capabilities Framework (JISC data analytics, 2024). *Academic Integrity* provides early exposure to this concept and how to avoid academic misconduct (Quality Assurance Agency, 2022).

Student life activities were conducted on campus, with resources made available online. They included an address from the Dean of Student Affairs, life skills, such as time and finance management, goal setting, self-awareness, interpersonal communication and critical diversity awareness, as well as social, recreational and student-led activities and information on available support, clubs and societies. There was also a mentoring programme, in which senior students were selected and trained to be mentors for groups of FY students. Time slots were allocated in the programme for mentors and mentees to meet.

## Implementation of GTS in 2022

Although GTS had been planned as a four-week programme, shortly before implementation the starting date had to be delayed by one week. Reasons for this included later than expected dates for opening student residences and for scheduled in-person registration for students needing assistance. (Students had to be registered before GTS to access the LMS.) However, the agile implementation approach meant that changes could be made quickly. In the end GTS ran from 7 to 25 February, and classes started on 28 February.

Implementation required engagement with stakeholders across the whole university. Buy-in and assistance from people in nearly every area of the university was needed: academic affairs, student affairs, all faculties and even schools and departments, central support services such as ICT, the Learning and Teaching Centre, Services, Facilities, Marketing, Communications, Alumni Relations, Security Services, the Social Justice Cluster

8 https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact

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of units, the International Students' Office, and the Student Representative Council and their sub-structures, including School and Faculty Councils, the All Residences Council and House Committees, and the Sports Sub-council.

As project manager, Brenner convened the logistics task team, comprised of a wide variety of support staff from across the University. She also coordinated all venue bookings and the compilation and production of the final programme, which involved constant communication with faculties, student affairs, marketing, facilities and security. The logistics were complicated by the fact that most of the venues had not been used for nearly two years and so required thorough cleaning and, in some cases, fixing or replacing equipment, such as data projectors or sound systems. In addition, since COVID-19 restrictions were still in place, venue capacities were limited, which meant that students from each faculty had to be divided into two groups for on-campus sessions, one from 8:30 to 12:30 and one from 12:30 to 16:30. It also meant that some larger campus venues had to be used that had not previously been used during O-week. One of these was the Great Hall, normally used for formal events such as graduation. Another was three science laboratories, each accommodating over 300 students, so that mentors could meet their mentees around an allocated laboratory bench.

Multiple media were used to communicate with students before and during GTS: letters, emails, bulk text messages, social media, the Wits website and the LMS. The detailed programme for each faculty, which included faculty-led and student life activities and information on the online courses, was uploaded onto the Wits website. An LMS site was created for the FYE, with GTS as the landing page, and each faculty created its own LMS student support site. Several computer laboratories were booked on campus, which were staffed by senior student tutors to assist students struggling to use computers and the LMS.

The day before the GTS programme began, students and their parents or guardians were invited to Welcome Day, at which they were formally welcomed by the Chancellor and Vice- Chancellor. In weeks 1 and 2 of GTS students attended a half day of faculty-based and a half day of student-life activities on campus per week. In week 3 there were on-campus student-life activities, campus tours and evening, student-organised entertainment, culminating on the last day in the traditional 'Wits Spirit' soccer game, at which students received Wits T-shirts and were welcomed as 'Witsies for Life'. In addition, students were expected to spend time on the online courses – 25 hours in week 1, 30 in week 2 and 20 in week 3.

## Reflection and outcomes of GTS 2022

Organising a new programme for 6 500 new students in four months was quite a feat. It could not have been done without drawing on Wits' networked way of working and modified agile project methodology, involving dozens of role players working on aspects of the programme in parallel, combined with coordinating structures and effective communication channels.

GTS was advertised as compulsory, and although this could not be enforced, attendance was high. An online survey was administered to all new first-year students during the first two weeks of classes, with a 57% response rate to the whole survey and another 9% to parts of it. In response to a question of how many friends they had made during GTS, only 6% of respondents indicated they made no friends, while when asked whether they were comfortable to call themselves 'Witsies', 95% of students said yes. These results suggest that GTS helped students feel a sense of belonging to the University, illustrated by the following quotes:

> *It was a warm welcome as a first year Witsie and it also gave me a sense of belonging.*

> *Wits really welcomed us with big arms and made me feel like part of the family. I am a proud Witsie, Witsie for life!*

> *I was made to feel that I belong at the university and that with hard work, perseverance and a positive attitude, success and growth were in sight. I am thankful for the experience.*

Self-reported attendance at almost all the in-person scheduled sessions was around 90%. The completion rate of the online courses was about 72%. Reasons given for not completing the online courses included problems with devices, data and connectivity and inadequate time management.

In terms of their overall experience of GTS, students indicated that it helped with the transition to university, they made friends, found it fun, enjoyable, informative and welcoming and felt a sense of belonging. A few students said it was overwhelming at the beginning, but they adjusted during the programme. Several students' comments are shown below:

> *It was an exciting experience, it helped me learn about university and how to adjust from high school. It also brought a sense of comfort to know that we are assigned mentors, the feeling of knowing you're not alone is the best thing any first year could ask for.*

> *The GTS program was a wonderful experience that really helped me adjust and get comfortable in university. I learnt important skills in the Climate Change course that I am grateful I learnt them before school started. I had the opportunity to make friends and familiarize myself with the campus. University is certainly a different environment compared to high school but the GTS program helped a lot in invalidating myths and just put us at ease.*

> *My experience [of] the GTS programme was overwhelming at first because I knew no one and had no friends but as time went on I adapted. It got even better when I met my mentor and the mentees group for the first time. Meeting them made me want to be engaged in all activities even the mentor made us feel at ease. The programme itself was quite informative. I learnt a lot from it and I realised that Wits is not just a university but it is a community that upholds equity. I really appreciated the session of mental health it showed me that Wits cares about our state of wellbeing. After the GTS programme I was proud to be a Witsie.*

## GTS 2023

Several changes were made to GTS in 2023. The biggest change was a reduction in length from three weeks (15 weekdays) to 11 weekdays. This was done because the NSC results would be released earlier and staff wanted to return to the pre-COVID schedule of earlier start and end dates for the academic year, rather than ending in December. Since COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in mid-2022, in 2023 there were no restrictions on how many students could be on campus or in venues at the same time. That meant that all students from a faculty could be on campus simultaneously, as could students from more than one faculty. Thus, there was no need to limit the time students spent in on-campus faculty and student-life activities. On the contrary, the time for faculty-led activities could be increased to one full day (instead of half a day) per week for two weeks to help foster student identity in a discipline and allow students to better familiarise themselves with campus venues. There was also one scheduled day of student-life activities per week per faculty, plus a number of informal on-campus social and recreational activities that students could participate in during the second week.

Another change was to remove the faculty-based online courses, reducing the total notional hours for the online courses from 75 to 50, requiring students to spend 25 hours per week on them. Since students had spent much of 2022 physically attending high school, it was hoped they had experienced less disruption to their classes, at least in Grade 12, compared to the previous year's students and therefore would not need the content-focused courses.

Based on feedback from students and staff, several other changes were made to the programme. One was to avoid having too many presentations or sessions in which students were mostly sitting and listening to a speaker (or a video), and to rather make sessions interactive. Another change was to introduce GTS Ambassadors (in addition to mentors) who would help with logistics, such as setting up venues and equipment, and help students find venues spread across the large campus.

The online GTS survey was administered in the second week of classes, with a response rate of 59%, slightly higher than in 2022. Responses about making friends and attending in-person sessions were similar to the 2022 responses. However, there was a significant change in the percentage of students who completed the online courses. For *Climate Change and Me* the percentage dropped from 72% in 2022 to 29% in 2023, for *Digital Abilities* it dropped from 71% to 49% and for *Academic Integrity* from 72% to 50%. Reasons given by students for not completing online activities included time constraints due to poor time management or feeling tired from the on-campus GTS activities. Some students struggled with internet connections, although computer laboratories were available on campus every day. It was also evident that this cohort of students was no longer used to learning in an online mode, unlike the 2022 cohort. In addition, anecdotal evidence from students and staff suggests that some students did not understand that the online courses were an integral and required component of GTS, without which they would struggle when they had to use the LMS in their formal courses.

The drop in participation in the online courses came as a surprise, but it did bring the realisation that students and their lived experience are changing every year, which means that every year GTS should be modified. It also means that, even though students are included on the committees and task teams, ways should be found to draw more heavily on their insights and experiences in the planning.

## Conclusion

Gateway to Success began as a bold initiative to address needs created and exacerbated by a global pandemic. It grew out of a commitment by academic and student affairs staff, made three years earlier, to collaborate on promoting student success, starting with orientation. The need to be innovative in accessing and leveraging limited human and financial resources quickly provided additional impetus to this pre-existing commitment (Commodore, 2018). GTS could be rapidly planned and implemented by using Wits' network of people methodology. The networked approach was first employed in 2019 in developing the *Wits Institutional Framework for Student Success*, which involved bringing people from highly siloed units together to work towards a common purpose, namely, promoting student success. These networks of people were expanded when emergency remote teaching and learning was implemented in 2020 and again when Wits switched to a new LMS in 2021, when a modified agile project management was added to the approach. Thus, by mid-2021 when GTS was conceptualized, the team had experience with a networked way of working and the number of people across the University who knew each other and were involved in promoting student success had grown considerably. By drawing on this experience, GTS could be quickly and effectively organised and new role players who had become committed to student success could be drawn in.

While the scale and severity of the pandemic have subsided, we are confident that there is still great value in mounting an extended orientation programme for new first-year students that integrates both academic and student life components, while helping students develop a sense of belonging to the University. We have seen a growing network of people across the University who want to contribute to ensuring our students succeed, and the relationships and sense of shared purpose among them facilitates our ability to run such a large scale and complicated programme.

GTS is now a part of the University calendar and funding cycle. We plan to keep running it for the foreseeable future, adjusting each year as needed to better cater for our students and the circumstances in which they and the University find themselves. In addition, in recognition of the importance of supporting students to navigate a number of transitions during their student journey, in 2024 the Division of Student Affairs has created a new Student Persistence and Transitions Unit. This unit will oversee, among other things, GTS, the year-long FYE programme and the first-year mentoring programme. All of these initiatives are part of our institutional commitment to student success, guided by our institutional student success framework.

### Ethics statement

The authors confirm that University ethics requirements were met in the writing of this reflective practice article.

### Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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BOOK REVIEW

# ***Widening university access and participation in the Global South: Using the Zambian context to inform other developing countries*** **by E. Mboyonga (2025). London/New York: Routledge Publishers.**

Reviewed by Sibeso Lisulo[1]

The increasing enrolment of students in higher education institutions in the Global South signifies advancement towards equitable access; however, significant disparities persist, impeding fair educational opportunities in higher education and society. Unterhalter (2023) asserts that widespread access to education does not inherently rectify existing disparities. Instead, existing inequalities among different groups worsen due to factors like climate, gender, ethnicity, disability, location, and the rural–urban divide. The current situation, especially in Africa, requires immediate intervention, consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063, to overcome the limitations of current frameworks. The book, *Widening University Access and Participation in the Global South: Using the Zambian Context to Inform Other Developing Countries*, speaks directly to these issues and provides essential evaluation tools and insights to assess current practices while developing practical alternatives for expanding university access in developing countries. These countries are grappling with the public funding of higher education, specifically concerning limited government funding, inadequate infrastructure limiting the capacities of public universities in accommodating growing demand, and the total costs of higher education being substantially higher than the available financing resources.

As a keen observer of higher education's evolving landscape and its critical role in promoting social justice, I found the book to be very insightful and timely. Mboyonga comprehensively analyses challenges and opportunities that arise when developing countries turn to private universities to expand higher education access.

Its strength lies in its practical approach, which employs the capability framework to highlight the experiences of students and stakeholders in the Global South. Much of the work on access to higher education in Africa has focused on the public sector, without highlighting the pivotal role of non-state actors. The book provides novel perspectives about African private higher education institutions and their role in advancing national development. Its focus on the Zambian context, where private universities have more student enrolment than public universities, highlights that the private higher education sector is altering the university landscape in some African countries, with novel and impressive outcomes. The book moves beyond human capital theory by using an alternative

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framework which acknowledges both the economic benefits of higher education and its social and societal value by fostering aspirations and expanding opportunities through increased access. Furthermore, the book provides a valuable lens through which to understand the challenges of access beyond mere enrolment numbers by delving into the critical factors that influence student participation and transformative educational outcomes.

The book comprises several key thematic sections, which include the capability approach as the main analytical framework, the significance of epistemological access (access to knowledge), the foregrounding of student and lecturer voices, and the expansion of access in private universities. These sections are underpinned by the central theme of higher education's role in human development across the Global South. The well-organised structure enables readers to understand intricate university access issues and their specific relevance to the Global South. The book's chapter sequence guides readers to explore interconnected topics, demonstrating their collective importance within the broader framework of higher education access. Striking a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical illustrations, the book maintains focus on how these elements affect and shape access. Notably, the capability approach emerges as a fundamental theme to address global inequality because it aligns with contemporary educational initiatives that work to establish equitable access opportunities (Alkire, 2005).

The author Edward Mboyonga persuasively contends that private universities contribute significantly to human development in low-income countries. The book's analytical strength lies in its application of the capability approach, which provides a robust framework to analyse the diverse impacts of expanded access to higher education. Instead of focusing solely on employability, Mboyonga demonstrates how developing specific capabilities like critical thinking enhances both graduate prospects and broader societal benefits. Furthermore, he argues that private universities serve as essential access providers because they offer educational alternatives when public institutions reach their capacity limits.

By featuring the voices of students and lecturers, the author offers profound insights into the challenges of access, agency, and participation in higher education. The use of first-hand accounts is an indispensable methodological asset, as it transcends abstract theoretical frameworks that frequently disregard lived experiences. His analysis is predicated on compelling personal narratives. The voices offer readers first-hand accounts of student challenges, thereby facilitating a more profound comprehension than theoretical frameworks alone can offer.

While the book's focus on the Zambian context provides a valuable case study, its findings resonate across and are significant for many developing nations, offering important lessons for other countries grappling with the challenges of widening university access and participation. Mboyonga presents a new understanding of higher education accessibility which goes beyond traditional university admission statistics and student enrolment growth. He demonstrates how this approach can mask the persistent inequalities in obtaining quality educational opportunities. He argues that the growing number of higher education institutions obscures the reality that disadvantaged students encounter multiple obstacles to success because of insufficient preparation, financial constraints and hostile campus environments, which limit their effective access to and participation in higher education.

Additionally, *Widening University Access and Participation in the Global South*'s analysis demonstrates the necessity of understanding the diverse student population in higher education institutions. The book argues that policies and practices aimed at widening access must be tailored to meet the unique requirements of marginalized communities, women, and disadvantaged students. Higher education policy needs to move on from uniform approaches to inclusive frameworks that address structural inequalities. The book demonstrates how different factors constrain student well-being and educational prospects, which subsequently impacts their ability to access and succeed in higher education. The findings suggest that policymakers should extend government-funded student loan programmes to private institution students because this support would help them pay for tuition fees, accommodation and food expenses. Such policies would represent a critical step towards equitable access for deserving students.

The book further delves into the concept of *ubuntu*, a central tenet of African philosophy, and its profound relevance for promoting more inclusive and equitable approaches to university access and participation. He convincingly argues that incorporating *ubuntu*, which emphasises interconnectedness and social solidarity, can create a more supportive and enriching learning environment. Mboyonga argues that universities can create an inclusive educational environment for students from different backgrounds by transforming their teaching methods to emphasise empathy, care and respect. The book stipulates that *ubuntu* can foster more inclusive, equitable university access and participation through the development of empathy, care and interconnectedness values. Through this approach, classroom dynamics and university culture would change to create an accessible educational environment for students from diverse backgrounds.

The book also examines the challenges related to the quality of education when universities widen access. Mboyonga asserts that expanding access to higher education should not compromise quality, emphasising the need for institutional investment in resources, infrastructure, and faculty development to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, receive a high-quality education that equips them with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in a globalised world. He connects the concept of 'epistemic contribution' to not only a student's ability to create new knowledge, but also to the quality of the learning environment and the resources available to them, arguing that under-resourced institutions may struggle to provide the kind of intellectually stimulating environment that fosters genuine epistemic contribution, thus limiting effective access to high-quality education. However, the analysis extends beyond merely identifying deficiencies in material resources. He also proposes solutions aimed at addressing epistemological inadequacies within these institutions, focusing on how to cultivate environments that nurture critical thinking, knowledge creation, and meaningful intellectual engagement.

*Widening University Access and Participation in the Global South* is a valuable and timely contribution to the field of higher education studies. The book employs the capability approach, foregrounds marginalized voices and offers nuanced insights into the role of

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private universities, thereby establishing a comprehensive framework for rethinking and widening university access while fostering equity in the Global South. The astute, relevant and significant insights presented in the book provide actionable strategies for policymakers and institutions aiming to enhance inclusivity and transformation within higher education systems.

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## Author biographies

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**Prof. Ahmed Bawa** is a professor at the Johannesburg Business School. Until September 2022, he was CEO of Universities South Africa (USAf) and before that he was vice-chancellor and principal of the Durban University of Technology. He has an interest in the understanding of universities as social institutions and the relationship between science and society. He is a theoretical physicist.

**Liz Brenner**, a biochemist, with an MEd degree, spent many years at Wits University, where she was assistant dean (teaching and learning) in the Faculty of Science before her retirement in 2019. Having been recognised with the vice-chancellor's most Distinguished Individual Teacher Award as well as receiving the National Excellence in Teaching and Learning award in 2010, her interest in ways to improve student success has been ongoing throughout her years of teaching undergraduate students.

**Prof. Anita L. Campbell** is an associate professor who teaches engineering mathematics at the University of Cape Town. Her research focuses on student success in mathematics, with a particular interest in growth mindsets, positive psychology, and academic coaching. She explores how these approaches can support thriving in the transition to university, especially in mathematically demanding programmes and with students who struggle in their first year. Anita is also involved in developing interventions that enhance resilience, motivation, and meaningful engagement with mathematics.

**Prof. Diane Grayson** was senior director of academic affairs at the University of the Witwatersrand from 2018 to 2023, responsible for teaching and learning, student success and quality assurance, and personal professor in physics. Before that she ran the Quality Enhancement Project at the Council on Higher Education to drive systemic approaches to student success in all higher education institutions and held academic and leadership positions in several universities and on national committees related to strengthening STEM education.

**Dr Nazar Hilal** is a PhD holder at the Gulf Studies Centre within the College of Arts and Sciences at Qatar University. His primary focus is the political economy of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, economic diversification, the interplay between the GCC countries and the Horn of Africa, and migration. Dr Hilal obtained two master's degrees from Canadian universities. He currently serves as an instructor in the Social Sciences Department, teaching different courses in the sociology programme.

**Dr Juanita Jonker** is an academic and researcher with over 15 years of experience in higher education. She began her career at the Central University of Technology in 2008 and lectures in the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences. Her research, focused on student well-being and female empowerment, centres on health, nutrition, and food security in academic and extreme environments, reflecting her commitment to improving student resilience and quality of life.

**Dr Mzwandile Khumalo** is a Siyaphumelela institutional lead and teaching, learning and development practitioner at the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at the Durban University of Technology. His work focuses on advancing student development and success through strategic academic support initiatives. With a passion for transformative education, he contributes to institutional projects aimed at improving learning outcomes, equity, and student retention in higher education.

**Dr Sibeso Lisulo** is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS) and a lecturer in the Educational Administration and Policy Studies Department at the University of Zambia (UNZA). With over 15 years in academia, she has contributed significantly to the intellectual development of her students and the broader academic community, specializing in critical issues confronting higher education and the philosophy of education. Her scholarly work notably centres on the critical theme of academic freedom, a topic explored in depth in her PhD thesis, 'Perceptions of Academics on Academic Freedom at the University of Zambia'. Her extensive expertise is demonstrated by published articles on academic freedom and higher education, addressing contemporary impediments to intellectual enquiry. Beyond this, her research also extends to other significant pedagogical investigations, such as open and distance learning and feedback mechanisms in undergraduate assessment processes at the UNZA. Her work has earned international recognition, notably through the Hans de Wit Fellowship runner-up prize awarded by Boston College's Center for International Higher Education (CIHE), which underscores her global relevance as a scholar. At JIAS, Dr Lisulo actively advances her research interests, contributing to contemporary discourse on higher education policy, academic governance, and the vital academic freedom across African universities and beyond. Her extensive background as a lecturer, coupled with her specialized research and publications, positions her as a thoughtful and valuable contributor to ongoing academic debates.

**Prof. Ryk Lues** holds a master's in microbiology and a PhD in food science from the University of the Free State. He is the director of the Centre for Applied Food Sustainability and Biotechnology at the Central University of Technology and holds the leadership chair in Food Safety Culture and Sustainability. His fields of specialization comprise social-behavioural aspects impacting food safety culture, and sustainable food innovations. He has held an NRF-rating uninterrupted since 2001.

**Dr Thierry M. Luescher** is the director of Postgraduate Studies and Researcher Development at the University of Cape Town and adjunct professor at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa. His research on higher education and student affairs in Africa, with special focus on the student experience and student politics, is highly published and has earned him research awards internationally and in South Africa.

**Dr Lindi A. Mabope** graduated from the University of Havana, Cuba, with an MSc in Biochemistry in 1987. She joined the School of Pharmacy at the former MEDUNSA in 1998 and contributed significantly to the implementation of the problem-based learning (PBL) BPharm programme. Her responsibilities as student support officer in the school include recruitment, selection, orientation and induction of first years, training on PBL pedagogy, and mentorship. She also obtained an MSc (Med) in 2007, focusing on student selection and outcomes. Lindi's personal involvement and experience gained as a student and mentor have shaped her values and beliefs about student success and failure. She prioritizes knowing students individually within a professional relationship to be able to assist when the need arises. Her immense commitment towards teaching and learning is evident from being the recipient of the HELTASA Teaching and Learning Commendation award (2011), and the Vice Chancellor's Senior Distinguished Teaching and Learning Excellence Award (2016). Dr Mabope's PhD in pharmacy (2021) addressed concerns regarding the under-preparation of South Africa's school leavers for higher education, leading to attrition and low throughput rates, with graduates not adequately prepared for the world of practice.

**Dr Isheachida Manatsa** serves as a teaching and learning development practitioner at the Durban University of Technology's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. With a PhD in public administration, his work centres on promoting student growth and achievement by implementing targeted academic support strategies. Driven by a commitment to transformative learning, he contributes to institutional efforts that enhance academic performance, foster equity, and strengthen student persistence within higher education. Dr Manatsa also assists in running residence-based programmes aimed at holistic student development.

**Prof. Johanna C. Meyer** is a professor in the Department of Public Health Pharmacy and Management at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU), and head of the South African Vaccination and Immunisation Centre at SMU. Prof. Meyer is an internationally recognised scientist who serves on the World Health Organization Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety and chairs the African Union Smart Safety Surveillance Joint Signal Management Group, facilitating cross-country signal management for health products in Africa. She is also a public health pharmacist who has served the South African pharmaceutical and public health sectors for 40 years. The Minister of Health appointed her to the National Immunisation Safety Expert Committee (which she chairs), the National Advisory Group on Immunisation, and the Board of the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority. She specialises in vaccine safety, vaccine hesitancy and vaccination as a pillar of antimicrobial stewardship. She is an NRF-rated scientist, and her research aims to strengthen healthcare services, improve public health, and contribute towards reaching the sustainable development goal of good health and well-being.

**Dr Linda Meyer** is the managing director of IIE Rosebank College and Rosebank International University College. She holds multiple advanced degrees and over 25 years of leadership experience in higher education, governance, and innovation. Her scholarly work focuses on transformation, equity, and policy in post-school education. Dr Meyer is an active researcher, external examiner, and peer evaluator, committed to social justice, quality assurance, and advancing inclusive academic practice.

**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.

**Dr Bongani V. Mtshweni** (PhD) is a licensed research psychologist and senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa. His research interests include student well-being, support, retention and belongingness in higher education.

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**Prof. Dr Birgit Schreiber**, PhD, has served in senior leadership positions in sub-Saharan Africa and Europe higher education with a focus, among others, on leadership, student success, DEI and gender. Birgit has worked with a range of national and trans-national bodies, notably USAf, SARUA, DAAD and ERASMUS, teaches, does research and supervision, programme design and policy development. She is extraordinary professor at her alma mater, the University of the Western Cape. Her PhD is in psychology. Birgit has over 90 publications, including authored books and monographs, on various themes around social justice, student affairs, student engagement and higher education leadership, gender and the SDGs. She was the founding editor and is part of the editorial executive of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA). She is on the board of the *Journal of College Student Development* (JCSD) and is a column editor for the *Journal of College and Character* (JCC). She serves as president of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) after being the Africa chair and vice-president. She has received numerous awards, most recently the Noam Chomsky Award for international research and the NASPA and ACPA Award for international practice. She is a member of the Africa Centre at the Albert Ludwig University Freiburg, Germany, research associate at Pretoria University, and she is Germany country director for the STAR Scholars Network and sits on various boards (SANRC at the University of Johannesburg, and CASHEF at the University of Pretoria).

**Jerome September** is dean of student affairs at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he holds executive oversight for campus housing and residence life, counselling and careers development, campus health and wellness, the Centre for Student Development and Wits Sport. He was previously head of student affairs at Sol Plaatje University and manager of Student Governance and Leadership at the University of Cape Town. He serves on a number of national committees and task teams.

**Prof. Beverley Summers** is a full professor in the School of Pharmacy at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU). She was born and educated in the UK; completed her BPharm at the University of Nottingham and worked in hospital and community pharmacy there for ten years before moving to South Africa in 1983, with her husband, Prof. Rob Summers. She is a South African citizen and a registered pharmacist in the UK and South Africa. She obtained her MSc (Med) in Pharmacy cum laude and her PhD at the Medical University of Southern Africa (MEDUNSA). She has extensive experience in collaborative research and postgraduate supervision. She currently teaches in the MPharm in Radiopharmacy course and heads the Photobiology Laboratory which is a clinical studies laboratory and a third-stream funding entity of the School of Pharmacy at SMU. She was involved in the curriculum development of both the integrated, modular PBL BPharm course and also the MPharm in Radiopharmacy at SMU. The latter degree is unique in Africa. She has supervised 50 master's degree students and 4 PhDs. She has served on working groups for the DoH, CANSA, the International Standards Organisation and the SA Bureau of Standards. She has published more than 50 peer-reviewed papers and made over 150 presentations at national and international congresses.

**Dr Corneli van der Walt** is a manager of the first-year experience at the Centre for Academic Development, Vaal University of Technology. An experienced higher education and student development practitioner, she specializes in first-year student success. She also teaches in the master's in education programme and supervises postgraduate research in higher education. A registered counselling psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa, Dr van der Walt has over 18 years of experience in private practice. Additionally, she is an academic associate of the Viktor Frankl Institute of Logotherapy in Dallas, Texas. Her research interests focus on meaning in life, student success, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

**Prof. Anna-Marie Wium** has a PhD in speech-language pathology, a postgraduate certificate in higher education (University of Pretoria), and a postgraduate diploma in medical research ethics (Stellenbosch University). She qualified as a speech-language pathologist and audiologist at the University of Pretoria in 1977 and hence started her career as a speech therapist/audiologist working in schools in several districts. She then worked for two years as a speech therapist at a state institution in Massachusetts, USA, where she serviced adult clients with severe communication challenges; with a special interest in augmentative and alternative communication. On her return to South Africa, she became a founding member of the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication at the University of Pretoria. For her PhD she obtained funding from the Shuttleworth Foundation for her research in the development of a support programme for foundation phase teachers in the facilitation of language skills for literacy and numeracy. She joined the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (former MEDUNSA) in 2009 where she was until her retirement in December 2021. She has developed a keen interest in learning and teaching in higher education, as well as service learning. She has served on several committees focusing on curriculum development and the accreditation of academic programmes.

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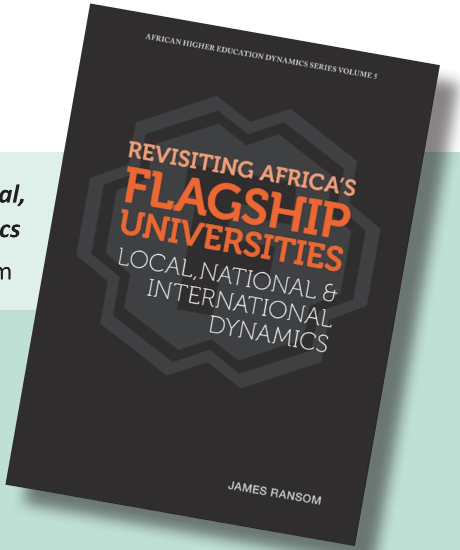


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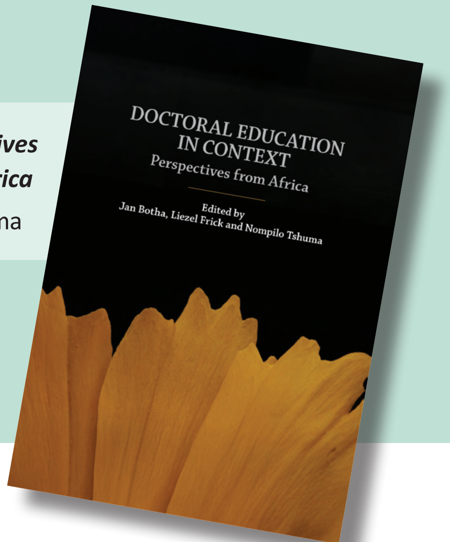


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