



Review Article

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# The Well-Being of Male Students at the University of Free State - the Men's Lekgotla Program

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## Abstract

South Africa has the third highest suicide rate on the African continent, with more men than women committing suicide *Mashishi, et al.*, According to a report by the World Health Organisation (2019), South African men are four times more likely to commit suicide than women. Despite this prevalence of suicide among men, existing evidence shows that women seek psychological help in greater numbers than men *Van der Merwe, et al.*, These highlighted examples point to the need for the establishment of safe spaces for men to tackle their realities. Globally, various male-focused well-being projects have been undertaken, including two in Australia, in Western Sydney at the Queensland University of Technology, as well as at Griffith University.

Locally, similar projects have been undertaken at the University of Zululand (UniZulu), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), University of Mpumalanga (UMP) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU), to mention a few [1]. These institutions have focused on various programmes related to men's mental health, using talk-shops to identify and address men's challenges. The University of the Free State (UFS), however, explored a project that promotes the holistic well-being of its male students. Based on existing models, and factoring in a unique context, the UFS established a Men's Lekgotla programme that encompasses all well-being matters for male students (physical, mental, social and spiritual). This project married the principles of positive psychology and the theoretical lens of humanising pedagogy. This developmental programme, therefore, was anchored on the human project that promotes the holistic well-being of male students at the UFS [2].

**Keywords:** Well-being, Suicide, Males, Students, Higher education

## Introduction

Globally, there is an increase in mental health challenges, particularly for men [3,4]. Tinklin, et al., Ridgen, et al., and Wilson, et al., argue that psychological challenges for students in higher education institutions has risen alarmingly [5]. The Heads of University Counselling Services Report (1999) supports their sentiments [5]. In England and Wales, men accounted for three-quarters of suicide deaths in 2021 [6]. According to the Anxiety & Depression Association of America (2023) [7], over six- million men in the USA suffer from depression every year, and depression often goes underdiagnosed. In 2019, depression accounted for 80% of suicide deaths in the USA [8]. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) reported that 43% of males aged 16–85 report having a mental disorder at some point in their lifetime [9]. In the Philippines, 3.3-mil-

lion Filipinos suffer from depressive disorders, with suicide rates of 2.5 males and 1.7 females per 100,000 [10].

Similarly, in Africa the challenges of mental health remain consistent with the world as the cultural and socialisation context in Africa plays a significant role in the perception of health and well-being [11,12]. Apolkova, et al., mention that due to social and cultural expectations, men think of themselves as risk-takers, thus leading to risky behaviour that can also be fatal. This ultimately impacts the perception of mental health and the lack of interventions for such challenges.

### The South African Context

The South African National Integrated Men's Health Strategy 2020-2025 is a guiding framework to navigate towards a milestone



that all South African men and boys receive support to mitigate against any risk that would prevent them from enjoying a long and healthy life. The strategy further articulates that South African men experience a greater share of the total fatal and non-fatal burden of disease, dying at younger ages (life expectancy at birth-61.5 years) than females and more often from preventable causes. Male deaths consistently outnumbered female deaths. The report amplifies the poor health-seeking behaviours of males in South Africa as a contributor to their fatalities [13].

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that, in 2019, “13 774 suicides were reported in South Africa. Of these deaths, 10 861 were men” [14]. In South Africa, men maintain higher percentage rates of TB infections, smoking and risky drinking, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), suicides, and the lack of seeking medical attention or any well-being assistance when required. South African men generally only seek assistance once their conditions are dire, due to cultural teachings and the general socialization of men [15].

For the purposes of this paper, the well-being of men will be approached in a holistic and integrated manner. This is the integration of physical, social and spiritual well-being. As mentioned in the abstract, South Africa has the third highest suicide rate on the African continent, with more men than women committing suicide *Mashishi, et al.*, This context motivated the University of the Free State (UFS) to create a safe space for its male students. Locally, existing programs with a focus on men’s well-being in higher education can be found at the University of Zululand (UniZulu), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), University of Mpumalanga (UMP) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU). These institutions have focused on various programmes related to men’s mental health, using talk-shops to identify and address men’s challenges. In addition, these institutions have focused on once-off conferences to deal with the challenges faced by men. The UFS Division of Student Affairs (DSA) took a different approach, based on existing models, while factoring in its unique context, and crafted a year-long programme that promoted the holistic well-being of men. This developmental programme, therefore, was anchored on the human project. The UFS holds itself responsible for the humanness of its students and how they model it in their communities during their studies and beyond. Objective 3 of the UFS Strategic Plan 2023-2028, as well as sections 5.2 and 5.3 of its Vision 130, are clear on the university’s community responsibilities. It is with reference to these objectives and visionary outlook that the programme was designed. The project commenced in March 2023 and was concluded in October 2023. All campuses of the university were included in the project. The programme received the participation of 1,337 male students from all three UFS campuses.

### The Theoretical Framework

This programme is anchored on the theoretical framing of the humanizing pedagogy and borrows principles of positive psychology. Positive psychology is a scientific approach to studying human thoughts, feelings and behaviour, with a *focus on strengths* instead of weaknesses, building the good in life instead of repairing the bad,

and taking the lives of average people up to “great” instead of focusing solely on moving those who are struggling up to “normal” [16]. The programme recognizes that most projects relating to men are implemented through the “fixing men” lens that highlights their negative conduct. In contrast, this programme subscribes to positive psychology, thereby magnifying the “strengths” of men in a positive way.

By definition, positive psychology is different to positive thinking in that positive psychology *recognizes that, despite the advantages of positive thinking, there are times when negative or realistic thinking is appropriate*. It is at this point that self-reflection is imminent to one’s development [17]. The humanizing pedagogy is a social justice framework whose primary purpose is to humanize the human interface. Though humanizing pedagogy was conceptualized for the teacher-student interface, it applies to other contexts of human interactions that are mediated by power. The humanizing pedagogy is about *encountering each other as humans first before our material beings*. In other words, it is about encountering each other’s soul. This project is centered on the development of the self, i.e. the male student’s soul, before he is a brother, friend, child, student and father [17].

## Methodology

### Research Approach and Strategy

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative research design. Concerning quantitative research, it made use of a web-based survey. Apuke, et al., affirms Kreamer’s, et al., functions of surveys as: “used to describe quantitatively a sectional aspect of a given population which involves studying the relationship [18]. In the survey research method, data is obtained from people, and lastly, the survey sample is a part of the population which is later used to generalize the whole population.” The surveys were conducted at every part of the six-part project series. All participants of the programme received an equal opportunity to voice their views. Only students who attended the programmes had access to the links for the web surveys. In addition, qualitative interviews were used, as they allow for a humanistic approach [19], considering the study aimed to gain knowledge and understanding of how the target population perceives, feels, experiences and responds to the pilot programme. Therefore, because of the ontological position of the study [20], qualitative questioning was employed. The study involved conducting three focus groups across the UFS’s three campuses, with a total of five (5) persons per group, per campus. This enriched the data to respond to the objectives of the study.

### Sampling

The population of interest was male students registered with the UFS for the 2023 academic calendar. These male students were actively engaged in the Lekgotla programme’s activities (inclusive of activities, reviews, reflections, etc.). In selecting the desired target population for in-depth interviews, purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling is utilized: (1) to isolate and select cases with a great deal of information [21]; (2) to identify and select individuals or groups that are well-informed about a particular phe-

nomenon [22]; and (3) to note the importance of availability and willingness of participants in providing input [23]. Through purposive sampling, the programme tracked students who attended all the programs and completed all the web surveys. In addition, the set participant must have been engaged in all the projects of the programme. A pool of 58 qualified, and DSA conducted interviews to narrow the number down to 15 participants. These students were also automatically shortlisted for the inter-institutional men's well-being conference.

### Data Collection & Analysis

Quantitative data was gathered through the web surveys conducted. In all projects, the web surveys were explained, and processes of consent were followed before the link was shared to all participants. The quantitative data was analysed by software called SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Qualitative data was gathered using in-depth interviews. The use of in-depth interviews enables the unearthing of profoundly sedimented information and the unveiling of knowledge hidden within layers of experience. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure procedural rigour (Ryan, et al., Coghlan, et al., and Cronin, et al.). Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report themes within the set data regarding the perceptions, feelings, experiences and responses of the male students. The research findings were analysed inductively, while focusing on themes occurring from different personal in-depth interviews with the participants. The analysis helps the researcher understand and learn the meanings attached by participants to the phenomenon under study Creswell, et al.,

### Ethical Consideration

The study respected and adhered to ethical principles synonymous with academic research. In this light research participants' autonomy is always respected, and they are given the freedom to decide for themselves what the boundaries are of their participation. Before respondents participate in a survey, informed consent must be received, and they must be made aware of their right to discontinue their participation at any point in the study [24]. The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no deception was used. For the focus groups, participants were given time to read and sign a consent form for their involvement in the research. It was made clear that their participation in the research was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any given point.

## Findings

The results of the study are presented under the following themes: the mental health challenge, transferable skills development, and the student experience.

### The Mental Health Challenge

The mental health component of the programme was activity tackled using various instruments of wellness, including dialogue and recreational sport. Hiking was ranked by students as the most enjoyed recreational activity. During this activity, a *hiking pledge*

was taken: 'I will not suffer in silence; I will tell my story.' This pledge was for all students to commit to seeking help as and when they require it, from the available services offered by the institution, to counter mental health challenges. The hiking pledge used the physical exercise of hiking as a tool to inspire inward-looking and interpersonal change. This activity was underpinned by a pledge for men not to suffer in silence but rather to open up and share their stories. The hiking component of the programme exposed young men to a challenging mountain trail that required teamwork, vulnerability, support and tenacity for the summit. Students demonstrated a strong drive to see their hike through despite the low morning temperature on the way up, and the increasing heat upon their return. After climbing the mountain, participants were divided into commissions to discuss symbolic lessons learnt from the hike, social issues such as gender-based violence, personal struggles like self-esteem, academic inspiration, leadership virtues, relationships and related heartbreak, mental health and more.

The overall student experience was positive, and students requested more opportunities for events that are of this nature. Below are statements from students, as well as a graphic presentation showing what students learnt:

*'Gave us a platform to share our stories and advise each other.'*

*'We were on top of a mountain that I didn't know surrounded by familiar faces of people I didn't know by name but have struggled the way I have despite the different ethnic groups we came from, but we had so much in common in our indifferences.'*

*'Nobody was ashamed to speak about their feelings.'* (Figure 1).

The statements and graphic presentation above show that there is a willingness by male students to be change agents in their immediate environments. The statistics further highlight that the objective of the session was met, with 62% of the students understanding the concept of telling their story when experiencing any aspect of hardship. The event was able to destigmatise men speaking out. In addition to the above, the historic three-day *Inter-Institutional Men's Well-Being Conference*, a collaboration between the University of the Free State (UFS) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU) (held on the Potsdam Campus of WSU), made a strong positive contribution to the mental health challenges faced by of young males' students. The conference was attended by 82 male students from WSU (75%) and UFS (25%). The student delegations reflected on their key takeaways from the conference, as presented below (Figure 2).

The three top takeaways were: mental circumcision, positive masculinity and the role of male leadership. The term 'mental circumcision' (48%) was introduced by the Chairperson of the Men's Forum: Correctional Services (Eastern Cape). The speaker reflected on his 20-year experience of working at a prison, and his encounters with young men. His vast experience has convinced him that young men are fighting many battles of the mind; these battles are influenced by friends, family, male socialisation and culture. The speaker emphasised that change can only happen when male students decide that they want to be better males, despite the road toward transformation not being easy. He urged them to think about

this, as he does not want them to end up in a prison men's forum with regrets, and he called for a circumcision of the mind that will result in changed behaviour and perspectives.

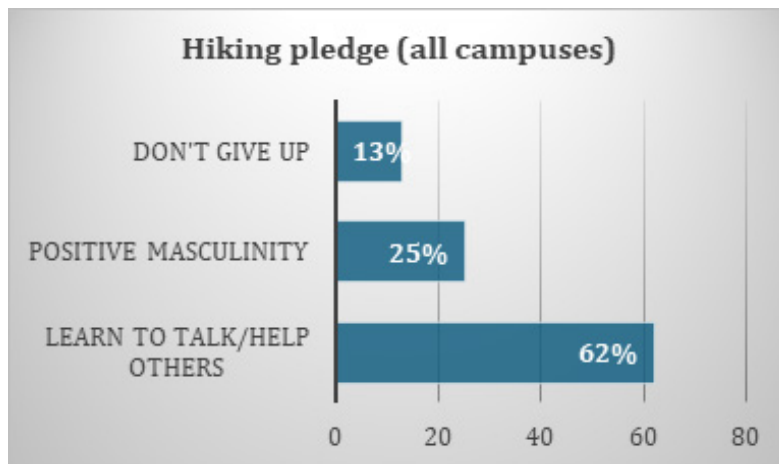


Figure 1: Table showing the highlight lessons gained by students during the hiking pledge activity.

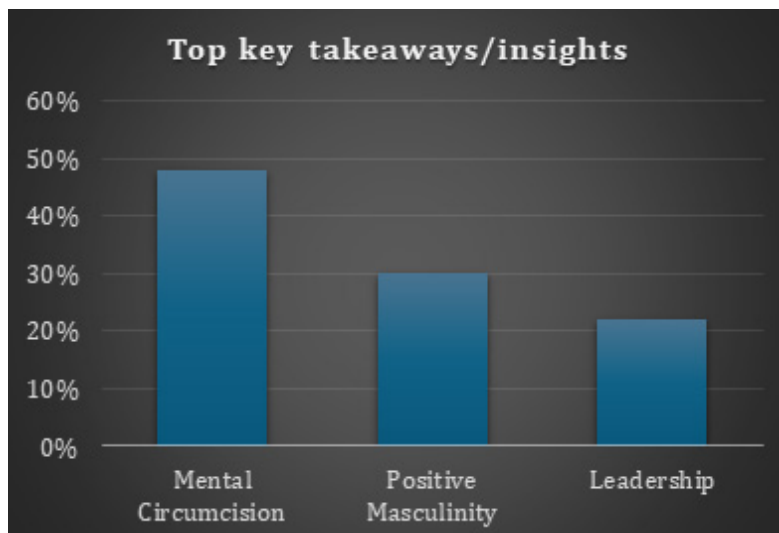


Figure 2: Table showing the key highlights from the inter-institutional men's conference.

### Transferable Skills Development

The survey requested that students reflect on the *areas of their lives that have improved since their involvement in the project*. Communication, as seen below, was ranked as the biggest area of improvement by students participating in the project. Students mentioned that they had previously had challenges with communication relating to their self-confidence and social skills. However, due to the delivery of the project and the students becoming co-creators, they have been more open and are able to better communicate with their peers, facilitators and project organizers (Figure 3).

Furthermore, the survey posed the question: *What did you learn were your greatest strengths?* The question was meant for reflection, as the project's aim is to enhance well-being, and it is not built on the premise that students are coached into corrective behaviour. Students indicated that they discovered perseverance, communication, teamwork and improving oneself. One student mentioned the following:

*'I am stronger than I think, if I can get this far with everything I had bottled up. The future has endless possibilities with me prioritizing my mental health issues and opening up about my traumas without feeling less of a man.'*

Perseverance was ranked as the most resonating strength that students discovered within themselves in the midst of the project. This aspect is evidently crucial given the rates of male suicide as shared by WHO. In addition, *Uku-Phefumlelana* was explored. This entails the metaphorical act of breathing into one another in an empowering, strengthening and therapeutic manner. It advocates for self-care, so that we don't pour from an empty cup. *Uku-Phefumlelana* is an emergent contemplative and inclusive agile practice. It is foregrounded on the engagement of humility, with compassionate and humanizing discourses that are geared toward a journey that facilitates a state of healing, wholeness and human flourishing in solo and communal spaces. In understanding that the concept is new, 94.4% of the students rated the concept as positive, and re-



requested more time for the event, saying they would recommend it to another male friend. Below is a graphic representation of the students' experiences [25,26] (Figure 4).

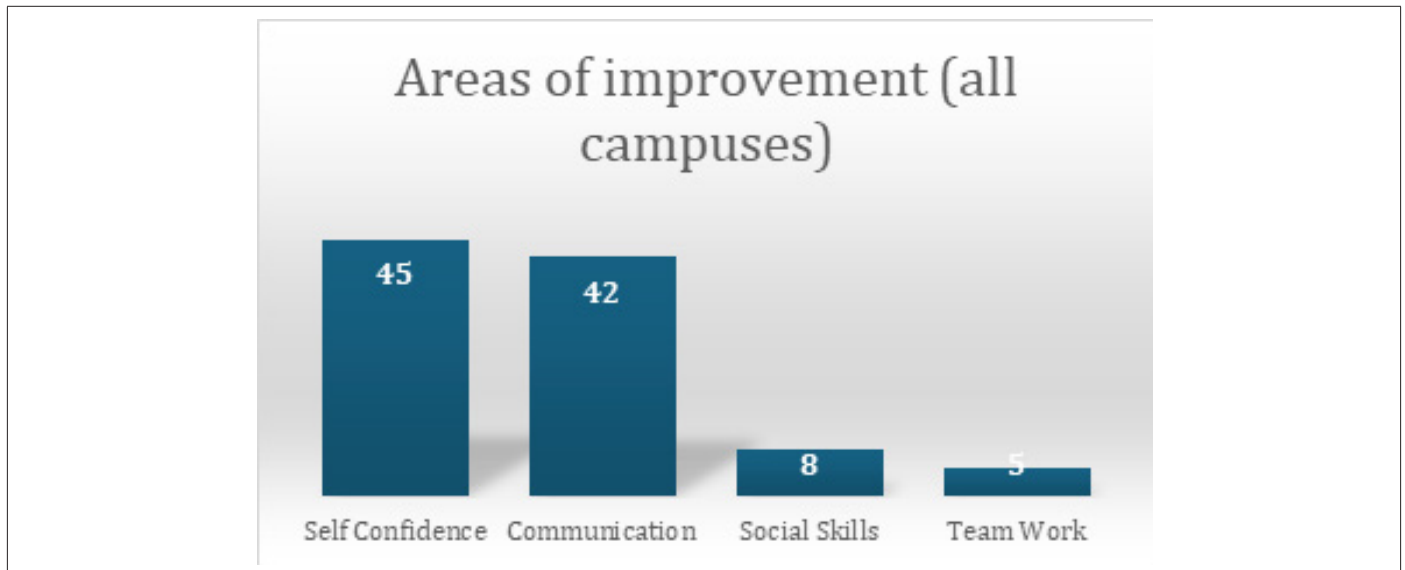


Figure 3: Bar graph showing the areas in which male students participating in the programme improved.

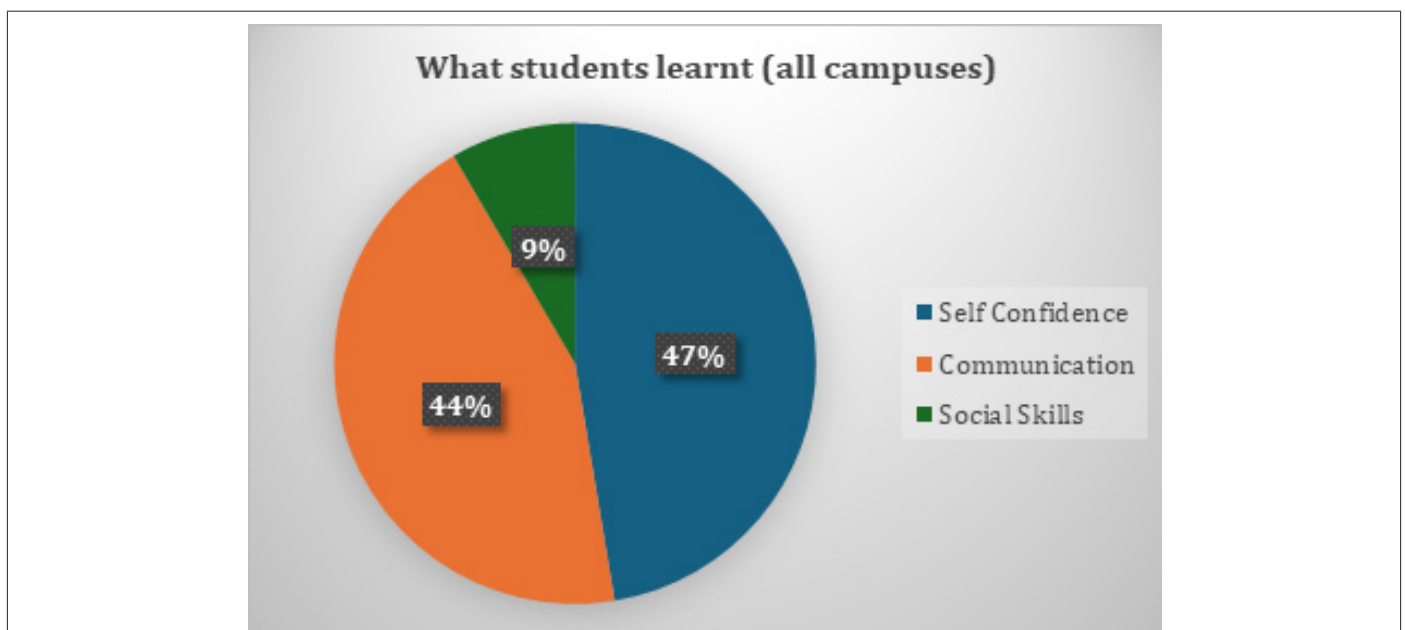


Figure 4: Pie chart showing what students learnt from Uku-Phefumlelana.

### The Student Experience

The researchers ran an overall reflection survey to deepen their understanding of the student experience after the first semester. The first question posed in the survey was for the student to reflect on their most powerful learning moment. Students mentioned that being given a platform to share their experiences was the most powerful aspect of the project. In addition, students made the following statements:

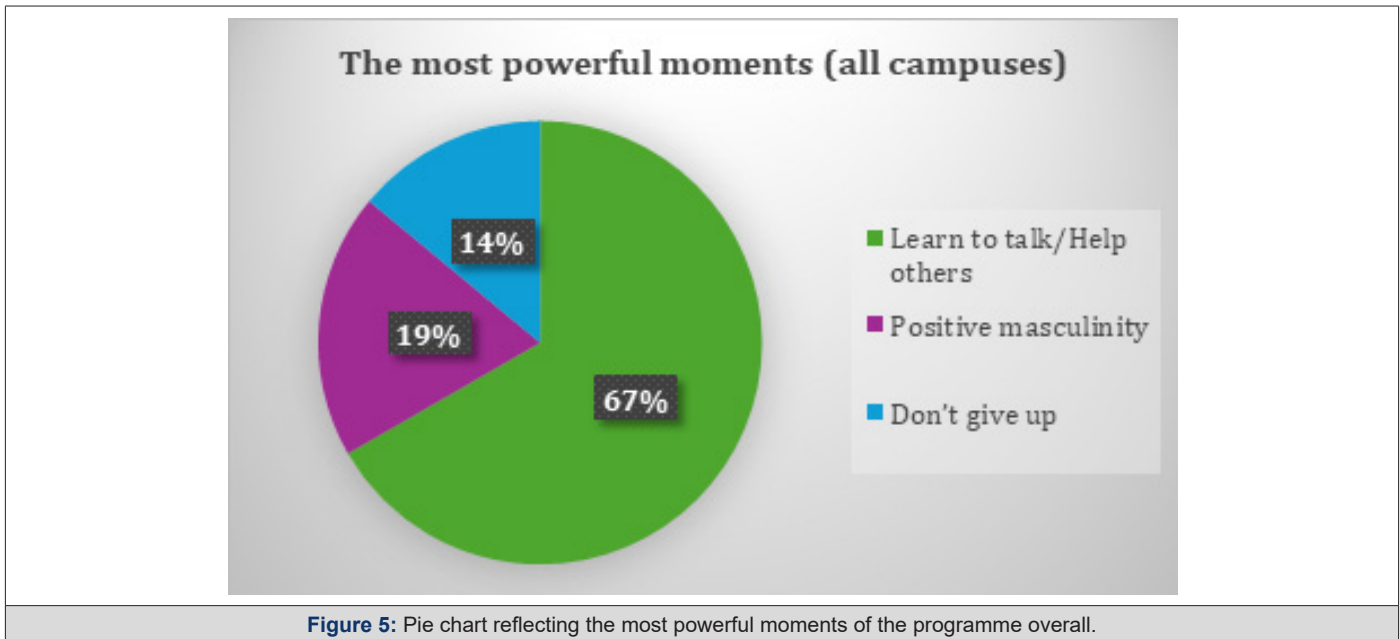
*'During the QnA of the imbizo. To hear older men tell their stories how we are an inspiration to them, and how they wish for us to go on, to feel, to heal, and to be better for ourselves. We don't get to hear that*

*from men often and that is wonderful and inspiring to hear.'*

*'I shared my problems with one of the group members and he gave me the most powerful words of wisdom I won't forget.'*

*'When we were given a task to cook - I learned that cooking is not a woman's job but we also as men can embrace and take pride in cooking. We cannot expect women to be the ones cooking for us - we must learn - not only learn but take pride in it.'*

*'Hiking that scary Golden Gate Mountain, reaching the top, and overlooking the whole of Golden Gate was victorious for me. Naturally, I am afraid of heights, but I learned that fear can be conquered. One just needs to be brave enough.'* (Figure 5).



## Conclusion

The men's well-being programme has successfully created a safe and supportive environment for male students to reflect on matters affecting their lives. The platform further provided them with an opportunity to be vulnerable and tackle their realities. Students enjoyed being vulnerable and the realization that they were freely engaging in a safe space. The hiking excursion provided a unique opportunity for students to connect with nature and themselves. The data indicates that male students who have participated in the project have increased levels of perseverance, better communication skills, and that they grasp the concept of raising their voices to seek help. The UFS has contributed immensely to the personal development of participating students. This in turn with positively impact the UFS community and society at large. The safe space fostered openness and trust, reflective practices enhanced self-awareness, and peer support encouraged meaningful connections. By investing in student well-being, we empower individuals to thrive academically, personally and socially.

## Acknowledgements

None.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

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