

## Sex Education and Sexual Socialization among Students: Insights from Professional Nurses at a South African University of Technology

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### Abstract

The engagement of students in risky sexual behaviours remains a public health concern. These risky sexual behaviours lead to sexually transmitted diseases such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus infection and unintended pregnancies among students. Hence, universities need to implement appropriate programmes to promote sexual health knowledge and safer sex among students. Sex education is a significantly important tool to raise awareness and ensure the safety of sexual practices and the prevention of students' susceptibility to risky sexual behaviours. This study aimed to explore and describe professional nurses' views on risky sexual behaviours among students and promote responsible sexual behaviour among students by advocating for sex education at the University of Technology (pseudonym) in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The study was guided by a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive, and contextual design. The researchers employed a purposive sampling technique and semi-structured interviews to collect data from 11 professional nurses in the Student Affairs Department.

**Key words:** sex education, sexual behaviour, South Africa, student affairs, university students

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The interview data were analysed using Tesch's method of qualitative analysis. Four broad themes emerged: the vulnerability of students to risky sexual behaviour, personal factors leading to risky sexual behaviour, environment influencing risky sexual behaviours among students and health promotion through sex education and training. The study findings show that risky sexual behaviours among students are a concerning matter as it is growing at an alarming rate. The vulnerability of students to risky sexual behaviour should be taken seriously as it affects their health and wellness. Two factors, namely, personal and environmental factors, have been identified as leading students to engage in risky sexual behaviours. Thus, the promotion of responsible sexual behaviour among students through sex education is important, and the necessary steps should be taken to address issues related to this behaviour.

### Résumé

L'adoption de comportements sexuels à risque par les étudiants reste un sujet de préoccupation en matière de santé publique. Ces comportements sexuels à risque entraînent des maladies sexuellement transmissibles, telles que l'infection par le virus de l'immunodéficience humaine, ainsi que des grossesses non désirées chez les étudiants. Par conséquent, les universités doivent mettre en œuvre des programmes appropriés pour promouvoir les connaissances en matière de santé sexuelle et des rapports sexuels protégés parmi les étudiants. L'éducation sexuelle est un outil extrêmement important pour sensibiliser les étudiants, garantir la sécurité des pratiques sexuelles et prévenir leur vulnérabilité face aux comportements sexuels à risque. Cette étude visait à explorer et à décrire les points de vue des infirmières professionnelles sur les comportements sexuels à risque chez les étudiants et à promouvoir un comportement sexuel responsable chez ces derniers en plaidant en faveur de l'éducation sexuelle à l'Université de technologie (pseudonyme) de la province du KwaZulu-Natal en Afrique du Sud. L'étude s'est appuyée sur une méthodologie qualitative, exploratoire, descriptive et contextuelle. Les chercheurs ont utilisé une technique d'échantillonnage raisonné et des entretiens semi-structurés pour recueillir des données auprès de 11 infirmières professionnelles du département des affaires étudiantes. Les données issues des entretiens ont été analysées à l'aide de la méthode d'analyse qualitative de Tesch. Quatre grands thèmes se sont dégagés : la vulnérabilité des étudiants face aux comportements sexuels à risque, les facteurs personnels conduisant à ces comportements, l'environnement influençant les comportements sexuels à risque chez les étudiants et la promotion de la santé par l'éducation sexuelle et la formation. Les résultats de l'étude montrent que les comportements sexuels à risque chez les étudiants constituent un sujet de préoccupation, car ils augmentent à un rythme alarmant. La vulnérabilité des étudiants face aux

comportements sexuels à risque doit être prise au sérieux, car elle affecte leur santé et leur bien-être. Deux types de facteurs, à savoir les facteurs personnels et environnementaux, ont été identifiés comme conduisant les étudiants à adopter des comportements sexuels à risque. Ainsi, la promotion d'un comportement sexuel responsable chez les étudiants par le biais de l'éducation sexuelle est importante, et les mesures nécessaires doivent être prises pour traiter les problèmes liés à ce comportement.

**Mots-clés :** éducation sexuelle, comportement sexuel, Afrique du Sud, affaires étudiantes, étudiants universitaires

### Introduction

Mazibuko, Saruchera, and Okonji (2024) stress that there is a growing concern in South Africa regarding risky sexual behaviour and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as many sexually active students engage in risky behaviours. This concern is further supported by a report from Higher Health (2024), which revealed that the provision of reproductive health services to students has shown little growth in recent years. The number of services available at universities appears to be insufficient to meet the demand, as it is inadequate to the number of students enrolled. Risky sexual behaviour, defined as having unprotected vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse (Kenku, Maiwada & Ajodo, 2023), increases the chances of an individual contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and experiencing unintended pregnancies (Lungu et al., 2022). According to Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Tesfay-Asgedom (2016), young people, including university students, are at the high risk of acquiring Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) because of their risky sexual practices. It has been emphasized that risky sexual behaviours are common among adolescents and young people (Mignault et al., 2022). The World Health Organization [WHO] (2013) indicated that across the world and especially in Africa, HIV/AIDS related mortality among adolescents has been increasing because of their risky sexual behaviour. Murudi-Manganye, Mashau and Ramathuba (2020) suggested that risky sexual practices include having multiple sexual partners, having unprotected sex and transactional sex which continue to pose risks of STIs, unwanted sex as well increase in termination of pregnancy among students. Sheehy-Skeffington (2020) argues that socioeconomic status significantly shapes individual decision-making processes. Similarly, Armstrong-Carter et al. (2025) emphasize that socioeconomic disadvantage and poverty influence young people's decisions in ways that increase their likelihood of engaging in heightened levels of health-compromising, risk-taking behaviours over time.

Correspondingly, socio-economic vulnerability and poverty have been identified as key contributing factors to risky behaviour among students (Baruwa, 2024). Qoza, van Heerden and Essack (2023) indicate that socio-economic conditions and poverty contribute to female students engaging in transactional sex with older men for material gains. Hence, the promotion of safe sexual activity would contribute to the reduction of sex-related morbidity and mortality that are caused by STIs and unsafe abortions (Tekletsadik et al., 2022). It is common knowledge that reproductive health education is important to prevent risky sexual behaviour and its linked to adverse outcomes regarding pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STIs among students (Reis et al., 2011). Therefore, an essential strategy to reduce rates of STIs and unwanted pregnancies is to provide students with sexual and reproductive education (Phillips & Martinez, 2010).

According to Fernández-Fernández and Calvo-González (2022), sexual education continues to be a crucial subject in many countries, and yet most students do not receive comprehensive sex education during their high school years. Hence, universities must prioritize integrating a sex education curriculum into their tertiary student experiences. This assists in promoting positive conversations that will foster a campus community of communication and acceptance (Seaver, 2021).

However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2017) argued that despite investments in comprehensive sex education for young people over the years, dangerous trends are still being observed, which confirms the importance of better sexual health education. The CDC works with the government of South Africa and partners to detect, prevent and control infectious disease outbreaks.

Furthermore, university students are at a critical stage of engaging in risky sexual behaviours, requiring informed knowledge and sex education (Amare, Yeneabat & Amare, 2019). While, Rume, Morhason-Bello and Oladokun (2024) emphasized on the importance of creating awareness of risky sexual behaviour among students regarding reproductive health, there are still risks associated with sexually transmitted diseases, which can often lead to fatalities if left untreated. According to Olshansky et al. (2018), professional nurses are advocates and supporters for student access to reproductive health services that act as preventative measures to eliminate risky sexual behaviours. However, the non-compliance to family planning regimens and repeated requests from youngsters for termination of pregnancies were perceived by nurses as irresponsible behaviours (Jonas et al., 2019). Therefore, health promotion and responsible sexual behaviours through sex education among students is a vital factor contributing to good health and

wellbeing (Mudzana & Mfidi, 2026). Therefore, this study aimed to explore and describe professional nurses' views on risky sexual behaviours among students and promote responsible sexual behaviour among students by advocating for sex education at a University of Technology (UoT) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa.

## 2. Literature Review: Risky Sexual Behaviour and Higher Education

Sexual behaviours have been studied in the context of sexual practices, sexual relationships, reproductive health, STIs, contraception and sexual behaviour (Chawla & Sarkar, 2019). Ugoji (2014) indicated that risky sexual behaviours have been reported to be increasing at an alarming rate and it puts young adults at a higher risk than other age groups for varying reproductive health problems. Thus, risky sexual behaviours among university students remain a public health issue (Ndagijimana, Biracyaza and Nzayirambaho, 2023). Handebo, Kebede and Morankar (2018) confirmed that risky sexual behaviours are becoming a major issue across the world, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where students are vulnerable to engaging in risky sexual behaviours. Evidently, most people begin their sexual relationship during adolescence, and some get into risky life-threatening behaviours, such as unwanted pregnancies, abortions and STIs. Unsafe sex, which often begins at the adolescent stage, will persist as long as there is an opportunity for risky sexual activity (Thepthien & Celyn, 2022). For students, being in a new environment exposes them to different social networks, which potentially leads to the development of new sexual behaviours (Eyeberu et al., 2023).

Khumalo et al. (2020) suggested that some of the factors associated with sexual and reproductive health risks occur because of cultural and traditional practices. The interaction between culture and sexual behaviours is very much contested, as studies show that some cultural norms contribute to certain sexual behaviours (Malinga & Modie-Moroka, 2020). Consequently, Juma et al. (2014) suggested that sexual risk reduction programmes should be undertaken to empower communities to challenge the widely accepted cultural norms that expose young people to risky sexual behaviours.

Furthermore, it has been established that unprotected sexual intercourse and inconsistent use of condoms are the drivers of risky sexual behaviours among university students (Muyemayema, 2021). Ajayi, Ismail and Akpan (2019) reported that consistent condom use is a central tool to prevent STIs and STDs among students. It is emphasized that there is a need to improve sexual education and raise awareness of consistent condom use (Chialepeh & Susuman, 2017).

Therefore, there is a need for targeted interventions, as alcohol use can impair decision-making and increase sexual desire, which may result in a higher likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviours (Das, Das, & Roy, 2023). Adal et al. (2024) further report that risky sexual behaviours are more likely to occur when students experience peer pressure, use substances, perceive themselves to be at low risk of HIV infection, watch pornography, and lack adequate basic sexual and reproductive health knowledge. According to Mori et al. (2019), the implications of risky sexual behaviours have contributed to the high rate of mortality and morbidity across the world, especially through HIV/AIDS. Moreover, risky sexual behaviours have a greater probability of unintended pregnancies, induced abortion and STIs or HIV/AIDS (Nigusie et al., 2020). Ngoc Do et al. (2020) advised that sex-related educational programmes focusing on the effects of alcohol use, multiple sex partners and unprotected sex should be developed.

Reducing risky sexual behaviours and related health problems can assist young people in adapting to lifelong attitudes and behaviours that support their health and well-being (Ena, Harissa and Aliyu, 2016). In the study, Mahoto, Mitonga and Likando (2025) identified early sexual debut, inconsistent condom use, and limited awareness of STIs as key issues contributing to students' engagement in risky sexual behaviours. Keto, Tilahun and Mamo (2020) argued that despite the awareness, a considerable number of students practise risky sexual behaviours that predispose them to different sexual and reproductive health problems. Consequently, adequate awareness of reproductive health in young people is important because they are in the early years of fertility and engaging in risky sexual behaviours is more probable (Jahanfar & Pashaei, 2022). According to Badillo-Viloria et al. (2020), university students, usually categorized as young people between the ages of 15 to 24, are a population that is largely characterized by high-risk sexual behaviours and also known to be at high risk of contracting HIV infections.

## 3. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted using a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive, and contextual design. This approach allowed the researchers to explore professional nurses' views on risky sexual behaviours among students, factors contributing to their risky behaviours, responsible sexual behaviour and advocacy for sex education. The study site, the University of Technology (UoT) in Durban, KZN, South Africa, was chosen because it has been revealed that university students engage in risky sexual behaviours (Muyemayema, 2021). The Human Sciences Research Council (2018) reported the KZN Province as having the highest HIV prevalence in South Africa among people aged between 15-49 years. Despite the interventions in addressing

the HIV epidemic, its incidence remains high, especially among young people (Baisley et al., 2018).

About 16 professional university nurses were approached to participate in the study, but only 11 agreed to do so. These nurses, aged between 26 and 65 years old and working experience ranging from 1 year to over 40 years, were drawn from the Student Affairs Division in the Student Counselling and Health Unit.

To achieve the study objectives, interviews, which lasted between 30 to 40 minutes, were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, allowing data collection flexibility. The team of researchers developed the interview guide in accordance with the objectives of the study. A digital recording method was used to capture accurate and useful information during the interviews, which were conducted from September to November 2023. Following the transcriptions of the interview recordings, the researchers reread the transcriptions for more familiarity with the data, followed by a rigorous thematic analysis. The themes were then organized in clusters, and similarities, differences and relationships between the responses were considered. The researchers referred the cluster themes to the original statements to validate them.

#### **Trustworthiness**

The researchers established rigor and achieved trustworthiness by utilizing the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for data verification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To support the validity of the data, researchers ensured that verbatim quotes were included. After the transcription of the data, verification of transcripts was done to confirm the accuracy of findings and to ensure the quality and completeness of the transcripts. Lastly, to ensure transferability, researchers outlined in detail the procedures of the study. For facilitation of the data analysis process, an audit trail was kept by the researchers.

#### **Ethics consideration**

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC 143/23). All participants signed informed consents prior to participating in the study which they participated without pressure. Their identities remained anonymous and were referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2. All information received from participants was kept confidential.

#### **4. Findings**

Following the analysis of the data collected from the participants, the following four themes emerged:

- i. Vulnerability of students to risky sexual behaviour;
- ii. Personal factors leading to risky sexual behaviour;
- iii. Environment influencing risky sexual behaviours; and
- iv. Health promotion through sex education and training.

##### **Theme 1: Vulnerability of students to risky sexual behaviour**

The study findings indicate that most of the students are vulnerable to risky sexual behaviours as they engage in different sexual activities. Professional nurses confirmed that the issue of risky sexual behaviours among students is considered a public health concern, for its prevalence and growth at an alarming rate. Excerpts from the participants' statements in this regard included the following:

*“As a professional nurse working with students daily, I have seen how risky sexual behaviour cases are increasing within our university. Numerous students do come to seek treatment if they have a sexually transmitted infection and or sexually transmitted diseases”* (Participant 1, Male, 26-30 years old).

*“Risky sexual behaviour among students is a troubling issue that we most often deal with. They expose themselves to sexual activities that put their lives at risk, and they forget about the consequences it has on their lives”* (Participant 2, Female, 36-40 years old).

*“I have witnessed how students are vulnerable to risky sexual behaviours since it is a growing pattern across universities as per the reports we get from Higher Health, and sadly, our university is not spared from this public health issue”* (Participant 3, Female, 51-55 years old).

Substantially, the views of participants show that students are a vulnerable group to risky sexual behaviours as they engage in sexual activities. There is a consensus that this is a public health issue growing at an alarming rate.

##### **Theme 2: Personal factors leading to risky sexual behaviours**

Participants outlined personal factors that they perceived to be contributing to risky sexual behaviours among students. This is illustrated in the following statements:

*“Some students decide for themselves that they would never use a condom whenever they engage in sexual intercourse and some use it*

*sometimes but because of inconsistent use of protection they end up being exposed to STDs” (Participant 4, Female, 61-65 years old).*

*“... they have multiple sexual partners as they would have sex with one person, then later another one. Students who engage in this kind of act are more likely to get HIV and other STIs” (Participant 5, Female, 36-40 years old).*

*“...some students love to live a life that they cannot maintain, and they want to be seen as people who have certain standards, especially among their peers. That is why you find them engaging in risky sexual behaviours because of money and dating older people who would do anything for them in exchange for sexual favours” (Participant 1, Male, 26-30 years old).*

Whilst the above statements highlight the personal factors that contributed to risky sexual behaviours, it was revealed that students who are misinformed about the use of contraceptives are also in a disadvantageous position and thus in danger. Participants stated the following:

*“Students do not understand the significance of the use of contraceptives and I always get that feeling whenever I engage with them, that they do not care about using them” (Participant 6, Female, 31-35 years old).*

*“The use of contraceptives by students is taboo to some of them which is why they are exposed to STIs including unwanted pregnancies which eventually affect their university experience” (Participant 7, Female, 46-50 years old).*

### **Theme 3: Environment influencing risky sexual behaviours among students**

The environment plays a critical role in influencing students to engage in risky sexual behaviours. The things that students experience and are exposed to can be associated with decisions that they make about their lives. These views of participants are highlighted below:

*“The background of the students has a role in influencing him or her to engage in risky sexual behaviours. Especially male students are pressured by their peers to not use protection during sexual intercourse – sometimes they are judged as if they are not man enough and they are cowards for using condoms which is one of the most challenging things we still need to address” (Participant 8, Female, 56-60 years old).*

*“...if a student associates him/herself with people who do not believe in engaging in protected sex, that is problematic because they do not see a need to condomize or use contraceptives” (Participant 9, Female, 46-50 years old).*

*“Also, the issues of culture and religion contribute to students engaging in risky sexual behaviours, and they influence their decision-making because these beliefs are instilled in them at a young age. This is why some students do not pay attention to the risks associated with engaging in unsafe sex.” (Participant 5, Female, 36-40 years old).*

### **Theme 4: Health Promotion through Sex Education and Training**

In addressing issues of risky sexual behaviours among students, participants made various recommendations to promote responsible sexual behaviours. It has been highlighted that health promotion through sex education and training is pivotal in championing challenges related to risky sexual behaviour. Participants stated their recommendations as follows:

*“We need to be creative in terms of how we promote responsible sexual behaviours among our students. Edutainment activities aimed at creating awareness of the risks associated with engaging in risky sexual behaviours must be effectively implemented across campuses” (Participant 10, Female, 46-50 years old).*

*“...promotion of responsible sexual behaviours is not a once-off thing, but it is a continuous thing that we should always strive to ensure the well-being of students and this can be done through various programmes that we do for them whether in residences or on campus” (Participant 1, Male, 26-30 years old).*

Other participants also raised important views on how health promotion can be done with students through sex education to develop their knowledge on issues of engaging in risky sexual behaviours. This is what the participants had to say:

*“Sex education provides the opportunity for students to make informed decisions, especially regarding their sexual choices” (Participant 11, Female, 36-40 years old).*

*“...the most important thing about sex education is that it creates awareness of the importance of using contraceptives; and students learn about numerous contraceptives to use other than condoms*

*like Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)” (Participant 4, Female, 61-65 years old).*

*“The problem is that sometimes, as student affairs professionals, we are scared to say things as they are, and we need to tell students the brutal truth about engaging in risky sexual behaviours. The purpose of sex education is to create a sense of responsibility among students” (Participant 2, Female, 36-40 years old).*

Participants also revealed that training plays a critical role in sharing appropriate information with students. The findings of this study confirmed the need for peer educators to serve at the forefront in training other students on the impact of engaging in risky sexual behaviours. Participants indicated as follows:

*“The promotion of responsible sexual behaviour among university students can also be done through peer education. We need to train and empower students to be part of peer educators so that they can teach their peers about healthy lifestyle” (Participant 8, Female, 56-60 years old).*

*“Training and development of peer educators plays a pivotal role in disseminating information to their peers so that they can educate others about issues related to risky sexual behaviours” (Participant 1, Male, 26-30 years old).*

## Discussion

The study aimed to explore and describe professional nurses' views on risky sexual behaviours among students and promote responsible sexual behaviour by advocating for sex education at a UoT in KZN, South Africa. The findings of the study revealed that students are vulnerable since they engage in sexual behaviours and activities that put their lives at risk. It has been found that the majority of university students are sexually active and that risky sexual behaviour is prevalent (Alves, Precioso & Becoña, 2022). This issue is a global challenge and should be taken seriously since it contributes to public health concerns. Further, emerging from the perspectives of participants is that students do not consider the consequences of engaging in risky sexual behaviours, which can have physical and psycho-social harm. This includes the high risk for STIs and HIV, including unplanned pregnancies (Rai et al., 2023).

Personal and environmental factors have been found to lead to risky sexual behaviour among students. The findings show that the challenge of poor,

inconsistent or no condom usage by students has been highlighted as one of the contributing factors to risky sexual behaviours. Consistent condom use can reduce the probability of STIs and STDs. Unprotected sexual intercourse due to inconsistent condom use is an important factor that explains the high HIV infection, STIs, and unplanned pregnancies (Sousa et al., 2023). Inconsistent condom use is defined as occasional use or never using it (Hamidi, Regmi & van Teijlingen, 2023).

Moreover, students having multiple sexual partners, defined as having more than one sexual partner over some time, are also a concern which has been identified as a likely driver of the spread of HIV and other STDs (Simelane et al., 2023). The study also found that some students date older people for money or financial gain. These transactional sexual interactions between older people and young students, noted as a mutually beneficial arrangement, provide financial support, gifts, mentorship or experiences to another person in exchange for companionship, intimacy or various levels of relationship involvement. This has negative consequences on their well-being since it leads them to engage in risky sexual behaviours and poses a significant risk factor for young women with respect to HIV infection. There is a trend that students are increasingly opting to date older people for financial independence (Mutinta, 2014).

Participants also gave insights on students failures in using contraceptives which eventually leads to exposures to STIs and STDs. The study found students as lacking an understanding on the procedures and importance of using contraceptives (Hoss and Blokland, 2018). Peer pressure is indicated as one of the leading contributing factors to risky sexual behaviour among students; and it impacts the decisions that students make about who they date, their sexual relationships, and sex (Kiprono, 2021).

Participants strongly believed that the promotion of responsible sexual behaviour plays a significant role in encouraging students to engage in safe sexual behaviours. The university environment is considered as important in strengthening the state and knowledge of health of students. The establishment of health [healthy] universities is based on a salutogenic approach – namely, health promotion (Ahlstrand et al., 2022). The study findings highlight the need for developing creative and innovative programmes which are specifically designed to create awareness of risky sexual behaviours among students.

Sex education is an effective tool to ensure that students are informed about risky sexual behaviours and should be done to help them gain knowledge on life skills (Safitri and Nurhayati, 2023). Lastly, the findings of the study also

advances that peer educators must be thoroughly trained and developed to educate their peers on risky sexual behaviours. A peer education model is paramount in effecting change in knowledge, behaviour, and attitude in groups comparable in age, education, and status (Sakru et al., 2023).

### Conclusion

The study indicates that risky sexual behaviours among students are a public health concern, growing at an alarming rate. The vulnerability of students to risky sexual behaviour should be taken seriously as it affects their health and wellness. Promotion of responsible sexual behaviour among students through sex education is important and the necessary steps should be taken to address it. The findings confirm that health promotion through sex education and training plays a significant role in addressing challenges posed by risky sexual behaviours of students. The university should ensure that its reproductive health programmes are evaluated and strengthened to improve the sexual behaviour of students. Access to contraceptives on campuses and residences should be provided efficiently and consistently and students encouraged to make use of them.

Furthermore, awareness of risky sexual behaviours should be created in collaboration with all stakeholders concerned, with students taking a leading role driving the initiatives. Reviving of peer education and recruitment of students, who are willing to educate their peers about health-related issues, are encouraged. Promoting a healthy sexuality culture is not simply the exclusive domain of parents or educators; but should be a collaborative effort between home and educational institutions. Therefore, policies of the universities should be aligned to current issues faced by students and implemented in conjunction with the Higher Health policies. Whilst education plays a primary role in providing information about sexuality and developing related social skills in tertiary education students, health professionals employed at these institutions should acknowledge and support the critical sex education in the sexual socialization of the student.

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