

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Students' Risk of Depression: Student Affairs Practitioners' Perspectives at a South African University of Technology

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Abstract

In this paper, we use data generated through one-on-one interviews with 12 purposively sampled student affairs practitioners at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to explore their perspectives on the vulnerability of the institution's students to depression. This study's findings indicate that depression is a serious mental health disorder among students, as they experience challenges that affect them daily. The participants reported numerous personal, environmental and social factors that contribute to students' depression. Analysis of the findings reveals that depression impedes students' academic progress and social well-being, as the students struggle to cope with the challenges they face in their academic lives. There is a need for multiple stakeholders to collaborate in addressing this mental health issue. Students must be equipped with skills and resources that will help them to cope with challenges that affect their mental health. Risk factors for depression must be identified to enable the establishment of prevention measures for improving students' mental health. The university of technology should develop policies that intentionally focus on mental health issues and how cases related to them are handled within the institution, so that students get the best support that they need.

Keywords: depression; mental health; students; university of technology

Introduction

Student affairs practitioners are responsible for ensuring campus conditions that affect students positively. They are also tasked with implementing supportive programmes and provide services that meet students' academic and social needs outside the classroom (Kuh *et al.*, 2010). According to Makoni (2016), the role of student affairs practitioners is to help students to be successful, develop skills that are much needed in the job market, and cope with academics and adjustment to higher education institutions. The practitioners are also expected to identify at-risk students and give them support towards academic success (Schreiber *et al.*, 2016). Student affairs in higher education institutions face continual changes as the demand to respond to college students' mental health increases (Laban, 2018). According to Al Amin and Rahman (2023), depression among students is a global phenomenon, and it has become the major health-related issue. Hence, student's mental health issues are increasingly becoming a concern in higher education. Most of these issues are due to socio-economic, political and technological changes across the globe (Salimi *et al.*, 2023). However, it must be stated that depression is a public mental health issue that affects millions of people globally (Koch *et al.*, 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2017) describes it as one of the most common illnesses that negatively affects how a person feels, thinks and behaves. Moreover, depression is considered to be one of the leading causes of mental disability (Ross *et al.*, 2023). According to Wang *et al.* (2022), approximately 10% of people around the world experience depression in their lifetimes. Furthermore, WHO (2017) reports that depression will be a leading global health burden by 2030. Although the illness is common, it often remains stigmatised, ignored and undiagnosed (Croock *et al.*, 2023).

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Depression can start early in the life course and can lead to the risk of substance abuse and premature mortality, as well as chronic conditions such as cardiovascular diseases (Gilman *et al.*, 2017). According to Herrman *et al.* (2022), depression is a complex diagnostic construct that is applied to people with particular symptoms, such as a bad mood and loss of interest in daily activities. It is for these reasons that social support, early identification and treatment must be strengthened to improve the quality of life of people living with depression (Shumye *et al.*, 2019). In this context, available research points to the mental health of university students as a growing concern (Siddique *et al.*, 2022; Chen and Lucock, 2022). Depression negatively affects the students' academic progress and interpersonal communication, among other aspects (Liu *et al.*, 2022). The triggers for depression among students include finance-related pressures, studying-related stress and living far from home (Xiang, 2022). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that people who have experienced toxic/negative life events are more likely to develop depression, which leads to stress and dysfunction and worsens the affected person's life situation (Ndegwa *et al.*, 2020).

Some of the students are at a vulnerable phase of their lives, as they undergo social, economic and developmental transitions that are both positive and negative (Wickramasinghe *et al.*, 2023). For example, being away from home for the first time, living with new people in a student accommodation and having to become independent can be overwhelming for students. These could lead to increased stress and depression (Sujarwoto *et al.*, 2023). The university space may also open up avenues for numerous challenges that may be stressful for students. Moreover, risk factors for depression must be identified to enable the establishment of prevention measures for improving students' mental health (Kim *et al.*, 2021). Wang (2020) emphasises the need for creating awareness of depression and stress management in relation to students' mental health and academic outcomes. Students' well-being, particularly mental health, has recently become prominent in higher education, and student affairs are mentioned as one of the solutions for these challenges (Luescher *et al.*, 2018).

Therefore, it was important to explore student affairs practitioners' perspectives on the vulnerability of students to depression at a university of technology (UoT) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. This study explored student affairs practitioners' perspectives, because these practitioners pave the way for student access, persistence, retention and success within institutions (Ludeman and Schreiber, 2020). Adjei *et al.* (2021) argue that the student affairs practice is important during times of crisis, as it ensures that students' basic needs, such as housing, good health and well-being, social worth, self-esteem, and mental health are supported sufficiently. This study is important because it contributes to demonstrating the need for universities to explore various options in supporting students who experience depression. It also intends to demonstrate how pivotal it is for institutions of higher learning to come up with different initiatives aimed at empowering students, especially those who are going through mental health issues, with coping mechanisms. Students are classified as a vulnerable group. Hence, specific interventions and preventions should be put in place to protect and improve their mental well-being (Aqeel *et al.*, 2022).

Methods

This study explores student affairs practitioners' perspectives on the vulnerability of students to depression at a UoT in KZN. It also examines the academic, social and emotional issues that contribute to depression and how it affects students' well-being and academic progress. For this study, we adopted a qualitative research approach, as it was appropriate for securing rich information from the participants. The qualitative method enabled me to collect information from multiple sources to understand the participants' problems (Akinyode and Khan, 2018). This study employed purposive sampling, as it is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases that were related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Student development officers and psychologists were purposely selected because they are well informed about social issues that affect students. The topic and aim of the study were explained to the participants. It was emphasised that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that should they feel uncomfortable, they might withdraw from the study. Before the commencement of the interviews, the participants were given a letter of information that outlined the study's aim. Each participant was required to sign a consent form that briefed them about the ethical processes that the researchers would follow.

A semi-structured interview that consisted of open-ended questions was used to collect data. This enabled me to interview 12 student affairs practitioners who provide some of the UoT's student services. The practitioners included student development officers and psychologists from the following units: Student Governance and

Development, Student Housing and Residence Life, and Student Counselling and Health. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes each.

Table 1: Participants' characteristics

PARTICIPANT	DESIGNATION	RACE	GENDER
P1	Student Development Officer	Black	Male
P2	Student Development Officer	Black	Female
P3	Psychologist	Black	Female
P4	Psychologist	Black	Male
P5	Psychologist	White	Female
P6	Psychologist	White	Female
P7	Student Development Officer	Black	Male
P8	Student Development Officer	Black	Female
P9	Psychologist	Black	Female
P10	Student Development Officer	Black	Male
P11	Psychologist	Black	Female
P12	Psychologist	Black	Female

The digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed. Once all of them were transcribed, I read the transcriptions to become more familiar with the data. The transcriptions were scrutinised following a rigorous process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns or themes that emerge from qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Results were integrated into an in-depth description of each student affairs practitioner's experiences and common interventions for positive student support.

Permission to access participants was sought from the relevant gatekeepers. Thereafter, ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC 055/20). The participants' confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Pseudonyms are used to hide the participants' real identities.

Findings and Discussion

The following are the themes that were identified from the participants' responses.

Depression as a common mental health challenge for students

The data analysed in this study suggests that depression is a concerning challenge among students in the UoT. A common thread among the participants is how depression is a dominant and common mental health challenge reported by students who access student-related services within the UoT. The following responses are representative of the participants' views:

"I think this is one of the most dominant mental health conditions among university students, as we have seen several cases reported to us to deal with." – P5 (Psychologist)

"This is one of the prevalent mental health issues among students, and it is common these days, as it is growing at an alarming rate. Sometimes I ask myself, 'As practitioners, what is it that we are not doing right to fight this demon which is negatively affecting our students?'" – P10 (Student Development Officer)

Some of the participants indicated that depression is a common mental health challenge, and others revealed symptoms of depression and isolation experienced by students as challenging mental issues among students.

"I would say this is a challenging disorder to deal with as a person. Can you imagine a student coming from far and having got no one to talk to about what is troubling him or her? It would be not easy for them to deal with depression, as they need someone to talk to, and some of them have no one to talk to, so they deal with their issues themselves, which is wrong." – P1 (Student Development Officer)

"Some of the students do not talk about what they are going through, because they have no trust in other people. Yes, it may be the fact that they have been betrayed, hurt and isolated, and that is why sometimes, depressive episodes would come up, and this is a challenging moment for them, as they fight battles alone with no support system." – P11 (Psychologist).

“There are various ways that depression can affect one’s well-being. Some would have issues of anger where they cannot control their emotions and they are easily triggered by minor things. I believe that is what some of our students go through with depression” – P6 (Psychologist)

These findings suggest that depression is a common threat and a challenging mental health concern among students. Depression emerges as the most commonly reported psychological problem among students (Karmakar and Behera, 2017). This confirms the literature that reports depression as a concerning health matter that grows at an alarming rate. Thus, as Eleftheriades *et al.* (2020) report, mental health challenges have come to the foreground in academia, as the literature demonstrates that the prevalence of student mental health issues continues to grow. Although participants expressed their perspectives on depression being a common threat and challenging mental health issue among students, they also mentioned the symptoms that indicate that a student is experiencing depression. One study conducted by Freitas *et al.* (2023) found that the symptoms of depression impact students’ quality of life negatively. This substantiates the findings of this study on how this mental health issue is damaging students from different backgrounds. Moreover, the participants revealed that depression causes students to isolate themselves from other people while dealing with different challenges that they are experiencing in life. Isolation is a state where a person is experiencing a reduction in the level of normal sensory input, which consequently impacts their ability to engage effectively with other people (Sundberg *et al.*, 2023).

Factors that contribute to students’ depressive episodes

According to the participants, numerous factors contribute to depression among students. These factors emanate from the surroundings and current situations that these students face daily. When the participants were asked what academic, social and emotional factors contribute to depression among students, they suggested the following:

“Academic work can be demanding at some point and requires students to pay attention to their studies. That is why you would find some of the students who cannot cope, because it is too much for them to handle the amount of work that they have.” – P8 (Student Development Officer)

“There are many things that can trigger depression [, and students], especially those who cannot manage their time accordingly, can feel burnout. This affects their academic performance; they end up [being] depressed.” – P4 (Psychologist)

“Students tend to not pay attention to what they are supposed to be doing. Some of them cannot distinguish between what is most important to them [sic]. Hence, they are unable to cope with their academic work, such as assignments and examinations.” – P10 (Student Development Officer)

“I feel like these students fail to cope with the pressure [that] their academic work comes with. When the deadline is close for the submission of assignments, or whatever, their mental health is severely affected, which is a bad thing.” – P6 (Psychologist)

Participants had different perspectives on social issues, as it was revealed that some students' backgrounds play a critical role in pushing them to depression. Furthermore, it was highlighted that a student's economic status can be a contributing factor to depression due to their attempts to survive. The participants responded in the following manner:

“... traumatic experiences emanating from their background and the way they were nurtured by their parents at home is [sic] a key to depression. Some students have never experienced love, kindness and care from their parents, and that is why they are easily triggered by these issues.” – P7 (Student Development Officer)

“A lack of financial support from home and a case where a student has to take his or her NSFAS money and send it home to look after the family. Others have responsibilities that are above their age and cannot enjoy their lives freely.” – P2 (Student Development Officer)

Moreover, other participants reported emotional issues that contribute to depression among students, and it appeared that students were confronted with many emotional issues that led them to depression. This is what some of the participants had to say:

“I would say in terms of emotional issues, the main contributing factor to depression is having no support structure, whether at home, from friends or even here at the university. It is important to note that having

support plays a huge role in one's life, as they can seek help whenever they feel they need help.” – P1 (Student Development Officer)

“Neglect and isolation can cause students to be depressed. We know that some of the students are in romantic relationships. When things turn sour, they would feel not loved and rejected.” – P7 (Student Development Officer)

“In my perception, I would assume that one of the things that contribute to depression among our students is not getting enough support when they need it. Remember, they go through the most, and at this particular time, life is unpredictable and requires one to be strong enough to stand against all odds.” – P11 (Psychologist)

University students are experiencing unparalleled levels of distress that eventually have a direct effect on their mental health (Liu *et al.*, 2019). The participants indicated that the inability to cope with the pressure academic work is one of the contributing factors to depression among students. According to Rehman, Shah and Bano (2023), academic stress among university students is a major issue that impacts their academic progress negatively. The findings of the study do confirm that students feel the overwhelming burden of academic work. This is because most often, students experience academic pressure due to the difficulties they face within the UoT. Furthermore, the participants revealed that students often fail to manage their time effectively. This also affects their ability to focus on their studies. This lack of time management triggers students into depression and mental health issues, as they are unable to balance everything efficiently. If students do not have good time management in the activities that they do, they will not have adequate control of the activities. This will ultimately increase their academic stress (Gallardo-Lolandes *et al.*, 2020).

The participants also acknowledged the toxic backgrounds from which students come and how they result in the students' mental ill-health. Saito and Ikari (2023) highlight that an individual's background is a major contributor to mental health challenges that affect a person's life negatively. The participants also expressed their views regarding how poverty contributes to depression among students. They stated that students go through financial crises, as they cannot meet their daily needs. Poverty is considered to be a common psychological issue among university students from impoverished backgrounds, and it can harm students' interpersonal interactions, mental health and life satisfaction (Liu and Fu, 2022).

Effects of depression

Their participants expressed their views on how depression affects students' well-being and academic progress. It was evident from the participants' perspectives that depression affected students' well-being negatively in all areas of life and reduced their academic performance significantly. With regard to students' well-being, participants indicated that depression affects their social, emotional and psychological well-being. The participants shared the following views:

“Generally, they would not be able to form relationships with other people, as they [would] feel worthless” – P12 (Psychologist)

“Depression affects their self-esteem, as they view themselves as failures in life who are achieving nothing, and that is why, maybe, some of our students are not taking part in any programmes that we do for them.” – P3 (Psychologist)

The participants' views suggest that the effects of depression on students' academic performance hinder scholarly excellence and good performance. This is what the participants had to say:

“Depression in students reduces their confidence to strive for academic excellence, as they are always not enthusiastic to focus on their studies as they should.” – P4 (Psychologist)

“... as they are dealing with depression, they tend to ignore their school work and do not pay attention to what is required of them. For example, one would submit late and even not attend lectures because of the challenges they are facing.” – P9 (Psychologist)

“I would assume that depression affects the students' academic performance. So, when someone is depressed, they lose focus on important things. Thereafter, poor results are expected, as they cannot cope.”
– P2 (Student Development Officer)

The data presented earlier illustrates how depression has a negative effect on students' well-being, as alluded to by the participants. According to Tiwari and Tripathi (2015), depression impacts a person's mood and interest in daily activities, including thoughts, behaviour, feelings and physical well-being. This study's findings indicate that depression affects students' ability to socialise with others and create lasting relationships with their peers. A common but negative social experience, including social exclusion, is a great risk factor in students' health and adaptation (Niu *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, participants also mentioned how depression affected the health and wellness of students, as they often experienced different illnesses related to depression. WHO (2021) revealed that this mental health disorder is one of the leading causes of disability across the world and it contributes to the global burden of disease. Furthermore, the study revealed that depression has major effects on students' academic performance, as students tend to lose focus on their studies. Mirhosseini *et al.* (2020) suggested that depression can affect academic performance negatively, but they also argued that academic satisfaction can promote it. Moreover, it is a known fact that acquiring an education from a university can be the most challenging experience for some students, because of its high work demands and related financial implications (Alonso *et al.*, 2019). This was evident from the participants' views, as some also indicated that students feel the pressure of their academic work and attempt to chase deadlines and end up being depressed. The participants also indicated that depression can also affect students' concentration during lectures. VanderLind (2017) emphasised that learning can be hindered by mental health. Depression affects a person's cognitive functions and reduces their concentration and ability to read and remember things (Skundberg-Kletthagen *et al.*, 2014).

Supportive mechanisms and interventions

According to the participants, many supportive and preventative strategies can be used to address depression among students. Since the participants are well informed about mental health issues that affect students, they believe that the UoT can do much to assist students in dealing with their mental health challenges. The following are the participants' suggestions:

“They need to be taught about different mental health issues, including depression, because some may have depression, but they do not know what is depression [sic] and how one can get assistance to deal with it.” – P3 (Psychologist)

“There is a need to strengthen the programmes that we do for students to create awareness of depression among students. Looking at the statistics that are growing should teach us that what is currently done is not enough.” – P8 (Student Development Officer)

The participants further expressed the need for policy interventions to address the issue of depression among students. The following are some of the participants' views:

“Policies on mental health should be developed, and clear guidelines should be developed on the intervention needed to assist students with depression.” – P1 (Student Development Officer)

“The policies would be good to assist us in dealing with depression among students, as they will be a point of guidance on what is expected from us to help these students who are facing challenges of mental health.”
– P10 (Student Development Officer)

“It is advisable to review policies that we have as a university to touch more on mental health issues that affect students. For example, these policies may provide a way on how students dealing with mental health issues can be referred to multidisciplinaries [sic] within the institution and what assistance would be required to address mental health issues.” – P9 (Psychologist)

This study's findings, as indicated by participants, indicate that there are strategies and institutional interventions that can be used to address issues of depression and/or mental health issues among students. Therefore, there is a call for interventions in preventing and promoting mental well-being among students by equipping them with cognitive behavioural skills (Mazurek-Melnyk *et al.*, 2022). This emphasises that we should be proactive in preventing students from being depressed by teaching them ways of behaving and techniques for dealing with

challenging issues. Furthermore, the participants expressed their views that students' awareness of depression should be raised. Yakushi *et al.* (2017) suggest that there is a need for establishing effective strategies for raising awareness on depression. However, Kiambarua *et al.* (2022) argue that there is still a lack of awareness of mental health issues, and that this is caused by the unavailability of systems and communication channels through which students who are vulnerable to mental health issues can speak up. Moreover, WHO (2010) emphasises the need for students' involvement in universities' policymaking, programmes and any activities related to mental health.

Conclusion

This study's findings are limited by the small sample of student affairs practitioners. The sample does not enable the generalisation of findings to the wider population of student affairs practitioners in any other universities, as the focus of the study was based on a selected UoT. The study's findings confirm that depression among students is one of the prevalent mental health issues. There are numerous factors that contribute to depression, such as personal, environmental and social factors. The study demonstrates that this mental health issue harms students' academic progress and social well-being, as they struggle to cope with the challenges that they confront in life. There is a need for multiple stakeholders to collaborate in addressing this mental health disorder. Students must be equipped enough to develop resilience and coping mechanisms in order to deal with challenges that may affect their mental health. Furthermore, the study recommends that risk factors for depression be identified to enable the establishment of prevention measures for improving students' mental health. Peer support groups must be established to provide the necessary support to ensure students' mental health and well-being. The UoT should develop policies that intentionally focus on mental health issues and how cases related to such challenges are handled within the institution, so that students get the best support that they need. Future research may focus on the experiences of student affairs practitioners in dealing with mental health cases among students.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: The article takes an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating insights from student affairs practitioners, examining factors contributing to depression, assessing its impact, and analyzing students' risk of depression to offer a more comprehensive understanding of student mental health challenges.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (Masuku and Sibiyi); literature review (Masuku); methodology (Masuku); analysis (Masuku); investigation (Masuku); drafting and preparation (Masuku and Sibiyi); review and editing (Masuku and Sibiyi). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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