

## SAACHS CONFERENCE

Support programme for pregnant students at a University

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Tshwane University  
of Technology  
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20  
YEARS  
2004-2024

# Introduction

- Teenage pregnancy refers to pregnancy occurring in girls aged 10–19 (WHO:2024).
- It remains a critical public health challenge, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa, where its prevalence is alarmingly high (UNFPA:2022).
- It is associated with adverse maternal and perinatal outcomes, posing significant risks to both young mothers and their infants (DOH:2023).
- Despite numerous interventions aimed at improving reproductive health and reducing adolescent pregnancies, teenage pregnancy rates continue to rise.
- In Gauteng Province alone, teenage pregnancies increased by 36% between April 2019 and December 2023, with a staggering 93,049 deliveries recorded among adolescents (GDOH:2023).
- This trend is particularly pronounced in the Ekurhuleni District, which has the highest contribution to teenage pregnancies within the province.



# Pregnancy trends and challenges among students

- Universities play a crucial role in fostering educational success and supporting student health and wellbeing.
- However, pregnancy among students is a pressing issue affecting academic performance, health, and mental well-being.
- Pregnancy trends among students can vary based on various factors:
- **Early Pregnancy:** In many regions, there is a trend of teenage pregnancies occurring among adolescents before completing secondary or tertiary education.
- **Child-bearing age:** More students are likely to become pregnant or have a child.
- **Unintended Pregnancies:** A significant number of pregnancies among students are unintended or unwanted (Norsi, Dusu & Kusi, 2022).



# Challenges Faced by Pregnant Students

## **Academic Impact: Pregnancy can disrupt a student's educational trajectory**

- Missed classes and exams due to pregnancy-related absences.
- Potential higher dropouts or delayed completion of studies.
- Affect concentration, energy levels, and the ability to meet academic demands.
- Balancing academic, pregnancy, and childcare responsibilities, and potential absences, affect academic performance and progress..
- Prolonged or frequent absences can disrupt learning and academic progress.

## **Health Risks**

- Limited access to antenatal care.
- Increased risk of pregnancy and birth complications, requiring regular antenatal check-ups.

# Challenges Faced by Pregnant Students

## Emotional and Social Strain

- Stigma and discrimination from peers and staff.
- Feelings of isolation and rejection by family, peers and partner.
- Fear, uncertainty, guilt, stress , requiring counselling services and peer support.

## Financial Burden

- Increased expenses for healthcare and childcare.

## Access to Support

- Inadequate access to counselling, healthcare, and childcare services.
- Limited institutional support tailored to pregnant or parenting students.
- Limited access to reasonable accommodation and class schedules.
- Safety concerns.
- Lack of specific frameworks leading to discrepancies in support and accommodations offered to pregnant students (Norsi et al.2022).

## Legal Compliance

- Ensuring compliance with anti-discrimination laws and regulations protecting pregnant students' rights, is crucial.
- Sections 9(3) and (4) of the Constitution of South Africa: Prohibit unfair discrimination on various grounds, including pregnancy.
- Section 27(1): Right to access healthcare services, including reproductive health care.
- Section 187(1) of **LRA (Act 66 of 1995)** and Section 6 of the **EEA (Act 55 of 1998)**: Protect employees from unfair dismissal based on pregnancy.

# Legal Compliance

- Pregnant students may not have the same extensive legal protections as employees.
- Universities are still obligated to provide reasonable accommodations and support.
- Ensure that pregnant students are treated fairly.
- Put appropriate measures to support their academic journey.
- Universities and policymakers to consider how the same principles of labour laws can be adapted and applied to support pregnant students.
- This involves developing inclusive policies, providing necessary support services, and fostering a supportive environment that promotes equal access to education for pregnant or parenting students.



# Questions

## How is Pregnancy Viewed?

- Universities should view pregnancy as a condition that requires temporary adjustments.
- This perspective helps in creating policies that support pregnant students without stigmatization.

## What Happens When Students Find Out They Are Pregnant?

- Early disclosure depends on the support systems and resources available to provide timely support and necessary accommodations.
- Universities should assure students that their disclosure will be treated confidentially.
- This encourages openness and trust between students and the institution.



# Questions

## Where Do They Access Care, Treatment, and Support during pregnancy and postpartum?

- Universities should provide or facilitate access to on-campus healthcare services, including emergency and reproductive healthcare, HIV care.
- Both pregnant students and their partners (male students) should have access to counselling services to support their mental and emotional well-being to make informed decisions about the pregnancy.
- Access to pregnancy-related workshops and information sessions or link to NGOs for resources.
- Linkage to external healthcare providers and social support services for ANC, PNC, high risk care and childcare.

# Questions

## How Are Pregnancy-Related Absence and Illness Considered?

- Universities should implement flexible attendance policies to accommodate pregnancy-related absences.
- Extensions on assignments, alternative examination dates, and modified coursework.
- Provide appropriate seating, rest areas, and accessible facilities to meet the needs of pregnant students.
- Allow pregnant students to reschedule exams if they coincide with medical appointments or if the student is unwell.
- Provide options such as extra time, breaks, or a separate room to ensure the student's comfort during exams.

## Challenges in Preventing and Addressing Pregnancy and Related Issues (Specific University)

- There is a noted low uptake of contraceptive methods among students, leading to unintended pregnancies.
- Students often default on contraceptive use, further increasing the risk of unintended pregnancies.
- There is a lack of capacity within the institution to adequately address the SRH.
- There is an absence of comprehensive policies that address pregnancy, contraceptive use, and related health issues on campus.
- Balancing students' rights to autonomy with the risks and complications associated with pregnancy can be challenging.



# Challenges in Preventing and Addressing Pregnancy and Related Issues (Specific University)

- Increased risk of health issues and complications such as gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, and premature labour.
- Addressing medical and psychological complications arising from pregnancy requires careful consideration and support.
- Recognizing pregnancy as either a choice or a medical condition impacts how support and accommodations are provided.
- The SRC programmes do not adequately address issues related to pregnancy, alcohol and substance abuse, GBV&F, violence, and mental health.
- Alcohol abuse is a significant contributing factor to unintended pregnancies and other related issues.
- Misuse of NSFAS funds exacerbates these problems.

# Challenges in Preventing and Addressing Pregnancy and Related Issues (Specific University)

- Unintended pregnancies can lead to crises and illegal termination, causing trauma and secondary trauma among affected students.
- There is a lack of an effective track and tracing system for monitoring students' health and well-being.
- Current student accommodations do not meet the specific needs of pregnant students and those facing related issues.
- Students' rights and autonomy often override institutional rules, complicating the enforcement of policies.
- Students sometimes refuse to vacate residences when required.
- There is a general sense of complaisance towards addressing these issues.
- Relationships with "sugar daddies" contribute to the complexity of addressing sexual and reproductive health issues on campus.



## Addressing the challenges

- SRHS are available and accessible through the university's Health & Wellness (H&W) centers.
- These services are crucial in ensuring students have access to necessary healthcare and support related to SRH.
- Increase education and awareness on contraceptive methods and safe TOP.
- Referrals to ante-natal care and safe TOP Services.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** DOH and various partners i.e. TDHS, Childline, Bayer, WITSRHI regularly provide SRHS.

# Addressing the challenges

- Implement peer education programmes where trained students educate their peers about contraceptive use, sexual health, and pregnancy prevention.
- Organize awareness campaigns, residence interventions, regular talks in classes to inform students about sexual health, contraceptive options, and available support services.
- Develop specific programmes aimed at male students and first-year students to address unique needs and promote responsible behaviors.
- Ensure that pregnancy testing is easily accessible and confidential.
- Offer pregnancy counseling services to provide emotional support and guidance to pregnant students.

## Recommended Interventions

- Tackle **Contributing Factors** such as alcohol abuse and misuse of NSFAS funds and "sugar daddies" through education and support initiatives.
- Develop effective tracking and tracing systems for monitoring student health and well-being.
- Ensure student accommodations meet the needs of pregnant students and those facing related issues.
- Balance students' autonomy with institutional rules to ensure compliance and safety.
- Create a framework that respects students' rights while addressing the risks and complications associated with pregnancy.





## Recommended Interventions

- Expand SRC programmes to include education and support on pregnancy, alcohol and substance abuse, GBV&F, violence, and mental health.
- Establish and implement policies that address SRH, contraceptive use, and support for pregnant students.
- Enhance the capacity of health and wellness services to support students' needs.
- By addressing these areas, the university can create a more supportive and effective environment for managing pregnancy and related health issues on campus.

# Conclusion

- Addressing pregnancy and sexual health on campus requires a comprehensive, proactive, and collaborative approach.
- By developing and implementing robust policies and programs, the university can ensure that students receive the support they need to manage their reproductive health while pursuing their academic goals.
- By focusing on these areas, the university can create a safe, supportive, and health-promoting environment that empowers students to make informed decisions about their reproductive health.
- This approach not only addresses the immediate needs of pregnant students but also promotes long-term well-being and academic success for the entire student community.



# References

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