



Utilising Choir Participation as a Strategic Instrument for Enhancing Social Coherence among Students at a University in the Eastern Cape

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of university choir participation in fostering social cohesion, emotional well-being, and skill development among students from various disciplines. It investigated how choir involvement affects music and non-music students, examining their motivations, experiences, and challenges in balancing choir commitments with academic responsibilities. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilising thematic analysis of interviews with twenty (20) participants, including fifteen (15) Public Relations, Electrical Engineering, and Management Sciences students and five (5) Music students. Findings revealed that students joined the choir with a passion for music, social interaction, and stress relief. Choir participation contributed to developing time management, communication, and teamwork skills, which enhanced academic and personal growth. However, challenges emerged, particularly regarding the balance between choir participation and educational commitments. The study underscores the significance of choir involvement in enhancing students' social experiences and emotional well-being while preparing them for future professional environments. The findings advocate for more excellent institutional support for extracurricular music activities, suggesting that universities recognise and integrate choir participation as a developmental tool that enhances students' holistic learning experiences. Recommendations for curriculum adjustments and structured support systems are provided to maximise the benefits of choir involvement for university students. This study contributes to the growing discourse on holistic student development within South African higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Participation in a university choir provides students with a distinctive platform for artistic expression, community engagement, and personal growth. Beyond musical proficiency, engagement in choral activities fosters social interaction, emotional well-being, and the acquisition of critical transferable skills necessary for academic and professional success. Choir participation has been associated with reducing academic stress, improving mental health, and enhancing students' resilience in higher education.¹ In a study conducted on Middle School Choir, more than half of the participating students reported improved

¹ Anette Kolmos, Roger G. Hadgraft, and Jette Egelund Holgaard, "Response Strategies for Curriculum Change in Engineering," *International Journal of Technology and Design Education* 26, no. 3 (August 18, 2016): 391–411, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10798-015-9319-y>.

emotional regulation, prompting CSI to expand its programs across Canada.² Similarly, research suggests that university choirs facilitate teamwork, communication, time management, and organisational skills, which are integral to academic success and career development.³

In addition to its educational benefits, choir membership provides students with a creative outlet to alleviate stress, fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie. This aspect is particularly relevant for students in highly demanding disciplines such as engineering, public administration, and business, where structured social interactions are often absent from the curriculum.⁴ However, despite substantial research on the role of choirs in performing arts education, limited studies examine the experiences of non-music students who voluntarily participate in university choirs. Existing literature primarily focuses on music students whose choir involvement aligns with their academic and professional trajectories.⁵ The motivations, experiences, and challenges of non-music students in choir settings remain underexplored, necessitating further inquiry into the broader impact of choir participation on diverse student populations.

This section addresses these research gaps. This study investigates the motivations, benefits, and challenges of choir participation among students from various academic disciplines, including engineering, public administration, business sciences, and communications. Additionally, it examines the experiences of five music students, providing a comparative analysis between music and non-music participants. The research explores how choir engagement influences students' socialisation, emotional resilience, and professional skill development. This research seeks to comprehensively understand choir participation as an extracurricular activity with significant academic and personal benefits.

The following objectives guide the study:

1. To explore the motivations driving non-music students to join university choirs.
2. To examine the social, emotional, and academic impacts of choir participation on students from various disciplines.
3. To assess the skills acquired through choir participation that may enhance students' academic and professional success.
4. To compare music students' experiences with non-music students' involvement in choirs.

The study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What motivates non-music students to join university choirs?
2. What are the choir's social, emotional, and academic impacts on these students?
3. What skills do students gain through choir participation that may help them academically and professionally?
4. How do the experiences of music students differ from those of non-music students in choir participation?

When addressing these research questions and goals, this study aims to provide insights into the broader role of university choirs beyond traditional music education. Understanding how choir participation benefits students across different fields will help institutions recognise and support such activities as an essential component of holistic student development.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on holistic student development within South African higher education. It emphasises the role of choir participation in fostering interpersonal skills, emotional well-being, discipline, and a sense of community among students, regardless of their academic major. In a context where many students face socio-emotional and academic pressures, the choir becomes more than just a creative outlet; it serves as a space for belonging, cultural expression, and personal

² Dana Anne Boylan, "High School Choir Teachers' Perceptions of Music Education Students' Undergraduate College Readiness Characteristics." (Wilkes University, 2024.: Wilkes University, 2024).

³ Bradley Merrick, "'I Love Playing Music, It's Challenging and i Meet New People". Investigating Co-Curricular Music Participation, Student Wellbeing and Connection in the Secondary School Setting," *Australian Journal of Music Education* 56, no. 2 (2024): 36–51.

⁴ Elizabeth Cassidy Parker, "A Grounded Theory of Adolescent High School Women's Choir Singers' Process of Social Identity Development," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 65, no. 4 (January 16, 2018): 439–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429417743478>.

⁵ Haohao Yang et al., "Does Participation in Group Music Activities and Pro-Social Behavior Among College Students Have an Association? A Study of the Interlocking Mediating Effects of Positive Social Connections and Peer Support," *Behavioral Sciences* 15, no. 1 (January 13, 2025): 64, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15010064>.

growth. The study explores the experiences of both music and non-music students. This research adds to understanding how creative engagement supports inclusive learning environments and enhances student retention. Integrating artistic practices such as choral singing within institutional frameworks demonstrates the potential to cultivate more humanising and connected higher education spaces. Jackson and Bridgstock's study affirms this approach by showing how co-curricular artistic participation can promote personal and professional development within university settings.⁶

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores previous research on choir participation and its impact on students' social coherence, emotional well-being, and personal development. It evaluates existing studies, shows gaps in the literature, and emphasises the significance of choir involvement in higher education settings.

Benefits of Choir Participation

Choir participation provides multi-dimensional benefits, fostering social bonds, skill development, and academic support. Research shows that university choirs create a supportive environment that enhances students' well-being and sense of belonging.⁷ This sense of community is particularly valuable for students transitioning into university life, where forming friendships and support networks can mitigate feelings of isolation.⁸

a. Social Connections and Community Building

Participation in choirs fosters social integration by encouraging teamwork, collaboration, and mutual support.⁹ The shared experience of group singing enhances interpersonal relationships and helps students build long-term social connections. University choirs function as micro-communities, where students from diverse academic backgrounds engage in meaningful interactions beyond rehearsals and performances.¹⁰ Additionally, choir membership provides students with a structured space for social interaction, which may be especially beneficial for students in non-music disciplines, such as engineering and business, where opportunities for collaborative engagement are often limited.¹¹ These students report a sense of belonging in the choir, contributing to their overall university experience and academic persistence.

b. Personal Growth and Identity Development

Choir participation plays a role in personal identity formation, helping students develop self-awareness, confidence, and emotional expression.¹² Singing allows students to express themselves creatively, which can be particularly valuable for those who struggle with verbal communication or social anxiety.¹³ Music-making in a group setting reinforces self-esteem, as students gain a sense of accomplishment through performance and peer recognition. Additionally, participation in a choir offers students the opportunity to explore and define their identity as they engage with different musical styles and traditions.¹⁴

⁶ Jackson, Denise, and Ruth Bridgstock. "What Actually Works to Enhance Graduate Employability? The Relative Value of Curricular, Co-Curricular, and Extra-Curricular Learning and Paid Work." *Higher Education* 81, no. 4 (2020): 723–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00570-x>.

⁷ Parker, "A Grounded Theory of Adolescent High School Women's Choir Singers' Process of Social Identity Development."

⁸ Yang et al., "Does Participation in Group Music Activities and Pro-Social Behavior Among College Students Have an Association? A Study of the Interlocking Mediating Effects of Positive Social Connections and Peer Support."

⁹ Bonshor, Michael. "Collaborative Learning and Choral Confidence: The Role of Peer Interactions in Building Confident Amateur Choirs." *Music Performance Research*, 10, (2020):38–56. <https://doi.org/10.14439/mpr.10.4>.

¹⁰ Zachary Debois. Cooke, "Servant Leader Choral Conductor: The Effect of Servant Leadership in Community Choirs and Community Partnerships." (Liberty University, 2024).

¹¹ Lunga Jeremiah. Sianagowa, "*The Meanings of Inclusive and Exclusive Choir Practices in Selected Junior Secondary Schools in Zambia*." (PhD diss. North-West University (South Africa), 2022).

¹² Courtney A Hulsey, "Social Emotional Learning in the Choral Classroom," 2022.

¹³ Rebecca Yarnold, "Singing Together, Growing Confident: Social Relationships and Music Performance Anxiety in Pre-Adolescent Voice Students," *Australian Voice* 25, no. 2024 (2024): 57–72, <https://doi.org/10.56307/LFYU6710>.

¹⁴ Briana E Nannen, "*Choir Is for Girls': Intersectional Mixed Methods Perspectives on Adolescent Gender Identity, Singing Interest, and Choral Music Participation* (The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2017).

2. Emotional Well-Being and Psychological Benefits

The emotional benefits of choir participation extend beyond social cohesion. Research suggests that singing in a group setting has therapeutic effects, reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.¹⁵

a. Stress Relief and Emotional Regulation

Choir involvement provides students with an outlet for emotional expression, allowing them to navigate academic and personal stressors in a supportive, structured environment.¹⁶ Singing triggers the release of endorphins and oxytocin, neurotransmitters associated with happiness and relaxation.¹⁷ Studies have shown that university students who actively participate in choirs experience reduced levels of academic stress compared to their non-participating peers.¹⁸ Additionally, regular choir participation has been linked to improved emotional intelligence as students learn to interpret and express emotions through music.¹⁹

b. Mental Health Benefits

Participation in choir activities has been found to contribute to long-term mental well-being, with students reporting increased resilience, emotional stability, and self-confidence.²⁰ Choirs provide a structured form of social support, which can be particularly beneficial for students experiencing academic burnout or personal challenges.²¹ Furthermore, structured choral engagement has been identified as a protective factor against declining mental health, as it promotes positive social interactions and a sense of shared purpose.²²

Skill Development and Academic Success

Choir participation offers students opportunities to develop transferable skills that enhance their academic performance and career readiness.²³

a. Life Skills and Professional Development

Engagement in choir activities improves teamwork, communication, and time management skills, all essential for academic and professional success.²⁴ The collaborative nature of choir singing encourages problem-solving as students learn to balance individual responsibilities with group dynamics. Research also suggests that students involved in music-based extracurricular activities demonstrate higher levels of discipline, self-motivation, and adaptability.²⁵ These skills are particularly relevant in multidisciplinary learning environments, where students must coordinate tasks, meet deadlines, and work effectively in diverse teams.

¹⁵ Michael Joseph Barrett, "Exploring Choristers' Perceptions of a University Choir as Potential for Social Capital and Personal Value" (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2017).

¹⁶ Barrett, "Exploring Choristers' Perceptions of a University Choir as Potential for Social Capital and Personal Value."

¹⁷ Jing Kang, Austin Scholp, and Jack Jiang, "A Review of the Physiological Effects and Mechanisms of Singing," *Journal of Voice* 32, no. 4 (2018): 390–95.

¹⁸ James Denny, "Factors of Faith in Immortality," in *The Expositor, Eighth Series, Volume 1*, ed. Robertson W. Nicoll (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911).

¹⁹ Agnès Ros-Morente et al., "'Beyond Music: Emotional Skills and Its Development in Young Adults in Choirs and Bands,'" *International Journal of Music Education* 37, no. 4 (2019): 536–46.

²⁰ Fiona. Evison, "'Relational Composition for Post-Pandemic Well-Being in a Canadian Children's Choir,'" 2024.

²¹ Yael Eilat and Nirit Raichel, "An Inclusive School Choir for Children with Autism in Israel: Using Grounded Theory to Explore the Perceived Benefits and Challenges," *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 16, no. 1 (February 22, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.15845/voices.v16i1.849>.

²² Ntshengedzeni Evans Netshivhambe, "Promoting Elderly Wellbeing through Indigenous Music and Choral Performance," *EXPLORE* 21, no. 3 (May 2025): 103145, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2025.103145>.

²³ Ailbhe Kenny, "Exploring Student Learning and Leadership through a University-Community Choral Initiative," *British Journal of Music Education* 35, no. 2 (July 4, 2018): 203–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051717000286>.

²⁴ Michael Bonshor, "Collaborative Learning and Choral Confidence: The Role of Peer Interactions in Building Confident Amateur Choirs," *Music Performance Research*, December 17, 2020, 38–56, <https://doi.org/10.14439/mpr.10.4>.

²⁵ Anna Bussu and Marta Mangiarulo, "Playing Music Together: Exploring the Impact of a Classical Music Ensemble on Adolescent's Life Skills Self-Perception," *PloS One* 19, no. 7 (2024): e0306326.

b. Leadership and Responsibility

Choir participation also offers students leadership opportunities, allowing them to take on section leader roles, organise rehearsals, and mentor peers.²⁶ These experiences cultivate accountability and confidence, preparing students for future leadership positions in their respective fields. Students who take on leadership roles in choirs often show stronger organisational skills as they manage rehearsal schedules, delegate tasks, and provide constructive feedback to peers.²⁷ The ability to guide and support fellow students fosters collaborative leadership styles, which are highly valued in professional and academic settings.

Challenges and Limitations of Choir Participation

Despite its numerous benefits, choir participation presents challenges, including time constraints, interpersonal conflicts, and balancing academic responsibilities.²⁸

a. Time Management and Academic Pressure

Balancing choir commitments with academic coursework can be difficult, particularly for students in highly demanding disciplines.²⁹ Some students struggle to allocate time for rehearsals and performances, increasing academic pressure and fatigue.³⁰ However, students who develop effective time management strategies often report that choir participation enhances their ability to prioritise tasks and maintain a balanced academic schedule.³¹

b. Interpersonal Conflicts and Group Dynamics

Choirs bring together individuals with diverse personalities, expectations, and skill levels, sometimes resulting in interpersonal conflicts.³² Differences in musical ability, commitment levels, or leadership styles may lead to tensions among choir members. However, research indicates that successful conflict resolution in choirs fosters the development of emotional intelligence, negotiation skills, and team cohesion.³³ Choir directors are crucial in mediating conflicts and creating a supportive and inclusive rehearsal environment.³⁴

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a valuable framework for understanding the motivational aspects of choir participation.³⁵ SDT posits that those three basic psychological needs drive human motivation:

Autonomy – Students develop a sense of personal agency when participating in choir, shaping their artistic and academic experiences.

Competence – Choir involvement allows students to develop and refine musical and interpersonal skills, boosting their confidence and performance abilities.

Relatedness – Singing in a choir fosters social connections and emotional bonds, fulfilling the innate human need for belonging and community engagement.

²⁶ James Andrew Sparks, “Transformative Singing Engagement: A Study in Cross-Cultural Leadership and Pedagogical Implications for Choral Music Education,” 2014.

²⁷ Dorianne Cotter-Lockard, *Chamber Music Coaching Strategies and Rehearsal Techniques That Enable Collaboration* (Fielding Graduate University, 2012).

²⁸ Diana Samir George. Talhami, “‘Cultural Influence on Recruiting Middle School Children to the Jordanian Nai Choir.’ ” (PhD diss., : Liberty University, 2024).

²⁹ Walter. Choplick, “‘Advanced Placement, College in the High School, and Music: Examining Student Motivation and Success.’ ” *PhD Diss.*, (Concordia University Wisconsin, 2024).

³⁰ Andrew Thomas Sutherland and Jane Southcott, “Fluctuating Emotions and Motivation: Five Stages of the Rehearsal and Performance Process,” *International Journal of Music Education* 39, no. 1 (February 3, 2021): 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761420963984>.

³¹ Wen Loong Tham, *A Framework for Choral Repertoire Selection for Singapore Children’s (Age 7 to 12 Years) Choirs for Musicianship, Vocal and Social-Emotional Development* (University of Southern California, 2024).

³² Tham, *A Framework for Choral Repertoire Selection for Singapore Children’s (Age 7 to 12 Years) Choirs for Musicianship, Vocal and Social-Emotional Development*.

³³ Liu, “Innovative and Practical Methods for Choir Conducting in Music Education.”

³⁴ Albert Oikelome, “The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18, no. 4 (2020).

³⁵ Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, “Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health.,” *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne* 49, no. 3 (August 2008): 182–85, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012801>.

Applying SDT to this study helps explain why music and non-music students participate and how choir experiences contribute to personal and academic growth. This literature review highlights choir participation's academic, emotional, and social benefits while acknowledging its challenges and limitations. By bridging the gap between music and non-music disciplines, choirs serve as a vital support structure for students in higher education. Future research should explore longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of choir engagement on students' careers and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of choir participation on students from diverse academic disciplines at Walter Sisulu University. Qualitative methods provide an in-depth understanding of students' social, emotional, and academic experiences, emphasising how choir involvement contributes to personal and professional development.³⁶ This approach allowed for a holistic exploration of students' motivations, challenges, and the benefits they gained from choir participation.³⁷ The study followed a pragmatic qualitative design to capture individual experiences, narratives, and perspectives through direct engagement with students actively involved in university choir activities.³⁸

Participants and Sampling

The study population consisted of 20 students from Walter Sisulu University who actively participated in the university choir at the Butterworth Campus. Participants were drawn from various academic disciplines, including Public Relations, Communications Management, Electrical Engineering, Human Resource Management, Office Management, Business Science, and Music within the Department of Humanities and Creative Arts Education. Including both music and non-music students allowed for a comparative analysis of their experiences in the choir setting.³⁹

A purposive sampling method was employed, which is widely used in qualitative research to select participants capable of providing rich, in-depth insights.⁴⁰ Only students who had participated in the choir for at least one semester were included to ensure that all participants had sufficient experience to offer relevant reflections. The sample size of 20 was considered appropriate to achieve thematic saturation, ensuring recurring patterns and perspectives were captured while maintaining data richness and diversity.⁴¹

Table 1: Summary of Participant Information

Participant ID	Discipline	Year of Study	Duration of Choir Participation
1	Public Relations	2nd Year	2 semesters
2	Communications Management	3rd Year	3 semesters
3	Electrical Engineering	1st Year	1 semester
4	Human Resource Management	2nd Year	2 semesters
5	Office Management	3rd Year	4 semesters
6	Business Science	1st Year	1 semester
7	Public Relations	4th Year	5 semesters
8	Music	2nd Year	3 semesters
9	Music	3rd Year	2 semesters
10	Music	2nd Year	1 semester
11	Communications Management	4th Year	6 semesters
12	Business Science	2nd Year	3 semesters

³⁶ Liu, "Innovative and Practical Methods for Choir Conducting in Music Education."

³⁷ Oikelome, "The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace."

³⁸ Deci and Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health."

³⁹ Liu, "Innovative and Practical Methods for Choir Conducting in Music Education."

⁴⁰ Oikelome, "The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace."

⁴¹ Deci and Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health."

13	Music	3rd Year	2 semesters
14	Public Relations	1st Year	1 semester
15	Music	3rd Year	4 semesters

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their experiences openly while enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes.⁴² This method provided flexibility and depth, ensuring the collected data reflected the complexity of participants' perspectives.⁴³ Interviews lasted between 45 and 50 minutes and were conducted face-to-face and via online platforms, depending on participants' availability. The interview guide focused on: Motivations for joining the choir, Social interactions and sense of belonging, Emotional and psychological benefits, Skill development and academic impact.

In addition, four focus group discussions (FGD 1-4) were conducted to capture group dynamics and shared perspectives.⁴⁴ Each focus group included participants from different academic backgrounds, allowing for cross-disciplinary insights between music and non-music students. All discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse interview and focus group data systematically.⁴⁵ This method allowed the researcher to identify key patterns within participants' responses while maintaining analytical rigour.⁴⁶

The data analysis followed the six-step framework outlined below: Familiarisation – Transcripts were repeatedly read to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants' responses.⁴⁷ This stage allowed for the identification of initial codes and patterns. Initial Coding – Responses were broken into meaningful units and labelled with descriptive codes that captured recurring ideas, participant expressions, and thematic content.⁴⁸ Theme Development – Related codes were grouped into broader themes, reflecting the main insights emerging from the data.⁴⁹ Reviewing and Refining Themes – Themes were checked for internal consistency and alignment with the study's research questions. Overlapping or weak themes were merged or refined.⁵⁰ Defining and Naming Themes – Each theme was clearly defined and named to capture the core of participants' experiences conceptually, distinct and coherent. Data Reporting – The final themes were presented as a coherent narrative, supported by direct participant quotations to enhance authenticity and trustworthiness.⁵¹ This structured approach to thematic analysis ensured a balance between analytical depth and transparency, accurately reflecting the richness of the lived experiences of choir participants.⁵²

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Humanities Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Walter Sisulu University. The study adhered to all ethical protocols, protecting participants' rights and privacy.⁵³ Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participant responses and ensuring all collected data was used solely for research purposes. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the

⁴² Liu, "Innovative and Practical Methods for Choir Conducting in Music Education."

⁴³ Oikelome, "The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace."

⁴⁴ Deci and Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health."

⁴⁵ Liu, "Innovative and Practical Methods for Choir Conducting in Music Education."

⁴⁶ Oikelome, "The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace."

⁴⁷ Deci and Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health."

⁴⁸ Oikelome, "The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace."

⁴⁹ Oikelome, "The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace."

⁵⁰ Deci and Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health."

⁵¹ Liu, "Innovative and Practical Methods for Choir Conducting in Music Education."

⁵² Oikelome, "The Choir Director: Conflict Management and Harmony at the Workplace."

⁵³ D.J. Harriss, A. MacSween, and G. Atkinson, "Ethical Standards in Sport and Exercise Science Research: 2020 Update," *International Journal of Sports Medicine* 40, no. 13 (December 15, 2019): 813–17, <https://doi.org/10.1055/a-1015-3123>.

study at any stage without facing any consequences.⁵⁴ A respectful and non-judgmental environment was maintained during the interviews and focus groups to encourage honest and open discussions. The study's ethical rigour contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS /FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from individual interviews and focus groups, focusing on themes related to students' motivations for choir participation, social and emotional benefits, vocal and technical skill development, challenges encountered, and recommendations for educational support. The results are structured to align with the research questions, ensuring a clear connection between the findings and the study's goals.

Motivations for Choir Participation

Participants expressed diverse reasons for joining the university choir. Non-music students revealed that social engagement, stress relief, and the opportunity to explore artistic expression were key motivators. Several Engineering and Business Science students noted that choir participation provided a creative outlet outside their structured academic schedules.

"I joined the choir because I needed an outlet from all the pressure of my course. Singing helps me reset." (Participant 6, Engineering)

"It was never about being a professional singer. I just needed a place to belong." (Participant 11, Public Relations)

"I was nervous at first, but in our group, others said the choir gave them a voice. That encouraged me." (Focus Group 1)

Music students, on the other hand, joined primarily to enhance their vocal skills and gain performance experience.

"For me, choir was about learning to blend, not just solo singing. It sharpened my musicianship." (Participant 2, Music)

A common theme across both groups was the sense of community fostered by choir involvement.

Social and Emotional Impacts of Choir Participation

The findings show that choir participation significantly enhances social connectivity and emotional well-being. Students reported that rehearsals and performances helped them develop friendships, improve confidence, and manage academic stress. Many participants described choir sessions as a safe space for emotional expression and collective support.

"Sometimes, choir was the only place I could breathe after a stressful week." (Participant 9, Management Sciences)

"Choir gave me confidence. I never thought I could perform in front of people." (Participant 14, Electrical Engineering)

"In our group, someone said choir was like free therapy—that stuck with me. It is more than just music." (Focus Group 3)

Some non-music students demonstrated that singing in a group environment improved their ability to collaborate and strengthened their interpersonal skills. Music students acknowledged the emotional depth required in performance:

⁵⁴ Tove Godskesen, Joar Björk, and Niklas Juth, "Challenges Regarding Informed Consent in Recruitment to Clinical Research: A Qualitative Study of Clinical Research Nurses' Experiences," *Trials* 24, no. 1 (December 11, 2023): 801, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-023-07844-6>.

“Singing in harmony taught me more about emotional expression than any theory class.”
(Participant 4, Music)

“We talked about how choir makes us feel like we belong to something bigger, especially for those of us from faculties where we do not engage in group activities.” (Focus Group 2)

Vocal Development and Technical Skills

A notable finding was the impact of choir participation on vocal development. Participants reported improvements in vocal range, breath control, and projection. Non-music students who had no prior vocal training mentioned that they gained fundamental singing techniques, while music students emphasised the refinement of their vocal artistry.

“I used to struggle with pitch and breathing, but choir helped me build real technique.”
(Participant 3, Music)

“I never knew anything about diaphragm support until I joined. Now I warm up properly.”
(Participant 12, Public Relations)

Participants also reflected on the importance of vocal health, stating that regular practice and warm-up exercises contributed to maintaining vocal strength.

Challenges in Choir Participation

Despite the benefits, participants identified several challenges. A recurring issue was time management, as balancing choir rehearsals with academic responsibilities proved difficult for many.

“It was hard during test week. I would come from a three-hour rehearsal and still needed to study.” (Participant 17, Engineering)

Vocal fatigue and performance anxiety were also concerns.

“There were times my voice felt overused, and we did not get enough rest between sessions.”
(Participant 1, Music)

Students from multiple focus groups echoed this:

“We discussed how hard it is balancing rehearsals and class, but we agreed it is worth it because the choir builds our confidence.” (Focus Group 4)

Participants also noted inconsistencies in access to resources such as rehearsal spaces and vocal coaching, which sometimes hindered their progress.

Recommendations for Educational Support

Based on participants’ feedback, several recommendations emerged to improve the educational experience of choir members. Many students suggested integrating more vocal health workshops and masterclasses on stage presence into the choir program.

“We need someone to talk to us about vocal care, like what to eat, when to rest, how to protect our voices.” (Participant 15, Business Sciences)

Others emphasised the importance of mentorship, where experienced choir members or vocal instructors could guide newer participants.

“It would help if we had a buddy system or mentoring for first-years joining the choir.”
(Participant 19, Music)

Some students proposed incorporating choir participation into academic credit systems, particularly for music students, to recognise the educational value of ensemble singing. Lastly, participants expressed interest in structured practice plans that align with their academic schedules, ensuring that choir involvement remains accessible without overwhelming their workload.

This study revealed that choir participation is more than just an artistic engagement; it fosters community, enhances emotional well-being, and supports technical skill development. However, the needs and experiences of students differ based on their academic backgrounds, emphasising the importance of tailored educational support. Addressing these diverse needs can strengthen the overall impact of university choir programmes.

Table 1: Summary of Key Themes from Participant Responses

Theme	Description	Representative Disciplines
Motivation for Joining Choir	Desire for social interaction, artistic expression, and stress relief	Public Relations, Engineering
Emotional & Social Impact	Improved confidence, stress management, and sense of belonging	All disciplines
Vocal Skill Development	Improved breath control, range, and pitch accuracy	Music, Business Science
Challenges Faced	Time management, vocal fatigue, and performance anxiety	Music, Communications
Recommendations for Support	More vocal health workshops, mentorship, and structured training support	All disciplines

Source: Interview and focus group data, 2025

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide insights into the experiences and perceptions of singing students at Walter Sisulu University, particularly regarding vocal techniques, vocal health, lifestyle habits, and educational support. The qualitative thematic analysis of individual interviews and focus groups highlights common themes that align with existing literature while offering new perspectives specific to this cohort.

Vocal Techniques and Skill Development

Participant feedback emphasises significant vocal technique progress and the ability to apply more functional singing techniques. Structured training has provided students with personalised feedback, leading to improved breath control, pitch accuracy, and vocal quality. This aligns with prior studies suggesting that systematic vocal training enhances singing potential and confidence.⁵⁵ Developing vocal skills contributes to technical proficiency and students’ artistic identity, as they focus on creative expression rather than solely technical mastery.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the collaborative learning environment in choirs supports students’ confidence and motivation, reinforcing the role of structured instruction in skill acquisition.⁵⁷

Vocal Health Practices

Participants reported increased awareness of vocal health due to their choir involvement. Many described strategies, such as staying hydrated, warming up their voices, and maintaining adequate rest, align with best practices in vocal health management.⁵⁸ However, some students noted that formal education on vocal health was lacking, and there were profound concerns from previous research that vocal hygiene education should be an integral part of music programs.⁵⁹ The need for structured workshops on vocal health was often mentioned, emphasising an institutional gap in addressing long-term vocal sustainability. Given the importance of vocal health in a singer’s career, implementing educational initiatives that teach preventive care could enhance students’ vocal longevity and overall performance.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Andrea L. Morris-Campbell, “Developing Singing Competence, Confidence, Motivation and Self-Identity for Teaching Music in the Primary School” (Queensland University of Technology, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5204/thesis.eprints.228678>.

⁵⁶ Thomas J Clark, “Harmonizing Voices: Vocal Pedagogy in 21st Century Music Education,” 2024.

⁵⁷ Bonshor, “Collaborative Learning and Choral Confidence: The Role of Peer Interactions in Building Confident Amateur Choirs.”

⁵⁸ Stephanie Martin and Olivia Darnley, *The Working Voice: Vocal Health and Effective Communication* (Routledge, 2024).

⁵⁹ Clark, “Harmonizing Voices: Vocal Pedagogy in 21st Century Music Education.”

⁶⁰ Amanda Flynn, “Vocal Health Education in Undergraduate Performing Arts Training Programs,” *Journal of Voice* 34, no. 5 (September 2020): 806.e33-806.e44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2019.03.016>.

Lifestyle Habits and Their Impact

Participants discussed the role of lifestyle choices in their singing ability, particularly concerning sleep and stress management. Many reported that stress and fatigue negatively impacted their vocal performance, consistent with findings that link physical and mental well-being to performance quality.⁶¹ The tension between rigorous rehearsal schedules and self-care practices was evident, reinforcing the importance of holistic student support in music education.⁶² Institutions should consider integrating wellness programs that educate students on managing stress while balancing their academic and musical commitments.⁶³

Educational Support and Recommendations

A recurring theme in participant feedback was the need for enhanced educational support, particularly in live performance opportunities and industry-relevant training. This finding aligns with existing literature, showing a gap between music education curricula and professional industry expectations.⁶⁴ Participants suggested that additional coursework on music theory, vocal health, and performance skills would better prepare them for professional careers. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of mentorship programs, a recommendation supported by studies on the role of mentorship in career readiness.⁶⁵

Another key recommendation was for universities to show stronger partnerships with professional organisations. These collaborations could provide networking opportunities, internships, and performance platforms, bridging the divide between academic training and industry demands. Mentorship and industry engagement are increasingly recognised as vital components of music education, ensuring that students graduate with technical skills and practical career insights.⁶⁶

Discussion Summary

This study explored the impact of choir participation on students' musical development, emotional well-being, and academic experience at Walter Sisulu University. The findings demonstrate that participation in choir activities has multifaceted benefits for both music and non-music students, confirming that ensemble singing fosters community, enhances vocal technique, supports emotional regulation, and nurtures professional growth.

A key contribution of this research is the light shed on choir participation as a pedagogical tool that supports a holistic approach to student development. Participants identified improvements in technical skills such as pitch control, projection, and breathing, which align with prior research emphasising ensemble singing as essential for developing core vocal competencies.¹ Music students noted that choir rehearsals deepened their understanding of blend, harmony, and interpretation concepts central to professional performance standards. These resonances with findings by Welch and Preti, who emphasised that ensemble work sharpens musicianship beyond solo technique.²

The emotional benefits reported, such as stress relief, increased self-confidence, and a heightened sense of belonging, reinforce the work of Hallam, who argued that musical engagement contributes significantly to emotional health and social development.³ These outcomes were especially evident among non-music students, who viewed choir as a sanctuary within the academic environment. The social bonds formed through choral singing also mirror Davidson's "affective dimension" of learning, where emotional safety and community enhance cognitive engagement.⁴ However, the study also reveals systemic challenges that constrain the potential impact of choir programmes. Time constraints, limited resources, and insufficient vocal health education were commonly cited. These issues underline the gap between

⁶¹ Eric J. Hunter et al., "Toward a Consensus Description of Vocal Effort, Vocal Load, Vocal Loading, and Vocal Fatigue," *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 63, no. 2 (February 26, 2020): 509–32, https://doi.org/10.1044/2019_JSLHR-19-00057.

⁶² Bridget Sweet, "Self-Care and the Music Educator," in *The Oxford Handbook of Care in Music Education* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 339–49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197611654.013.31>.

⁶³ Mary Jebii Chemagosi, "Student Well-Being in Higher Education Institutions," 2024, 81–106, <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-4417-0.ch004>.

⁶⁴ Guadalupe López-Íñiguez and Dawn Bennett, "A Lifespan Perspective on Multi-Professional Musicians: Does Music Education Prepare Classical Musicians for Their Careers?," *Music Education Research* 22, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

⁶⁵ Rebekah L. Layton et al., "Career Planning Courses Increase Career Readiness of Graduate and Postdoctoral Trainees," *F1000Research* 9 (February 3, 2022): 1230, <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.26025.2>.

⁶⁶ Jaana Juvonen and Sandra Graham, "Bullying in Schools: The Power of Bullies and the Plight of Victims," *Annual Review of Psychology* 65, no. 1 (January 3, 2014): 159–85, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115030>.

institutional music education practices and students' lived experiences, a theme raised and noted by Lebaka in his analysis of African university choirs. Students may struggle to balance choir participation with academic demands.⁵ Without structured rehearsal planning, proper vocal coaching, and wellness support, especially during exam periods, students may struggle to balance choir participation with academic demands.

The study's findings also contribute to broader discourses on curriculum transformation in African higher education. Participants expressed the need for music education to incorporate industry-relevant competencies such as performance psychology, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy. This call aligns with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, which advocates for experiential, student-centred education that prepares learners for complex real-world environments.⁶ This approach remains relevant; music departments must reimagine ensemble-based learning as a bridge between academic training and industry readiness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study builds upon the findings of this study. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of choir participation on students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and career trajectories. A longitudinal study tracking students' progression over several years could provide deeper insights into how choir experiences shape professional and personal development beyond university life. Comparative studies across multiple universities are also recommended to assess how institutional variation, including curricular structures, funding models, and levels of institutional support, influences student engagement and learning outcomes in choir programmes. Exploring these dynamics would help identify best practices for choir integration in higher education.

In addition, future studies should investigate the role of digital technologies and AI-assisted choir training, especially in the context of post-pandemic innovations in music education. Examining the effectiveness of virtual rehearsals, online platforms, and AI-powered vocal training tools may offer practical ways to modernise choir participation while maintaining its educational and social benefits. Lastly, more nuanced research into choir participation's gendered, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions could contribute to a more inclusive understanding of accessibility, motivation, and experience. Such research would aid in designing interventions that promote diversity and equity in university-level music education.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of choir participants at Walter Sisulu University, focusing on vocal development, health management, and educational support structures. Through qualitative thematic analysis of interviews and focus group discussions, it was found that students highly value structured vocal training and ensemble learning for improving their technical and expressive capabilities. At the same time, there is a recognised need for specialised guidance in vocal health and stage performance.

A critical insight from this study is the gap between music education curricula and the industry's evolving demands. Participants demonstrated the need for a more integrated approach to music education that combines technical training with business acumen, mental wellness, and real-world performance opportunities. These findings support broader discussions in the field, which advocate for industry-oriented curricula that equip students with adaptable, career-relevant competencies.¹ In addressing these challenges, institutions should consider embedding practical training components into formal music programmes, including live performances, mentoring initiatives, and industry collaborations. A restructured curriculum that connects academic learning with professional expectations will cultivate resilient, well-rounded performers ready for diverse career paths. This study contributes significantly to ongoing debates in African music education, offering fresh insights into student needs and the broader function of choir participation as an academic, emotional, and professional development tool.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study present clear implications for educators, institutions, and students seeking to optimise the value of choir participation:

- Universities should formalise the role of choir activities across disciplines for those in other academic fields. This encourages interdisciplinary learning, fosters emotional well-being, and builds essential soft skills like collaboration, resilience, and leadership.
- Educators must incorporate vocal health awareness, performance psychology, and career-oriented mentoring into choir training. This aligns with calls for more holistic, student-centred pedagogies in music education.
- Institutions should provide access to qualified vocal coaches, rehearsal spaces, and digital tools to support inclusive participation. Recognising choir participation in student wellness programming can promote balanced academic development.
- Students are encouraged to see choir involvement not merely as an extracurricular activity but as a strategic developmental experience that enriches their academic journey and prepares them for life beyond university.

By positioning the choir participation as a transformative learning space, higher education institutions can create inclusive, supportive environments that bridge cultural, academic, and professional gaps, ultimately empowering students to thrive in artistic and non-artistic careers.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of choir participants at Walter Sisulu University, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is generally limited as it focuses on a single institution. The findings may not fully represent the experiences of students at other universities, particularly those with different institutional structures, music programs, or cultural influences. Future research should include a broader range of institutions to strengthen the applicability of the findings.

Second, the sample size is relatively small, consisting of 20 participants. While qualitative research aims for depth over breadth, a larger sample may have provided a more comprehensive understanding of choir participation across different student demographics. Expanding the study to include a broader range of disciplines and academic levels could enhance the robustness of the findings. Additionally, response bias is a potential limitation, as participants may have provided socially desirable responses rather than fully candid reflections. This is particularly relevant in focus group discussions, where peer influence may have shaped responses. Future studies could incorporate longitudinal approaches or mixed-method designs, combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures such as surveys and performance assessments to minimise biases and validate findings.

Future Research Directions

Future research might explore the longitudinal effects of choir participation on students' academic performance, personal growth, and career trajectories, particularly in African university contexts. Comparative studies across institutions could reveal how different pedagogical models and institutional cultures influence outcomes. Additionally, researchers may investigate the role of digital technologies and AI tools in choir rehearsal and instruction, especially relevant in post-pandemic blended learning environments. Finally, intersectional inquiries examining gender, socio-economic background, and cultural affiliation could offer insights into barriers to participation and reveal how choral programmes can promote inclusivity in higher education.

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