
Exploring inclusive leadership and strategic visioning as pathways to well-being in TVET colleges

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study reports on the ways in which staff and student well-being is embedded and promoted in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges through inclusive-leadership practices such as policies that structure and guide well-being programmes, making them part of the strategic vision. Such well-being is also evident in the wellness programmes and initiatives in some colleges. Eleven participants in total were purposively selected from a population of 59 TVET college leaders enrolled in a TVET (PGDip in TVET) leadership development programme at the University of Pretoria during 2021 and 2022. Data were generated during teaching and learning activities when the entire population (n=59) was involved in completing a structured checklist of enablers of, and risk factors related to, well-being for their colleges. From this process, the checklists of 11 campus managers were selected. The depth and the quality of the information the managers provided about the research topic, and the insights it provided in response to the question of how well-being was promoted in their colleges, also determined their selection. The study findings suggest that well-being policies were inconsistently implemented at different colleges, and that there is a perceived lack of strategic thinking about well-being and a lack of guidance and direction from college leaders about how to deal with it. Furthermore, it became evident that student well-being was prioritised over that of the staff, with staff members experiencing burnout and fatigue as a consequence of elevated levels of stress arising from meeting deadlines, unmanageable workloads and unrealistic expectations.

KEYWORDS

Vocational education; leadership; well-being; pathways; wellness programmes; enablers; risk factors; whole-school approach

Introduction

That the well-being of all people in educational contexts is important, is indisputable. Globally, increased emphasis has been placed on the way well-being is conceptualised, how it is contextually determined by culture and circumstances, and how people make sense of what well-being means to them in their unique educational contexts. Educational communities such as schools, colleges and universities are complex ecological systems in which there is a dynamic interplay between the needs of the individual and:

- the ways in which the immediate environment can affect such individuals;
- how people interact with and influence each other;
- the role the environment plays in individual and group functioning; and
- how this is embedded in, and influenced by, societal and life events such as a pandemic and a war.

This complex interplay between people and their environment makes well-being a subjective and complex phenomenon to define and promote (Carter & Anderson, 2023). It also makes it a collective or community undertaking if well-being is to be achieved for all (McCallum & Price, 2016).

The well-being of staff and students has been high on the agenda of educational leaders because it is a well-known fact that positive educational outcomes for students are directly linked to their well-being, which is, in turn, affected by that of those who take responsibility for their academic and career development (Turner & Theilking, 2019; Kaya & Erdem, 2021). This makes well-being a high priority for school leaders and managers. Despite this acute awareness of the importance of well-being in an educational context, many studies globally report on the pervasiveness of the challenges that students, teachers and school leaders experience with it. Some of the problems noted are:

- the deterioration of teacher, student and school leader well-being (Riley, 2014; Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Hogan, Thompson, Sellar & Lingard, 2018);
- high levels of performance anxiety among students and teachers;
- high attrition rates among teachers and dropout rates among students (Global Happiness Council, 2018; Tang, He, Liu & Li, 2018);
- a higher prevalence of mental illness among young people and staff at schools and tertiary institutions (Kessler & Bromer, 2013; Baik, Larcombe & Brooker, 2019); and
- a lack of agreement on the manner in which well-being could be promoted in educational contexts (Powell & Graham, 2017).

The TVET sector in South Africa similarly faces many challenges that pose a risk to the well-being of staff and students (Ronnie, 2023). Some of these include the very complex nature of TVET colleges as a result of their intensive restructuring since the 1990s (Terblanche &

Bitzer, 2018); the difficulties of teaching and learning in the South African context, what with the many societal, political and infrastructural challenges people have to navigate in their daily lives; the perception that TVET colleges are inferior to other higher education institutions such as universities (Ronnie, 2023); reports on the toxic work culture that exists in many TVET colleges (Meyer & Kirsten, 2014; Waddington & Wood, 2019); poor or inadequate leadership (Terblanche & Blitzer, 2018); an implementation gap between policy and practice; low staff morale and general dissatisfaction among staff with their working conditions (Wedekind & Buthelezi, 2016); and a very large student population (DHET, 2018) that is at high risk of developing mental health problems as a result of challenges such as poverty, crime, a lack of resources, and studying at colleges that are clearly under pressure (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019).

In recent years, there has been a strong shift of emphasis in educational contexts towards a whole-school approach to well-being, with clear evidence in research that wellness initiatives are more successful when they are integrated and reflected in the culture of a school or college system. This includes centralised support services that coordinate wellness initiatives among institutional leaders, teaching staff, administrative staff, parents, students, outside agencies, and the community in which the colleges are situated (Wilson, Dejoy, Vandenbergh, Richardson & McGrath, 2004; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Weare & Nind, 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Barry, Clarke & Dowling, 2017).

According to Carter and Anderson (2023), a sustainable whole-school approach to well-being can be achieved only if there is a shared vision and commitment by all the members of an educational community. The authors identified 12 key pathways that can be used to embed well-being in an educational context. These pathways are:

expert inclusive leadership; strategic visioning; quality teaching and learning; a supportive, caring, and inclusive educational community; a safe learning environment; social-emotional competencies; a sense of meaning and purpose; using, monitoring and evidencing strengths-based approaches; strategies encouraging healthy lifestyles; programmes that develop pro-social values; and family and community partnerships (Carter & Anderson, 2023:70).

This specific study focuses on only two of these pathways: expert inclusive leadership, which entails giving clear guidance and direction, and a commitment to student and staff well-being; and strategic visioning, which entails having a vision for well-being and well-being as evidenced by policies and intervention programmes.

The role of leaders in educational contexts is paramount in ensuring that wellness programmes and initiatives are embedded in the everyday context of staff and students, and that these programmes and initiatives are capable of dealing with the diverse dimensions of well-being and can create pathways towards an integrated college approach (Barry et al., 2017). This means that leaders should see to it that policies which give direction on what can be done to

ensure well-being, are in fact implemented. Such policies should have clear goals and aspirations regarding well-being; they should also mobilise people to the extent that they will assume responsibility for their own and others' well-being, monitor that of students and staff by assessing the efficacy of such interventions, and ensure the sustainability of well-being programmes (Weare & Nind, 2011; McCallum & Price, 2016; Powell & Graham, 2017; Carter & Anderson, 2023).

In South African TVET colleges, there are three levels of leadership and management. At the top level is the principal, who is the college's chief financial officer and who answers to the DHET minister. The principal's managerial responsibility is to oversee the planning, organisation and direction of the college. Principals have the authority to make the final decisions on all issues pertaining to college management and administration. The middle level of leadership is made up of the deputy principals in charge of various portfolios, followed by the third-level leaders or managers, who are department heads, campus managers and the managers of various units (Sithole, Wissink & Chiwawa, 2022).

The participants who were included in this study were first-level leaders. Although it is important to note these various levels of leadership because doing so will offer insights into the context and background of the study, the level of leadership of the participants was not the specific focus of the study. What was more relevant is that it is acknowledged that TVET leaders have both leadership and managerial duties to perform, and that though the lines between leadership and managerial roles overlap, there are subtle differences between the two roles (Robertson, 2015). The concept of leadership foregrounded in the conceptual framework aligns with the ethos of this study: that leaders must be visionary and innovative if they are to transform educational contexts where well-being is a priority for all.

It is against this background that this study aims to initiate research on the way in which well-being is promoted in TVET colleges along the pathways of expert inclusive leadership and strategic visioning which also encompass wellness programmes and initiatives as evidence of the way well-being is enacted.

Background to this study

This study forms part of a broader five-year project aimed at exploring the efficacy of leadership skills development in the Postgraduate Diploma in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (PGDip in TVET) programme. This programme was developed by the University of Pretoria, with the first cohort of students commencing their studies in 2020 (Smit & Bester, 2022). One of the eight modules in this programme is Emotional–Social Wellbeing. The module was informed by the notion that TVET colleges are key stakeholders in promoting the well-being of the young people and staff at such colleges. These educational communities are increasingly being challenged to position well-being as both a foundation and an integral part of an educational context's structures, processes and learning.

The module is structured around various aspects of well-being and mental health in the post-secondary learning environment. These aspects are that well-being and mental health are everybody's responsibility, and that they require a whole-college approach, are context-specific and are a social-cultural construct. Dealing with well-being and mental health requires leaders to make their attainment a strategic goal, to create a culture that makes well-being a priority, and to engage actively with mental health concerns. All of these are necessary if the stigma associated with mental health problems is to be removed (Carter & Anderson, 2023). The educational approach to instruction in the module is evidence-based and enquiry-led. Enquiry-based learning draws on the latest theories of human learning and instructional practice; it emphasises an active approach to learning which assumes that students are actively involved in their learning, solving problems that are unique to their contexts and constructing knowledge that is new to them. Pedaste et al. (2015) cite several studies that provide evidence to support the effectiveness of enquiry-based learning, and they state that it is generally regarded as a vital element in building a scientifically literate community.

One of the units in the module required the PGDip in TVET students to investigate those enablers or risk factors that promote well-being in their colleges. They had to follow a process of scientific discovery during which they were encouraged to explore existing research on this topic and construct their knowledge. They had to map possible risk factors by completing a structured checklist of enablers and risk factors of well-being (Carter & Anderson, 2023).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore and describe the views of 11 TVET campus managers on the extent to which staff and student well-being is embedded and promoted in TVET colleges through inclusive-leadership practices. Included in these measures are policies that structure and guide well-being programmes, making them part of the strategic vision. The study also sought evidence of policies and practices aimed at implementing wellness programmes and initiatives at colleges.

Conceptual framework

Well-being is a highly complex concept to define and various definitions exist. At a subjective level, well-being can be different things to different people based on their world views, values, emotional experiences and subjective judgment of these. It also differs across life stages and it is influenced by culture, context, and life or world events (Diener, 2000).

From a hedonic perspective, well-being is defined as happiness, whereas from a eudemonic world view people may experience it if they feel that they are able to express themselves as good, moral and righteous people who are true to themselves. Constructs such as self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) have added to our understanding of what constitutes well-being, while some believe that it requires a

more complex definition that could reflect the complexities of human life as ‘interwoven, environmental, collective and individual elements that interact across the lifespan’ (Carter & Anderson, 2023:22).

Based on their comprehensive review of the various definitions of well-being, Carter and Anderson (2023:22) proposed a broader and more encompassing definition of ‘well-being’ for educational contexts. They define it

as a holistic, balanced life experience where well-being needs to be considered in relation to how an individual feels and functions across several areas, including cognitive, emotional, social, physical and spiritual well-being.

It is also important to define ‘wellness’, since this concept also fits into the broader context of well-being. Wellness is not the same as well-being – although the terms are often used interchangeably. Wellness influences well-being and it refers to the various positive interventions and actions that can be undertaken to ensure holistic and integrated well-being at all the levels of an individual’s functioning – spiritual, cognitive, emotional, environmental and physical (Albrecht, 2014).

Various complex and interrelated factors may affect well-being either positively or negatively. These factors may be contextual – community, significant events such as a pandemic; social-cultural – culture, politics, poverty, and violence; and individual or personal – genetic factors such as temperament or psychological mindset. Some of these factors may be within the control of a person, while others fall outside their control. A proactive and positive approach to promoting well-being which is not purely reactive in nature, has been noted as being the most successful approach to follow to ameliorate the negative factors that affect well-being in educational contexts (McCallum & Price, 2016).

International research suggests that educational, context-based well-being programmes, if implemented correctly and effectively, have the potential to produce long-term positive outcomes for both students and staff (Clarke, Sixsmith & Barry, 2015). Currently, the DHET has commissioned Higher Health to develop and implement mental health policies and programmes at 50 TVET college campuses in South Africa. The primary focus of Higher Health is to provide a comprehensive set of preventive services to halt the spread of HIV, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and other health conditions, to reduce the impact of mental health conditions, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, LGBTQI+ issues, violence on campus, etc., and to advance reproductive-health rights and economic empowerment. As part of this intervention, a peer-to-peer-led health and wellness programme was introduced on campuses, providing a wide range of services at the doorstep of students and staff (Higher Education & Training Health, Wellness and Development Centre, 2023). However, the well-being initiatives that are currently implemented by the DHET can be successful only if there are also leaders at colleges who support and augment well-being initiatives.

Bingham and Bubb (2017) claim that a leader is crucial to ensuring that a school's culture does not deteriorate, and that school leaders directly affect student performance through their vital role in determining teachers' working conditions. Teachers' opinions of their working conditions and leaders' contributions to developing and preserving a school's culture are crucial to retention, motivation and well-being. A good leader will coordinate the institution's ideals so that everyone can see them and perceive a common thread connecting them to the school. The authors concluded that the most important factor in running healthy schools has to do with culture. Similarly, Sithole, Wissink and Chiwawa (2022) concluded that one of the most important tasks a TVET manager has is to create an organisational culture that encourages staff to function optimally and to attend to the core business of teaching and learning. However, the authors found that TVET colleges face enduring and persistent challenges because of a negative culture and, in addition to this, Balkrishen and Mestry (2016) found that the leadership role of campus managers at TVET colleges needs to improve, because their leadership has direct implications for student success.

According to Bingham and Bubb (2017), leaders in educational contexts can reduce the stress on their teaching staff and therefore benefit students by committing themselves to being part of the change process, being inclusive in their decision-making, and adopting whole-school systematic and practical strategies that are sustainable. This aligns with Carter and Anderson's (2023) 12 key pathways (listed above) that can be used to embed well-being in an educational context.

Study method

Research theory that underpins this study

For this study, interpretivism was used as a meta-theoretical paradigm and qualitative research as a methodological paradigm. Interpretive researchers value subjectivity and believe that reality is shaped by people's varied experiences and points of view. Interpretive researchers value interacting with insiders on the social situation which is being studied in the context in which it occurs (Nguyen, 2019). They also believe that understanding the phenomenon being studied requires the acceptance of different realities (Hammersley, 2013; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

Qualitative methodologies enable researchers to gather data in natural settings where they may speak with people face-to-face about the problem being studied in its true context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The goal of qualitative researchers is to present a comprehensive description of the specific issue or problem being studied. This implies that various viewpoints are considered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This researcher believes that each participant has a unique real-life experience determined by their specific college context that could influence their point of view on the factors that influence well-being in their college. What is more, these varied experiences could offer a

deeper insight into the phenomenon being studied. Since TVET leaders play an integral role in managing and leading people and co-contribute to the strategic vision of their colleges, this researcher believes that their perspectives will inform the purpose of this study.

Design

An exploratory case study design was used. The case was limited to one group of participants, namely 11 TVET leaders. The unit of analysis was the participants' views on how staff and student well-being is embedded and promoted in their colleges. Qualitative exploratory case studies are suitable when using interpretivist research paradigms because they offer possibilities to interact with individual perceptions through in-depth data-collection strategies such as using documents in the form of assignments – which was the case in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data generation and selection

Data were generated during teaching and learning activities. The entire population of 59 TVET leaders who were enrolled on the PGDip in TVET leadership development programme at the University of Pretoria during 2021 and 2022, had to complete a structured checklist of enablers and risk factors of well-being as these applied to their colleges. The teaching and learning process also involved a reflection session that was conducted with each year group during the contact sessions in the programme. These reflection sessions mostly confirmed the data that were generated in the checklists: it became evident that data saturation was reached during the compilation of the checklists. The checklists of 11 campus managers or first-level leaders were selected based on the depth and quality of the information they provided about the research topic and the insights it could provide to answer the question of how well-being was promoted in their colleges. The selection strategy was also used to manage the large data set.

The project had ethical clearance for the duration of this period. Due consideration was given to informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and managing the power relationship between lecturing staff and students as a potentially captive audience. The participants were approached every year for their consent to participate in the ongoing research project during face-to-face contact sessions and in follow-up emails.

Data analysis

The three themes that are presented later in the findings section were identified based on the existing categories in the structured checklist that the participants used to populate with the information from their colleges. The structured checklist was designed by Carter and Anderson (2023:70, 127) and it consists of the 12 categories listed above.

After these themes were identified, an inductive data-analysis process was followed to analyse the data that were populated on the checklists. This researcher followed a four-phase analysis process adapted from the six-phase process as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). During

phase one, the researcher engaged with a process of familiarisation with the data by carefully reading through and rereading all the documented data to identify relevant ideas. During phase two, the researcher developed initial codes and identified interesting aspects and repeated patterns across data items. During phase three, all the relevant data were integrated into each theme, and the data were checked within themes to ensure that they were meaningful and coherent. During the last phase, convincing extract examples were selected, the selected extracts were analysed, and the analysis was related to the literature.

Findings

In this section, data will be presented according to three themes: the role of policy and strategic visioning as enablers of well-being; the commitment of leaders to well-being; and how staff and student well-being is evident in college programmes.

Theme 1: Role of policy and strategic visioning as enablers of well-being

The participants in this study reported mixed experiences regarding policies that guide and direct well-being. There were views that there are clear policies, indicated in statements such as:

National as well as college policies are in place that support both student and staff wellness.

The college has an internal wellness policy aligned to [the] DHET Wellness Policy for students and an employee assistance programme to assist staff with personal or professional challenges. These policies will, however, be more effective with better advocacy of [such policies] and practices.

Opposing views were these:

There are no specific policies in place and there is a lack of guidance on the part of management.

Staff well-being is not clearly evidenced in educational policy documents and programmes. Not apparent. Staff must access their medical aid to address health and wellness issues.

When asked to indicate if well-being is a strategic vision in their colleges, the participants agreed that there is a lack of strategic thinking about well-being in their colleges. This is evident in the following responses:

It is in place for students but not for staff.

The college community does not have a clear strategic vision for well-being.

As reflected [in] all documents, ... clear goals and objectives for mental health and well-being [are not outlined]. Currently there is no strategic vision for mental health and well-being at the college.

The participants felt that there is also a lack of guidance and direction given to staff by college leaders on how to deal with well-being in their colleges. They indicated the following:

There is some management support, but staff are largely left to capacitate themselves.

There is a lack of guidance and direction with regard to mental health and well-being. Individual staff members engage with students in a caring and supportive way.

Theme 2: Commitment of leaders to well-being

The participants were of the view that there was a stronger commitment from leaders to students' well-being than to staff well-being. The commitment was attributed to the role of Student Support Services in their colleges. This is evident in the following statement:

Well-structured Student Support Department with a manager, a student wellness officer, [and] student supporters on each campus. Student support programmes and initiatives are in place.

One participant indicated that there has only recently been some commitment from leaders in their college to well-being and stated:

The first meeting was held in October 2021 to open the discussion about mental health and well-being. Campus management, student support staff and SRC members were grateful for this initiative.

There was a clear indication that there was a perceived lack of real commitment to well-being from college leaders. This is evidenced by statements such as:

The primary focus of executive management is to get the task done. This filters down to staff lower ... in the pecking order. In the quest to get the task done, there is not much focus on the people and their well-being.

Lip service is paid to wellness and well-being, without it translating into real, tangible initiatives or efforts to improve wellness and well-being.

Educational leaders are committed, as they are accountable for the certification rate (pass rate), retention rate and throughput rate of all students at their campuses

as well as to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Managers do not make enough time to engage with staff and address the actual needs of the staff.

Staff wellness resides with [the] HR manager, with no other dedicated post, limited initiatives, and an approach that staff are responsible for their own well-being

During traumatic periods such as COVID, perceptions on the ground are that management is 'cold' towards staff needs.

[There are] too many people in leadership positions who are not introspective and could be described as too involved with themselves to acknowledge their blind spots. This impacts on how they engage with staff and [on] the decisions they make.

Theme 3: Staff and student well-being as evident in college programmes

There seemed to be agreement that student well-being is supported effectively by the various wellness projects that are coordinated by Student Support Services (SSS) in collaboration with Higher Health and other organisations as mandated by the DHET. This is evident in the following statements:

Student Support Services (SSS) were mandated by the DHET to support students at the college and campuses.

... Student Support Services plans and implements various awareness programmes, in partnership with social organisations and Higher Health, to enable students and lecturers to develop resilience.

Apart from the various awareness programmes that are coordinated by the SSS, there are also individual counselling services for students. This is evident in the following statement:

Student support officers are all qualified counsellors who will counsel students when it is within their scope. They will refer students when they assess there is a need to

The college leaders, at least in some colleges, seem to fulfil their role in ensuring that information about support services is available and accessible to students. This is evident in the following statement by one of the participants:

Students are made aware of the services offered to them [by using] channels of communication and [by relying on] the supportive role of the lecturers, managers

and support staff. Having an open-door policy also facilitates good communication at college so issues can be dealt with as early as possible. This instils confidence in the students and lecturers and contributes positively to their well-being.

However, the efficiency of the SSS is affected by what seems to be an inadequate support staff to student ratio. This is evident in the following statement:

More student support officers must be employed. They are often inundated with appointments, which means that there could be long waiting periods for students to see them.

There also seems to be an inefficient use of the SSS's time in that they are involved in matters that are not necessarily within the scope of their function. This is evident from this next statement:

Students Support Services [is] sometimes busier with NSFAS applications and administrative work and [does] not have a lot of time to support students

In contrast to student wellness programmes, staff were of the view that their well-being is not prioritised by college leaders. In some colleges, positive steps are taken and some initiatives that seem to be in place are that some colleges subscribe to the Independent Counselling and Advisory Services (ICAS). Two participants indicated that their college subscribes to this service. This is evident in the following statements:

ICAS (Independent Counselling and Advisory Services) is a wellness service that was secured by the college, which can be accessed by staff for physical and mental health and wellness.

ICAS Connect: This is an employee health and wellness programme that empowers our employees to take control of their well-being, reducing problems at home and work and facilitating higher levels of productivity. This is an online and face-to-face service that provides professional health, counsellors, [and] occupational therapist and social worker services. These services support resilience development so that staff can cope with tough situations. All staff have free access to this service. My Benefits covers support in the following areas: Counselling, Family, Finance, Health@hand, Legal and Trauma.

There were comments on the limited resources at some campuses to promote staff well-being and it was indicated that a possible solution could be for all colleges to subscribe to ICAS. This is illustrated by the following statement:

There is no stress management programme available for staff. The college should register with a professional organisation such as ICAS to aid [it].

Apart from the ICAS initiative at some campuses, there is limited evidence that staff well-being is prioritised: it seems to be dealt with by means of very superficial interventions such as:

An annual staff wellness day.

Quarterly team-building activities are scheduled on the campus. Not all campuses follow this model.

The compassion policy addresses the well-being of staff. It also serves as motivation

Staff clearly felt the need for stronger initiatives to support them, some stating:

Facilities are made available for students but not staff. Higher Health runs health days six times a year for students, offering services ranging from family planning, general health consultations, sexual education and referrals to professional health services. Staff do not have access to any services on site.

There are limited awareness campaigns regarding ill-health, especially mental health.

The college could also appoint an employee wellness officer, as currently only in an extreme case where an employee is having a mental breakdown can the student support officer assist.

These statements are a reason for concern about staff well-being in colleges against the background of statements about their well-being and mental health such as:

Burnout and fatigue among employees during peak periods such as examinations, submission of final marks, and teaching and learning delays due to strikes, lead to stress, fear and anxiety.

Staff often experience high levels of stress about meeting deadlines, punctuality, unmanageable workloads and unrealistic expectations.

Discussion

One of the strategies that leaders could use to ensure that there is a structured and organised approach to well-being in colleges would be to make certain that national and college-specific policies are implemented and enacted. The value of policies is that they are guiding documents which exist because there was an exchange of ideas and a coming together of minds to form a basis for making decisions and working towards objectives that are considered important in reaching a goal (Bacchi, 2000). Various studies have reported on the role of policy and strategic visioning as enablers of well-being and on the interface between policy and practice

in the process of promoting well-being by implementing wellness programmes and initiatives (Bacchi, 2000; Birkland, 2016; Carter & Anderson, 2023).

However, one of the barriers that exists for example in student support services in TVET colleges is that policies and procedures are developed in colleges but there is little coordination in the TVET sector to ensure that these policies come to fruition (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019). This study similarly indicated poor coordination and that a gap exists between policy and implementation. Our study group reported mixed experiences regarding policies that guide and direct well-being: some participants indicated that there are clear policies in place that support both student and staff well-being, while others stated that there are no specific policies in place and that there was a lack of guidance on the part of management. This contrasts with scholarly views that it is the duty of leaders in education to ensure that policies are implemented adequately. When they do not do so, leaders in South African TVET colleges may be putting staff and students' well-being at risk (Weare & Nind, 2011; McCallum & Price 2016; Powell & Graham 2017; Carter & Anderson, 2023).

A strategic vision requires leaders to have a future-orientation and clear goals and aspirations for promoting well-being. The value of having a strategic vision is underscored by Bingham and Bubb (2017), who found that following a well-structured, coherent approach to well-being in a school could reduce the stress on teaching staff. The benefits of following this approach are usually evident in improved teaching and learning and in the students' academic success. However, the participants in this study reported that there is a lack of strategic thinking about well-being in their TVET colleges. There is also a perceived lack of guidance and direction from college leaders about how to deal with well-being, and individual staff members compensate for this shortcoming by engaging with students in a caring and supportive way. Terblanche and Bitzer (2018) are of the view that TVET leaders may lack the capacity and abilities to lead effectively owing to inadequate or inappropriate vocation-related leadership skills to effect change.

The participants were of the view that there was a stronger commitment from their leaders to the students' well-being than the staff's well-being. This was attributed to the role of the SSS in their colleges, which, in collaboration with Higher Health as mandated by the DHET, implemented a comprehensive and integrated programme promoting the health and well-being of students across South Africa's public universities and TVET colleges. This raised the question of how the Higher Health programme could be rolled out consistently across the institutions of higher learning for both staff and students. The question arises because the vision of the programme to support staff and students in TVET colleges does not seem to have been realised for all (Higher Education & Training Health, Wellness and Development Centre, 2023).

There seems to be a lack of real commitment to well-being by college leaders, as evidenced by the statement that 'lip service is paid to wellness and well-being, without it translating into real, tangible initiatives or efforts to improve wellness and well-being'. In addition, managers do not make enough time to engage with staff and to respond to the actual needs

of their staff. During traumatic periods such as COVID, perceptions on the ground were that management was ‘cold’ towards staff needs.

The role of expert inclusive leadership is to establish wellness programmes and initiatives that are embedded in the everyday context of staff and students in order to promote the diverse dimensions of well-being (Carter & Andersen, 2023). SSSs are mandated by the DHET to support students at the college campuses, and they coordinate various awareness programmes in partnership with social organisations and Higher Health. There are also individual counselling services for students, and the college leaders are responsible for ensuring that information about the SSS is made available and accessible to students. However, the efficiency of the SSS is affected by an inadequate support staff to student ratio and the inefficient use of their time.

Furthermore, TVET college leaders are not prioritising the same level of care for their staff so as to take care of their well-being. However, some colleges have taken positive steps to deal with this neglect by, for example, subscribing to the Independent Counselling and Advisory Services (ICAS Connect), an employee health and wellness programme that provides professional health, counsellor, occupational therapist and social worker services. These services support resilience development and provide free access to support in the areas of counselling, family, finance, health and trauma. However, the services are not available to all staff at all the colleges. There is limited evidence that staff well-being is being prioritised; rather it is dealt with by way of superficial interventions such as annual staff wellness days and team-building activities. Staff also feel the need for stronger initiatives to support them, such as Higher Health days, awareness campaigns and the appointment of an employee wellness officer. This is expressed against the background of statements about their well-being and mental health, including burnout and fatigue among employees and high levels of stress about meeting deadlines, unmanageable workloads, and unrealistic expectations. Wedekind and Buthelezi (2016) believed a comprehensive management strategy was required in the TVET sector to attend to staff dissatisfaction and to promote staff cohesion. However, Robertson and Frick (2018) quite rightly point out that TVET leaders have very complex and demanding tasks to deal with, which they must perform irrespective of adverse and challenging circumstances. This fact, together with their own need for support and well-being, can very easily be overlooked.

Limitations of this study, and future research

This study is limited by the narrow focus on leaders and also the focus on the ways in which they enable well-being through the effective use of policy and strategic visioning, on how committed they are to well-being in their colleges, and on the ways in which the well-being of their staff and students is evident through wellness programmes and initiatives. Other pathways to well-being, such as quality teaching and learning, safety in colleges, inclusive practices and social-emotional competencies – to name but a few – and the views of other staff, must be explored before a more comprehensive understanding of the current

status of well-being at TVET colleges can be arrived at. Moreover, the findings of this study are limited to the views of the participants in this study, who are employees at TVET colleges; they do not reflect the views of the students. These limited findings may therefore be regarded as constituting only one piece of a bigger puzzle that needs further scientific investigation.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the challenges that TVET college leaders have been grappling with, such as how to bridge the gap between policy and its implementation, the need for the development of leaders in TVET colleges to deal more effectively with complex matters such as committing to the well-being of both staff and students, and how to create a culture of well-being that is embedded in a college's everyday activities – and which is embraced by all. Even though the sample and scope of the study were limited, its findings might help to guide the formulation of strategic plans that promote well-being at TVET colleges. This study indicates that a need exists for more structured and organised thinking, and also points to the action that needs to be taken to ensure well-being at TVET colleges. In this respect, it is a starting point for research into other facets of well-being that remain unexplored.

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