



Central University of
Technology, Free State

SAACHS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

08 – 10 JANUARY 2025

BLOEMFONTEIN



Thinking Beyond

SAACHS CONFERENCE 2025

ACADEMIC EXCLUSION AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES: A CASE STUDY OF THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

THABO MONYATSI

(PSYCHOLOGIST: ACADEMIC SUPPORT – CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY)



Central University of
Technology, Free State

AIM OF THE STUDY

**TO IDENTIFY CAUSES, ANALYSE CONSEQUENCES AND
PROPOSE SOLUTIONS TO INCREASE INCLUSIVITY AND
MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH
ACADEMIC EXCLUSIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH
DIFFICULTIES**



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To determine the prevalence and types of mental health difficulties faced by CUT students
- To examine institutional and academic reasons driving academic exclusions and their connection to mental health difficulties
- To evaluate the impact of academic exclusions on students' mental health and academic performance
- To propose solutions to address mental health issues and reduce academic exclusions through institutional interventions and assistance



SIGNIFICANCES OF THE STUDY

The study could help explain CUT academic exclusions and mental health difficulties.

Why? University policies often lead to academic exclusions, but their psychological impacts are unknown.

Back up by literature:

- Lynch et al. (2024) say academic exclusions cause anxiety and hamper academic rehabilitation without robust assistance.
- Lipson et al. (2023). “ Mental health disorders like stress and depression often precede academic failure, creating a cycle that many institutions ignore.
- Tabor et al. (2021). “ early interventions and targeted support networks can reduce mental health's harmful effects on academic performance.
- Duraku et al. (2024) recommend proactive mental health interventions in academic systems.



SIGNIFICANCES OF THE STUDY

- The finding from the institutional concerns will also inform national and regional higher education mental health efforts.
- Franzoi et al. (2022) say stigma keeps youngsters from seeking help, causing exclusion and mental health degradation.
- The study will also reduce stigma, which is exacerbated by socioeconomic and cultural variables.
- The study advocates an inclusive narrative to encourage students to use mental health resources without condemnation, improving academic and psychological outcomes
- The research could also boost CUT`s academic retention. Academic expulsions affect student education and graduation rates and student satisfaction



RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

- The study addresses CUT`s unique student demographics, making it contextually and culturally sensitive.
- Most CUT students come from marginalized areas with poor mental health facilities.
- For historically marginalized communities, Quimby and Agonafer, (2023) recommend culturally adapted remedies.
- The study may affect global mental health and higher education discourses. Western universities research these issues more than African universities. Hernandex – Torano et al. (2020) believe that this difference preludes context – specific solutions because Western approaches rarely address African students` needs.
- Finally, Knowledge of higher education mental health issues will inform future research and policies.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

STRESS AND COPING THEORY

- Transactional model of Stress and Coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) which describes how people respond to stressful situation; like the university.
- According to this model, cognitive appraisals determines threat and coping strategies reduces threat.
- According to Fatima et al. (2024), heavy workloads, competitive environments and personal ambitions cause academic stress in university students.
- The institutional culture of high accomplishments without equitable support increases mental health challenges, causing student psychological distress.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Bronfenbrenner`s ecological systems theory how systematic factors, from individual interactions to social interactions, impact human conduct and results.

- **Microsystem level: Peers, family, and professional relationships affect students 'mental health, positive linkages in these systems lessen stress and negative ones harm mental health**
- **Mesosystem level: connects microsystems like student`s family and university. Academic achievement of many CUT students is hampered by poverty. Lipson et al. (2023)revealed that low - income students stress over academic and financial obligations.**
- **Macrosystem level: includes social expectations, stigma and academic performance norms. Cultural stigma prevents students from seeking help, exacerbating their distress.**



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

ACADEMIC RESILIENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Academically resilient students avoid stress and mental illness. Resilience helps students cope with academic, financial and social issues (Fatima et al. 2024).
- Academically resilient students have better self efficacy, emotional intelligence and management and problem-solving skills.
- Self confidence, coping skills and mindfulness programmes make university students resilient.
- Poor mental health services and institutional support limit these attempts. (Oliveira et al. (2021).
- To create resilience, CUT students must encounter these hurdles.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON MENTAL HEALTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- WHO (2022): University mental health is a global issue and fifth of university students worldwide endure anxiety, sadness and stress.
- Bantjies et al. (2023): Over 40% of European university students, mostly women, were stressed.
- Nurunnabi et al. (2020): say socioeconomic instability and insufficient mental health resources increases comparable tendencies in emerging nations like Asia and Africa
- In a comprehensive study by Dessauvague et al. (2022), 30% Southeast Asian university students expressed worry owing to finances and lack of counselling.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

- South African universities` socio economic and cultural dynamics affect students` mental health. Depression and anxiety affect around 30% of South African university students (Hernandez –Torrano et al. (2020).
- In South Africa, poverty, unemployment and limited health care access cause these concerns. According to Bantjies et al. (2022), financial pressures can stress poor students making it difficult for them to focus on their studies.
- Demand for mental health services often exceeds capacity, highlighting the need for mental health infrastructure investment at South African universities.



STUDY PARTICIPANTS

There were 1100+ students who were academically excluded and granted an opportunity to register in 2024

Only +-80 responded to the call to attend academic support programmes

Randomly selected 20 students (unanimous) who completed the programme to participate in the study and were informed of the study goals and gave consent

All undergraduate students from various faculties and departments



DATA COLLECTION

Questionnaire

35 questions

5 categories:

- Reasons for poor performance
- academic pressure and coping strategies
- self esteem
- Emotions
- Help seeking behaviour



RESPONSES, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Reasons for poor performance and exclusions

- Financial problems leading to poor attendance leading to poor performance
- Students with no bursaries, late or no payment by NSFAS, poor family backgrounds
- No accommodation
- No food
- Poor hygiene
- Death in family and prolonged grieve
- Wrong choice of the course, difficult modules and dissatisfaction, hence poor performance

(contributing factors to high levels of stress)



RESPONSES, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Academic pressure

- Pressure from family and peers to do well
- Future personal growth: discipline and commitment
- Stress lead to procrastination and physical ailments like headaches, sweating, panicking, blackout and fainting
- Poor time management



RESPONSES, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Coping strategies

- Coping: getting enough sleep, eating healthy, exercising and sports, talking to someone, consulting with Lecturers and peers, Tutor, playing music, connect with family for support, coloring books, singing,



RESPONSES, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Emotions

- devastated, anxious, sad, overwhelmed, extremely hurt, can't sleep and eat, heart aches
- joy and excitement when granted second chance



RESPONSES, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Self esteem

- low self confidence being laughed at by peers,
- acknowledge mistakes and not blame others – boost self confidence
- seeking validation from peers



RESPONSES, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Help seeking behaviour

- know about wellness center
- being judged
- emotionally drained to seek help
- have no confidence on professionals
- will rather seek help outside campus
- was scared,
- could have seek help before, was not going to be where I am today



RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Financial problems: early identification and early interventions**
- **University to invest on property and accommodate all students. NB: Private accommodation – expel students**
- **Access to meals to needy students. (Meals on wheels, Meal a day) NB: Stigma**
- **Access to toiletry for needy students**
- **Death – identify students and refer for grieve therapy**
- **Exposure to more academic support programmes. NB: Need for cooperation from faculties as some Lecturers sometimes tell students not to waste time with programmes that are not compulsory**

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **More physical activities.. partnership with sports division**
- **Introduce other therapy like Art, Music. Drama therapy**
- **Encourage one on one sessions to address confidence, stigma and self blame**
- **Oliveira et al. (2021) found app-based therapies which can be utilized by distant students and those concerns about being stigmatized or judged.**
- **Mental health can be improved by adding mental health education to the curriculum, strengthening counselling services, and creating a friendly campus atmosphere. (Dougall et al. (2023).**

CONCERNS

- **Severe exclusion policies are meant to improve performance but undermine students` mental health and increase exclusions.**
- **Severe exclusion rules ignores students` financial, personal, and mental health difficulties, causing stress and worry.**
- **Without institutional support, students do poorly and feel alienated.**
- **CUT needs adaptative policies and support to improve inclusivity and reduce mental health concerns.**
- **Consideration for socio economic and environmental factors**



THANK YOU

Thinking Beyond

