



Recruiting Students for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research: A Critical Reflection on Challenges and Lessons Learnt at a South African Higher Education Institution

ABSTRACT

This collaborative auto-ethnography study reflects on some experiences associated with recruiting students to participate in a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research study. Specifically, the reflection used the duo-ethnography approach to analytically explore the complexities of recruiting students within a lecturer's own module. It draws on the complementary perspectives of two authors (Cindy, who held a direct role in the study and provided an experiential reflection and Michael, who offered an analytical reflection based on the literature and applicable theories). Cindy's firsthand experience in recruiting participants is contextualized by Michael's analytical views, providing a critical lens on navigating and interpreting challenges associated with participant recruitment in SoTL research. We followed Gibbs' six-step reflective cycle to examine the challenges of participant recruitment and to determine strategies that may inform future research recruitment. This collaborative reflection concludes that for effective recruitment of students in SoTL research, recruitment challenges can be a source of growth and learning.

KEYWORDS

student participation, higher education research recruitment, reflection on higher education research, higher education student responses

INTRODUCTION

This auto-ethnographic study narrates and analytically examines a lecturer's experiences with recruiting students to participate as respondents in a research study. Cindy recruited students for research that explored teaching-learning practices within the lecturer's module (Inclusive Recreation: RKKX216) to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Specifically, this study explored inclusivity in recreation teaching and learning praxis for people with disabilities. It aimed to promote transformative and innovative pedagogies. The main aim of the Inclusive Recreation module is to equip students with relevant knowledge, skills, and competences in understanding, designing, and delivering recreation programmes that inclusively cater for people with varying disabilities (Theriault 2022). The lack of empirical studies on the interface between inclusive recreation pedagogy and scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) informed this study. The researcher hoped to establish evidence-based teaching practices that enhance student learning outcomes. In general,

scholarly research on recreation and people with disabilities is on the rise in South Africa (Mululuma, Mugwedi, and Malema 2025). Limitations related to a lack of knowledge and skills on how to work with people with disabilities sometimes prevent professionals from providing high-quality services to these individuals (Brown and Kalaitzidis 2013). Therefore, teaching and learning in higher education should be based on evidence-based and student-centred teaching practices in order to develop recreational practitioners who are equipped to effectively address the needs of people with disabilities. The study aimed to enhance teaching methods, learning outcomes, support resources, course units, lecture topics, assigned readings, key assignments, and assessment protocols based on students' perspectives. This reflection in the current manuscript, however, focuses on communicating the challenges and lessons learnt when recruiting students as participants for this study.

CONTEXT

The marginalization and exclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs) through multiple forms of discrimination affect their access to healthcare, employment, and education (South African Human Rights Commission 2017). In South Africa (and globally), PWDs should be viewed as equal citizens and should participate fully in societal activities (Kahn 2017). The White paper on the rights of persons with disabilities considers it a national priority for all people to play, develop, and learn through their participation in sport, leisure, and recreation (White Paper on the Rights of People with Disabilities 2016). To prepare and equip undergraduate students to work with PWDs, Cindy undertook a SoTL research project to explore inclusive pedagogical approaches that could be adopted to equip students with skills for quality, inclusive recreation learning.

Background and justification

Recruitment

Research recruitment in higher education is pertinent for advancing knowledge, in line with the trifocal functions (teaching, learning, and research) of a university (Ederio, Inocian, Calaca, and Espiritu 2023; Goslin, van der Klashorst, Kluka, and van Wyk 2016). Recruited student participants should be comfortable, motivated, compensated, and protected when selected for an appropriate sample in a research study (McCrum, Schneider, and Zenko 2025). While this study did not offer formal compensation for student participants, they received a coffee voucher as a gesture of appreciation for their time.

According to Negrin, Slaughter, Dahlke, and Olson (2022), the process of participant recruitment is under-communicated or even treated like a footnote in most research articles. This under-reportage also holds true for most articles in the discipline of recreation studies, to which the authors of this article belong (Goslin et al. 2016; Labuschagne, Schreck, and Weilbach 2023, 2025; Mokeona and Dhurup 2017; Schreck, Weilbach, and Reitsma 2022; Weilbach 2018). As a result, few benchmarks exist to determine the approaches and resources required for successful participant recruitment. This could result in unrealistic expectations or missteps, which may lead to discouragement when researchers face challenges in recruiting participants (Archibald and Munce 2015). In instances where recruitment processes and outcomes do not go according to plan, clear explanations encourage transparency and may inform recruitment for future studies with comparable designs (Nevins, Nicholls, Ouyang, Carroll, Hemming, Weijer, and Taljaard 2022). Acknowledging challenges related to recruitment not only brings transparency but also puts a humane face to the research process. That is, it promotes authenticity by demonstrating that research is not a

mechanistic process in which perfectionism is the norm, but a human endeavour that is subject to challenges and vulnerabilities.

Scholarship of teaching and learning (synopsis)

The South African Council of Higher Education identified SoTL to be a strategic priority in recent years (Schreck, du Plessis, Coetzee, Bisschoff, Oosthuizen, and Kahts-Kramer 2023). They regard it as a necessary mechanism for mitigating the many teaching and learning challenges in higher education that prevent a large proportion of students from achieving academic success (Vorster 2020). Within the human movement sciences field (under which recreation sciences falls) at the higher education institution where the primary study was conducted, there is a growing pursuit to implement evidence-based teaching practices that are informed by SoTL in order to enhance student success prospects (Kahts-Kramer, Oosthuizen, du Plessis, Schreck, Bisschoff, and Coetzee 2025). This requires students' perspectives to play a central role, but student involvement seems to be the missing link in current SoTL efforts in South Africa (Chaka, Shange, Ndlangamandla, and Mkhize 2022). According to Almeida, Teixeira-Dias, and Medina (2010), research that informs pedagogic practices should embrace students' voices so that it arches towards creating student-oriented university classrooms. By centering students as its primary beneficiaries and stakeholders, SoTL provides insights and tools for academics to reflect on their teaching methods, explore evidence-based best practices, and transform student learning experiences (Kim 2023). While an emerging and critical body of knowledge on SoTL in South African higher education exists, high student failure rates point to the need for more research into teaching and learning challenges across disciplines and modules (Vorster 2020).

Self-positioning reflections

As co-authors (hereinafter referred to as Cindy and Michael), we embark on a collaborative autoethnography that explores the complexities of recruiting students to participate in research. By acknowledging our respective positionality, we occupy different vantage points in order to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges and lessons learnt from the recruitment process and its implications.

Cindy

I am a senior lecturer who conducted the study and directly experienced the challenges of recruitment. I also teach the Inclusive Recreation module and invited students in this course to participate as study respondents. My position as a lecturer and researcher offers me direct experience with the complexities of recruitment. I have learnt valuable lessons from navigating these challenges. By sharing these experiences and challenges, I aim to contribute to a more nuanced and transparent understanding of research, which not only humanizes the process but also foregrounds the importance of deploying effective recruitment strategies.

Michael

As a post-doctorate researcher who collaborated with Cindy on this reflection, I provide a different perspective and angle. I have previously taught a module on special recreation and disability and published articles on the same subject in peer-reviewed journals. I also have an educational background in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. I have not previously worked with this specific cohort of students, which means I have no preconceived assumptions about their

attitudes. My role in this reflection provides theoretical insights and analytical support while learning from Cindy's experiences with recruitment challenges. I recognize that my outsider perspective on the recruitment process gives me a unique advantage in identifying gaps and nuances that may not have been immediately apparent to Cindy.

THE REFLECTION PROCESS

Borrowing from the ideas of Negrin et al. (2022), we deploy Gibb's six step model of reflection to enunciate and make sense of the research recruitment experiences in order to identify ways for improvement. The Gibbs' cycle, used in reflective practice, is a tool for self-reflection, academic learning and teaching activities, personal and professional development, as well as mental wellbeing monitoring (Galli and New 2022). Our reflection straddles all these thematic aspects.

It is structured in six phases: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis stage, conclusions, and action plan. In the description phase, Cindy carefully examines the recruitment efforts by detailing what occurred throughout the research process. In the feelings phase, Cindy explores the emotions about the recruitment experience, from which she makes value judgements about the experience. In the evaluation phase, both Cindy and Michael make an appraisal of what went well and what could have been improved. Cindy provides an experiential perspective, while Michael weighs in with an outsider perspective. In the analysis stage, Michael provides theoretical context and insight from the literature in order to determine the meaning of the experience. The conclusion phase presents key takeaways from the experience and reflects on what was learnt to identify areas for improvement. In the final phase, Cindy and Michael develop an action plan to guide future recruitment.

Methodology used to generate reflections

In this reflection, we used the duo-ethnography approach, which we situated within Gibb's reflective cycle to create our reflections. According to Burleigh and Burm (2022) the duo-ethnography approach is a collaborative research methodology that invites researchers to articulate and juxtapose their respective reflections and perspectives in order to make sense of meanings about a particular phenomenon. As a methodology, duo-ethnography presented us with an opportunity not only to juxtapose and hybridize our reflections, but also to engage in an iterative and reflexive process of critically and dialogically interweaving our reflections in order to reshape our understanding of phenomena. While most duo-ethnographies include exact dialogues and narratives, we strove to capture the essence of the experiences without resorting to verbatim narratives to emphasize our focus on the reflective process rather than the conversations between us. We reckoned that this approach distilled the representations concisely without compromising their depth or substance. Thus, in line with the tenets of duo-ethnography, we created our reflections through a series of personal ruminations and introspections as well as relational conversations and discussions. We facilitated these through free writing, mind mapping, and open-ended questions. Instead of generating themes as per convention, we sought to use the topics of Gibb's reflective cycle to structure the reflections, thus providing what we viewed to be a transparent, nuanced, and process-oriented framework for understanding the experiences.

In applying duo-ethnography, Cindy firstly free-wrote their personal experiences of the research process. The main aspects included the challenges faced in the recruitment process, the attempts at overcoming the challenges, and the feelings experienced in the process. This presented a basis for fostering a deeper foundation for a deeper dialogical discourse into the phenomenon, by allowing initial thoughts to develop spontaneously and instinctively (Dobson and Ingram-Brown

2025). Michael, who had no direct, first-hand experiential exposure to the phenomenon under investigation, also wrote initial thoughts about Cindy's reflections. This included how the reflections connected to literature, how they were resonant, and how they were intriguing. This set the foundation for thoughtful and well-reasoned engagement that positioned Michael as an efficient and critical sounding board in the dialogue to follow. We subsequently conducted an initial dialogue in which we verbally shared our initial independent reflections. This was a spontaneous and transparent process in which we clarified and elaborated on the initial reflections. This presented us with the opportunity to engage interactively while developing further insights through conversation (Burleigh and Burm 2022). Cindy presented an elaboration from the primary researcher's perspective, while Michael provided an external perspective, which added context, detail, and an objective and balanced outlook. To encourage critical thinking and reflexivity, Michael critically engaged with and examined Cindy's assumptions. This allowed Cindy to reflect on questions, opening the discourse to multiple views of reality instead of the positivist, single-reality notions of phenomena with no room for validity beyond the self (Kinnear and Ruggunan 2019). To do this, the authors pointed out possible inconsistencies, fleshed out nuances, shared alternative perspectives and sought clarity on specific points and conclusions. We further built on each other's insights by comparing them to form a more comprehensive and nuanced view of phenomena. By synthesizing and integrating perspectives, we developed new insights and nuanced understandings, which also helped us to resolve potential areas of perspective disagreement and difference. We basically engaged in the co-creation of meaning and understanding through iterative processes that involved writing and revising, interspersed with continuing dialogue and discussions. Though we wrote some of the reflective accounts individually (as seen in sections of the Gibb's reflective process used), we premised them on the robust but respectful and mutual sharing of perspectives. In the final write-up, we present our reflections and interconnected ideas in distilled insights, which interweave individual narratives with collaborative perspectives within the framework of the Gibb's reflective cycle. To ensure methodological rigour, our approach borrowed from Waalkes and DeCino (2020), who posit that knowledge and truth are perspectives held by an individual at a specific moment in time, as opposed to being static and universal, a supposition that aptly applies to duo-ethnography. The transparency of the writing, not any claims to objectivity and absolute truth, reveal the quality and trustworthiness of duo-ethnography and do not contain any claims to objectivity or absolute truth. We used depth and self-reflexivity as the primary ways to determine trustworthiness. This involved prolonged engagement through discussions and conversations involving honest, robust, and focused dialogue (Kinnear and Ruggunan 2019). In co-constructing narratives, we held each other accountable for our interpretations, thereby promoting transparency, mutual validation, and critique, thus avoiding what Kinnear and Ruggunan (2019) call the fetishization of self, wherein individual subjective accounts leave no room for external validation. To guide the reflection in a focused, directional, and guided way for rigor, the following research question was posed: What are the challenges, lessons, and interpretations associated with recruiting students in a SoTL research study for a selected module at a South African higher education institution?

Figure 1. Gibbs reflective cycle

Figure 1 presents a diagrammatic illustration of the reflective process.

In the first step, which is the description, Cindy presents a detailed account of personal experiences and interactions that occurred during the recruitment process. Michael's role was to reflectively and dialogically seek clarity on some aspects of the descriptive narrative in order to refine Cindy's account. Michael did not provide his own personal description, as he did not directly participate in the recruitment process.

In the second step of feelings, the purpose was to capture the individual subjective experience of Cindy, hence only her account is presented. Cindy expressed her emotions and attitudes about the recruitment process's challenges, successes, and intrigues. Michael did not share his own feelings in the narrative, as he did not participate in the process firsthand. He did facilitate Cindy's reflection through critical feedback and validation of Cindy's feelings.

In the evaluation step, Cindy presented a self-evaluation of her experiences and feelings, reflecting on her own assumptions and biases. Michael's role was to facilitate the reflection through dialogue, which led to a nuanced account of the self-evaluation process that did not detract Cindy's focus.

Michael completed the analysis step. This involved interpreting and situating Cindy's responses to applicable literature and theoretical frameworks to contextualize understandings and draw informed conclusions on the generated reflections. Cindy iteratively engaged in dialogue with Michael to ensure that the analysis and the conclusions rigorously, fairly, and accurately represented her perspectives and experiences. The conclusion step was jointly done by both authors, summarizing the research recruitment process reflections and the findings. Both authors narrated the action plan step, which, through reflective dialogue, focused on how to address the issues and challenges encountered during the recruitment process. The following account presents these steps in detail, accompanied by questions (in brackets) that scaffolded the reflection process to provide a clear structure for meaning making and organizing ideas.

Step 1: Description (What happened?)

Cindy

In 2023, I invited my second-year students registered for the Inclusive Recreation (RKKX216) module (which I teach) to participate in a SoTL research study. The research study sought to explore inclusivity in teaching and learning praxis in the inclusive recreation module (associated with recreation for people with disabilities) in order to promote transformative and innovative pedagogies by applying SoTL principles. A main research question guided the study: What is the role of project-based learning in undergraduate recreation students' attitudes, self-efficacy and self-determination when working with PWD? The relevant higher education institution ethics review board provided ethical clearance (NWU-00195-22-A1). The study was a quasi-experimental interrupted time-series design. An interrupted time-series design involves repeated data collection at multiple points before and after an intervention to determine if an intervention associated with determining improvement on a given metric was successful or not (Miller, Smith, and Pugatch 2020). I was very excited about the study and its prospects in view of my scholarly passion for the intersections between recreation, inclusivity and disability studies, and pedagogies.

The study procedure was such that participants would first consent to participate and then complete a set of identical questionnaires on three different occasions from February 2023 to May 2023. Focus group interviews would then follow the third round of questionnaires. I interspersed the data collection sessions with teaching and learning interventions across time. Participation in the research project was voluntary, and students could withdraw from the research project at any time without any consequences. Participation or nonparticipation in the research project did not affect students' module marks. A total of 61 students were eligible to participate in the study. Three different Likert scale questionnaires were compiled into a single Google Forms survey which consisted of 102 questions. Completing the questionnaire did not take longer than 30 minutes and was communicated to the students in the informed consent document. Students accessed the questionnaire by scanning a QR code, which was available on a screen in class as well as on the module site. An advertisement and a document containing detailed information regarding the research study was posted on the module site two weeks prior to the commencement of classes.

During the first contact session of teaching and learning activities, I explained the research problem to the students and left the classroom. The research administrator (RA) explained the research project to the students and allowed them to ask questions. Students who were uninterested or unwilling to participate in the study had the opportunity to leave the classroom. The RA provided hard copies of the informed consent to the remaining students. Students had the opportunity to either complete the informed consent form in class or to take a week to consider whether they wanted to participate in the study. Only the RA had access to the completed informed consent forms. The RA compiled a list of the students who agreed to participate and allocated a code number to each participant. Students provided their email addresses for the RA to invite them to take part in the focus group interviews at the end of the semester.

Although the study held no direct benefit to the students in the immediate aftermath, we anticipated a good response as the study also held no risk to them. Of the 61 eligible students who complied with the inclusion criteria, only 16 consented to participate in the research study and 15 students completed the first round of questionnaires. In the second and third rounds, eight students completed each of the two rounds of questionnaires. Most of the students only completed two of the three rounds. Only two students responded to the numerous invitations to participate in the focus

group interviews, which, due to the low response, we were unable to do. These would have provided in-depth information regarding students' experiences on the module. We extended the study to 2024 and 2025 with hopes of producing enough data to yield the publication of the results, but participation remained a problem, even after we made a token of appreciation in the form of a coffee voucher available to students who completed all three rounds of questionnaires. Of the 127 students who were eligible in 2024, 27 consented to participate. 25 completed the first round of questionnaires, 12 completed the second round and eight students completed the third round. There were seven students who completed all three rounds. Participation patterns in 2025 yielded comparatively similar trends, with 95 being eligible, and 17 consenting and taking part. Twelve of them took part in round one, five took part in round two, and nine took part in round three.

Step 2: Feelings (What were my feelings and reactions?)

Cindy

The challenges faced in recruiting the participants threw me into an emotional tailspin. Disappointment, bewilderment, despondency, anxiety, and frustration overtook the initial excitement of procuring funding and the prospect of exploring a key topic, such as SoTL. Shortcomings to secure a satisfactory number of participants meant a negative effect on the validity, reliability, and continuation of the study. Despite my feelings, I could not force the students to participate, as this would be unethical. I felt like I had hit a cul-de-sac, a dead end. I questioned my own effectiveness and adequacy as a researcher, as well as my abilities to clearly communicate and implement intended recruitment strategies. Recruitment shortfalls in any research project are always disappointing. However, shortfalls associated with failing to recruit one's own students as research participants can be gutting. In my case, even while practicing professional distance in the recruitment process, my goals towards this research's success and student's growth were closely tied to my students' engagement and involvement. Hence their nonparticipation was a heart-wrenching, but humbling, drawback.

From my position, I thought I had done everything right and by the book on the procedural and ethical aspects of the research recruitment process. The low response was therefore a bewildering moment. I could also sense the frustration in the master's student who used the data in her study. Although I was able to gather additional data in 2024 and 2025, she wanted to conclude her study and finish her thesis. As part of team dynamics, we shared our frustrations and, despite our collective disappointment, we took this as a learning opportunity. This provided some sort of consolation, which calmed down our nerves and frustrations. However, I could not help but have nagging questions in terms of what I could have done differently, how I could have mitigated the unpleasant situation, and what support mechanisms I could have deployed as contingency strategies or recourse to improve outcomes, because, as things stood, the research process was still incomplete and in a state of discontinuity. Premature discontinuation in the recruitment process is a strong risk factor for nonpublication (Briel, Speich, von Elm, and Gloy 2019), and this seemed to be on the course of being proven true in our case.

Step 3: Evaluation (What was good and bad?)

Cindy

The procedural steps and efforts taken to conscript participants into the study went well, despite the low recruitment outcomes. Posting research information far ahead of time on the module site ensured that every student had awareness about the research to make an informed decision.

Enlisting an RA was critical so that I did not unduly influence my students to participate through perceptions of power imbalances. Power coercion is a high risk in education research or where potential participants are in a subservient position (whether real or based on perception) to the researcher (Botma, Greef, Makhado, and Mulaudzi 2022). The persistence in making follow-ups despite the encountered challenges demonstrated a positive mark of resilience.

What did not go well was the low response rate, which limited the study's validity and generalisability. The number of respondents regressed with time in the different stages of the recruitment process, which rendered the study unfeasible. There could be a possibility that I overestimated the number of students who would be interested in participating in the study, since we are operating in a learning institutional setting. They did not have to travel or spend monetary resources to participate, as they had internet access in class and I gave them time to complete the questionnaire. Jacques, Ahmed, Harper, Ranjan, Saeed, Simpson, and Walters (2022) advise that researchers should avoid presumptions by exercising cautious optimism about their recruitment projections. Gaps and challenges would have been noted and adjustments made to ensure that prospects for a good response rate would be improved at the planning stage. Given the low response, one also wonders if a coffee voucher was an appropriate token, considering that this was a multiple-intervention stage. In a study on SoTL in New Zealand, Lees, Godbold, and Walters (2024) offered a NZ\$20 store voucher and refreshments after students participated in focus group interviews, in line with Māori protocol. They managed to recruit a total of 34 university students as participants.

In hindsight, perhaps presenting student participants with opportunities to gain research skills through enlisting them not only as respondents but also as partners and co-creators of knowledge in the research process would have led to a personal connection with the study. Given that the students were recreation students, I could have considered making available tokens that align with their recreational interests, while being mindful that such tokens were not a means to unduly influence them to participate. I also had not inquired about their previous experiences with other research studies; these could potentially have affected their attitudes towards the present study. For example, it could have been possible that they might have been used for 'data mining' in other studies without some form of acknowledgement and a feeling of ownership of the research process and its outcomes. Researchers should present their findings to participants; however, this aspect is often overlooked and has adverse consequences for future attempts to recruit participants (Patel, Doku, and Tennakoon 2003). Another action, which I did not do, could have been to debrief or discuss with colleagues who have engaged in research with students. Their experiences could enhance my own participant recruitment prospects and possibly saved me from some of the challenges.

Step 4: Analysis (Why did things go the way they did, and what theories can help make sense of this?)

Michael

The literature provides some key insights into the possibilities of why things happened as they did. Researcher A's experiences in this reflection show that the recruitment of participants is a challenging endeavour and can significantly impact research, as confirmed by Manohar, MacMillan, Steiner, and Arora (2019). Ideally, a research study of importance should not be abandoned due to challenges with participant recruitment (Parbhoo-Ebrahim and Fourie 2020). For improved recruitment outcomes to occur, it is critical to analytically make sense of the seemingly reluctant behaviour that was exhibited by potential study recruits who a study that presumably would benefit them since the findings would inform effective teaching practices. In this analysis section, I attempt to

locate and examine the underlying dynamics that could have affected recruitment based on the description provided by Cindy to illuminate latent meanings on unseen dimensions within Cindy's reflections.

To attain this goal, I anchor this analysis on the Health Belief Model (HBM), a theory rooted in public health but with wider and extended applicability in other fields (Alyafei and Carr 2024). In its classical and conventional use, the HBM is used to understand the health behaviour of people in their failure to adopt disease prevention strategies. At its core, it proposes that one's perception of a health threat and their belief in the remedy's effectiveness will affect their response to the health-related action they will take to address their situation (Brehaut, Venegas, Hudek, Pesseau, Carroll, and Rodger 2021). In this analysis, the HBM is re-purposed and adapted to understand the recruitment failures, particularly the unwillingness of potential participants to engage in the study. The reason I selected HBM is that its constructs bear relevance to and provide structure, criticality, and depth in making sense of what characterized the recruitment in this SoTL study. HBM consists of six constructs that influence behaviour, and they are used as analytical topics here to scaffold the analysis. The constructs are perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, self-efficacy, and cues to action.

Perceived susceptibility

This construct is a determination of the research participants' belief in whether they see themselves as personally relevant to the investigated research phenomena. According to Solberg (2025), most people are interested in participating in research they perceive as concerning them. In the SoTL study, if the recruitment was to be successful, participants should have possessed high perceived susceptibility, which means seeing themselves as significantly and personally affected by the study. Considering that this study had possible implications for their module based on the insights they provided, I thought their perceived susceptibility would be high. However, the low recruitment rate most likely suggested that students felt disconnected from issues related to the research study. Specifically, they might have felt that they were not personally susceptible to the consequences of the teaching quality of the module. This position resonates with Patel et al. (2003) who argue that few participants will take part in research unless they can personally identify its validity and relevance. From a SoTL perspective, it appears that perhaps students view teaching and learning improvement issues as a preserve of faculty and administration, while their only focus is on grades, credits, and graduation. Less depends on their input, or so they think, when it comes to improvements in the teaching of the module. However, in stating the importance of such a research study, the recruitment process should have driven the point home that their engagement would be a mechanism for change and would have implications for them, not only as consumers of education but as effective contributors.

Perceived severity of risk

This construct determines the participants' beliefs about how bad the outcome would be if this problem is not addressed because they did not participate in the study. This does not mean that the recruitment tactic should scare potential participants by overstating or exaggerating the grim consequences of their non-participation. What it means is that students did not perceive the teaching inadequacies of the module (if they existed) as being severe enough to affect their future professional competence if they did not participate. On the other hand, the other possibility could be that they regarded the teaching of the module to be sufficiently satisfactory, that the study did not induce

sufficient motivation for them to engage in. From an analytical perspective, it would have been interesting to know students' perceptions about the importance of the module itself. If they viewed the module as not being of high status in relation to other modules, it would show in their attitude towards participation, despite the rigour and excellence strategy adopted in recruitment. The premise would be that students choosing not to participate as respondents in a study that seeks to improve the teaching of their module would mean that they do not regard such non-participation as affecting their future professional competence. From a SoTL perspective, students did not sufficiently reckon that negative outcomes associated with teaching and learning informed by their lack of participation in the study are severe. To dispel this view, the module's content should deeply engage with the consequences of how teaching practices uninformed by students' voices may result in pedagogical challenges that warrant a volunteer mindset, which includes participation in research. This is particularly pertinent in the South African context where university students were up in arms in 2015 during university protests against, among other things, a curriculum they perceived as disconnected from their lived realities (Maluleka 2020).

Perceived benefits

Perceived benefits as a construct focus on the perceived value and advantages of participation that the students reckon will accrue for them and the community. In the context of this study, I deduce that if the recruitment was to be successful, the benefits of participation should have been such that they carried sufficient inducement to motivate students to participate. In the current study, I provided a coffee voucher. Arguably, it is possible that such a token of appreciation was not worth their time and effort, especially for a three-part study. Given the strict and narrow parameters within which incentives can be offered at the study's institution, it could have been helpful to emphasize altruistic or long-term benefits that went beyond personal and immediate gratification. In any case, research does not normally have any immediate positive consequences or tangible gratifications for participants (Solberg 2025). To which Nasser, Grady, and Balke (2011) posit that willingness for participants to enroll in a study can depend on the altruistic attractiveness of the research question. Unfortunately, altruism as a form of incentive will not always or readily be an appealing incentive for students. The implementation of whatever interventions arising from students' recommendations would benefit future students, which would disincentivize current participants, considering that immediate gratifications such as course credits did not form part of the incentive matrix. Hence, the low recruitment suggests that participants perceived the rewards of participation as too low to induce interest and action. It is very tempting to conclude that students viewed their research relationship with the researcher as transactional. However, considering that there have been other studies that have involved students' participation which were relatively favourable in terms of recruitment, in spite of the lack of tangible rewards, I treat that conclusion with caution. From a SoTL perspective, I posit that scholars should integrate research early into the curriculum as part of students' experiential learning so that an appreciation of what constitutes research purpose and benefits is well understood and instilled in students.

Perceived barriers

This construct focuses on the potential participants' obstacles and negative consequences associated with participating in the research study. For university students, common barriers to participation are time constraints, the nature of the study protocol, and lack of trust if they assume that their responses would lead to negative consequences. Students are busy people; hence, Solberg

(2025) quips that sometimes, recruiting busy people for research is like herding cats, characterized by refusals and non-responses. Besides, recruitment of participants among higher education students is particularly challenging because students frequently receive invitations to participate in research projects. This leads to research fatigue, which occurs when a population of interest tires of engaging in research due to being overburdened with too many research requests and failing to see any subsequent changes following participation, thus discouraging further participation (Patel, Webster, Greenberg, Weston, and Brooks 2021). This also gives the perception that students are just being used as guinea pigs or data mining sources to churn out articles instead of being worthy and valued contributors to the research's aims. The feasibility of research questions, the adopted methodology, and the ethical considerations of the research largely influence recruitment in pedagogical and curriculum research that involves students. SoTL knowledge should be co-created and disseminated with the student as a legitimate knowledge broker, not just a mere source of responses (Maurer, Woolmer, Powell, Sisson, Snelling, Stalheim, and Turner 2021).

Considering that the study in question involved a relatively small sample that was wholly drawn from a single module and class, it is possible that the students could have felt that the responses could be deductively traceable to them. This may have caused them to shy away from participating, despite the promises of ethical safeguards for anonymity and confidentiality. Based on the low responses, it is possible that some of these dynamics were at play. The design of the instrument could also have been a contributing factor to the low response. For example, the questionnaire consisted of 102 questions. That is quite a lot for any standard questionnaire. The nature of the study itself was such that it would be longitudinal, consisting of three intervals of data collection sessions. Newington and Metcalfe (2014) confirm that the type of research has a bearing on participant recruitment, with recruitment challenges being higher when the design requires greater commitment from the participants in terms of time and risk. It is reasonable to argue that some of the students would shy away from committing to these sessions from the outset or drop out of adhering to subsequent ones, as revealed in the reflection that there was a steady decrease in participants across time. From a SoTL perspective, if the recruitment process has brief items in instruments, one-off studies can help to improve recruitment while effectively informing the teaching and learning of the module in question. I reckon that it is much better to have a brief instrument with high participation than a long instrument with poor recruitment.

Perceived efficacy

The construct of self-efficacy focuses on the students' confidence in their ability to successfully execute the required research tasks. In the context of this study, these include providing useful responses and attending the whole stages of the research protocol. For higher recruitment, perceived self-efficacy should be high. Based on the low recruitment experience, one can deduce that perhaps the students viewed their input as not being impactful enough to inspire positive change in the module. SoTL is a new concept in the human movement sciences at the institution where Cindy completed this study. This possibly reduced the participants' sense of competence to participate. It could also mean that students' belief in their perceived capability to meet the procedural demands of participation was low, particularly in committing to and completing the full-time commitment or the schedule required by the protocol. In the recruitment process, perceived efficacy can be improved by reassuring the participants about the simplicity of the tasks (filling the questionnaire). Solberg (2025) supports this by arguing that providing them with assurance is valuable as a confidence booster for potential participants in recruitment. Since Cindy did not directly participate in recruiting the participants, the role of the RA in terms of effectiveness or the challenges they might have faced in the

recruitment process in simplifying the process could not be ascertained. However, the low recruitment suggests that the study possibly fell short in affirming the perceived efficacy among some potential participants.

Cues to action

This construct focuses on the effectiveness of the stimuli required to induce the decision to participate in the study. One of the key factors that determines response under this construct is the source or agency through which the recruitment is being done. Ordinarily, since the primary researcher in the study taught the module, one would assume that recruitment would be easy. This explains the vortex of emotions that Cindy experienced after these challenges, because the unspoken question in all this is: “What is the perception of my students towards me as a researcher that they seem uninterested in my study?” This, of course, does not mean to say the students owed Cindy anything, but it did trigger feelings of inadequacy. Solberg (2025), however, argues that being turned down and being ghosted in research recruitment is part of the process; it should not be taken personally and may not even hold any inferences on one’s research skills.

It is worth noting that to manage power dynamics, the primary researcher made use of a RA. In other studies, such as the one on SoTL by Lees et al. (2024), current students of the primary researcher were ineligible to participate. The use of a trusted party with pedigree (not taking anything away from the research assistant used), usually induces a positive response in recruitment as it adds gravitas to the recruitment message. This is confirmed by Newington and Metcalfe (2024), who noted that the recruiters’ professional roles, their personality, and knowledge of the research project are influential in inducing a decision to participate. Perhaps a backup message from the department head or another respected member of the research unit in the department could have triggered the cue to action. It is not clear if the use of a master’s research student had an impactful influence on the strength of the cue to action. Hilário et al. (2023) introduce an interesting suggestion, which states that participant observations may build more rapport and trust with participants to boost recruitment. If my reading of their suggestion is correct, participant observation can be a pre-recruitment strategy wherein a would-be recruiter informally familiarizes and exposes themselves to the environment of potential participants way before enlisting them to participate in a study. In the context of this reflection, this might mean that the recruiter may make themselves physically present within the environs of potential participants in order to build trust and understand the students’ vibe by socially immersing themselves in their group without mentioning the study or soliciting data. This gives a personal touch and makes up for the otherwise detached and non-interactive data collection techniques, such as questionnaires, since prior acquaintance may make participants feel more than just impersonal numbers or variables of a study. As Coyne, Grafton, and Reid (2016) argue, if the researcher is known by the potential research participants, the recruitment process is easier from a relational standpoint, as long as it does not transgress ethics-related power-balance dynamics, which are common concerns with student recruitment.

Significant effort in using various platforms, such as email, the use of a QR code, and even placing information on the module site, presented a multi-pronged approach to stimulate a positive recruitment response. In the final analysis, despite these cues, it was up to the perspective of students to determine their stimulative efficacy, despite their well-intentioned use. These might have had weaknesses which did not produce enough inducement for participation, especially if, for example, one had no smart phone to scan the QR code. Another possible factor is that busy people do not readily read long emails, hence briefness is even regarded as more important than politeness in some recruitment cases (Solberg 2025). While technology might be associated with convenience to promote

Kriel, Cindy, and Michael Sakala. 2026. “Recruiting Students for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research: A Critical Reflection on Challenges and Lessons Learnt at a South African Higher Education Institution.” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 14: 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.14.47>

recruitment, visibility, and appeal, for some students who might have limited or no access to certain devices, that can weaken the selected cue to action.

To conclude this section, the Health Belief Model provided an analytical and interpretative framework for insight into the challenges that potentially affected the recruitment experience. It is plausible that the recruitment failure was due to a combination of factors that map onto the constructs explained in this section. Key takeaways based on the analysis provided are that recruitment should be designed in ways that mitigate against the placement of undue burden on the participants, while sufficiently providing prompts which induce participants to positively decide to participate in the study.

Step 5: Conclusion (What has been learnt?)

Cindy and Michael

Our key takeaway is that recruitment success or failure is not the outcome of a single factor. When failure happens, an honest introspection should explore various aspects of the research participants' decision-making calculus. We waited until too late to diagnose some of these issues in favour of trying to repeat the same procedures. But at a certain level, doing the same thing and expecting different outcomes is not persistence; it is an exercise in futility. When recruitment fails, a researcher can fall into the sunk cost fallacy, wherein one believes the same method should continue even if it previously failed because much effort and resources have already been expended. In hindsight, it is key to cut our losses, re-evaluate, and explore alternatives, especially through a pilot study. With technological and communication advances that bring opportunities to facilitate recruitment, we reckon that investing in training on how we can effectively use them to improve recruitment can be helpful. At the same time, it is pertinent to determine whether these advances effectively apply to our targeted audiences, especially noting that access to the use of such technological recruitment strategies may not be equal among respondents. Hence, versatility combined with pragmatism could be helpful.

It is our considered view that identifying barriers and refining recruitment strategies would have helped a pilot study involving about 15 participants drawn from the population of interest. Since the main study would entail a focus group after the third questionnaire measurement, the researcher could recruit a small group of five participants for a pilot study to provide recruitment feedback in an interactive manner, which provides an open space for communication and dialogue, which can, as Hilário et al. (2023) also note, deconstruct interpretations and assumptions about the main research. Findings and experiences from the pilot study can inform the ideal length of the questionnaire, the type of incentive, the ideal recruitment timing, utilized recruitment channels, and even the whole study design itself. Bridging the gap between recruitment as a concept and recruitment in practice is hard work because the research process is not always linear and straightforward; it is iterative, dynamic, and sometimes perplexing, if the outcomes are not favourable. In this reflection, the Health Belief Model has provided a cogent framework for analysis, which presents a cost-benefit recruitment matrix that informs participation decision-making. In other words, the unstated question for the student, at least from a SOTL perspective, would be: Does the value of improving/informing this module through my feedback outweigh the barriers and risks involved in presenting this feedback? This sets a basis for a cogent action plan for enhanced recruitment strategies intended to effectively mediate and resolve tensions between perceived benefits and barriers to participation.

Step 6: Action plan (Anything I need to know and do to improve for next time?)

Cindy and Michael

Our proposed action plan outlines some strategies on how to improve recruitment strategies going forward. Based on the contemplations in the previous steps, critical lessons from the reflection itself and the literature covered the mistakes and missteps. This sets a foundation for some practical steps that might respond to those challenges.

- Our first strategy will be to conduct a pilot study. We believe it will provide better insight, based on the feedback we receive, on how to adjust our recruitment strategy. A smaller sample of students will participate in the pilot study and through interactions with them and via their feedback, improvements to the messaging, recruitment protocols, and any other issues they raise will be attended to before the main study.
- Our strategy to improve recruitment will also involve leveraging people in higher authority roles, such as a department head, to endorse the study so that its perceived importance and credibility is well appreciated by the students. This message will be framed and presented in a non-coercive manner but will help validate the study and its potential contribution.
- To eliminate the fear of reprisals or that there might be repercussions if students' responses seem unfavorable, we will involve a recruiter who is unaffiliated with the module or research study. Re-emphasis will be made that the research study will not affect their grades.
- Informed and guided by our institution's ethical office, we will re-look at how we can incentivize the participants, to improve on the coffee voucher, which did not seem effective. Instead of a coffee voucher, we may consider rewarding the participants for their time through monetary compensation at every stage of the research process.

We will reduce the length of the questionnaire so that students do not spend more than five minutes on it. This will help to minimize the time and effort required to complete it and will reflect students' busy schedules and research fatigue. In the final analysis, we think that if most of the aspects which emerged in the reflection are addressed, the study can still go ahead. We are not oblivious to the resources that have already been spent. However, the benefits of adjusting and correcting outweigh the act of discontinuing due to the significant potential for useful outcomes. With a well-planned and executed recruitment strategy, informed by the action plan, the study can still attain its objectives.

Final reflections

Cindy

There is a pack of coffee vouchers lying in my office, initially intended as tokens of appreciation for research participants. They are now silent reminders of the challenges of participant recruitment in research. I am left with a newfound appreciation for the complexities of research, particularly when expectations and reality do not meet. I take this as a positive step towards personal and professional development. This reflection is a cathartic release that will help transform these experiences into valuable lessons and insights that may inform future endeavours in SoTL research to create inclusive environments that nurture student engagement and success.

BIOGRAPHIES

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