Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk
An international journal rooted in South Africa
Vol. 62, No. 3, 2026, DOI: https://doi.org/10.15270/62-3-1678

Dimensions of social and academic support relating to the general wellbeing of students in social work programmes

Willem J. H. Roestenburg [1.1], Hanelie Malan [1.2], Roelf Reyneke [2], Varoshini Nadesan [3], Ulene Schiller [4] and John V. Rautenbach [5]

[1.1] *North-West University, School of Psychosocial Health, Potchefstroom, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8079-0967 *wim.roestenburg@nwu.ac.za*

[1.2] *North-West University, School of Psychosocial Health, Potchefstroom, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1146-863X *hanelie.malan@nwu.ac.za*

[2] *University of the Free State, Department of Social Work, Bloemfontein, South Africa*
https://orchid.org/0000-0002-6534-0175 *reynrp@ufs.ac.za*

[3] *University of Johannesburg, Department of Social Work & Community Development, Johannesburg, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5786-529X *vnadesan@uj.ac.za*

[4] *University of Fort Hare, Department of Psychology, Social Work and Criminology, East London, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7272-9082 *uschiller@ufh.ac.za*

[5] *University of Zululand, Department of Social Work, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-/5127-2805 *rautenbachj@unizulu.ac.za*

Article received: 27/08/2025; Article accepted: 04/05/2026; Article published: 30/09/2026

ABSTRACT

Social work students face significant mental and emotional challenges, including financial hardship, academic stress and secondary trauma. In South Africa, these pressures are intensified by socio-economic disparities, highlighting the need for targeted wellness support. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this quantitative cross-sectional study examined the influence of six social and academic dimensions on the general well-being of 233 social work students at five South African higher education institutions. The General Well-being Schedule (GWBS) and Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21) assessed well-being and depression, anxiety and stress. Support factors included IT resources, on-campus support programmes, off-campus support, friendship networks, financial support and accommodation. Findings identified

distinct predictors of general well-being and depression. Financial support had a limited effect, primarily enhancing students' sense of self-control. Inadequate or stressful on-campus support programmes emerged as a significant risk factor, substantially reducing wellbeing. Unexpectedly, protective friendship networks were associated with higher depression scores, suggesting possible peer co-rumination. Older students experienced greater financial strain, while socially isolated males appeared particularly vulnerable. Overall, males reported higher well-being than females after controlling for institutional stress. The findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to provide targeted emotional and academic support alongside structural resources.

Keywords: higher education; protective behaviours; resilience; social work students; South Africa general wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

Globally, social work students face a range of challenges that negatively affect their wellbeing, including financial hardship (Bartley et al., 2024; Guijarro & Edwards, 2024), heightened stress and anxiety (Guijarro & Edwards, 2024; Stanley & Buvaneswari, 2022), and the emotional toll of working with vulnerable populations (McCarthy et al., 2024). Tuition costs, living expenses and the financial demands of fieldwork placements further contribute to mental distress (Iglesia & Lu, 2021; Mpofu, 2024). In addition, students are often exposed to secondary trauma and burnout when engaging with clients who have experienced adversity, particularly those students who themselves have a history of trauma (Dion, 2024; Kranke et al., 2024). These cumulative stressors significantly impact on students' mental and social wellbeing, academic performance and professional development.

Although such challenges are widespread, they are compounded in contexts marked by historical and socio-economic inequalities (Van Wyk et al., 2022). In South Africa, the burden of family poverty remains acute among first-generation students. Over 1 million students rely on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), and many of their families also rely on state social grants, underscoring the urgent need for targeted wellness support (Wildschut et al., 2018). In the United States, similar patterns have been observed, where financial hardship disproportionately affects social work students from underprivileged backgrounds (Unrau et al., 2020).

Student mental health has become a global concern as a result of its direct influence on academic success, dropout rates and career trajectories (Worsley et al., 2022). Mood disorders and anxiety are among the most prevalent mental health challenges, significantly undermining student wellbeing (Bantjes et al., 2023). Social work students are particularly vulnerable because they must navigate the intersection of rigorous academic demands and the emotional labour inherent in clinical practice.

These students prepare for a profession that exacts a significant psychological, emotional and physical toll. During their training, they often work on the frontlines of crises, requiring them to manage personal feelings that could interfere with professional judgment. This exposure makes students vulnerable to the secondary trauma absorbed from clients, a risk that may be compounded by their own personal histories of adversity (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022; Maurer et al., 2023). Furthermore, students in social services face the same risks as qualified social workers, including aggression, violence and traumatic client narratives (Crocker & Wilson, 2023).

Research confirms that social work students report elevated levels of stress (McLean et al., 2023) and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Martín-Cano et al., 2022; Tonsing & Tonsing, 2023) compared to their peers. These risks manifest through various forms of indirect trauma: secondary traumatic stress (STS), which involves mirroring a victim's trauma symptoms; vicarious trauma (VT), the cumulative shift in a practitioner's worldview from exposure to traumatic narratives; and compassion fatigue, a state of physical and mental exhaustion from depleted emotional resources. For instance, a United States study – comprised of 83.7% social work students – found that 40.2% of participants exhibited moderate to severe depressive symptoms (Tonsing & Tonsing, 2023). These findings align with a comparative study in Spain and Mexico, which revealed that social work students reported higher rates of depression (47.6%), anxiety (47.4%) and stress (43%) during the COVID-19 lockdown (Martín-Cano et al., 2022). Furthermore, Beddoe et al. (2024) found that 60.7% of social work students in New Zealand disclosed that they had experienced significant anxiety, stress and depression during their studies, yet chose not to seek help from mental health professionals.

Field education, a cornerstone of social work training, can exacerbate psychological strain. Students working with trauma cases may face retraumatisation, particularly if their own adverse experiences drew them to the profession (Carello & Butler, 2015; Uclaray, 2023). This can lead to over-identification with clients and challenges in maintaining professional boundaries (Grant, 2014; Uclaray, 2023). Ben-Porat et al. (2021) found that 75% of social work students experienced secondary trauma, highlighting the urgent need for protective interventions.

These psychological risks manifest in several forms of indirect trauma. Secondary traumatic stress (STS) involves experiencing trauma symptoms identical to those of the victim, stemming from the intense emotional labour of helping a suffering person (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022; Maurer et al., 2023). Alongside STS, students are at risk of vicarious trauma (VT), which refers to the cumulative transformative effect on a practitioner's worldview resulting from chronic exposure to traumatic narratives (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022).

Furthermore, students face a higher risk of compassion fatigue compared to seasoned professionals because of their relative inexperience (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022). This condition is a state of physical and mental exhaustion resulting from the depletion of emotional resources (Crocker & Wilson, 2023). Ultimately, failure to cope with STS and VT can lead to burnout, characterised by emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced personal accomplishment (Theofilou &

Malkopoulou, 2024). These conditions impact negatively on long-term health, often manifesting as sleep disorders, anxiety and depression (Theofilou & Malkopoulou, 2024)

Despite growing recognition of student wellness as a determinant of academic success and professional resilience (Mdaka, 2023), South African research has largely overlooked the unique experiences of social work students. Most studies in local higher education institutions (HEIs) focus on the general student population, examining the prevalence of mental health (Bantjes et al., 2023), self-care (Gumede & Sibiya, 2023) and wellness strategies (Henrico, 2022). While these are informative, they do not address the distinctive pressures faced by social work students that are shaped by a blend of personal trauma, academic rigour and professional ethical demands.

The South African Bachelor of Social Work qualification standards (Council on Higher Education, 2015) prescribe intensive academic training alongside demanding field placements. These experiences may trigger past traumas or introduce new stressors, particularly for students with adverse childhood experiences (Felitti et al., 1998; Manyema & Richter, 2019). Furthermore, socio-political realities and legacies of inequality continue to shape the lived experiences of many aspiring social workers.

As academics and supervisors, the authors of this paper have observed these patterns with growing concern about the effectiveness of those services and structures within and outside the academic environment intended to support students in effectively resolving mental health and educational issues. A gap remains in understanding which academic and social support factors most significantly influence the general wellbeing and mental health of social work students in South Africa. This study seeks to address that gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wellbeing reflects overall life quality, combining physical resources with mental health across multiple dimensions (OECD, 2022). The psychological elements of wellbeing have gained greater prominence in higher education because of rising student mental health concerns (Baik et al., 2019). Jarden and Roache (2023) explain that wellness emerges from personal and social functioning, shaped by internal states and external factors, including academic demands, financial pressures and the support networks available.

Dimensions of measurement

The present study examined six dimensions of social and academic support as independent variables expected to influence the general wellbeing and the causes of depression among social work students. These dimensions were selected based on previous research on student wellbeing in higher education, which consistently highlights the importance of institutional, interpersonal and socio-economic support systems in shaping students' psychological functioning (Baik et al., 2019; Bantjes et al., 2023; Wilson Fadiji & Eloff, 2024). The selection of these dimensions was guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasises that individual

wellbeing is influenced by multiple interacting environmental systems, including immediate relationships, institutional contexts and broader socio-economic conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Within this ecological framework, the six dimensions were conceptualised as representing different system levels that may function as protective or risk factors for student wellbeing. Microsystem influences included friendship networks and off-campus support from family and friends, reflecting the role of close interpersonal relationships. Mesosystem influences were represented by on-campus support programmes, which captured the interaction between students and institutional support structures. Exosystem influences included financial support and accommodation arrangements, which affected students indirectly through structural conditions. The macrosystem influences were reflected in access to information technology and institutional resources, which shaped students' learning environments within the broader higher education context.

These dimensions were operationalised through the questionnaire items included in the survey instrument extracted from the General Wellbeing Schedule (GWBS) (Fazio, 1977) and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995, 2011). The six support dimensions were analysed as potential protective or risk-promoting factors that influenced students' emotional wellbeing, academic functioning and their readiness for professional practice.

IT systems and software

Students assessed how Wi-Fi access, software and internet services influenced academic performance and welfare (Ohei & Brink, 2020). Reliable internet connectivity supports learning and communication, but can also create stress either from information overload or from limited access to essential resources (Borrell-Carrió et al., 2004; Salvagno et al., 2017; Van Der Merwe, 2020). Excessive technology use may lead to emotional loneliness. Integrated IT systems enhance learning opportunities and access to online skills in social work (Apostol et al., 2023; Carbonell et al., 2023; McCarthy, 2020).

On-campus support programmes

This study considered two main types of on-campus support: student wellness initiatives (Wilson Fadiji & Eloff, 2024) and academic literacy programmes (University of the Free State, 2025). Wellness programmes assist students in managing stress, improving psychological wellbeing and adapting to the academic environment. Literacy programmes play a vital role for second-language learners, because they enhance their reading abilities and their skills in paraphrasing and academic writing (North-West University, 2025; Sebolai & Huff, 2015), which is as fundamental for social work students as for any others.

Social work students sometimes need institutional support to handle their emotional challenges, which frequently include stress, burnout and secondary trauma (Grant & Kinman, 2020).

Unfortunately, some students avoid counselling services because of stigma and cultural barriers, even though these services can offer help (Cerolini et al., 2023).

Social work programmes should incorporate resilience training, peer mentoring and open dialogue about mental health to create a sense of belonging and connection (Apostol et al., 2023; McCarthy et al., 2024). Educational institutions must establish a comprehensive system that provides easy access to support services while using relationship-based teaching methods and promoting a caring environment (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022; Beddoe et al., 2024; Hitchcock et al., 2024). These authors argue that student wellbeing, academic success and professional readiness should be supported through teaching coping strategies and promoting self-care practices.

Students need robust social and institutional support networks to handle the demands of their academic work and personal responsibilities. They face difficulties managing their demands when they lack sufficient support**,** especially when studying emotionally challenging subjects such as social work (Grant & Kinman, 2020).

Some authors argue that institutions should implement three essential strategies**,** which include making available accessible counselling services**,** advancing supportive teaching methods and promoting sound self-care practices. The implementation of such measures strengthens student resilience and enhances mental health (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022; Beddoe et al., 2024; Hitchcock et al., 2024). A systemic approach needs to establish protected learning spaces while promoting collective development. Student success and wellbeing depend on teaching coping skills and developing a caring environment (O'Donnell et al., 2024; Uclaray, 2023).

The identification of the dimensions of student wellbeing is a fundamental requirement. Students experience emotional distress and poor academic results because of fieldwork stress combined with financial strain and inadequate institutional support. Social work students require ongoing systematic support because they face high risks of burnout and secondary trauma. Research on general student wellbeing continues to grow, but the difficulties faced specifically by South African social work students remain understudied.

Off-campus support

This study highlights two key types of on-campus support: wellness initiatives and academic literacy programmes. Wellness programmes help students manage stress and improve their psychological wellbeing. In contrast, literacy programmes are crucial for second-language learners, as they enhance their reading and academic writing skills (Fox et al., 2014). This is particularly important for social work students. As far as wellness initiatives are concerned, social work students in particular often encounter emotional challenges such as stress, burnout and secondary trauma, yet many avoid counselling as a result of the perceived stigma as well as cultural barriers. They typically come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, face language barriers and may carry responsibilities outside of university life (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Ndofirepi et al., 2023). This makes it essential that they receive as much on-campus support as possible.

Motsabi et al. (2020) found that family, the home community, extended family, teachers and peers play essential roles in supporting and encouraging first-generation students. Although families often provide social and emotional support, they may not fully understand the expectations of university life (Naudé & Breshears, 2024; Saenz et al., 2007). This lack of understanding can limit their ability to offer meaningful academic support. Still, studies show that families offer tangible and intangible support, which can help motivate students and encourage them to persevere (Motsabi et al., 2020; Pather et al., 2017).

Friends on campus also play a key role. They offer emotional support, help students attend classes, introduce them to campus resources and assist with the transition into university life. Observing peers succeed can also inspire students to pursue their own academic goals. While peer influence may be subtle, it can significantly shape students' behaviour and academic performance. Interestingly, friends from home are not always supportive, mainly because they don't understand the challenges and demands of university life (Motsabi et al., 2020).

Financial support

Research on the financial wellbeing of social work students in South Africa remains limited. However, feedback from social work lecturers suggests that a significant proportion of students come from low-income backgrounds. Data from five universities indicate that 71% of enrolled social work students receive funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (see Table 1). To qualify for NSFAS, applicants must be South African citizens or permanent residents and meet one of the following criteria: receive a SASSA grant, belong to a household with an annual income below R350,000, or, in the case of students with disabilities, belong to a household with an income below R600,000 (NSFAS, 2025). These eligibility requirements confirm that the majority of social work students come from economically disadvantaged households.

Despite receiving financial aid, many students continue to face economic hardships. Lecturers frequently report that students struggle to meet their basic needs because of delayed or insufficient disbursements. Some students admit to going without food or essential items, while others divert their limited funds to support family members in financial distress. Supervisors across departments have observed that financial allocations intended for transport, textbooks and other academic expenses are often mismanaged, which heightens student stress. This is particularly concerning given the practical demands of the social work programme, which requires regular travel to field placements and participation in skills development sessions (Bornman, 2017; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2021).

Table 1 presents the number of social work students receiving NSFAS funding across the five participating universities.

Table 1: ***Student numbers and NSFAS recipients at the five participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Reyneke, 2022)***

Number of undergraduate social work students						
	HEI_1	**HEI_2**	**HEI_3**	**HEI_4**	**HEI_5**	**Total**
1st year	109	162	132	49	44	452
2nd year	108	125	82	47	39	401
3rd year	59	124	72	0	40	295
4th year	68	100	47	0	33	248
Total	344	511	333	96	153	1437
NSFAS recipients						
Number of recipients	275	397	178	72	104	1026
Percentage of students	80	78	54	75	68	71

Table 1 indicates that more than two-thirds of students (71%) across the five HEIs receive financial aid for registration, academic support, books and other requirements.

Accommodation arrangements

Accommodation issues can be a major source of stress for university students. In a study conducted in Sierra Leone, Bulanda et al. (2020) explain that this may stem from students from various parts of the province lacking nearby family support. Similar patterns are seen in South Africa, where many students travel from different regions to attend university, often without access to suitable housing.

Most universities lack sufficient on-campus housing, forcing some students to rely on substandard off-campus options. Some students living off campus often struggle to access university facilities, as their accommodation is sometimes far from campus. Limited financial resources make it difficult for them to afford transport, which can prevent regular attendance and participation in campus activities (Bulanda et al., 2020).

Those who live in on-campus residences often report challenges related to accessibility, campus insecurity, irregular security checks, and poor-quality services within residences (Krishna, 2021). Some students feel anxious and unsafe in some South African university residences, particularly where state resources are insufficient to maintain a quality living environment (Gopal & van Niekerk, 2018).

Despite these challenges, on-campus residences can play a key role in student development by offering greater social, cultural and extracurricular opportunities. Living on campus can also

positively influence academic success (Gopal & van Niekerk, 2018). Having proper accommodation can thus contribute positively to students' wellbeing.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) as its conceptual framework to demonstrate how environmental systems and their interactions affect human development at the different system levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Myer & Moore, 2006; Nadesan, 2019; Siporin, 1980).

The *microsystem* consists of immediate environments, including family, peers and educators, where direct interactions occur (Crawford, 2020). The study explored general wellness factors related to off-campus support and on-campus friendship networks, including student-supportive relationships and the influence of their immediate environment on their wellbeing.

In this study, the GWBS (Fazio, 1977) served as the research tool to explore the interactions in the *mesosystem*, represented in our study by on-campus support programmes, or between different microsystems (e.g. the relationship between the student and university and/or the immediate support system as experienced by the student). The study also explored the exosystem, such as social structures affecting students indirectly through financial aid policies and university resources and institutional support (financial support and accommodation arrangements) (Dickens et al., 2025; Tong & An, 2024), and whether these systems produced distress or created positive effects on their wellbeing.

The GWBS (Fazio, 1977) measured how students perceived the impact of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Dickens et al., 2025; Härkönen, 2007), including IT systems and software resources, financial support and accommodation arrangements. Finally, the GWBS allowed researchers to evaluate the impact of the chronosystem (i.e. effects of time along with life transitions and historical events, including the COVID-19 pandemic) on student wellbeing (James & Gilliland, 2016; Jurich & Myers-Bowman, 1998).

Research question

What factors explain the general wellbeing of social work students at five South African HEIs?

Research aim

The aim of this study was to focus on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of social work students, which are determined by factors that inform higher education policies and interventions that foster emotional competence, enhance academic outcomes and build resilience. As the demand for skilled social workers increases, prioritising student wellbeing is essential.

The research investigates the general wellbeing of social work students at five South African higher education institutions, focusing on six academic and social protective factors within their learning environment. Students completed the General Wellbeing Schedule (GWBS) (Fazio, 1977)

and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995, 2011) as measures of their wellbeing.

The six selected supportive factors include (i) access to IT systems and software such as Wi-Fi, internet, email and academic platforms (Salvagno et al., 2017); (ii) on-campus support services, including wellness programmes, academic literacy initiatives, and teaching and learning support (Wilson Fadiji & Eloff, 2024); (iii) off-campus support from family and friends (Vungkhanching et al., 2017); (iv) friendship networks on campus (Baik et al., 2019); (v) financial aid, including NSFAS (Bulanda et al., 2020; Unrau et al., 2020); and (vi) accommodation arrangements such as residence, home or apartment (Bulanda et al., 2020). These factors can serve as either protective or risk-promoting influences, shaping students' emotional wellbeing, academic achievement and readiness for professional practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

This study employed a quantitative approach to examine social work students' wellbeing through standardised surveys, providing a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon under investigation (Fouché, 2021). Standardised tools, such as the GWBS (Fazio, 1977) and the DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995, 2011), measured wellness dimensions and depressive symptoms, and identified patterns across variables.

A non-experimental, descriptive, cross-sectional design was adopted, enabling data collection at a single point in time. This design supports comparisons between groups (Fouché, 2021), such as between institutions and student groups, offering insights into wellbeing across academic years and contexts. This design is useful for developing a detailed profile of student wellbeing across diverse institutions. Patterns and relationships identified in the survey data enhance understanding of the challenges faced by social work students and can guide the development of targeted support and interventions to improve student wellness (Fouché, 2021).

Population and sampling

The study targeted social work students enrolled at South African higher education institutions (HEIs) offering accredited Social Work programmes. Following a national conference involving 18 HEIs, all institutions were invited to participate. Five institutions consented, resulting in a self-selected sample. The total student population across these five institutions was 1,437, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Given the relatively small population size, an all-inclusive sampling approach was adopted.

To ensure the findings could be generalised, a minimum sample size of 14% (202 students) was set, based on the guidelines proposed by Stoker (1985, as cited in Fouché, 2021). Additionally, a sample size calculator indicated that a sample of 304 students would be sufficient to achieve a 5%

margin of error, thereby enhancing the reliability of the results (Calculator.net, 2025). All social work students at the five participating institutions were invited to take part in the study.

Ethical clearance

The study received ethical clearance from North-West University's Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support (NWU-00210-22-A1), with additional approval obtained from each participating HEI. This was important as individual researchers at the HEIs had to abide by their institutional policies.

The gatekeepers for the study were inevitably the researchers themselves as they marketed the study at their respective HEIs; however, each researcher also received a permit to collect data or ethics committee approval from their respective institutions. Recruitment of participants occurred face to face and digitally in line with our sampling processes. Researchers used university platforms and social media as these allowed students to access the online survey through mobile phones, tablets or computers, ensuring convenience regardless of location.

The preamble to the online survey contained details relating to voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity (Caggiano & Weber, 2023). Participants were informed that their participation in the survey was voluntary. The survey was structured in such a way that if participants elected not to participate after reading the preamble, they could not proceed to the rest of the questionnaire. Informed consent: details informing participants about the study were provided beforehand during the recruitment process by each researcher via a social media platform that was followed by a link to the survey. The survey form also gave details about the purpose of the study, recruitment procedures, multi-university involvements, and how confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. It was critical to adhere to the principles of information confidentiality and participant anonymity. The researchers ensured that the form did not collect personal details such as names and email addresses. However, the informed consent section indicated that including the name of the participating university was inevitable for the purpose of comparison of data.

The study also took into account researcher positionality and potential participant bias (Bryda & Costa, 2023) as each recruiter (researcher) was employed at the HEI where the respective data were collected. It was important that the researcher did not influence the selection of participants, nor did they influence the data collected (Babbie & Mouton, 2001); therefore, the researcher's details were excluded from the survey form.

Data were managed on a SharePoint site accessible only to the six researchers. These data will be stored on SharePoint for five years and linked to a university repository at the end of that period.

Data collection

The electronic survey included a cover letter detailing the study's aims and a section on informed consent. Students who consented could proceed to complete the questionnaire via a link, which

was available from September to November 2024. The survey gathered demographic data and incorporated the General Wellbeing Schedule (GWBS) (Fazio, 1977) and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995, 2011).

Measurement instruments

The first section of the questionnaire gathered demographic information, including age, gender, university affiliation, and forms of support received during teaching and learning, such as access to electronic devices, mobile data, financial aid and accommodation. It also explored students' support networks, including family, friends, spiritual guidance and other off-campus resources.

The second section used the General Wellbeing Schedule (GWBS) (Dupuy, 1977; Fazio, 1977), an 18-item self-report scale assessing psychological and somatic wellbeing across six dimensions: anxiety, depression, general health, positive wellbeing, self-control and vitality (Yang et al., 2018). Participants rated their experiences over the past month using a six-point scale for the first 14 items and a 0–10 scale for the final four. Scores range from 0 to 110, with lower scores indicating greater distress. A score of 0–60 indicates severe distress, 61–72 suggests moderate distress, and 73–110 reflects positive wellbeing. The GWBS demonstrates strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.90$), with test-retest and intra-class correlations of 0.81 and 0.85, respectively. While some studies have questioned the six-factor model's robustness in specific populations (Taylor et al., 2003), the scale shows solid construct validity and has been validated with marginalised groups (Leonardson et al., 2003). It is suitable for non-clinical educational settings and aligns with holistic wellness frameworks relevant to South Africa (Bantjes et al., 2023; Henrico, 2022).

To complement the GWBS, the study also included the DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995, 2011), a 21-item self-report instrument measuring depression, anxiety and stress. Each subscale consists of seven items assessing key emotional states: depression (e.g. hopelessness, anhedonia), anxiety (e.g. autonomic arousal, situational anxiety) and stress (e.g. irritability, difficulty relaxing). Subscale scores are calculated by summing the relevant items. Although not a diagnostic tool, the DASS-21 serves as a reliable screening measure for emotional distress (Brown et al., 1997) and was interpreted using standard severity categories.

Table 2: ***DASS-21 score interpretation***

Severity	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Normal	0–9	0–7	0–14
Mild	10–13	8–9	15–18
Moderate	14–20	10–14	19–25
Severe	21–27	15–19	26–33
Extremely Severe	28+	20+	34+

Data analysis

The quantitative data were exported from the online survey platform and analysed using the JASP software (JASP Team, 2025). Descriptive statistics outlined the sample's biographical profile. Group differences were analysed using the ANOVA or non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis's test; variable relationships were assessed via chi-square tests and contingency tables. Effect sizes above 0.2 were reported. Lastly, hierarchical regression analysis with the addition approach was used to determine predictor variables, and Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess scale reliability.

RESULTS

A total of 236 students completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 16.4%. While this exceeds the minimum threshold recommended by Stoker (1985), it falls short of the calculated minimum sample size of 304. As such, the findings should be interpreted with caution. However, the relatively even distribution of responses across the five participating institutions supports the representativeness of the data (see Table 3: *Distribution of respondents by age and HEI*).

Table 3: ***Distribution of respondents by age and HEI***

Contingency Tables

	Higher Education Institution					
Age ranges	HEI_3	HEI_1	HEI_5	HEI_2	HEI_4	Total
18-24	42	30	33	31	48	184
25-34	9	12	6	6	8	41
35-55	1	4	0	2	1	8
Total	52	46	39	39	57	233

Demographic profile of the sample

The study sample included 236 students from five South African HEIs, with participation ranging from 39 to 58 students per institution. Most respondents were female (n = 204; 87.71%), reflecting the current profile of social workers in South Africa. Age distribution in the group 18 – 24 years was 186 respondents; in the group 25 – 34 years, 42 respondents; in the group 35 – 55 years, 8 respondents; and in the group 56+ years, 2 respondents. Three respondents were excluded from the analysis as their responses were identified as outliers. Most respondents (78.15%) were between 18 and 24 years old.

Scale reliability

Cronbach's internal consistency reliability was determined for all sub-scales and overall scale scores using the combined students' dataset, with all dimensions demonstrating acceptable reliability ($\alpha > 0.685$). The results are presented in Table 4 (Scale reliability).

Table 4: ***Scale reliability***

Scale Dimension	Coefficient Alpha	Inclusion
GWBS Overall	0.835	Yes
GWBS Anxiety	0.738	Yes, items 2, 5, 8 and drop item 16
GWBS Depression	0. 610	Yes, all items, 4, 12, and 18
GWBS Positive Wellbeing	0.694	Yes, all items 1, 6, 11
GWBS Self-Control	0.697	Yes, all items 3, 7, 13
GWBS Vitality	0.685	Yes, all items 9 (rev), 7, 14
GWBS General Health	0.541	No, exclude sub-scale
DASS-21 Depression	0.931	Include all items
DASS-21 Anxiety	0.881	Include all items
DASS-21 Stress	0.897	Include all items

All GWBS dimensions, except General Health and DASS-21, were included in the further analysis. Table 5 indicates the depression, anxiety and stress score ranges as measured by the DASS. Higher scores indicate increased levels for each dimension. On average, mean scores were higher for anxiety and stress compared to depression.

Table 5: ***Depression, anxiety, and stress scores***

Statistic	DASS Depression	DASS Anxiety	DASS Stress
Valid	233	233	233
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	20.04	27.10	28.92
Std. Deviation	11.91	16.09	15.61
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00
Maximum	40.00	56.00	56.00

Table 6 indicates the depression scores for gender groups in the sample.

Table 6: ***Gender and depression***

Contingency Tables

Depression Recoded	Data Type	Female	Male	Total
Normal	Count	48	5	53
	% within column	23.53%	17.24%	22.75%
Mild	Count	23	2	25
	% within column	11.27%	6.90%	10.73%
Moderate	Count	41	8	49
	% within column	20.10%	27.59%	21.03%
Severe	Count	27	4	31
	% within column	13.24%	13.79%	13.31%
Extremely severe	Count	65	10	75
	% within column	31.86%	34.48%	32.19%
Total	Count	204	29	233
	% within column	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

About 32% of women and 35% of men fell into the "severely depressed" category. The smallest group was in the “mild” category. Additionally, 23% of women and 17% men were in the "normal" category.

1. Comparative Analysis: ANOVA vs Kruskal-Wallis

To examine differences in wellbeing across the five training institutions, the study utilised either One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) or the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test. Given the robust sample size (N = 233), ANOVA was prioritised for composite scale scores, provided the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were met (Field, 2018). While ANOVA is generally robust to minor deviations from normality in large samples because of the central limit theorem, the Kruskal-Wallis test was employed as a conservative alternative for variables exhibiting significant skewness, or for which homogeneity of variance was violated (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). Furthermore, in cases of heteroscedasticity, where normality was maintained, Welch's ANOVA was used to preserve statistical power while controlling Type I error rates (Delacre et al., 2017). Effect sizes will be interpreted according to generally accepted thresholds, as follows:

Standardised Mean Differences (d Family)

- Small: 0.20
- Medium: 0.50 (Note: many now suggest 0.40 is more representative)
- Large: 0.80
- Very Large / Huge**:** 1.20 to 2.0+ (Sawilowsky, 2009)

2. Categorical Analysis: The Chi-Square Test

In instances where student wellbeing was assessed through individual, non-standardised survey items rather than validated composite scales, the chi-square test of independence was applied to evaluate the association between the training institution and categorical responses (Agresti, 2018). To ensure the validity of these results, the analysis adhered to the assumption that no more than 20% of the expected frequencies were less than 5; for 2 X 2 contingency tables that failed to meet this criterion, Fisher's Exact Test was utilised to maintain precision (McHugh, 2013). Effect sizes for these associations were quantified using Cramér's V, providing a standardised measure of the strength of the relationship between institutional context and specific wellbeing indicators (Cohen, 1988).

3. Predictive Modelling: Multiple Regression Analysis

To identify the primary predictors of wellbeing and depression, a series of multiple regression analyses was performed, following the reporting standards of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). Beyond significance levels (p-values), the study reported 95% confidence intervals and standardised coefficients (β) to provide a more transparent estimation of effect magnitude and precision (Cumming, 2014). Given the heterogeneity of the sample, the models controlled for relevant demographic covariates (such as age, gender, and socio-economic status) to isolate the unique variance explained by the predictors (Pedhazur, 1997). Methodological rigour was maintained by assessing multicollinearity using variance inflation factor (VIF) values, with a threshold of VIF < 5 to ensure model stability (Aiken et al., 1991).

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

The initial dataset consisted of 236 students from five South African higher education institutions (HEIs). Following a screening for multivariate outliers, three cases were identified and excluded, resulting in a final sample of N = 233. The sample was predominantly female (n = 204; 87.7%), reflecting the demographic profile of social work students in South Africa. Most respondents were aged 18–24 (n = 184; 78.2%), with smaller representations in the 25–34 (n = 41; 17.5%) and 35–

55 (n = 8; 3.4%) age brackets. Missing data were handled via listwise deletion, as the internal consistency and completeness of the N = 233 subsets were verified for all primary variables.

Psychometric properties and internal consistency

Internal consistency was assessed within the current sample to ensure the reliability of the measures in the local context. The DASS-21 demonstrated excellent reliability across all subscales: Depression (α = .931), Anxiety (α = .881) and Stress (α = .897).

For the General Wellbeing Schedule (GWBS), the overall scale showed strong reliability (α = .835). Reliability for subscales was generally acceptable (α > .685), though the GWBS Depression subscale was borderline (α = .610). Following a general guideline regarding inclusion thresholds of .6 as a general inclusion criterion, the General Health subscale (α = .541) was excluded from further analysis. Item composition was optimised post-deletion to ensure maximum internal consistency; for example, item 16 was removed from the Anxiety subscale to achieve an alpha of .738.

Prevalence of depression and low wellbeing

Descriptive statistics for the DASS-21 indicated high levels of distress amongst the student sample, with mean scores for Stress (M = 28.92, SD = 15.61) and Anxiety (M = 27.10, SD = 16.09) exceeding those for Depression (M = 20.04, SD = 11.91). Approximately 32.2% of the sample fell into the "extremely severe" depression category. Categorical analysis revealed that 53.6% of students reported "severe distress" on the GWBS (scores 0–60), while only 15.8% reached the "positive wellbeing" threshold, consistent with the findings from the DASS-21.

Comparative analysis of demographic factors

Group differences were analysed using One-Way ANOVA or the Kruskal-Wallis H test, with the choice of test determined by Shapiro-Wilk normality checks and Levene's test for homogeneity of variance (p > .05).

Gender: ANOVA results revealed a significant difference in general wellbeing by gender (F(1, 231) = 5.719, p = .018, ω^2 = 0.020). While males initially appeared more vulnerable in descriptive distributions, they scored an average of 5.64 points higher on overall wellbeing when controlling for covariates in the final regression model discussed below.

Age and Financial Support: A significant association were found between age and perceived financial support ($\boldsymbol{\chi^2}(4)$ = 12.756, $\boldsymbol{p}$ = .013, Cramer's $\boldsymbol{V}$ = 0.166), with older students less likely to receive funding, and therefore more likely to be influenced by financial problems. Although of small effect, NSFAS funding significantly influenced the "Self-Control" dimension of wellbeing

($\boldsymbol{F}$ = 5.245, $\boldsymbol{p}$ = .006, $\boldsymbol{\omega^2}$ = 0.036), suggesting that financial protection enhances a student's perceived control over their personal situation.

Predictors of student general wellbeing and depression

This study conducted detailed analyses of the relationship between the six protective factors designed to support students in the university environment and the general wellbeing and depression of students as measured by the GWBS, and the DASS 21, respectively. The findings indicated that *on-campus support programmes* significantly influenced general wellbeing beneficially, while *off-campus support* from family and friends influenced depression levels positively and significantly.

To identify predictor variables, correlations among the study's dependent variables were examined. The dependent variables were the General Wellbeing Schedule (GWBS) and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21). Examining these correlations is a fundamental step in establishing construct validity and internal coherence, as it assesses the strength and direction of linear associations between variables. In this cohort, it was essential to confirm that as psychological distress (DASS scores) increased, general wellbeing (GWBS scores) decreased in a consistent, linear fashion. Secondly, the analysis helped us evaluate the suitability of the GWBS and DASS-21 dimensions for approximating interval-level data. The analysis also enabled us to verify variable redundancy – whether the dependent variables are sufficiently related to suggest a shared underlying construct, yet distinct enough to avoid multicollinearity in subsequent regression modelling. Lastly, the analysis enables **construct validation:** finding significant, moderate-to-strong negative correlations between the GWBS and DASS dimensions (ranging from r = -0.421$ to r = -0.485$, $p < .001$) provides empirical evidence that these scales are measuring theoretically related aspects of mental health within the student population.

Table 7: ***Pearson's correlations***

Pearson's Correlations

Variable		GWBS Total	DASS Depression	DASS Anxiety	DASS Stress
1. GWBS Total	Pearson's r	—			
	p-value	—			
2. DASS Depression	Pearson's r	-0.485	—		
	p-value	< .001	—		
3. DASS Anxiety	Pearson's r	-0.421	0.799	—	
	p-value	< .001	< .001	—	
4. DASS Stress	Pearson's r	-0.454	0.821	0.872	—
	p-value	< .001	< .001	< .001	—

Table 7 (Pearson's correlations) shows that all DASS dimensions correlated significantly with the corresponding GWBS dimensions, ranging from moderate to strong. The correlations were negative, indicating that the subscales were negatively correlated. Higher DASS scores reflected higher levels of depression, while lower GWBS scores indicated reduced wellbeing. These results suggest that the DASS dimensions are suitable for inclusion in further modelling.

Predictive modelling

The research aimed to identify whether supportive factors could predict students' general wellbeing. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to address this objective and answer the primary question: Which factors explain (predict) the outcome variable, general wellbeing and depression among students?

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to identify predictors of wellbeing and depression, controlling for age, gender and HEI context. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF) values; all were below 5.0, indicating stable models.

In the regression analysis conducted for this study, a backward elimination approach was utilised to refine the predictive models for student wellbeing and depression. This method is a deductive, step-by-step procedure in which all potential predictors, including identified protective factors and demographic covariates, are initially entered into the model.

Procedure and motivation

In this study, the stepwise selection method was used to identify the most potent predictors of student wellbeing and depression, while accounting for the complexity of multiple potential protective and risk factors. This approach is particularly motivated by the following methodological requirements.

Stepping method criteria

- **The entry/removal criteria:** Variables were retained in the model if their significance level was below the threshold of $p < .05$ and were targeted for removal if $p > .10$. Given that many initial variables, such as IT support and certain on-campus programmes did not contribute meaningfully to the outcome, the stepwise method allowed for the systematic exclusion of non-significant predictors. This ensures the final model is parsimonious, containing only variables with actual predictive utility value.
- **Significance level:** The removal of variables was based on the largest p-value (least significant) in each step, provided it exceeded the removal criterion.

- **Multicollinearity monitoring:** At each step, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was monitored to ensure that no retained predictors were excessively intercorrelated, with a strict threshold of VIF < 5.
- **Model fit evaluation:** The transition between steps was evaluated using the R^2 Change and the Adjusted R^2, ensuring that the removal of a variable did not lead to a substantial loss in the model's overall explanatory power.

This systematic reduction ensured that the final depression model, which explained 77.4% of the variance, and the wellbeing model, which explained 32.4% of the variance, consisted only of robust and theoretically relevant predictors. Managing the risk of overfitting is essential in cross-sectional studies where high R^2 values are observed, such as the 77.4% variance explained in the depression model of this study. Overfitting occurs when a model captures random noise within the specific sample rather than the underlying population trend, often resulting from an excessive number of predictors relative to the sample size. To mitigate the risk of overfitting and maintain a robust finding, the following aspects were taken into account:

- The cases per predictor were well within the 15 – 20 cases rule of thumb. For the depression model, five predictor variables were identified, providing a stable basis for its adoption;
- Taking into account the Adjusted R^2, in the model provided a more realistic estimation of the model's predictive power;
- A minimal shrinkage between the R^2 and Adjusted R^2 indicates that the model is not overly reliant on redundant variables;
- The use of the stepwise model ensured that non-significant variables were excluded;
- Application of multicollinearity diagnostics as outlined above ensured that the predictors were distinct;
- Theoretical grounding – overfitting was avoided by including only variables with a strong theoretical rationale.

Model 1: General Wellbeing (GWBS)

The final wellbeing model (M1) (see Tables 8-10) explained 32.4% of the variance (R_{adj} = .299, p < .001). DASS Depression was the strongest negative predictor in this model (B = -0.415, SE = 0.056, β = -0.418, p < .001), whilst specific institutional effects emerged: students at HEI_2 and HEI_5 reported significantly lower wellbeing compared to the other reference institutions. This trend could be the result of specific geographical and contextual factors prevalent at these institutions at the time. Regarding respondents' perceptions of support, the following result emerged: perceiving on-campus support as a "risk factor" (stressful or inadequate) was associated with a 10.48-point decrease in wellbeing (p = .047).

Table 8: ***General Wellbeing, Model 1 summary***

Model Summary – GWBS Total

Model	*R*	R^2	Adjusted R^2	RMSE	AIC	BIC	R^2 Change	df1	df2	*p*
M_0	0.446	0.199	0.195	13.146	1833.733	1844.034	0.199	1	227	< .001
M_1	0.569	0.324	0.299	12.269	1808.933	1843.270	0.125	7	220	< .001

Note. M_0 includes DASS Depression 2.

Note. M_1 includes DASS Depression 2, On-campus support programmes, Higher Education Institution, Gender.

Table 9: ***GWBS Model 1 – Regression Coefficients and weights***

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardised	Standard Error	Standardised[a]	t	*p*
M_0	(Intercept)	70.254	1.863		37.713	< .001
	DASS Depression 2	-0.443	0.059	-0.446	-7.508	< .001
M_1	(Intercept)	72.693	2.523		28.817	< .001
	DASS Depression 2	-0.415	0.056	-0.418	-7.458	< .001
	On-campus support programmes (Protective factor)	-0.972	1.686		-0.576	0.565
	On-campus support programmes (Risk factor)	-10.483	5.239		-2.001	0.047
	Higher Education Institution (HEI_1)	-2.062	2.503		-0.824	0.411
	Higher Education Institution (HEI_5)	-7.219	2.619		-2.757	0.006
	Higher Education Institution (HEI_2)	-10.733	2.686		-3.996	< .001
	Higher Education Institution (HEI_4)	1.031	2.389		0.431	0.667
	Gender (Male)	5.643	2.496		2.261	0.025

[a] Standardised coefficients can be computed only for continuous predictors.

Table 10: ***Descriptive statistics for GWBS Model***

Descriptives

	N	Mean	SD	SE
GWBS Total	229	57.882	14.656	0.968
DASS Depression 2	229	27.939	14.761	0.975

Model 2: Depression (DASS-21)

The extended model (see Tables 11-13) explained 77.4% of the variance in depression (R_{adj} = .769, p < .001). The predictors Anxiety (β = 0.613, p < .001) and Stress β = 0.290, p < .001) emerged as the dominant predictors. The role of peer relationships as a risk factor was prominent in the model. Unexpectedly, protective friendship networks were associated with higher depression scores (p = .010).

Table 11: ***Model 2 Depression Model Summary***

Model Summary - DASS Depression 2

Model	*R*	R^2	Adjusted R^2	RMSE	R^2 Change	df1	df2	*p*
M_0	0.446	0.199	0.195	13.240	0.199	1	227	< .001
M_1	0.880	0.775	0.770	7.080	0.576	4	223	< .001

Note. M_0 includes GWBS Total

Note. M_1 includes GWBS Total, On-campus friendship networks, DASS Anxiety 2, DASS Stress 2

The regression coefficients and weights for the Depression model are presented in Table 12.

Table 12: ***Depression model - Regression coefficients and weights***

Model	Predictor	Unstandardised	Std. Error	Standardised	t	p
M_0	(Intercept)	53.825	3.567		15.088	< .001
	GWBS Total	-0.449	0.060	-0.447	-7.508	< .001
M_1	(Intercept)	4.969	2.939		1.691	.092
	GWBS Total	-0.027	0.037	-0.027	-0.720	.472
	DASS Anxiety 2	0.552	0.061	0.613	9.068	< .001
	DASS Stress 2	0.253	0.057	0.290	4.474	< .001
	Friendship networks (Protective)	2.543	0.979		2.597	.010
	Friendship networks (Risk factor)	0.382	2.814		0.136	.892

Table 13: ***Descriptive statistics for the Depression Model***

Descriptives

	N	Mean	SD	SE
DASS Depression 2	229	27.939	14.761	0.975
GWBS Total	229	57.882	14.656	0.968
DASS Anxiety 2	229	29.913	16.398	1.084
DASS Stress 2	229	26.148	16.934	1.119

SUMMARY

In the basic depression model, general wellbeing (GWBS) was a key predictor of depression, whereas in the wellbeing model, depression played a key role, amongst others. The higher the depression, the lower the wellbeing. However, in the extended model, anxiety and stress became dominant predictors, whilst the role of other wellbeing factors, such as self-control, personal wellbeing and vitality, diminished. The finding that protective friendships correlated with higher depression warrants further exploration, possibly reflecting emotionally burdensome or co-ruminating peer relationships associated with specific regional or contextual factors prevalent at some campuses. The risk effect of friendship networks seemed greater than their protective properties.

DISCUSSION

A comparative analysis of the two models reveals that while the Depression model (R^2_{adj} = .769) is characterised by high clinical convergence among negative affective states, the General Wellbeing (GWBS) model (R^2_{adj} = .299) offers a more nuanced, multidimensional view of student life. Specifically, the GWBS model was uniquely sensitive to institutional context and the perceived quality of campus support: factors that did not reach significance in the clinical depression model. This suggests that "wellness" among social work students is an ecologically sensitive construct, influenced not only by internal distress but by the institutional environment and the perceived efficacy of external resources. Consequently, the GWBS model provides a more robust framework for institutional intervention, as it highlights that improving on-campus support systems and addressing institutional-specific stressors can significantly bolster student wellbeing, even when clinical symptoms remain constant.

While descriptive counts showed many males in high-distress categories, the GWBS regression model (which controls for age, HEI and depression) showed that males scored 5.64 points higher on the wellbeing scale than females (p = .038). This suggests that for a male and female student with the *same* level of depression and the *same* institutional stress, the male student likely maintains a higher level of "Vitality" or "Self-Control". This points to a potential gender difference in how "wellness" is maintained under pressure.

The GWBS model includes a unique variable: the perception of on-campus support as a "risk factor". This indicates that perceiving support services as stressful or inadequate predicted a 10.48-point drop in GWBS scores (p = .047). A potential explanation for this inclusion is that in the Depression model, this variable (on-campus support) was largely absorbed by the intensity of stress and anxiety. In the Wellbeing model, however, it stands alone. This suggests that the disappointment or stress of navigating inadequate support systems actively erodes "Positive Wellbeing" and "Self-Control" (two key GWBS subscales).

One of the most striking differences between the two models is the Training Institution's significance in the GWBS model, which was less dominant in the Depression model. In the GWBS Model students at HEI_2 and HEI_5 reported significantly lower wellbeing. This indicates that the institutional environment (campus culture, workload, funding or location i.e. accommodation) places a direct "tax" on a student's general sense of wellness, even if it hasn't yet manifested as a clinical depressive disorder. Therefore, we conclude that General Wellbeing is sensitive to environmental factors and influences. Low "vitality" or "self-control" because of their specific institutional environment may be present, yet the student is not yet depressed.

The unexpected positive correlation between protective friendship networks and depression may be attributed to co-rumination (Rose, 2002). While students perceive these close-knit peer groups as supportive, the repetitive and speculative discussion of shared institutional and personal stressors may inadvertently exacerbate internalising symptoms, leading to higher depression

scores despite high levels of perceived social intimacy achieved through participation in on-campus friendship groups.

The above results indicate that various regional and contextual factors associated with situations or events on campuses seem to play a significant role in students' perceptions of themselves, such as the level of support they receive from their friendship networks and formally from the institution. In some instances, a combination of institutional factors may play a role at any specific time. For example, many students experience funding instability, largely as a result of payout delays from NSFAS. During these periods of payout delays, students cannot pay for accommodation or class fees. In some instances, students may experience food shortages because of funding issues. At these times, students may engage in protest action, often fuelled by other external campus factors. It can be deduced that these circumstances may hugely interrupt students' wellbeing, often dominate their functioning and reality, and may lead to depression and anxiety.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The study showed that the students' varied participation in on-campus support systems predominantly has an impact on their wellbeing and depression, the effects being adverse in cases of inadequate utilisation of support services or lack of access. The findings of the study are consistent with international research indicating that social work students experience elevated levels of psychological distress compared to other student groups, largely as a result of the emotional demands of professional training and exposure to trauma-related material (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022; Beddoe et al., 2024; Grant & Kinman, 2020). Similar studies in South Africa have also highlighted the influence of socio-economic stressors, academic pressure and limited institutional support on student wellbeing (Bantjes et al., 2023; Wilson Fadiji & Eloff, 2024). The present findings therefore support existing evidence that student wellness is shaped by both individual psychological factors and the broader academic and social environment in which students function.

Other variables (including IT access, off-campus support, peer networks and accommodation) did not significantly influence wellbeing. Notably, the model identified no significant predictors for female students, suggesting that their wellbeing is shaped by factors not captured in this analysis. Campuses where male students showed particularly low wellbeing were identified, indicating a risk of social isolation and limited engagement in support services. These findings highlight the need for gender-responsive and age-specific support structures in social work education.

Interpreting these findings through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights the importance of investigating student wellbeing as the result of interactions across multiple environmental levels. Factors located within the microsystem, such as friendships and family support, as well as mesosystem influences such as engagement with institutional support programmes, were particularly relevant in explaining variations in wellbeing. In contrast, exosystem influences, such as financial aid and accommodation, were less consistent predictors,

suggesting that structural support alone is insufficient without meaningful relational and institutional engagement. These results support the ecological assumption that wellbeing is shaped by the dynamic interaction between personal, relational and institutional contexts rather than by individual characteristics alone.

From a depression perspective, depressive conditions were strongly associated with anxiety and stress, with the highest levels reported at specific campuses. These differences reflect student risk levels rather than the quality of institutional support. The findings emphasise the influence of individual psychological factors on student mental health.

OTHER KEY FINDINGS

While financial aid, such as NSFAS, was an essential component of students' ability to participate, it was not a significant predictor of wellbeing in this study. Instead, environmental and relational support systems, particularly formal on-campus programmes, had a greater impact (Ben-Porat et al., 2021). Male students who did not access these supports reported poorer wellbeing.

Older students experienced greater financial strain and less familial support than their younger peers. The NSFAS model is better aligned with the needs of younger students, even those who are academically underprepared, but it fails to address the complex needs of older students, especially those in the "missing middle" who do not qualify for aid (Naidoo & McKay, 2018). These students often juggle academic, work and family responsibilities, leading to increased stress and reduced academic performance. First-generation students were especially vulnerable, lacking both financial literacy and familial guidance (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021).

At a broader level, macroeconomic pressures and social expectations further undermine the educational experiences of older students (Singh, 2016). Life-stage transitions, such as parenting or homeownership, add to psychological and financial strain, making full-time study more challenging (Bulanda et al., 2020).

Off-campus support networks (such as family, friends and community) were positively associated with resilience and emotional wellness. Students with strong support systems reported better outcomes, particularly at residential universities where those from rural or distant areas are more vulnerable. The study found that intentional, inclusive support structures can help students succeed, even when far from home (Wilson Fadiji & Eloff, 2024).

Some of the findings were unexpected and require careful interpretation. In particular, the result that stronger on-campus friendship networks were associated with higher depression scores contrasts with the commonly reported protective role of peer support. One possible explanation is that peer relationships within social work programmes may involve shared exposure to emotionally demanding material, which can lead to co-rumination and emotional burden rather than relief (Grant & Kinman, 2020). The limited influence of information technology support on wellbeing may reflect the fact that most students had access to basic technological resources,

thereby limiting variability in this variable. These findings suggest that the quality of support may be more important than mere resource availability, which highlights the need for further research to understand how support systems function in practice.

Mental health emerged as a critical component of student wellbeing. Age-related challenges differ: younger students often struggle with transition, while older students face competing life demands. Support systems must be tailored to address these diverse needs and promote equitable wellbeing in social work education (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022; Beddoe et al., 2024; Hitchcock et al., 2024).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This study provided valuable information for social work educators to understand students' wellbeing, risk and resilience across all years of study. It shifts away from a focus on what was wrong with the student towards encouraging educators to focus on what is required of the students to thrive at university. This study also assists educators in considering shifts to strengths-based assessments instead of a deficit model of curriculum design. Educators can create space for a trauma-informed pedagogy, recognising that students are responsible for their own risk factors and should develop emotional regulation as a core professional competency.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design captures a single point in time, limiting insight into changes in student wellbeing over time. The sample, drawn from only five institutions, may introduce selection bias and limit generalisability to the broader population of South African social work students. However, the participating universities represent both advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions across different regions, offering some contextual diversity, ensuring variations with regard to resource allocation. Additionally, the use of self-report measures may introduce subjective bias, which can potentially affect the accuracy of responses. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and applying them to broader contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several targeted recommendations are proposed to improve the wellbeing of social work students in South Africa.

First, the results indicated that older students experienced greater financial strain and lower wellbeing than younger students. Institutions should therefore develop more flexible and inclusive financial aid programmes that address the needs of mature students, particularly those who fall outside the traditional funding modules such as NSFAS. Financial support structures should take

into account the multiple responsibilities that older students carry, such as family obligations and academic commitments.

Second, as indicated under the factors influencing depression, it is recommended that universities strengthen off-campus support by partnering with community-based organisations to expand access to mental health resources and supportive networks beyond campus.

Third, based on the finding of access to on-campus support, it is recommended that on-campus support services must be enhanced through proactive mental health initiatives, peer mentoring and accessible counselling. Digital tools such as internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy (iCBT) and web-based counselling platforms are recommended to support students who experience high stress yet may avoid traditional services (Cerolini et al., 2023; Guijarro & Edwards, 2024; Palacios et al., 2018). These tools should be well integrated and widely accessible to maximise impact.

Fourth, as this study had a limited time for collection of data, it is recommended that future research should adopt longitudinal designs and include a more diverse sample to generate more robust and generalisable evidence for policy and intervention planning.

Finally, the findings on the academic demands of social work education are critical, particularly as field placements and intensive coursework must be balanced with adequate academic support and workload management strategies. These are essential to mitigate stress, especially for students with existing mental health challenges and to promote sustainable academic success.

Future research should build on the present findings by using a qualitative study approach to obtain narrative descriptions from participants on their personal views of their general wellbeing. This will enhance the findings of this quantitative study.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights critical concerns regarding the wellbeing of social work students in South Africa and underscores the need for systemic reform within higher education. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the findings reveal that complex interactions across personal, institutional and societal levels shape student wellness. Therefore, it is recognised that students should be able to avail themselves of both on-campus and off-campus support, as this seemed to play a significant role in strengthening their wellbeing.

Off-campus support emerged as a key protective factor, playing a vital role in reducing depression and promoting emotional stability. Students should be encouraged to seek support from family and peers as this will strengthen their ability to cope with challenges that they face.

Students' understanding of the availability of on-campus support also significantly influenced their emotional regulation and overall wellbeing. While financial aid remains important, its impact was

most pronounced among older students facing greater financial vulnerability. This then points to the need for more responsive funding models for students facing economic strain.

Improving social work student wellbeing requires multifaceted, tailored interventions that address both emotional and financial support needs. The researchers are of the view that the institutional strengthening of these support systems can enhance student resilience, academic success and, ultimately, the quality of the future social work workforce, contributing to more effective social service delivery and broader societal impact.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Wim Roestenburg has been a Professor of Social Work at the School for Psychosocial Health, North-West University since 2014. During his academic career of thirty years, he focused primarily on developing and promoting ecometric assessment technology use in practice and, of late, the digitalisation of professional services. He contributed to the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis, and writing and revision of the research article.

Hanelie Malan is an Associate Professor and Head of the Social Work Department at North-West University, with over 10 years of teaching experience in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Her research interests include the wellbeing of social work educators and students and child protection in the South African context. She contributed to the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis and writing and revision of the research article.

Roelf Reyneke is an Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of the Free State, South Africa. His research focuses on school social work, child protection, trauma-informed care and restorative discipline in schools. He contributed to the conceptualisation of the study, supervised the research at his university and contributed to the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis, writing and editing of the article.

Varoshini Nadesan is an Associate Professor at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Her field of specialisation is the multiple systems' contribution of social work education to graduate employment. She has been part of the multi-university research project since 2023 and assisted with the conceptualisation, data collection, writing and editing of the article.

Ulene Schiller is a Professor of Social Work and Acting Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of Fort Hare. Her work centres on child protection, social innovation and higher education transformation. In this study, she contributed to the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis, writing and revision of the research article.

John Rautenbach is a Professor and Head of the Department of Social Work at the University of Zululand. He contributed to the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis and writing and editing of the research article.

REFERENCES

Agresti, A. (2018). *An introduction to categorical data analysis* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Aiken, L. S., West, S. G., & Reno, R. R. (1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions.* Sage.

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). American Psychological Association.

Apgar, D., & Cadmus, T. (2022). Using mixed methods to assess the coping and self-regulation skills of undergraduate social work students impacted by COVID-19. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 50(1), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00790-3

Apostol, A.-C., Irimescu, G., & Radoi, M. (2023). Social work education during the Covid-19 pandemic and future developments to enhance students' wellbeing. *Sustainability*, *15*(11), Article 11. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15119009

Babbie, E. R., & Mouton, J. (2001). *The practice of social research* (South African ed). Oxford University Press Southern Africa.

Baik, C., Larcombe, W., & Brooker, A. (2019). How universities can enhance student mental wellbeing: The student perspective. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(4), 674–687. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1576596

Bantjes, J., Kessler, M., Lochner, C., Breet, E., Bawa, A., Roos, J., Davids, C., Muturiki, M., Kessler, R. C., & Stein, D. J. (2023). The mental health of university students in South Africa: Results of the national student survey. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *321*, 217–226. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.10.044

Bartley, A., Beddoe, L., Hashemi, L., Rahimi, M., & De Fossard, S. (2024). Social work students in Aotearoa New Zealand: The impacts of financial hardship on mental and social wellbeing. *Social Work Education*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2326540

Beddoe, L., Baker, M., Cox, K., & Ballantyne, N. (2024). Mental health struggles of social work students: Distress, stigma, and perseverance. *Qualitative Social Work*, *23*(5), 813–832. https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250231212413

Ben-Porat, A., Shemesh, S., Reuven Even Zahav, R., Gottlieb, S., & Refaeli, T. (2021). Secondary traumatization among social work students: The contribution of personal, professional, and environmental factors. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *51*(3), 982–998. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa056

Bornman, J. (2017). Over R800,000 misspent by Walter Sisulu University student. *SowetanLIVE*. https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/sundayworld/news/2017-08-30-over-r800000-misspent-by-walter-sisulu-university-student/

Borrell-Carrió, F., Suchman, A. L., & Epstein, R. M. (2004). The Biopsychosocial Model 25 years later: Principles, practice, and scientific inquiry. *The Annals of Family Medicine*, *2*(6), 576–582. https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.245

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). Developmental ecology through space and time: A future perspective. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder Jr, & K. Lüscher (Eds.), *Examining Lives in Context: Perspectives on the Ecology of Human Development* (pp. 619–647). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/10176-018

Brown, T. A., Chorpita, B. F., Korotitsch, W., & Barlow, D. H. (1997). Psychometric properties of the depression anxiety stress scales (DASS) in clinical samples. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, *35*(1), 79–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(96)00068-X

Bryda, G., & Costa, A. P. (2023). Qualitative research in digital era: Innovations, methodologies and collaborations. *Social Sciences*, *12*(10), 570. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100570

Bulanda, J. J., Conteh, A. B., & Jalloh, F. (2020). Stress and coping among university students in Sierra Leone: Implications for social work practice to promote development through higher education. *International Social Work*, *63*(4), 510–523. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872818796136

Caggiano, H., & Weber, E. U. (2023). Advances in qualitative methods in environmental research. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, *48*(1), 793–811. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-112321-080106

Calculator.net. (2025). *Sample Size Calculator*. https://www.calculator.net/sample-size-calculator.html

Carbonell, Á., Navarro-Pérez, J.-J., Fernández, I., & Botija-Yagüe, M. (2023). The impact of COVID-19 on the academic life of social work students: Resilience as a mediating variable. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, *20*(4), 496–507. https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2023.2171330

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *35*(3), 262–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059

Cerolini, S., Zagaria, A., Franchini, C., Maniaci, V. G., Fortunato, A., Petrocchi, C., Speranza, A. M., & Lombardo, C. (2023). Psychological counseling among university students worldwide: A systematic review. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, *13*(9), Article 9. https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13090133

Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Council on Higher Education. (2015). *Qualification Standards for Bachelor of Social Work*. https://www.che.ac.za/publications/standard-reviews/qualification-standards-bachelor-social-work

Crawford, M. (2020). Ecological systems theory: Exploring the development of the theoretical framework as conceived by Bronfenbrenner. *Journal of Public Health Issues and Practices*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.33790/jphip1100170

Crocker, A., & Wilson, L. (2023). Resilience of social auxiliary workers: Defined by strengths and coping abilities. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, *59*(3), 196–227. https://doi.org/10.15270/59-3-1134

Cumming, G. (2014). The new statistics: Why and how. *Psychological Science*, *25*(1), 7–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613504966

Delacre, M., Lakens, D., & Leys, C. (2017). Why psychologists should by default use Welch's t-test instead of Student's t-test. *International Review of Social Psychology*, *30*(1), 92–101. https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.82

Dickens, C., Suarez-Balcazar, Y., Allen-Meares, P., & Brazil, E. (2025). Using ecological systems theory to enhance community health literacy. *HLRP: Health Literacy Research and Practice*, *9*(1), e29–e36. https://doi.org/10.3928/24748307-20241126-01

Dion, L. (2024). When the helper is in crisis, too. In J. Stone, R. J. Grant, & C. Mellenthin (Eds.), *Trauma Impacts: The Repercussions of Individual and Collective Trauma* (pp. 167–178). Wiley.

Dupuy, H. J. (1977). *General wellbeing schedule*. Quality of Life Research: An International Journal of Quality of Life Aspects of Treatment, Care & Rehabilitation.

Fazio, A. F. (1977). A Concurrent Validational Study of the NCHS General Wellbeing Schedule. *National Center for Health Statistics, Vital and Health Statistics, Series 2, No. 73. U.S. Government Printing Office*.

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *14*(4), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8

Field, A. (2018). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics* (5th ed.). Sage.

Fouché, C. B. (2021). Quantitative research designs. In C. B. Fouché, H. Strydom, & W. J. H. Roestenburg (Eds.), *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human services professions* (5th ed., pp. 157–180). Van Schaik Publishers.

Fox, J., Cheng, L., & Zumbo, B. D. (2014). Do they make a difference? The impact English language programs on second language students in Canadian universities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(1), 57–85.

Gopal, N., & van Niekerk, C. (2018). Safety in student residences matters! *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *32*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.20853/32-3-2524

Grant, L. (2014). Hearts and minds: aspects of empathy and wellbeing in social work students. *Social Work Education*, *33*(3), 338–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.805191

Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2020). *Developing emotional resilience and wellbeing: A practical guide for social workers*. Community Care Inform. https://markallenassets.blob.core.windows.net/communitycare/2020/04/Community-Care-Inform-emotional-resilience-guide.pdf

Guijarro, C., & Edwards, V. (2024). *Navigating mental health challenges among social work students*. (Master's Thesis). California State University, United States. https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/z029pd17h

Gumede, D., & Sibiya, M. N. (2023). An analysis of digital stories of self-care practices among first- year students at a University of Technology in South Africa. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, *11*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v11i2.4911

Härkönen, U. (2007). *The Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development*. Scientific Articles of V International Conference Person.Color.Nature.Music. 7-21 October, 2007. (keynote speech), Daugavpils University, Saule. Latvia.

Henrico, K. (2022). Sustaining student wellness in higher educational institutions: Possible design principles and implementations strategies. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, *18*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v18i1.1114

Hitchcock, C., McPherson, L., Whitaker, L., & Hughes, M. (2024). Social work students' understanding of professional resilience. *Social Work Education*, *43*(1), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2076826

Iglesia, M. Q., & Lu, M.-T. (2021). College students' wellbeing during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A systematic review of the literature. Global Research in Higher Education, 4(4). https://doi.org/10.22158/grhe.v4n4p1

James, R. K., & Gilliland, B. E. (2016). *Crisis intervention strategies* (8th ed). Cengage Learning.

Jarden, A., & Roache, A. (2023). What is wellbeing? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *20*(6). https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20065006

JASP Team. (2025). *JASP (Version 0.19.0) [Computer software].* Free and User-Friendly Statistical Software. https://jasp-stats.org/

Jurich, J. A., & Myers-Bowman, K. S. (1998). Systems theory and its application to research on human sexuality. *Journal of Sex Research*, *35*(1), 72–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499809551918

Kranke, D., Kranke, B., Milligan, S., & Dobalian, A. (2024). Introducing trauma trigger fatigue as an underlying factor of social work burnout. *Social Work*, *69*(4), 403–405. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swae034

Krishna, S. B. N. (2021). Challenges of student accommodation at institutions of higher learning a case study of University of KwaZulu Natal South Africa. *Alternation Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa*, *SP38C*. https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2021/sp38c16

LeBouef, S., & Dworkin, J. (2021). First-generation college students and family support: A critical review of empirical research literature. *Education Sciences*, *11*(6), Article 6. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11060294

Leonardson, G. R., Daniels, M. C., Ness, F. K., Kemper, E., Mihura, J. L., Koplin, B. A., & Foreyt, J. P. (2003). Validity and reliability of the general wellbeing schedule with Northern Plains American Indians diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus. *Psychological Reports*, *93*(1), 49–58. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.2003.93.1.49

Lovibond, P. F., & Lovibond, S. H. (1995). The structure of negative emotional states: Comparison of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) with the Beck Depression and Anxiety Inventories. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, *33*(3), 335–343. https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967(94)00075-U

Lovibond, P. F., & Lovibond, S. H. (2011). *Depression Anxiety Stress Scales DASS--21, DASS--42)* [Dataset]. APA PsycTests. https://doi.org/10.1037/t01004-000

Manyema, M., & Richter, L. M. (2019). Adverse childhood experiences: Prevalence and associated factors among South African young adults. *Heliyon*, *5*(12). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e03003

Martín-Cano, M. D. C., Díaz-Jiménez, R. M., Caravaca-Sánchez, F., & De La Fuente-Robles, Y. M. (2022). Depression, anxiety and stress in social work students during COVID-19 confinement. A comparative study of Spanish and Mexican Universities. *Social Work in Mental Health*, *20*(3), 259–281. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2021.2005739

Maurer, K., Kimyaci, M., Konyk, K., & Wekerle, C. (2023). Building resilience through daily smartphone App Use: Results of a pilot study of the Joypop App with social work students. *Frontiers in Digital Health*, 5. https://doi.org/10.3389/fdgth.2023.1265120

McCarthy, K. M. (2020). Empowering online undergraduate social work students to address their stress. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, *25*(1), 231–243. https://doi.org/10.18084/1084-7219.25.1.231

McCarthy, K. M., Kondrat, D. C., & Johnson, N. C. (2024). Supports and barriers: Social work educators addressing student wellness needs. *Studies in Clinical Social Work: Transforming Practice, Education and Research*, *94*(2), 136–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/28376811.2023.2299847

McHugh, M. L. (2013). The chi-square test of independence. *Biochemia Medica*, *23*(2), 143–149. https://doi.org/10.11613/BM.2013.018

McLean, L., Gaul, D., & Penco, R. (2023). Perceived social support and stress: A study of 1st year students in Ireland. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *21*(4), 2101–2121. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-021-00710-z

Mdaka, Q. (2023). *The potential scope of social work practice at a higher education institution in South Africa: Views of key informants at Stellenbosch University*. (Master's thesis). Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Motsabi, S., Diale, B. M., & van Zyl, A. (2020). The role of social support in the persistence of first-year first-generation African students in a higher education institution in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *34*(4), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.20853/34-4-3486

Mpofu, M. (2024). Social support, resilience, and mental health of students in a university in Namibia [Master's thesis, University of Namibia].

Myer, R. A., & Moore, H. B. (2006). Crisis in context theory: An ecological model. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *84*(2), 139–147. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2006.tb00389.x

Nadesan, V. S. (2019). *A System Analysis of Field Instruction in Social Work Education*. (Doctoral thesis). University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Naidoo, A., & McKay, T. J. M. (2018). Student funding and student success: A case study of a South African University. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *32*(5), Article 5. https://doi.org/10.20853/32-5-2565

Naudé, L., & Breshears, D. (2024). It has given us a title: Identity-transitions in first-generation students at a South African University. *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, *97*, 86–108. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i97a05

National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). (2025). *National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) - Eligibility. Who can apply?* https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/faqs.html

Ndofirepi, E. S., Moosa, R., Reed, M. J., & Maodzwa-Taruvinga, M. (2023). Perceived life balance, cultural experience, and academic outcomes: A comparative study of first-generation students in South Africa and Canada. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South*, *7*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v7i2.284

North-West University. (2025). *Academic literacy*. https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/languages/academic-literacy

O'Donnell, L., Keys, F., Thomas, S., Love-Schropshire, N., Wells, K., & Patterson, D. (2024). Indicators of wellness among social work students within an urban setting during times of crisis. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *44*(4), 407–422. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2024.2374250

OECD. (2022). *Students' wellbeing*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/students-well-being.html

Ohei, K. N., & Brink, R. (2020). The use of instructional ICT web technologies in higher education systems to support students' academic success. *Mousaion: South African Journal of Information Studies*, *37*(2), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-659X/5975

Palacios, J. E., Richards, D., Palmer, R., Coudray, C., Hofmann, S. G., Palmieri, P. A., & Frazier, P. (2018). Supported internet-delivered cognitive behavioral therapy programs for depression, anxiety, and stress in university students: Open, non-randomised trial of acceptability, effectiveness, and satisfaction. *JMIR Mental Health*, *5*(4), e11467. https://doi.org/10.2196/11467

Parliamentary Monitoring Group. (2021). *Update by Minister on National Skills Fund & NSFAS investigations*. https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/34278/

Pather, S., Norodien-Fataar, N., Cupido, X., & Mkonto, N. (2017). First year students' experience of access and engagement at a university. *Journal of Education*, *69*, Article 69. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i69a07

Pedhazur, E. J. (1997). *Multiple regression in behavioral research: Explanation and prediction* (3rd ed.). Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Reyneke, R. P. (2022). *Survey on social work students and staf*f. University of the Free State. Bloemfontein. Unpublished report.

Rose, A. J. (2002). Co-rumination in the friendships of girls and boys. *Child Development*, 73(6), 1830–1843. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00509

Saenz, V. B., Hurtado, S., Barrera, D., Wolf, D., & Yeung, F. (2007). *First in my family: A Profile of first-generation college students at four-year institutions since 1971*. Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Higher Education Research Institute. https://www.heri.ucla.edu/

Salvagno, M., Taylor, J., Bobeva, M., & Hutchings, M. (2017). Ubiquitous connectivity and students' wellbeing: A situational analysis in a UK university. *Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal*, *8*(3), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-9795/CGP/v08i03/1-17

Sawilowsky, S. S. (2009). New effect size rules of thumb. *Journal of Modern Applied Statistical Methods*, *8*(2), 597–599. https://doi.org/10.22237/jmasm/1257035100

Sebolai, K., & Huff, L. (2015). Academic literacy curriculum renewal at a South African university: A case study. *Journal for Language Teaching*, *49*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v49i1.13

Siegel, S., & Castellan, N. J. (1988). *Nonparametric statistics for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Singh, R. J. (2016). Current trends and challenges in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *29*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.20853/29-3-494

Siporin, M. (1980). Ecological systems theory in social work. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, *7*(7), 507532.

Stanley, S., & Buvaneswari, G. M. (2022). Do stress and coping influence resilience in social work students? A Longitudinal and comparative study from India. *International Social Work*, *65*(5), 927–940. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820905350

Stoker, D. J. (1985). *Steekproefneming: Teorie en praktyk* [Sampling: Theory and practice]. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Taylor, J. E., Poston II, W. S. C., Haddock, C. K., Blackburn, G. L., Heber, D., Heymsfield, S. B., & Foreyt, J. P. (2003). Psychometric characteristics of the General Wellbeing Schedule (GWB) with African–American women. *Quality of Life Research*, *12*(1), 31–39. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022052804109

Theofilou, P., & Malkopoulou, S. (2024). Multidimensional perceived social support: A predictor of fatigue and quality of life in Greek social workers. *Global Health Economics and Sustainability*, *2*(3), 3039. https://doi.org/10.36922/ghes.3039

Tong, P., & An, I. S. (2024). Review of studies applying Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory in international and intercultural education research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*(1), 01–17. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1233925

Tonsing, K. N., & Tonsing, J. C. (2023). Prevalence and correlates of depressive symptoms among university students: A cross-sectional study. *Social Work in Mental Health, 21*(2), 115–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2022.2076577

Uclaray, A. C. (2023). Stress and wellbeing of social work students in field instruction. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *43*(1), 99–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2022.2120165

University of the Free State. (2025). *Critical Academic Literacies (CAL) courses*. https://www.ufs.ac.za/ctl/home-page/alld/academic-literacy-courses

Unrau, Y. A., Sherwood, D. A., & Postema, C. L. (2020). Financial and educational hardships experienced by BSW and MSW students during their programs of study. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *56*(3), 456–473. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1656687

Van Der Merwe, T. M. (2020). ICT use patterns, mental health symptoms and the wellbeing of the open distance learning student: A replication study with historically advantaged students. *International Journal of Learning Technology*, *15*(4), 360–383. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJLT.2020.113884

Van Wyk, M., Mason, H. D., Van Wyk, B. J., Phillips, T. K., & Van Der Walt, P. E. (2022). The relationship between resilience and student success among a sample of South African engineering students. *Cogent Psychology*, *9*(1), 2057660. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2022.2057660

Vungkhanching, M., Tonsing, J. C., & Tonsing, K. N. (2017). Psychological distress, coping and perceived social support in social work students. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *47*(7), 1999–2013. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw145

Wildschut, A., Bongiwe, M., Rogan, M., Rust, J., Fongwa, S., & Meiring, L. (2018). *The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and its impact: Exploring the absorption into employment of NSFAS-Funded graduates*. National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/reports/NSFAS%20Complete%20Report.pdf

Wilson Fadiji, A., & Eloff, I. (2024). Student wellbeing and academic support in higher education. *Frontiers in Education*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1119110

Worsley, J. D., Pennington, A., Corcoran, R., & Carrà, G. (2022). Supporting mental health and wellbeing of university and college students: A systematic review of review-level evidence of interventions. *PLoS One*, *17*(7), e0266725. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0266725

Yang, E., Schamber, E., Meyer, R. M. L., & Gold, J. I. (2018). Happier healers: Randomized controlled trial of mobile mindfulness for stress management. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, *24*(5), 505–513. https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2015.0301