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**“A socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences
while at university”**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree.

Master of Social Science in Industrial Psychology

in the School of Applied Human Sciences,

College of Humanities,

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Supervisor:

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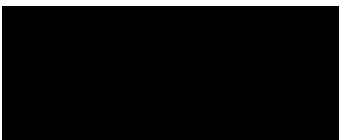
Declaration

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I, Sisanda Natalie Khoza (Student number 215011725), declare that the thesis titled: **A socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university** is my original, and unaided work.

1. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
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Sign:



Date:

19/08/2022

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother Lindiwe Praxedis Madlala, who is my greatest support, my best friend, and the wind beneath my wings. I also dedicate this thesis to my father Joshua Mbuyiseni Khoza. I attribute all my success to you both and I love you both very much.

And

I also dedicate this thesis to every young person around the world who has ever been financially excluded from higher education or who has ever struggled to pay for higher education.

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“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be the glory, Amen (Ephesian 3:20 -21)”

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Preface

The study described in this master's dissertation was carried out at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College, Durban, under the supervision of Dr Mthokozisi Wellington Hlengwa.

This dissertation represents original work by the author and has not otherwise been submitted for any other degree or diploma to any other tertiary institution. Where use has been made of the work of others it is duly acknowledged in the text and included in the reference list.



Sisanda N. Khoza

Abstract

The study explored the experiences of postgraduate students at a South African tertiary institution. The intention was to understand the challenges that entwined postgraduate studies and the coping mechanisms employed by students during their postgraduate studies. In this qualitative study, the participants were interviewed utilizing a semi-structured interview schedule: with the consent of the participants the interviews were recorded using an audio-recorder. The data obtained was thematically analyzed, which gave rise to various themes. The following themes emerged: students' motivation to enroll in postgraduate studies: the graduate unemployment problem, implications of lack of funding at postgraduate level, non-monetary challenges at postgraduate level: mental health issues, postgraduate workload, online learning challenges, coping mechanisms, social relationships, and support during postgraduate studies. The findings of this research study indicated that financial, academic, and psycho-social support positively impact postgraduate students' experiences at university. Nonetheless, that lack of financial aid, mental health issues, postgraduate workload and online learning challenges negatively impact postgraduate student experiences.

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Chapter 1– Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Postgraduate students are imperative to the country as they produce critical research that aims to solve problems in various fields such as social development, health, innovation science and technology etcetera. Furthermore, they are critical in the production of knowledge that will aid the country's progression into a more equal and inclusive society and help improve the country's socio-economic conditions through research throughput (Phakeng, 2017). There are various research throughput and breakthroughs by South African postgraduate researchers yearly. Some of the research breakthroughs in South Africa include the (I) discovery of the world's first digital laser by a University of KwaZulu Natal, PhD candidate (Speckman, 2013), (II) the discovery of a chemical compound that can treat malaria by the University of the Witwatersrand and University of Pretoria researchers Mlaba (2021) and (III) the development of a micro reader app by a University of Cape Town honours student that helps technologists in the field measure samples using their mobile phones (Phakeng, 2017) to name a few.

Regardless of how remarkable these research breakthroughs are, very little is known about the research journey thereof and the challenges experienced in the process. Likewise, very little is known about the postgraduate student's research journey, lived experiences nor their transitional experiences as they transition from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies and the challenges thereof. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2012) explain that because by definition, postgraduate students were successful undergraduate students, there is an expectation of competence, independence and a powerful assumption of postgraduate students being 'naturals or expert' students. Hence, disguising the challenging nature of their transition. Huang et al. (2021) emphasize that postgraduate studies can be multifaceted, emotional and inherent of challenges and pressures from various aspects namely: academic, economic, interpersonal, workplace, marriage and physical or mental health.

McPherson, Punch and Graham (2017) correspond that postgraduate studies can be complex and may lead to feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, isolation, undermined sense of belonging, disorientation,

imposter syndrome, and depression. Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, and Vanderford (2018) conducted a postgraduate based study and according to the study results, it was discovered, that graduate students are six times more likely to experience mental health issues such as depression and anxiety compared to the general population. This was attributed to the challenging nature of postgraduate studies and the students lack a work-life balance. In another study that was conducted by Styger, Vuuren and Heymans (2015), it was discovered that over 37.2% of students dropped out of their master's program and over 34% of students abandoned their PhD studies. Thus, highlighting that postgraduate studies are also characterized by high dropout rates and a delay in completion time.

Mental health-related issues and postgraduate studies are not a problem that is unique to South Africa only. In a United Kingdom (UK) based study, it was revealed that 40% of doctoral students, based in UK universities were at high risk for suicide, Shaw (2021). Postgraduate pupils' proneness to suicide was attributed to chronic stress levels and the isolation and loneliness of postgraduate studies. In addition, to mental health challenges, South African postgraduate student challenges are exacerbated by the lack of financial sponsorship for graduate-level studies, leading to high dropout rates (Zeworir, North & Murray, 2015). Despite the challenges faced by graduate students; it is the country's higher education and training policy to retain postgraduate students in universities to generate new knowledge through research, that will develop the country's socio-economic conditions Wangenge-Ouma (2012).

In the most recent years, the need for a postgraduate degree qualified workforce supply has been highlighted, more specifically in the higher education sector, as a result of there being a predominantly ageing cohort of academics that will soon be facing the age of retirement. Hence, the induction of the Staffing of South African Universities Framework (SSAUF) wherein the primary mandate is to encourage the enrollment of students into postgraduate programs (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). Despite there being a need for postgraduate enrollments and research outputs, postgraduate students face diverse challenges in their postgraduate journey and thus, highlighting the need for the study, to better understand postgraduate students lived experiences while at university, and the need to explore possible interventions to better support graduate students where required.

1.2 Background of the Study

Educational transitioning is a topic that has drawn the attention of many scholars in the recent past (Batholomew & Gustafsson 1997, Yeboah 2002, Tobbell 2003, Henewald 2013, Stransberry-Brunsnahan 2016). However, the research focus is predominantly on the transitions from nursery education to primary education, primary to secondary school education and from secondary school education to university. Researchers are interested in understanding the challenges inherent with these transitions to develop research that will better equip and prepare the students for successful transitioning. In a study that was done by RaisingtheChildrenOrg (2017) it was discovered that if the transition from primary school to secondary school is not properly managed, the student's academic performance can drop by as much as 39%. Moreover, the study shared insights and strategies to help students to cross the bridge to high school successfully.

The afore mentioned study also elaborated on the importance of parental support was highlighted and its effects on the successful transitioning, and the need for open communication between the child's school and the parents. Additional insights from the study emphasized the need for parents to encourage their children to make friends at school and to also create a safe space for their children to voice their stressors and concerns about navigating the new learning environment (RaisingtheChildrenOrg, 2017). Regarding the transition from high school to university: study contributions highlighted the importance of preparing the students for independence, encouragement of students to familiarize themselves with the faculty handbook, encouraging students to build social networks during orientation week, reminding the student of important dates for registration, residence openings, the commencement of lecturers', the advantages of joining university clubs and societies (Lovicu, 2021). However, the same research courtesy is not given to the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies.

Hence, highlighting the need for a study that will consider the transition from undergraduate to graduate studies and the lived experiences thereof. It is also important to note, that there is a clear differentiation in the literature between undergraduate and doctoral degrees. However, the lack of

literature is more glaring with the transition from undergraduate studies to honours and masters' studies, making these in-between degrees the forgotten subdivisions of the higher education sector, that very little is known about (McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017).

Mangano (2011) reaffirms that pursuing postgraduate studies is challenging and may include challenges that one may have not experienced or foreseen in their undergraduate studies. Therefore, making the attainment of honours, master's or a doctoral qualification an uneasy and an unpleasant experience for most students. This, therefore, further highlights the need for postgraduate orientated research to better help postgraduate students overcome the challenges that encompass postgraduate studies. The study, therefore, intends to get an in-depth socio-ecological analysis and understanding of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university. It is hoped that insights gained from the study will allow for the development of initiatives that will emphasize better academic, social, and financial support for postgraduate students.

1.3 Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to conduct an in-depth socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- 1.) To explore the experiences of postgraduate students while at university.
- 2.) To understand challenges faced by postgraduate students at university.
- 3.) To explore coping mechanisms adopted by postgraduate students while at university.

1.

5 Research Questions

- 1.) What are the experiences of postgraduate students while at university?
- 2.) What are the challenges faced by postgraduate students at university?
- 3.) What are the coping mechanisms adopted by postgraduate students while at university?

1.6 Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the background of the study and the rationale for conducting the study. The aim of the study which was to get an in-depth socio-ecological analysis and understanding of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university was also highlighted. The chapter further highlighted the study background, the problem state, the objectives of the study and the research questions.

Chapter 2– Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the different facets that encompass postgraduate studies. Factors such as postgraduate academic demands, students' motivation levels, the student-supervisor relationship, financial aid, part-time working and studying, and the sometimes-isolating process of conducting postgraduate research and the coping mechanisms sometimes employed by postgraduate students. This chapter further elaborates on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory as a framework for enquiry and understanding of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university.

2.1.1 Academic Demands and Motivation:

According to Olivier (2007) students that enroll for postgraduate studies most often at times are not well prepared to deal with the challenges that come with pursuing postgraduate studies, the vast workload and the increased academic demands and pressure. In a study that was done by Ahern and Manathunga (2004), it was found that another challenge that would particularly arise for most postgraduate students would be a decrease in motivation levels. Mostly regarding their research study, where the focus is lost, loss of interest in the initial research topic and changing the dissertation topic numerous times. It was discovered that such problems relating to the lowered motivation towards the research study may lead to some students avoiding meeting with the supervisor, submitting their work late and procrastination.

The behavioural orientation of postgraduate students avoiding meeting with their supervisors leads to a delay in the completion of their honours, master's, or doctoral degrees. In a similar study that was done by Motseke (2016) other reasons for the slow completion of the postgraduate degrees by adult South African learners included students' lack of research skills, limited computer skills, stress, part-time work pressures and a lack of relevant resources in the university libraries. Furthermore, the delay in the completion of university degrees was also attributed to the student's

prior education, as it was also found that students that had lived and obtained their primary and secondary education in the rural

area or townships, faced challenges when pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees because of the education that was previously received. Case and Yogo (1999) further explain that the quality of prior education is a strong predictor of academic success, as it equips the student with essential academic skills and competencies to manage the demands of university.

Other factors responsible for postgraduate students' demotivation are explained by O'Kennedy (1990) as being a lack of research progress despite the student's sustained effort, inadequate literature sources, lack of supervisor availability, and lack of support in the research process and lack of support when faced with personal problems. Likewise (Yasmin, Saeed and Ahmad, 2018) asserts that personal challenges such as family relations and dynamics, ill health, finances and a lack of time management can also hamper and have a negative effect on the student's ability to stay focused and motivated when pursuing postgraduate studies.

On the contrary, O'Kennedy (1990) recommends that students should select a research matter that they have a curiosity and an interest in, a supervisor that has a good reputation, that the student and supervisor set supervision expectations to ensure a satisfactory supervision relationship, the student enrolls in a reputable institution or research study pursuit that has economic rewards as these factors positively influence postgraduate studies. Moreover, students are also motivated when there are workshops on how to conduct postgraduate research, opportunities to travel and meet other experts in their field of study, when they see the success of their work and when they get along with the research supervisor and deem the research supervisor's feedback as being positive and constructive.

2.1.2 The Student-Supervisor Relationship:

A prominent theme in the literature regarding postgraduate studies is the student-supervisor relationship which if not properly managed could yield academic failure. Kumar and Stracke (2007) explain that the relationship between the student and the supervisor is inherent of a power dynamic, whereby the supervisor is conceptualized and perceived as a director or master, whereas the student is the novice or the follower. The supervisor's leadership could be detrimental to the relationship in instances where the supervisor imposes their research topic or interests on the student. Other factors

contributing to the power inequality in the student-supervisor relationship are highlighted by Schuller (2018), as being that the supervisor possesses legitimate authority in the supervision relationship. In addition to the legitimate authority, there is also the perception that the supervisor controls the rewards (supporting the students' publications) and the punishments in the relationship (for example providing limited supervision and being unavailable for important meetings).

Despite the unequal power dynamics that exist within the student-supervisor relationship, power in itself is not a bad thing, however, it can be used for good or for bad. Schulze (2012) explain that when supervisory authority is channeled to: create an atmosphere of safety, enabling collaboration with the student in knowledge production and consciously empowering the student then it is a positive use of power. Armitage (2007) further elaborated that there is inherent power in different supervision styles. Two different types of supervision approaches were identified, namely: the power centered supervision which is task-oriented and directive, and the facilitation centered supervision, which is nondirective, and process orientated. The supervision style then, informs how the supervisor interacts with the student, which may be empowering or disempowering depending on the type of student being supervised and the student's expectations of the supervision relationship which should be communicated with the supervisor.

Setting expectations is an important part of the beginning of the student-supervisor relationship and this is a step that is sometimes overlooked. It is because of this overlooked step that many problems arise as the supervisor and the student may have conflicting expectations of each and different ways of working. Johnson and Burnard (2002) explain that supervisory problems could be minimized if the students and supervisors could dialogue and agree on their expectations, responsibilities, needs and ways of working at the onset of the relationship. This stage will help define and structure the supervision relationship and help set clear guidelines, regarding the rules of engagement, appropriate communication channels and the supervisory meeting schedules.

Nonetheless, some postgraduate students are dissatisfied with the guidance they receive from their supervisors, also the supervisor's lack of resourcefulness and the delays in the time taken by the

supervisors to give students feedback on the work they had previously submitted (Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary & Ryan, 1999). Similar contributions were found in a study done by Schulze (2012) as students expressed that prompt feedback was of utmost importance as it enabled them to keep up the momentum of writing their dissertation chapters. On the contrary, students found that having to wait long periods for supervisor feedback was demotivating. Moreover, Mangano (2011) adds that some of the feedback given by supervisors is said to use language that discourages and undermines the student, whereas at the same time some comments by the supervisor on the student's research paper are said to be vague, uncritical, and not contributing positively to the progress and quality of the student's overall research thesis.

Another factor influencing the student-supervisor relationship is that of the nature of communication as open communication and stimulating conversations with the supervisor in the co-creation of knowledge are found to lead students to find their voice in writing their thesis Leonardo (2004). Although (Mouton, 2001) states that it is the student's obligation to initiate the communication with the supervisor, however, the most ideal communication is a two-way communication where either the student or supervisor is free to initiate the communication, sharing ideas related to the study and doing progress check-ins. Schulze (2012) however argues that it may not be possible to have effective communications with supervisors that are remote or that are difficult to reach, therefore this may be disempowering to students who have a low research self-efficacy and who doubt their research capabilities.

Effective supervision is vital to the successful completion of a master's or PhD thesis and effective supervision also incorporates student encouragement and pastoral care. In the supervision relationship, the human side is often overlooked, especially if the supervisor employs a strict power centered supervision style. However, Schulze (2012) affirms that acknowledging the learner as a person is vital to the supervision relationship as it leads to the notion of emotional support and earns the supervisor referent power. In addition, Gill and Burnard (2008) explain that good supervision includes appropriate pastoral care, encouragement, support, advice, constructive and critical evaluation of the student's work and helping to develop the student into being a critical thinker and an independent researcher.

Additionally, cultural differences between the student and the supervisor may also pose a challenge to a successful supervision relationship. The stance of supervisors from a previously privileged background may induce an inability to create a space for mutual understanding between the supervisor and the student from an underprivileged background (Olivier, 2007). In addition, students who were previously oppressed because of their sexual orientation, race or class may enter into supervision untrusting of the one with the greater power Ali, Watson and Dhingra (2016). Students who perceive the supervisor as a power centered director, tend to be disconnected from their research and may perceive the research as a task produced for the supervisor and therefore may take longer to complete their research.

On the contrary, students who perceive the supervisor as a mentor, facilitator and a guide tend to work autonomously setting timeframes for themselves and taking ownership of their research project. Hence the proposition made by Sayed, Kruss and Badat (1998) is that the supervision should provide students with guidance, mentoring, and support and allow for the students to take ownership of their research project as this will foster the empowerment and the development of a student to be an independent researcher. Furthermore, Prazeres (2017) asserts that the supervisor's academic support and pastoral care are vital to the student's postgraduate journey, moreover that supervisors should also encourage postgraduate students to apply for funding opportunities as financial challenges are known to be a problem for postgraduate students.

2.1.3 Postgraduate Funding challenges:

In the most recent years, the government's funding of South African higher education has declined. Therefore, the decline in resources provided by the state, of resources needed by universities for their day-to-day functioning, has led to the higher education institutions regularly increasing their tuition fees (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). The consistent increase of tuition fees by higher education institutions to make up for the inadequacies of state funding is not without disputation as it is contested by both the government and the students Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete (2008). The student's contestations are expressed through protest actions and campaigns such as the fees must fall campaign of 2016 as these

regularly increasing tuition fees are said to increase the inequality gap in South Africa and particularly hinder the poor black African child access to higher education (Langa, Ndelu, Edwin & Vilakazi, 2017). Additional to the disputes of fee increments are the student's demands for free higher education.

The general conception is that most black students come from low socio-economic backgrounds and therefore cannot afford higher education fees. Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete (2008) however, explains that free education would benefit the rich as it is the children of rich families who dominate in numbers, the higher education institutions as they had attended high-quality secondary schools and therefore allowing them easy access to universities. Consequently, the poor will be paying for the education of the rich through taxation thus making free higher education unfeasible. In addition, Lebeau, Stumpf, Brown, Luchesi and Kweik (2012) justify that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme's (NSFAS) shortcomings are due to there being increased enrollments of poor but talented students in universities than there are available financial resources.

The increased university enrollments account for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Although universities impart skills and knowledge to undergraduate students, postgraduate students contribute to the universities, through research and knowledge creation. Illing and Sloan (2018) state that the research produced by postgraduate students helps fuel the country's economy in this time of rapid innovation, technological advancements, and change. In addition, Naidoo (2021) asserts that the research produced by postgraduate students contributes to national development by promoting, supporting, and advancing research and human capacity development. Likewise, Phakeng (2017) argues that postgraduate research can be resourceful in solving problems that can be of a global effect in various fields such as health, engineering, technology, media, education, law, business, and social welfare -to name a few sectors.

Black and Visagie (2020) explain that postgraduate students are critical for the knowledge they create, which is essential to cultivate South Africa's higher education sector and grow the country's knowledge economy. For example, the criticality and need for more postgraduate students in the

higher education sector were highlighted in a 2015 meeting that was held by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) wherein the problem of the higher education sector was examined. Their problem is that the higher education sector has in recent years been facing the problem of the ageing cohort of the general profession in the country. On average the ages of the academics range from 59 to 68 years old. Consequently, the problem is the looming departure of the majority of the academics in the higher education institutions because of ageing, retirement, being plundered by the private sector and or immigration.

The Department proposed a solution to this problem, which would be implemented through the Staffing of South African Universities Framework (SSAUF). Wherein the core mandate of this framework is to prioritize and encourage the enrollment of graduate students into postgraduate programs. Thus, proceeding with academic careers to feed the system. Hence, programs like the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) were introduced to prepare the new generation of academics to eventually take over from the ageing academics. The nGAP guaranteed that the junior academics were appropriately inducted by the universities and that they received sufficient support. However, the looming challenge with the implementation of the Staffing of South African Universities Framework (SSAUF) was hypothesized to be that South Africa lacks the capability to raise the numbers of postgraduate student outputs to the level required, for future sustenance because of limited financial resources (The Department of Higher Education and Training Meeting report, 2015).

Additionally, to the above-mentioned reasons, postgraduate research is also largely vital to the enablement of the country's evolvement into a more equal and inclusive society. Nonetheless, the lack of funding available at the postgraduate level continues to be an impediment to the country's transformation and limits the intellectual and creative diversity needed to solve the country's problems in the various sectors. Concerning the National Financial Aid Scheme, Phakeng (2017) explains that NSFAS is only awarded to students who are studying to earn their initial degree. Thereafter, students who depended on the NSFAS to attain their first degree must compete for a limited number of postgraduate scholarships, grants and bursaries for them to be able to continue with their postgraduate studies. The contradiction to this regulation, however, is noted in that NSFAS covers students in the

4th year of their 4years undergraduate degrees such as law, social work or engineering, however, does not cover students in 4th year, honours year.

In addition to the limited number of funding sources at the postgraduate level, Black and Visagie (2020) identified three prevalent challenges with the postgraduate funding grants and scholarships. Firstly, the amount of money offered to students is generally inadequate to fully cover the living expenses and the costs of postgraduate studies. Secondly, a bulk of the funding sources apply restrictions to how much-paid work students are permitted to do on the side. Thirdly, the funding sources assume qualification completion in record time (three years for PhD and two years for a master's qualification), which might be feasible for full-time students however difficult to achieve when students also have to work part-time to make up for the rest of their study and living expenses not sufficiently covered by their postgraduate funding source.

It is eminent that funding is one of the main challenges faced by students at their honours, master's, and doctorate level of study and yet the state still has no clear solutions to the problem at hand. Thus, the academic training of financially needy students whose initial degree was funded by NSFAS is prematurely terminated (Phakeng, 2017). Funding for master's and doctorate students traditionally came from sources such as the National Research Foundation (NRF) however, with the growth of student enrollments for postgraduate studies and the competitiveness of attaining the NRF scholarships, most postgraduate students find themselves in financial destitution or having to work part time to be able to pay for their living and educational expenses.

2.1.4 Part-time Working and studying:

According to Nonis and Hudson (2006) today's postgraduate students may be lesser prepared for their university degree level of work as they spend less time studying and spend most of their hours working. This is due to high tuition fees, and limited sources of funding, with some sources, only partially funding the students. The phenomenon of students working to sustain their livelihoods has proved to negatively affect academic performance. This is because the time that could have been spent studying, is spent on working, leading to missed seminars, exhaustion from working long hours

and increased stress due to work and school demands (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003). Likewise, Evans, Gbadamosi & Richardson (2014) also state that the amount of time that could have been dedicated by the student to their academic work is often compromised amongst students who work part-time which may lead to underperformance and an extended timeframe for degree completion.

On the contrary, Cheng and Alcantara (2007) argue that employment while still at university does not affect the students' academic achievement. Similarly, Perna (2010) explains and differentiates that student working on campus have increased academic achievement in comparison to students working off-campus as their focus, energy and time is drawn away from university by their work. However, Nonis and Hudson (2006) explain that personal factors such as students' motivation levels, personality, time spent studying outside the classroom etcetera ought to also be considered when investigating employment effects on students' academic achievements.

Even so, there are both pros and cons to working whilst studying. Pro's being the source of income (elevating some of the student's financial stress), learning to be disciplined, time management, getting work experience, especially if the work is in line with one's field of study, learning to adapt to the workplace, networking and building connections in the student's field of specialization if the part-time work is aligned (Sharunlal, 2015). Evident in the literature is that there seem to be more benefits if the student's part-time employment is aligned with their field of study, which is not always the case. In a study that was done by Martin and McCabe (2007) it was found that the majority of the postgraduate students who had part-time work, worked in the hospitality industry (e.g., waitressing). Phakeng (2017) also expressed that "I know of one promising postgraduate student who is devoting critical study time to washing cars to raise funds." Further highlighting that in these cases it is not about getting part-time work that will align with the student's field of study, however, the intention is to merely generate funds to aid with the basic needs and survival of the student.

Some of the cons with students working part-time were the added stress that may come with having to balance both work and study, therefore also highlighting that the students would also have to find

ways to distress for them to avoid possible burnout. Lack of time, depending on the students' work shifts, scheduling, work peak times versus the students' examination times, and the lack of time for socialization as most of the students' time might be consumed by the student's work and school (Sharunlal, 2015). Nonetheless, Martin and McCabe (2007) argue that as postgraduate students are increasingly turning to part-time employment to help fund them through their studies, it is important for students to find a part-time work arrangement that will also allow them sufficient time to study (e.g., work arrangements with flexible hours or rationed work for students).

2.1.5 Low socioeconomic status and postgraduate studies

Palakatshela (2018) states that majority of black students come from low socio-economic backgrounds and therefore this has an influence on the students learning experience and academic performance at university. Adverse implications of coming from a disadvantaged socio-economic background are evident in instances where the student may have the added responsibility of having to work part-time to financially support their families whilst studying Black and Visagie (2020). Evidence from the literature suggests that working whilst studying has negative effects on academic performance (Evans, Gbadamosi & Richardson, 2014., Curtis & Shani, 2002., Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003). This is attributed to less time being spent on studying, fatigue from working extended hours, missed seminars and stress due to having simultaneous commitments.

In a study that was conducted by Metcalf (2003) working whilst studying was highly correlated with academic underperformance. The study also found that students whose parents did not have university qualifications were more likely to work whilst studying consequently, profiting less from university academically. This was attributed to parents not having worked good enough jobs to afford them enough savings for themselves and their families and or parents' joblessness. Beutel and Anderson (2008) explained that parental involvement has an influence on the student's academic performance. Furthermore, parents who have some form of formal education, stable employment and who earn high salaries have high aspirations and prospects for their children's academics. Likewise, they are economically well positioned to afford their children the best schooling system in the country and to meet the cost of their living expenses.

Louw and Louw (2014) argue that the majority of Black South Africans come from poverty-stricken backgrounds, usually categorized by a lack of parental supervision, child-headed or single-parent headed homes. Additionally, the parents often work long hours, and come back home fatigued therefore inadequate time is spent helping with the educational needs of children, resulting in academic deficits. On the contrary high socio-economic status positively contributes to the student's academic performance and provides an environment fostering a positive learning experience and many opportunities for intellectual growth.

According to Palakatshela (2018) it is not uncommon for low-income families to put all their hopes on a single individual, that upon completion of their first qualification, they will be able to support the family financially. A phenomenon that is informally known as 'black tax' or family tax. Black tax is when young professionals must financially support their immediate or extended family members Magubane (2017). It is also whereby recently employed graduates must take care of the financial needs of their family members (Zikalala, 2020). It is called Black tax because it is more common amongst black families in South Africa, which is characterized by the highest unemployment rate. Unemployment rates in South Africa according to the designated race groups, respectively are 39.1% for the black population, 29.8% for the coloured population, 27.5% for the Indian population and 8.8% for the white population (Statistics South Africa, 2021).

Carpenter & Phaswana (2021) expounds that South Africa is a country with high levels of racial inequality. Which has resulted in black south Africans being forced into a state of economic disadvantage. Hence why young black graduates might be obligated to financially support their family members. It is for this reason that *some* African families may be reluctant to support the graduate student who advances to postgraduate studies when they are expected to hastily find a job, to be able to alleviate some of the families' financial responsibilities. Thus, expectations like this may also induce unnecessary pressure on the black postgraduate student and may jeopardize their chances of academic success at university, unlike in instances where students come from financially stable and supportive families.

Yan-Li, Roslan, Abdullah, & Abdullah (2020) explain that families are the primary and most significant environment that the student is exposed to and therefore affect the student's learning experience and academic achievement. Consequently, highlighting, the importance of examining the family background effects on academic achievements. Yamamoto and Holloway (2010) further explain that family support, whether tangible (e.g., monetary) or intangible (e.g., words of encouragement) has been found to play a crucial role in determining the student's academic success. Therefore, families should be encouraged to take a more proactive role in the students' academic endeavours and to provide an environment that cultivates their intellectual advancements. It is eminent that there are numerous challenges that come with being a postgraduate student, however, the literature suggests that there are additional dynamics, challenges and responsibilities for postgraduate students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

2.1.6 Social Isolation and Social Support during postgraduate studies:

Pursuing postgraduate studies can also be a lonely and isolating process. Williamson (2013) attributes this to some students being new in that University, the significantly smaller number of postgraduate students in comparison to undergraduate students and the individualizing and isolating process of thesis writing. Furthermore, postgraduate students prolonged feelings of being overwhelmed, self-doubt, feelings of incompetence and isolation can spawn into serious depression and anxiety-related issues (Kumaraswamy, 2013). Academics are an essential part of the university student's life and without a positive, healthy attitude toward academics' students can experience prolonged and crippling amounts of stress which is harmful to the student's mental health Crocker and Luhtanen (2003).

Other factors that may be detrimental to a student's mental health and qualification completion, include factors such as the student's lack of social support and social isolation. Social isolation as defined by (Lovitts, 2001) is the "lack of meaningful social connections." The demanding nature of postgraduate studies coupled with the unfamiliarity of the postgraduate environment can contribute to feelings of social isolation. Stacey, Talbot and Coxon (2019) argue that social support is integral

to creating a positive postgraduate experience and that it is vital for students to build a social network with peers, friends, colleagues and family to help combat feelings of stress and social isolation.

Kosi (2020) explains that social support can be subjective or objective. Subjective in that it is the individual's perception that they can get social support when required. The objective is the actual social support obtained. Nevertheless, either social support serves as a mechanism for coping with university academic pressures and contributes to the student's psychological well-being. Furthermore, having people to talk to or approach in times of need also helps to provide the student with words of encouragement, attention, and a positive self-image. Jairam and Kahl Jr (2012) moreover emphasize that it is important to note that there are various types of social support that may be required by a postgraduate student, such as practical support (e.g., discussing research problems), issues of reduced confidence and motivation and the need for emotional support. Therefore, highlighting the need for social support networks to feed into the student's various needs.

Stacey, Talbot and Coxon (2019) explain that there are various avenues whether online or face-to-face that students can turn to, to build their social networks: (I) social media through blogging and reading academic blogs as this can be a source of support that students can draw on during postgraduate studies. Blogging also helps postgraduate students or researchers share their experiences, struggles and useful information. (II) joining an online postgraduate community or peer support groups to share experiences, struggles, and practical advice and also draw on one another for support, which can help postgraduate students feel less alone in their experiences and also help them overcome the isolating and lonesome journey of postgraduate studies.

2.1.7 Coping Mechanisms

Evident in the literature is that embarking on a postgraduate studies journey can be very stressful. Factors such as increased academic independence (in thought and work), limited research skills, personal or family crisis, the amplified volume of work, social isolation, feelings of incompetence and the lack of funding opportunities at the postgraduate level amongst other factors can all induce

stress to the postgraduate student hence the need to review some of the coping mechanisms generally used by postgraduate students.

Coping mechanisms are strategies individuals frequently use in the wake of stressful or difficult times, to help in the management of difficult feelings (Kelly, 2004). Coping mechanisms help individuals regulate their emotions during stressful events in hopes to maintain balanced emotional wellbeing. Sharma (2003) differentiates between two broad categories of coping mechanisms. One is referred to as the problem-focused coping strategy and the other is referred to as the emotion-focused coping strategy. Problem-focused coping is based on the individuals' attempts to control the situation through the application of their problem-solving skills. Behavioural orientations of this coping strategy may include planning, breaking down tasks into smaller tasks, advice seeking, generating different possible solutions to the problem, evaluating different pros and cons of the different solutions, and then implementing a solution that will best minimize the problem or stress.

The emotion-focused coping strategy on the other hand is based on the individual's focus on inwardly regulating or altering how one thinks and feels about the stressful situation or event. In the thought process, this strategy may be typified by denial of the existence of a stressful situation, wishful thinking, freely expressing one's emotions, avoiding the stressful situation, socially comparing oneself to others, trivialising the problem or extreme positivity and focusing on the bright side of things. Behavioural orientations of this strategy include seeking social support, engagement in physical exercise, relaxation, meditation, joining support groups and the use of alcohol and drugs as a means of escaping reality (Sharma 2003). Moreover, another emotion-focused coping strategy is meaning-making, which includes believing in God or a higher power, believing in the alignment and being in sync with the timing of your life and practising religious rituals.

In a study that was done by Baker and Berenbaum (2007) about the emotional and the problem-focused coping mechanism, it was distinguished that the problem-focused strategies are resourceful when the problem is subject to change. However, emotion-focused strategies are more resourceful when the problem cannot be changed. In addition, it was further noted that the different strategies can

be grouped into adaptive or healthy strategies, maladaptive or unhealthy strategies and neither healthy nor unhealthy strategies. Examples of the different coping strategies are elaborated on by Sharma (2003) who asserted that an example of a healthy coping strategy would be brainstorming solutions to a problem, an example of an unhealthy strategy is the use of drugs to escape reality and practising religious rituals being neither healthy nor unhealthy.

In a study conducted by Sajid, Hamid, Sabih and Sajid (2016), unhealthy coping mechanisms that University students resort to when faced with academic-related stressors were mental and behavioural disengagement, self-blaming and substance abuse. However, some of the more prevalent coping mechanisms were, the student's faith and religion, physical exercise, planning, acceptance, and positive thinking. In a similar study conducted by Popa, Schenk, Rus, Szasz, Suciu, Szabo and Cojocaru (2020) coping mechanisms mostly adopted by students were acceptance and planning. Other strategies employed by students were of seeking counselling and psychotherapy sessions, social support, denial, mental disengagement, and religion. Therefore, as highlighted by the studies mentioned above it is evident that students tend to use a combination of the problem-focused coping strategy and the emotion-focused coping strategy.

2.1.7.1 Coping Mechanisms and Mental health

The utilisation of effective coping strategies can help improve the emotional well-being and the overall mental health of an individual. Through effective coping strategies, individuals may be better equipped to adjust, handle, and manage stressful situations. Therefore, having effective coping mechanisms causes the student to be less prone to mental health illnesses such as depression, and anxiety disorders (GoodTherapy, 2018). In a study that was conducted by Berrera and Norton (2009) on college students and mental health disorders, it was found that students with anxiety disorders reported a low quality of life in comparison to students who do not have high levels of anxiety. Therefore, highlighting the need for students to adopt more effective coping mechanisms to avoid mental health concerns.

Additionally, in a study that was done by (Doom & Haefel, 2013) high levels of anxiety and sadness amongst students were correlated with unprofitable behaviours such as smoking, poor sleeping habits, alcoholism, poor diet, non-exercise and disregarding medical treatments. Thus, emphasizing that the use of maladaptive or ineffective coping strategies may have negative implications for the individual's mental, emotional and overall well-being. Maladaptive strategies such as problem avoidance or escaping using drugs or alcohol may offer immediate stress relief, however, in the face of perpetual challenges it may lead to substance dependency. Therefore, highlighting that some coping strategies may work for a short period of time, however, may be ineffective in the long term and may yield counterproductive or negative consequences.

On the other hand, it is important to note that an individual's choice of coping mechanisms is also subject to the resources for coping that may be available to the individual. These resources are explained by Sharma (2003) to include the individual's knowledge (e.g., knowledge of how to meditate or do breathing exercises), skills (e.g., problem-solving skills), attitudes (e.g., the individual's self-efficacy in one's ability to perform a specific behaviour), social resources (e.g. supportive people to turn to), material resources (e.g. money), physical resources (e.g. health and stamina) and societal resources such as the laws and policies. GoodTherapy (2018) however, highlights the importance of adopting healthy stress coping methods and recommends interventions such as seeking professional help from a therapist, social support from loved ones, problem-solving, humour, relaxation and or physical exercise.

2.1.8 Conclusion:

Postgraduate students may be confronted with many challenges from academic pressures, to adjustment problems (more especially the workload versus the time constraints), isolation and loneliness from the individualizing and isolating process of doing research, to lack of finances, decreased motivation levels, personal or family crisis, having to both work and study, problems in the workplace, mental breakdowns and relying on excessive use of substances and engaging in extreme detrimental behaviours for relief and coping. Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory helps one understand the student's different contextual environments and how they all intersect and

are interrelated to create the student's lived experience. Ryan (2001) explains that the theory consists of different human developmental stages such as the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems and justifies how human development is impacted and informed by these different stages.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK- Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory

This study used Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theoretical framework or model to understand the different factors that shapes students lived experiences while at university. This theory is relevant for the study as it will assists in the explanation of the multilayered stages of influence that affect the students lived experiences while at university. According to this theory the stages of influence are namely: the microsystem, the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bjourklund and Blasi, 2012). The different stages therefore describe how the students' social relationships (with family, friends, teachers etc.), environmental factors (social values, law, policies, norms etc.) and concept of time exert influence on students' experiences.

2.2.1 The Microsystem

The microsystem is described as the direct, face to face interactions and relationships with significant primary socializing agents (Leonard, 2011). It is comprised of interactions with parents, friends, church members and teachers. This level is most influential in the ecological system as a person's daily life is mostly lived around these interactions. An example of a microsystem influence would be if the students' parents valued education, then they would encourage the students to also value education and support them in their pursuits of educational qualifications.

2.2.2 The Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the interaction of the different parts of the microsystem. The microsystem is interconnected and influences one another to exert influence on the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1917). For example, the relationship between the student's teacher and the parents of the student. If

the two get along then this may have positive implications for the individual. However, if the two do not get along then it may impact the individual negatively. Another example is the interaction of one's parents and the church that they attend which in turn may all together inform the rules that parents teach to their children and expect them to live by. Therefore, this system accounts for the interrelatedness of the different settings that an individual actively participates in.

2.2.3 The Exosystem

The exosystems are the broader social frameworks that do not involve or include the individual's participation in decision making, however, the decisions made therein affect the individual. These include politics, policies made, mass media, neighbors, distant family, a place where one's guardian works, vital institutions and law implementation offices (Bjorklund & Blasi, 2012). This system accounts for things that affect the individual but are outside the individual's control for example the government's decision to predominantly fund students completing their undergraduate degrees then students completing their postgraduate degrees. Herein the students are not included in the decision making, however the decisions made affects the students. Other examples of the exosystems influences includes decisions made the University's board of directors to increase tuition fees or student loan agencies to increase their interest rates for student loans.

2.2.4 The Macrosystems

The macrosystem pertains to the components of an individual's entrenched culture, social values and traditions. The previous three levels of the ecology system are all affected and informed by cultural beliefs and patterns that have strong historical roots Beck (2011). For example, if there exist the social values and assumptions of white supremacy like in the time of Apartheid South Africa, the policies made will be in favour of the white South Africans, thereby informing racism, segregation and interactions where each one is keeping to their race.

2.2.5 The Chronosystems

This aspect of the theory emphasizes the time aspect. That the various contextual environments and events throughout an individual's life (from the microsystem to the macrosystem) are all subject to change over time (Bjourklund and Blasi, 2012). This may be attributed to the fact that people change over time, through life experiences, learning and gaining new knowledge.

2.3 Summary

The literature review chapter has considered the various aspects of postgraduate studies, aspects such as graduate unemployment, leading to increased post-graduate enrollments to increase chances of success post-university. The chapter has also considered how the lack of funding opportunities affect postgraduate studies, the student-supervisor relationship, part-time work and studying, the isolating process of doing research and the coping mechanisms employed by postgraduate students. Furthermore, the chapter has also provided an overview of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory, which was the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the research methodology that was adopted for this study. Furthermore, elaborates on the research design, study approach, the data collection method, sampling, and the data analysis procedure. Lastly, this chapter will also include a critical reflexivity statement, ethical and covid 19 considerations and include the chapter's summary.

3.2 Research design

A qualitative approach was used for this study, which according to Babbie and Mouton (2005) is an approach that assists in explaining and understanding a social phenomenon. Through this approach, the researcher was able to establish an in-depth meaning of lived experiences according to how participants view them and understood them.

3.3 Research setting

The study was conducted at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Howard College Campus. The University is situated in the heart of Durban and is one of the biggest universities in the country and is ranked among the top five hundred universities in the world. The Howard College campus offers various study programs within the fields of humanities, law, engineering, nursing, creative arts, built environment and development studies (University of KwaZulu Natal Website). The campus offers various student services including student support, housing, libraries, and an on-campus clinic. financial aid offices etcetera. Moreover, these services have a bearing on the student's lived experiences while at university, therefore making the university setting appropriate for the study. Nonetheless, before the commencement of the study ethical clearance and the gate keepers' letter were obtained from the university.

3.4 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used for this study. This is a sampling technique where participants are selected according to the criteria that is determined by the researcher (Swarts, 2016). A message was posted on the social media pages (WhatsApp and Facebook), addressed to the UKZN postgraduates, informing them about the research study and that research participants were needed. Off the responses received the first eight postgraduate students were then selected to take part in the study. The challenge of this sampling method however is that the researcher can be biased and subjective when choosing participants and that the data collected cannot be generalized to the rest of the larger population Swarts (2016). In this study, however, the researcher's subjectivity when choosing research participants was addressed by opening the opportunity to participate in the study to all the UKZN postgraduates, however only choosing the first eight respondents. Nonetheless, the pros of this sampling method are that it can produce reliable and robust data.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

The data was collected by conducting eight semi-structured interviews in English. These are interviews where the researcher asks open-ended questions to allow the respondents to give in-depth answers, thereby increasing the thoroughness and richness of their responses (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002). However, due to the Covid 19 regulations, the researcher opted to conduct telephonic interviews. Telephonic interviews are interviews whereby the researcher interviews the respondents via the telephone, in accordance with the prepared interview schedule (Novick, 2008). The interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes long. The researcher used a smart cell phone and the phone call recorder option on the device, and pen and paper to make notes of the things or topics that she later wanted to probe on, as the respondents were answering. Also, before interviewing the respondents, the researcher read the study information sheet and the informed consent form to the participants and checked to see if they understood their rights and responsibilities and whether they gave permission to participate in the study. Additionally, before recording the interviews, the researcher also asked for the participant's permission to have the interview recorded.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data was transcribed and analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis can be described as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). The method of thematic analysis involves six stages namely 1) Familiarizing yourself with the data collected, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes and 6) producing the report. The thematic analysis was done manually. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read and coded for themes in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework. This enabled the researcher to explore associations that existed within thematic segments that were identified and categorized.

3.7 Critical Reflexivity

Critical reflexivity involves a meticulous consideration of one’s own beliefs, assumptions, and values and how these might impact the phenomenon being studied Setchell and Dalziel (2010). The fact that the researcher was a postgraduate student, doing research on a socioecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university required that the researcher had to reflect on her own bias, assumptions, and experiences, without imposing them on the study as this could impact on the study findings. According to (Carey, 2009) the process of critical reflection involves the following steps: an examination and awareness of preconceived assumptions on the research topic, an introspection of possible prejudices held about the study participants and a reflection on personal experiences and dominant personal values. Furthermore, reflecting upon the learnings throughout the research process and how the new information obtained from the study altered your values and beliefs. Hence, using the aforementioned steps, the researcher was able to critically reflect on her own experiences, beliefs, and assumptions before and after the study, to ensure that they do not interfere with or influence the research process or findings.

3.8 Dependability

According to Cope (2014), dependability is sometimes difficult to achieve when focusing on human participants. This is attributed to that human participants may interpret a single event in various way

and thus, construct different meanings based on individual experience. Nevertheless, in this study dependability was established through the consistency of the participant's responses and perceptions of their experiences.

3.9 Confirmability

Confirmability denotes the researcher's ability to establish that the data represent the participant's responses and is free from the researcher's partiality and biases. Moreover, the researcher can demonstrate confirmability by providing a description of how interpretations and conclusions were made and demonstrating that the findings were derived unswervingly from the data (Cope, 2014). Regarding the current study, the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, the interview schedule documented, and the data thematically classified. See attached appendices.

3.10 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied or generalized to a similar group or setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, to achieve transferability the researcher gives an explanation of the research methodology used to conduct the study, study contextual information and factors and an in-depth description of the study participants. Thus, the reader gets sufficient information to be able to determine the study finding's applicability to other settings. The current study's focus was on a socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university. The study focused on eight postgraduate students from a South African tertiary institution. Therefore, these experiences might not necessarily reflect those of all students in other-like contexts.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

To ensure the safety and welfare of the study participants, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu Natal (reference number: HSSREC/00003818/2022), Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Before participation in the study, participants were read a study information sheet and an informed consent.

form, explaining the aim and purpose of that study. Moreover, that participation in the study would be voluntary and the respondents would be allowed without prejudice to withdraw from the study should they at any point feel uncomfortable to continue participating. Furthermore, the ethical rule of doing no harm to the participants was maintained throughout the study and confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms in writing the findings report.

3.12 Summary

This chapter elaborated on the research methods that were used by the researcher to gather the necessary data. Furthermore, the data collection instruments, the sampling method used, and the steps on how the data was analyzed. In addition, the researcher's critical reflections statement was included, as the ethical and covid-19 considerations.

Chapter 4– The Findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to answer the research questions which guided the research study focus areas (see chapter 1). Therefore, this chapter presents the study findings gathered from the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were then thematically analyzed following the guidelines of Braun and Clark (2006). The presentation of the results was arranged into themes and subthemes, demonstrated by direct quotations from the participants. The themes and sub themes were: students motivation to pursue postgraduate studies, choosing the field of study, choosing a research study topic, the student supervisor relationship, students expectations of postgraduate studies, postgraduate studies and the lack of funding opportunities, non-monetary challenges during postgraduate studies, postgraduate studies and students' mental health, student support services, coping mechanisms, support systems during postgraduate studies, the families education background and support, policies informing postgraduate studies and recommendations to improve the postgraduate program. Before the presentation of the findings, the demographic information of the participants is provided in Table 1 below.

4.2 Demographic representation of participants

Prior to discussing the findings of the study, this chapter will present the socio-demographic features of the participants (see Table 1). The demographic data shows that there was a fair distribution and an even representation of the genders between the males and the females. However, there was an uneven distribution with regards to the level of study, with a higher number of students in their master's level of study (5) compared to a lower number of students in their honours level of study (3) interviewed. The reason for this was due to the assumption by the researcher that student in their master's level would be able to provide more and in-depth information considering that they might have been at UKZN for longer, and therefore may have more experience as postgraduate students compared to students at their honours level. The participants were in their twenties and were keen to participate in the study.

Table 1 demographics

		Number of participants
Gender	Females	4
	Males	4
Level of study	Masters	5
	Honours	3

4.3 Students Motivation to Pursue Postgraduate Studies

Pursuing postgraduate studies can seem like a safe haven for graduate students who have not secured employment or who are not ready to vacate the university residence and return to their home living situation. When asked about their motivation to pursue a postgraduate degree participant 1 proclaimed that:

Honestly at that time I didn't see any luck of getting a job after my undergraduate degree outside of university. So, I just wanted to keep the ball rolling, other than that I didn't have anything to do after my undergrad. So, I just went there so that I can be inside the university and see if I can get any luck with the postgrad [degree] after that.

Participant 5 also affirmed that:

Another motivation was that I didn't want to stay at home, so that was another big factor as well. Even though I was applying for jobs, instead of just applying for jobs at home I decided that let me just proceed with my studies.

A prominent motivating factor for pursuing postgraduate studies, proved to be the graduates' students concerns with employability post receiving their first university qualification. Participant 2 emphasized that:

Ummh, to be honest with you for me personally I only went on to do my postgrad studies because I felt like in order for me to be employable with regards to the social sciences field, I needed a qualification that will be of a postgraduate caliber, because I felt like having a mere degree wouldn't help me secure a job easily, you know as compared to having like a postgraduate

qualification. So that was my main motivation like to pursue postgraduate studies because I felt like that would increase my chances of getting employed or being employable.

Moreover, participant 7 also noted that

One of the main reasons is that I noticed there being a lot of students doing the same degree that I was doing and so I thought let me work on my advantage and pursue my postgraduate degree maybe by having a postgraduate degree, I can become first preference in some workplaces and most jobs now actually prefer for you to have postgraduate studies in my field

Some students indicated that pursuing postgraduate studies was motivated by the need for academic and self-improvement. This was affirmed by participant 4 in the statement that:

The reason why I decided to do postgraduate is because one, I want to excel in every field that I am in, so I was like me having a degree only, it didn't make any sense at all because I was still young and I could still pursue postgraduate and I did have a few chelete (money) in my savings which could help me with the registration and I was like let me just take this opportunity and make myself a better person when it comes to academics so that is why I pursued my honors and my masters.

Some participants indicated to have been motivated by their background to study further and excel in their academics despite coming from struggling backgrounds. This was verified by participant 3 in this statement:

Ummh, okay firstly it was my background where I come from. Umm that is my first decision number one. Ummh number two, I'm still young and I wanted to pursue my education to Phd, thirdly ummh it was an opportunity again to build something by learning and from nothing so those are decisions for me which led me to pursue my masters all the influence, from my background at home so yeah

When the researcher probed on what the participant meant by being motivated by their background, participant 3 further explained that:

I mean that at home (pause) I knew that at home I had to make my parents proud, the support that I got from home. So, at home my parents being a domestic worker, I wanted to prove that even if at home ummh you are coming from a background where you struggle to make ends meet ummh you can be something more from nowhere. So, the background also plays into me being a hard worker. So, it doesn't mean that when you are coming from a home where you are struggling that you can't, because you can go extra mile without having nothing to being

capable and being a hard worker. I wanted to also show the world that I can be a hard worker and be more than what one can expect.

The study concluded that for most participants, the motivation to enroll in postgraduate studies were concerns of employability post earning the initial degree and that going back to university provided a safe space for students who had not yet secured employment as opposed to go back their home living situations. Other motivations included a need for self-development and improvement and the desire to prove that one can become an academic success despite coming from an underprivileged background.

4.3.1 Choosing the field of study

The study discovered that for some of the participants, the prerogative is to just get enrolled in a postgraduate course, as a result some postgraduate students end up enrolling for any available study program, without there being an actual research interest in the field. Participant 1 stated that:

I did policy, public policy. Like I said, I wasn't really interested much in the field of study after my undergrad degree I just went for public policy just to... I don't know... find something available at that time, but ummh.... my field of study for the thing that I was mostly concerned with it was development ummh.... Community development and currently the space was full for me there to get in, so then I chose public policy, it is something that was available.

On the contrary, however, some of the participants, expressed that they chose to pursue a postgraduate qualification based on their topics of interests. Participant 4 asserted that:

To answer your question, I think from a very young age I was very interested in investigations, crime, and everything because my dad was a member of the SANDF, so he was a soldier and it always interested me when he came back home and talked about the cases. So, from a very young age I was very intrigued by that field of study. So that is why when I came to the University, I was just like let me just check the courses that they provide. They had law and criminology forensics, so I had to choose and criminology to be a forensic investigator in the future. So that is why I chose this course which is criminology and forensics.

In addition, participant 5 explained that:

My interest in pursuing a postgraduate study was that in my undergraduate level I did very well in the module that was related to the masters that I am currently studying. Even way above my major so when I did that, I found that there was a particular interest that I had in the field for which I am currently doing my masters in and so basically that is what influenced me, because during my undergrad I had an introduction to the module or to the course that I am currently studying now. I found out that hey, I'm interested in this, so let me just go on and pursue it.

Furthermore, participant 7 also stated that:

I wanted to know more in my field of politics and not just the three-year degree, because now I'm learning something completely different then what I had [learned] so just to gain more knowledge and understanding in globalization, the political economy and these are the things that I'm learning in my honours.

4.3.2 Choosing A Research Study Topic

Majority of the study participants expressed that they chose their own research study topics, based on the social phenomenon's they witnessed happening in their immediate environments. Participant 4 explained that:

My research topic was mainly influenced by the challenges that we face at the community that I come from. We call it iSkomplaas, it is a mixture of the township and the rural area and also the informal settlements. So, it is a mixture of everything basically. So, the service delivery is very poor. So, I was just like let me do research that will also help the community that I come from and so that is why my research mainly focused on water theft, which is water meter tempering and illegal water piping connections which leads to water shortages. So, with going through the most with having water shortages let me just conduct something that will really help us at the end of the day and not just doing research for the sake of completing my masters.

In addition, participant 3 also affirmed that:

Uhm, I chose my topic based on my community; it is about the employment of youth in housing delivery. So, the reason why I chose it was [that] I had to manage the point of breaking new

grounds (policy) and one of the objectives of the policy was to create new opportunities for the youth and I wanted to understand, the pros and cons or the justification of the policy. So, I wanted to prove that the housing policy does create job opportunities specifically looking at the youth, because if I look at the youth, it is the key, they have the potential of building development in their communities so that's why.

Moreover participant 2, also stated that:

Oh, ja. My research topic was like assessing the employability of postgrad students from UKZN. Ja the pre-occupation of going into the whole, honours, and masters I wanted to increase my chances of being employable, so as I was like going into the whole program, I had that in my mind. It was like in the back of my mind, the reason why I'm pursuing industrial psychology post graduate degree is because I'm increasing my chances of being employable. So, I was like why not just research this topic as this is something that is much more personal for me, because the reason why I chose a postgrad degree it is for that. So, I just decided that let me go do some research on that so that I could achieve the goal of my academic degree and as I'm also looking into something personal so ja,

Nonetheless, some of the participants, expressed that they did not get a chance to choose their research study topic as the topic was imposed by their research supervisor and or funder's. Participant 5 stated that:

My supervisor chose the research topic for me, there was funding and she approached me, the topic had to be aligned with the objectives of the funding. My main topic and interest were then changed because of that and so ja basically I was doing the topic that she chose for me.

However, some of the study participants asserted that they did not have research topics yet, they had not been allocated their research supervisors, for the past five months into their one-year honours study program and that they will only be given six months in the second semester to complete their research project. This was proclaimed by participant 6 who stated that:

I haven't chosen a research topic and at honours level we are allocated supervisors and we do not have supervisors yet. I guess we will be allocated later in the year from June because we are going to do the research project in the second semester of the year, so we are not yet allocated.

When the researcher further probed if anything had been finalized yet pertaining to the research project, participant 6 further explained that:

No, not yet. Nothing has been finalized. All we know is that we will have 6 months to do the research project.

Moreover, participant 7, also verified that:

We will be allocated supervisors second semester because that is when the research will start

Thus, the study concluded that majority of the participants got to choose their own research topics based on their research interests. One participant had their research topic imposed by the supervisor and her financial sponsors. All of the honour's student participants did not have a finalized research topics and they had not met their research supervisors five months into their one-year study program. Which is concerning as the students will be given six months to complete their research, whilst in the same six months they will still be expected to attend seminars and complete other course assessments as well.

4.3.3 The Student Supervisor Relationship

Contrary to most of the literature available on the student supervisor relationship, this study revealed that most of the students were actually happy with their engagement and interaction with their supervisors. Participant 2 affirmed that:

(Laughs) ... I don't know, I think it is organic, she is an understanding person, she is a nice person, genuinely she is a nice person, and I could communicate with her in a much more genuine manner. You know I don't have to pretend or lie to her about a lot of things because I know that she is a very understanding person. So, I think it is a good... uhm like it is a good warm relationship that I have with my supervisor, but I mean like there are some personal or administrative issues that affected that relationship. But ja she is a nice person that you would like to have as a supervisor, she is very supportive.

Furthermore participant 4 stated that:

Fortunately for me, the research focus was on environmental crime but when I pitched my research topic my supervisor understood what I was trying to achieve and throughout my dissertation, she was a really huge support in me completing my masters.

In addition, participant 1 added that:

It was okay, I wouldn't say it was too much, but it was okay. It was just fine. It was on my side whereby it was lacking to go and see my supervisor and all that, but other than that I think it was fine.

Therefore, highlighting that at times the supervisors may be responsive, however it being the students who is avoidant when it comes to communicating or meeting with the supervisor.

Nonetheless, participant 8 elaborated on challenges she found were inherent with the online supervision relationship as she stated that:

I haven't met my supervisor face-to-face because of Covid. So, we are doing everything electronically however I do not have a relationship with her because I feel like I have a relationship with the screen and not a person. Sometimes it is very easy to basically disengage when it's just you in the screen so you cannot say that there is a relationship with or between the two people. When you send an email, you just know that you will get your feedback three days later which is a disadvantage for me because if you can answer me in maybe two hours or three hours then I can basically continue with my way and keep up the progress in on that day.

Therefore, highlighting that the use of online technological tools hampers the formation of effective interpersonal relations and may be an impediment to efficient supervision as the students sometimes wait for a period of up to three days to have their emails responded to by their supervisors.

4.4 Students Expectations of Postgraduate Studies

The increased workload can be argued to be one of the expectations that most students anticipate when they transition from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies. This was verified by participant 2 who stated that:

Okay the first one was like the workload, I knew that the workload would increase as opposed to undergrad where we were being spoon fed, like the information that we were learning wasn't as in-depth as it was going to be, going to postgrad. So, ja I expected the workload to increase which is there, I feel like that was my only expectation.

Moreover, participant 6 also pointed out that:

Well academically I thought that it was all about sleepless nights (laughs) I thought you will start in December and finish the following year. But I started this year February. I thought it was going to be extremely hectic which has not been the case. It is, but not that much.

Nonetheless, majority of the students expressed that they were not sure what to expect regarding pursuing postgraduate studies. Some expressed that they were confused as they had not been advised of what the postgraduate journey would look like and in addition, they had not done much research themselves. Participant 4 explained that:

To be honest with you, when I was doing my undergrad, I was very skeptical about me pursuing honors because I hadn't done research about what is required from you in passing your honors or your masters. So, I was not sure. As much as I know that I am a person who wants to excel in everything that I do but I was like do I really really want to go for something that I am not sure of because no one had informed me that for honors, this is what is required from the student and for masters, this is what is required from the student.

Furthermore participant 3 stated that:

ummh, I didn't have much expectations because I didn't have much experience [with postgraduate studies]

Moreover participant 5 noted that:

Oh my, my expectations when I was doing my undergrad, was that it was not going to be as challenging as I found it to be. Also, I didn't really get much advise on arhh, you know how you have expectation and then there's reality? There weren't any people that told me that at master's level we don't have mentors and especially if you went from your degree to master's level, we didn't have people that tell us, one on one that this is what you should expect.

Some students were of the idea that not having to attend lectures at postgraduate level would make postgraduate studies easier compared to undergraduate studies. This was asserted by participant 1 in the statement:

Ummh no, the pressure I was told about is that you're at postgrad you have to focus, everything comes in all at once. Ummh but then the expectation was that I thought it was going to be easier since I was not much attending like in undergrad, day to day classes. So, I

thought I would be at my res doing my work, desktop research. I didn't think that it was going to be a fuss, like it was.

Evident from the study findings is that there is a mismatch between the students' expectations of postgraduate studies and the students actual lived experiences. This was further elaborated upon by participant 6 in the statement:

I thought the postgraduate students were rich and they had a lot of money [because they worked on campus jobs] compared to us undergraduate students. I thought wow doing honours, you must be monied hey (laughs) and then to my disappointment it is actually the opposite, and we are even more broke. It is actually the opposite of what I anticipated during my undergraduate. I was inspired by my tutor in my first year, I thought man wow, and I didn't know what he was going through.

The study found that many students go into postgraduate studies, not sure and not knowing what to expect, therefore making them less prepared to embark on a postgraduate journey. In addition, students also reported to being taken aback by some of the aspects of postgraduate studies such as the expectation of research competency, how time-consuming postgraduate studies are, and the lack of mentors at postgraduate level.

4.5 Postgraduate studies and the lack of funding opportunities

The study found that funding becomes an important factor when pursuing postgraduate studies. Moreover, to the university registration fees and tuition fees, there are other costs that are required for the pursuit of a postgraduate degree. This was noted by participant 1 who stated:

I think funding becomes the main factor, because when you are at postgraduate level you have to do your research, you going to have to go places, be somewhere, you have to go extra mile and what not so funding becomes the main factor thingy because otherwise it come with a lot of money challenges and stress in between so I think it is the main thing any student should think about when it comes to postgraduate [studies].

In addition, participant 4 stated that:

from the get-go you cannot continue with your studies without having funding, because at the end of the day not everyone has savings or parents that can pay for their school fees. Funding is like a really huge factor in one completing their postgraduate studies. Whether it is honors or masters, because after registration you will need meals, books, money to conduct research, money to travel, money to bind your research before submission and so you can see that money is really an important factor into pursuing postgraduate studies and if you don't have funding it is very difficult especially if you are doing research as well. Then you would have to jeopardize your studies in taking part time jobs so that you will be able to fund yourself, to complete your studies and it is very draining and mind you, you must have a fresh mind to write your chapters so ja It is very difficult.

There are many challenges that were found to be as a result of the lack of funding at postgraduate level. Some of the noted challenges were that students had to balance the postgraduate workload and working part-time jobs.

From this study it was eminent that the financial challenges that resulted from lack of funding opportunities induced strain on the student's mental health and ability to fully focus on their academic pursuits. This was pointed out by participant 2:

like for me, my own experience, when I was doing my postgraduate degree and I didn't have funding you know that sort of like affects you. You constantly think about it. As you are like learning, when you are doing some projects, as you are preparing for presentations it is something that is like always on your shoulders. Constantly like thinking, okay where am I going to get the funding for this or for that, or how am I going to get this funding... ummmhh... will I ever be able to fund myself. There are somethings that you are not able to see if you are not funded for example, you can't see your marks, they say you can't get your degree if you haven't paid your tuition fee. Those things are constantly at the back of your mind, and it does affect your performance, it did with me. I remember sometimes when I would try to study or prepare for a presentation, it would be something that was at the back of my mind. Every now and then I am thinking about it and most of the time, I would go online and search for scholarships and I would try and find someone who would help me pay my fees. It is something that really affects you, your performance and your mind set during that whole time.

When participants were asked what are some of the challenges that they experienced as postgraduate

students, majority of them expressed that financial destitution was one of the greatest challenges that they faced. Participant 8 explained that:

I as participant 8 come from a very disadvantage background and if I had funding it would make my life not easy but at least bearable, because then I would know that I don't have to basically bother my grandmother with grocery money. She is a pensioner but now she has to look after me as well. Inasmuch as I can always go back home and be like can I have an amount [even if they give me] it won't be enough to basically buy me a monthly grocery because my grandma is only earning R2700. We have a home and at home there is basically my brother, my niece, my nephew, and them as well they expect my grandmother to buy groceries you know. So, for me as a post graduate student it is really hard to think about all these things. Sometimes I feel like I should have not even studied, I should have not come and studied this post graduate degree maybe I should be working and supporting back home. So having funding for me it would make my life very much bearable.

Participant 4 asserted that:

One of the main challenges is funding. When you are a postgrad, it is either you apply for NRF, and the NRF for the college of humanities?? They fund a very low percentage, So, you just look for external sources to fund you. For NRF I was declined, and I had to pay out of my own pocket. That was a huge challenge for me because the school fees are very expensive.

Participant 3, further stated that:

The financial challenge that is the first and the major challenge during postgraduate [studies]. You have to find your own funding and resources. Sometimes when you have to do research you have to travel to specific people that you will need for your research. So, I think that is one of the biggest challenges.

In addition, participant 6 asserted that:

The fact the none of the bursaries that I have applied for are responding or have responded yet, that means that arhh it is a disaster. Imagine studying and not knowing what to expect in the near future. We are only studying hoping that we might get assistance, but there is no hope.

Moreover participant 1 also stated that:

I had a really, really bad experience with getting funds or funding when I was doing my postgrad. There is no longer funding for postgraduate [studies], unlike undergrad we had NSFAS and then postgrad you have to see for yourself. Then you have to apply for this thing called NRF and sometimes you have to write those long applications and cover letter and all those things and unfortunately, I didn't complete all the [NRF] applications, I didn't get the funding. So that was the most challenging thing in postgrad when it comes to challenges, I came across.

Participants felt like there is more that the university could do to assist postgraduate students that face financial hardships in their postgraduate journey. This was pointed out by participant 2:

When it comes to postgrad studies a lot of these funding schemes do not cater for postgraduates. I feel like I don't know, but the university can like do more with regards to that and try and help postgraduate students

Participant 3 further asserted that:

Postgraduate [studies] costs a lot, our school, UKZN, can create funds for us, the first thing is to get funding, secondly you must have a bank, so that when we finish our degree's we can go extra mile to do our masters, our PhD. So, it must be easy for us to have access to funding, because truth be told, no one can just fund you alone, out of nowhere, but if the school creates a body, that will seek funding for postgraduate students, it will be easy for us to finish our masters. I think our institution, must create a body, that will go and secure funding so that we can study, even if we don't get money for groceries but academic funding, we need academic funding, we need residential funding. At least if we have those two, we will survive.

Moreover, to the call for the university to do more, the participants also felt that the National Research Foundation (NRF) applications were long and complicated and therefore that it would help if the supervisors assisted the students with the applications. This was pointed out by participant 5:

Financially if the supervisors could assist students with the NRF applications or funding. Particularly in the black community, you find that after the first degree, they even state that now proceeding with postgraduate studies is just a bonus and you are now alone. I think there is a big financial strain on the student, that is because the students are now independent even within the residence, you find that the students are now on constant loans, and they don't

know how to pay and that alone can cripple the mental state of a postgraduate student. If that could be looked into that would really help.

Moreover, the study found that students had an overall negative perception towards the NRF and like participant number 5, other participants also felt that making NRF applications was a long and complicated process. The sentiment was further explained by participant 1:

Eish NRF! It's a loooong process and you need a supervisor who has time and who has got your back to help you and can assist you with that as well. Unfortunately, my supervisor didn't help me much with that, when it comes to applications with NRF and unfortunately, I didn't get the NRF funding, Ja so I didn't get the NRF funding for my postgraduate studies, so that was a challenge. I also didn't get much assistance from the SRC as well or my supervisor

Participant 8, also stated that:

The process for applying for NRF was really long and really hard. At first, I didn't know how to apply because there are so many things that I didn't understand I had to basically ask one of my lecturers to help me apply and it took her for quite some time as well, but at the end of the day we applied however, my application was just unsuccessful.

The complication in making NRF applications was attributed to that student are not given the proper guidelines on how to make the NRF online applications. This was expressed by Participant 4:

[When] making applications for NRF funding, I think we are not given proper guidance on how to fill in online application forms, because one mistake you are out nje they are not considering your application. If they are that strict and you have a limited number of students that you will fund, I think it would be fair enough if they gave guidance or information on paper on how to fill in their application form and then they take it from there.

In addition to the challenges faced by students when making the NRF applications, some of the participants were also of the idea that NRF generally gave funding to students in other faculties than students that came from the humanities faculty. Participant 2 stated that:

I feel like the NRF is more interested in ummh students in other fields like in science or in economics, that's how I feel, because like every time I apply for funding like the NRF, I would always get like declined, my application would always get declined but I feel like those from other fields or schools, or departments were getting the funding especially in economics or

science. So, ja I feel like if you require funding from NRF you need not be a social science student. I mean some social science students get the funding, but I feel like it is catering for the students in other departments or fields in science and economics.

In addition to students having their applications declined by the NRF, they do not receive feedback on why their applications were denied. Participant 4 explain that:

When you apply [for the NRF] you apply knowing that you have the average that they are looking for or even higher than what they are looking for. So, if they decline, I think it would be better if they give you the reason as to why they declined. So, when they just decline without giving any explanation knowing very well that the funding would change my life, it is a bit unfair to not get any reason

Participants felt that the NRF processes were unfair, as they spend time filling in the long and complicated NRF applications, however when they get declined do not receive clarity on why they are rejected. Lastly, the participants expressed a loss of faith and in the NRF funding scheme. This was clearly articulated by participant 7 in the statement:

The NRF does not care, the NRF is not for students, the NRF does not cater for people that should be catered for. Many of us applied for the NRF but we didn't get the NRF, our reasons for applying for the NRF are simple and easy and straightforward but you still didn't get it. After not being successful you are not told that you are not successful, so NRF is pointless in my opinion, because if the NRF is the postgraduate students NSFAS, but the NSFAS covers all the students that applied for it but for the NRF a lot of us who applied for it didn't get it, even though we met the requirements but then when you do apply, you are told you don't qualify. So even for the people who do get it I don't know how they get it. In my undergraduate degree I did have NSFAS so obviously for my postgraduate degree I needed the NRF, but I didn't get it, also I don't know why.

4.6 Non-monetary challenges during postgraduate studies

Some of the non-monetary challenges noted by the participants included the overwhelming workload and time management. participant 8 stated that:

Every week is a submission week and I think there is only one assignment that I submitted on time and then there rest I am just behind. Not by one week but two weeks and also my not submitting my work on time it's not just causing a problem but it's causing more problems and more stress. The more I delay it's adding more work and more stress.

Moreover, participant 5 explained that:

Coursework can be very strenuous I had to do 14 modules, including winter school. This was a two-year program, when you are done with the modules then you have to do research. After the 14 modules you are exhausted and you really want to take a break, but you can't really take a break so there are challenges, because you are now on you own and you are expected to work independently and if you have a bachelor's degree and you don't have an honors, [but are now doing masters] you don't really have much information and you don't really know how to do research or have the skills to do research, that when the challenges, start coming in.

Participant 2, further asserted that:

I think like the workload and having to adjust to dealing with that much workload, having to devote your time, manage your time, completing each and everything , which is one of the reason why I didn't finish my dissertation when I was doing my masters [M1] because it was like time management and there were a lot of things that we needed to do and like the time wasn't on our side. You have to be a very disciplined person who is able to manage time properly and able to finish everything in the 12 months that we were given. I feel like Ja, time management that was one of the greatest challenges that I had that whole year of my master's program.

In addition to the challenges of an increased work volume are the challenges that are inherent with the online learning process. Participant 6 stated that:

Zoom is the biggest challenge! Mind you I completed my undergrad in 2019 so I had no idea how to be in class online. Wow! So, now every class I have attended is online since the beginning of the semester. First thing people will be unmuting their mics and you will be hearing chickens in the background or family conversations that we are not supposed to hear and or loud music. We are supposed to be focusing on class and yet you are getting easily

distracted by other students. Also, now since we only communicate via emails, I have emailed my lecture countless times and he never responded concerning an assessment he has given us. So that is a huge challenge in my opinion.

Participant 8 explained that:

The residence Wi-Fi is always an issue because you can't even attend the full seminar, it will just kick you out especially now that they have introduced something that is called the global protect. The global protect Has affected students in a very negative way because you never know today it might work tomorrow it might not work. Even the fact that for you to use Wi-Fi you have to basically install global protect, what if you don't have space on your phone then now you have to delete some of your important apps to install it.

Moreover, participant 7 proclaimed that:

The online thing has not been easy for me. It also goes back to what I said before about the need to have [face to face] consultations with my lecturers and unpacking the module one on one or if we took turns attending there is not a lot of us in my class and so in contact [classes] would be feasible, because it honestly has been hard sending the lecturer emails asking them to explain the work for you. They are going to explain it how they think they know it but not unpack it and that time you may need to ask more clarifying questions. You send an email asking for assistance and you are told that the chapter is easy. Also, the lecturers' consultations should be face-to-face. Consultation happens once a week, so it can't be that lecturers can't come to campus once a week for that period of time for example 9-2 pm Because consultation is something different then a class so if I didn't understand it in class, you can't explain it to me the same way you had explained it in class, I can't understand it again. I need face to face and explaining everything step-by-step.

Highlighted by the study findings were some of the challenges that derive from online learning processes such as poor Wi-Fi hindering lecture attendance, students having to wait for long periods of time to have their queries attended to by lecturers and the participants call to have lectures and or lecture and supervisors' consultations being reverted back to contact or face to face sessions. This was further emphasized by participant 8, in the statement:

For me I feel that since postgraduates are not that many, for example there is eight of us doing dramatic arts I don't think it would be a problem if our supervisors can make time for us to meet with them and just for them to ask the vice Chancellor or the dean to give them permission to come to campus and meet with us in person because I think that would really help. This whole zoom meeting is really not working for many of us not just me but many of us, maybe if they could just make it a point that they come to campus to meet with us in person it would really help.

Another challenge noted is with regards to the Ethics committee's response time when postgraduate students apply for ethical clearance prior to conducting their research study. Participant 4 expressed that:

Another challenge that most postgraduate students face including me is with relations to the ethical clearance and so you find that you don't get a response within two three months and so you have to call them every day and that costs money and mind you, you don't have funding. Those challenges really take a toll on the postgraduate student. I couldn't go to the ethics office at Westville because of Covid, when you send them an email, forget it they won't reply and so I was just calling them like literary every day. Telling them the status was not changing on rig. I applied in September, and they replied [the following year] January. So, I think the calling them none stopped helped in getting them to reply.

A theme that also came up from the study was that of difficulties that students experienced from the housing department. Participant 6 explained that:

Then there is this thing of allocating postgraduate students at res, I applied for residence when I was applying for my postgraduate studies and then I enquired to be allocated, there was a lot of challenges. I don't know what the lady is at department of housing, Howard Campus UKZN, but she told me to 'wait until everyone is allocated and then she can see if there is still space for me' imagine that I was treated like I was a secondary citizen in this institution and then after that she allocated me in a five-sleeper residence, imagine doing my postgraduate and being allocated in a five sleeper.... I found out that there are empty rooms in residences, they are not occupied, but still, I live with 4 other people which is hectic... at least if there was honesty from the leaders in every department at school, especially from the residence one. That one would be better for me. I just need transparency if you say there is

no space at the residence then there must be no space. Don't say there is no space and then I find a number of people saying why are you not staying at Tower [postgraduate residence] because there are many empty rooms at Tower. I mean it only break my heart; it doesn't make me feel better anyway.

Therefore, the participant felt that there is a lack of honesty and transparency with regards to how the department of student housing allocates the rooms to students. In addition, it is also clear that the department does not make priority allocation of single rooms at residences to postgraduate students due to the nature of their study program and quite area needed to effectively conduct research.

The study also found that the department of student housing is not responsive to students when they face challenges at the residences. This was asserted by participant 8 in the statement:

I had clashes with the R.A and I know that the RA does not like me as a person and he makes it a point to make my life miserable on a daily basis by him saying negative stuff about me to my peers in the residence, also to the securities and also him saying negative things to my face so that really messed me up mentally. There was a time whereby I broke down and I cried seven days straight, not even a single day whereby I had a smile on my face. I basically developed a thing of locking my door, putting a locker outside my door so that people won't know whether I am in or out. This has really contributed negatively to my academics because if your mental health is not in the right state then also you cannot function very much on your academics.

The Residence Assistance (R.A) is normally a postgraduate student that is appointed by the department of housing to oversee the residence. When the researcher probed the student if they have reported that the R.A is bullying her, participant 8 stated that:

I did report this to housing and basically, they said they have had complaints about the R A but needed more people to report this similar kind of problem and it must be something that is reported by maybe half of the residence before they can take it seriously. Which doesn't make sense because me as a person then my sanity is not taken seriously enough just because I'm just one individual pointing out things that I don't like the things that abuse my state of mind and my stay in this res.

Therefore, highlighting the dismissal of the students' complaint by the department of housing without them offering mediation or the removal of the student to another residence.

Participants also expressed that course facilitators and lecturers at postgraduate level fell short off rendering the necessary social support and pastoral care. Participant 2 asserted that:

I think socially and academically, the support that you get from the lecturers or the professors that are facilitating the whole master's program, I felt like the support from them was lacking. A lot of those lectures and professors went being there or invested in to sort of like helping us even on that personal level. Like what were the issues that we were having, how were they affecting us, the performance, why were we not being as productive or as enthusiastic as they wanted us to be. So ja, I feel like the support wasn't as much as we wanted it to be or as we needed it to be.

4.6.1 Postgraduate studies and students' mental health:

Moreover, another common theme noted by the study participants was the negative impact that postgraduate studies can have on the student's mental health. This was affirmed by participant 8 in the statement:

Obviously, I did think that it [postgraduate studies] was not going to be easy, but I also didn't think that it was going to be difficult as it is, I didn't think it was going to be so depressing as it is, I thought it was going to be a bit manageable, but then it turned out to be so depressing.

Participant 4 furthermore stated that:

Postgraduate studies really take a toll on the mental health of the students and so I think that it is important that the schools that we are enrolled in could implement programs with regards to the mental health and how to deal with the work overload. The literature review alone is like a lot. So, they must implement things that help us in maintaining our mental health because, if you are not okay mentally, there is nothing that you can do and your research will come to a standstill, so I think it is very important that the schools help us deal with postgraduate studies.

Moreover, participant 7 also expressed that:

My personal life, my social interactions with my friends, it [postgraduate studies] also affects my mental health. I have been to the doctor because of postgraduate studies. I do have sleep problems also and so it affects my lifestyle, like my day-to-day life and sometimes I feel frustrated and don't take stress very well and this happens because I have massive pressure, submissions, research, and everything. It is a lot to take in it is not easy

As a result of the pressure imposed by postgraduate studies one of the participants also shared that they are strongly contemplating to deregister from their postgraduate course, this was shared by participant 8 who asserted that:

It is the academic stress and remember I said that if you're state of mind is not okay then you won't be able to function very well on your academics and that really triggered everything that I am going through, it triggered my stress and there is a time whereby I really wanted to de-register because I felt like it was too much I wasn't going to make it I'm not going to make it in fact I am still undergoing that because I feel like there is so much on my shoulders, every week is a submission week and I am not saying that they should be doing otherwise however if maybe our supervisors were here, and if we had a contact education it would be very easy for us.

For some of the participants the stress was also attributed to the isolating and dehumanizing process of online education. Moreover, the interaction via technological tools was said to take away the value of face-to-face interactions and the lecturer having to explain hard to understand concepts in person and the students having the luxury to ask clarifying question if they do not understand in lectures or seminar presentations.

Participants also shared that they experienced postgraduate studies to be socially isolating. This was elaborated upon by participant 7 in the statement:

Ummh social life is the worst you don't have a social life. My side I arhh I don't have a social life; it is only when I have submitted something that I can breathe and get to talk to people and just have time for myself because it [postgraduate studies] is very demanding. I had also seen my tutor who were doing postgraduate previously, how they were always at the LAN or library. So, it has really affected my social life, but I know in the end I'm going to gain something.

Likewise participant 5 also shared that:

Socially you have to excuse yourself from some activities with your peers and spend more time in the LAN or consulting with your supervisor. There is not much time to be social and also you must be careful, because there are certain aspects that can come into play like depression and so you have to take care of yourself, it is of paramount importance, taking care of your mind, your body, your soul [because] at times you find that it is not the work that is the issue, however it is your mental state.

Additionally, participant 8 also explained that:

Socially I thought it was going to be welcoming, I thought it was going to be a welcoming environment where I can express myself but right now, I feel like I am in a cocoon or in a shell. I didn't think that it was going to be like that I just thought it was going to be welcoming and I don't want to say a freezone but just welcoming and not an isolating environment. Even if you go to the next person to ask for help, they do not know how to help you because they are going through the same thing as you so it is very much isolating because you can't even ask another Person for help. Even when they try helping you it doesn't help because their understanding is not, you're understanding.

4.6.2 Student support services:

Study participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the student counselling services and the fact that since Covid 19 the UKZN counselling services have moved online. This was expressed by participant 7 who explained that:

Ummh, they did not help me out [the support services] during my first year, but now that covid has affected everything they are no longer face to face if you want to see the psychologist. Also, when you set up an appointment, it is not something that can happen within a week. You call to make an appointment and they give you one after two weeks. If I'm facing a problem now, I would love to talk to the person now. So, for me it has not been effective... Also, with the UKZN therapist, as much as I would love to talk to them, it is like I have a time limit and when your time ends, they will end the session. Whereas with the private one you can even spend the whole day there. So, ja that is the reason why I cannot go there because I can't

express myself properly and having zoom meetings it is just not working for me. I want to connect and have you understand me face to face.

Here the participant raised several issues with the student support services one being that the reliance on technological tools to conduct online counselling, takes away from the human connection and effective interaction. In addition, the delayed assistance as a result of having to wait weeks before getting to see a psychologist, and having sessions being abruptly cut off when the time is over.

Likewise, participant 8 also shared that:

As much as they did suggest to for me to see a psychologist which I did go and speak to, but I really didn't feel an emotional connection with the person that I was talking to, because I feel like it's helps when the person is emotionally invested, it is easy to know that this person hears what I am saying. However, when a person keeps on asking me questions and [mind you] this session was online, and I was talking to the screen and not a real person. So that did not help me however it just added because I felt like I just wasted my time talking to this person or just talking to the screen. Yes, I could see her, but she was just looking at the paper and I could see that she was writing something down, but I felt like she was not even listening to me. For her I feel like it was just about her doing her work but not her wanting to listen to my problems.

Participants overall had a negative attitude towards online counselling services. Participant 7, moreover stated that:

I feel like if UKZN wanted these sessions to work then they would make them face to face post covid and follow the covid procedures but this thing of being over the phone and being on zoom meetings Is just not working for me. Also, when I set an appointment today because I'm going through the most today in my academics, social life, in my personal life and I get the appointment date for next week. Probably next week I would have survived what I'm going through.

Additionally, participants also shared other concerns that they felt hampered the effectiveness of the student support services at the university. Participant 4 stated that:

I think they [student support services] are doing their job it is just that they are understaffed. The humanities college has a lot of students compared to other colleges. So, they are

understaffed, but I do think they are doing their ultimate best in excelling. With regards to visibility their offices are not visible. I only knew about student support when I was an R.A at master's level. So, during my undergrad and honors degree, I didn't know anything about student support... So, with regards to that they really need to just be on the ground. Then to just sit in their offices and send emails. They must be on the ground, we must see them on the Shepstone foyer, telling students about their services and just interacting with the students and maintaining their mental health.

In addition, participant 4 also expressed that:

I think that there is not much awareness of those resources, there's also stigma around using them, also with the location, they are located at gate 1 and most people don't want to be seen going to gate 1 so I think if they can do something with the location and awareness.

Pointed out in the study were also some of the non-monetary challenges that were faced by postgraduate students during their postgraduate studies. Challenges included immense workloads, time management, the turnaround time for ethics clearance applications, mental ill-health at postgraduate level, issues with the student support services at the university and inadequate pastoral care from the academic staff.

4.7 Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are some of the ways in which the students relieve stress in between the postgraduate study's academic demands. Leaving the university residence for the weekend and going home to family was a prominent theme amongst the participants. Participant 4 stated that:

I was staying at res so when I was going through, like life showing me flames, I would just like go home. Leave my laptop and my work at res. I would go home maybe for a weekend; at home I get a sense of peace and just my mind becomes refreshed. I also talk to my mother and just leave the school part or block the school part out of my mind. Then after rejuvenating myself, or after I find myself within myself, I come back and continue with my studies.

Participant 5 also noted that:

I would go back home, once after every two weeks. I would exercise, I would make sure my spiritual part is still intact, mind, body soul. I would speak up with my other friends who were also doing research and I would ask assistance, also study groups, sometimes we would just go to the beach, have ice-cream here and there. After buying groceries for the month, we would get ourselves coffee and that is where we would get time -to talk and just let it all out and just going home, interacting with my child that also gave me motivation and strength as well.

The study found that going home for participants gave them a break from their studies and also provided the social support element as they would interact with their family members and get an opportunity to vent as well. Social relations and support seemed to be the common theme amongst the participants as participant 6 explained that

Arhhh, ummmmh, with me I just keep good people around me. People with positive energy towards you, people who see good in you even when you don't. I just keep those people around and stick around them and being good to them as well.

Participant 2 also stated that:

It was like social support from my experience we used to talk about things, like sit down have a chat have a conversation that really helped us, you know that you are not alone we are in this together we used to talk about these things chats like during our break time. so that was like the basic coping mechanism it really helped me. another thing was just like to have fun yeah just like have fun outside of like academia and doing whatever activities that we could do, activities that we could do outside of schoolwork.

When the researcher probed on the kind of activities that the participants would engage in outside of academia, Participant 8 stated that:

I know that it is not an appropriate thing but alcohol, sometimes just that one glass a day or I will just drink so much alcohol and just sleep, you know and also this is a bad habit, but it helps me. Sometimes I overdose pills so that I can just sleep and not think at all.

Participant 2 elaborated that:

Well (laughs) it depends people are different for me it was chilling with good friends listening to music having good food and drinks whatever it depends, like it depends on the person. I'm being honest. In as much as some people would say that is a bad thing but I am being honest.

Participant 1, also stated that:

I play soccer, Ja I just go play soccer with my friends or at the res league and go watch rugby when there are other universities playing against Howard college campus, sometimes we would do booze as well. I won't lie. Ja we will drink and go out and have fun, come back tomorrow morning, and then sleep. If we go out on Friday, then we definitely won't be doing anything on Saturday. Ja we would do booze as well.

When the researcher probed as what kind of places would the participant go out to, to have fun, participant 1 elaborated that:

We were going to clubs arhh sometimes restaurants, get the beers as well and what not, yeah most of the time we would go to clubs

Although participants shared that they also used alcohol as a stress reliver or coping mechanism, they seemed hesitant to share this information and justified it. Participant 2 further explained that:

It was just like to unwind and have a breather and like relieve the stress and everything so yeah. It wasn't something that we did the whole day or every weekend but like every now and then.

What was eminent from the study findings was that participants sometimes needed to take a break from their studies, engage in activities outside of school activities before resuming with the schoolwork. Participants also stated that they engaged in physical exercise as a means of relieving stress. Participant 3 expressed that:

I participated in the UKZN team for karate, and I would go to gym, also spent time with friends, for a few hours then go back to studying.

Some of the participants expressed that they also resorted to their faith and prayed as a means of coping. Participant 8 verified this in the statement:

Praying I do pray I pray at all times

Participant 6, also stated that:

Oh, and praying. Some believe that if you pray then it will help, I also believe so you just need to pray. Pray about it for your sanity, So, just pray. Don't pray for things to workout in miraculous way but just pray for your peace of mind and then you will be able to pull through.

Participant 7 also shared that:

Oh, I forgot to mention praying I do, talking to friends I do, postgraduate friends, people who understand and I also mentioned earlier that talking to someone who knows what happens in the post graduate life is also so helpful.

The study concluded that social support (talking to a friend, visiting family, having study groups), alcohol use, going out, physical exercise and praying were amongst the coping mechanisms that were used by postgraduate students as stress relievers during the time of high academic pressures and demands.

4.8 Support Systems During Postgraduate Studies

Social support from colleagues, family and friends positively impacts the students. For some of the participants the form of support that they received was words of encouragement, which they asserted that it helped to motivate them during tough times in their academic journey. Participant 3 explained that:

My parents they are supportive, they tell me I must do my best, and they remind me of where I come from. They tell me 'You know where you come from and so there is not much we can say, so you must do well and keep up' sometimes they would call, just to check up on me and how am I coping, how am I doing you know, so they always give me that support.

Likewise Participant 2 also asserted that:

I think my support system was my colleagues and fellow students that I was studying with quite a few of them we supported each other, we had conversations regarding how we would go about maneuvering through everything that we went through during that time. So we would have conversations with someone who was going through the same thing you were experiencing which really helped, because I felt like they really understood and their input

was quite helpful it helps you to make the whole experience kind of better even when you see that things are not going well Or whatever because the people are there and motivating you get through the whole thing and we were helping each other So yeah that was helpful.

Peer support was highlighted as being of paramount importance, as the participants felt that they were not alone in the journey, which enable them to also draw strength from fellow colleagues. Like participant 3, participant 2 also highlighted the importance of receiving words of encouragement from loved ones and explained that:

Even my family, even my mom and my dad, even though they didn't like (pause) didn't know what I was going through, [they are] old people, but they try like to support you, motivate you, like they believe in you and they know like they are your parents and like they see your potential, and they have been with you like throughout the whole journey and they know that you are capable of great things. So yeah, I feel like that support was helpful as well. The support from parents.

In addition, participant 8 also explained that:

I have one friend that is basically always there she basically always tells me that you can't give up, you need to go on, you have been through so much so you can't basically give up now. Even though I don't tell her so many things because sometimes we are scared to basically open up to friends and sometimes you feel like you are a burden to them you know. So, I don't tell her so much but whenever I do, she is always going to be like "have you seen the psychologist" or have you done this, or have you done that, so she is always supportive.

Some of the participants felt that when they academic staff was responsive towards their academic needs or when the research supervisor responded in a timely manner that it was a form of support. Participant 5 stated that:

My supervisor and her assistant. They send emails, and when I send work, she responds in a timely manner, the administrator as well, they are very helpful. even when you would go to campus before this covid thing, you would find them there and they would be able to assist you, so ja, they were a great support system.

Nonetheless, the study also found that it is not all participants that receive their family's support in their academic pursuits. When asked about having a support system, participant 1 explained that:

Ever since I've been at university, I have been myself and pushing myself, Ja. When it comes to academics I [only] have myself.

When the researcher probed if the family members understood the importance of pursuing postgraduate studies, participant 1 explained:

No, they don't understand, because in their minds it's just like you have a degree now so you can go anywhere and get a job and come and support the family, the families' basic needs. So, most of the time our parents don't necessarily like us going to further our studies with the postgrad things because to them it seems like a waste of time and delaying them because they have to still come to our aid and what not. You see all those things.

For some families, there is an expectation that when their child graduates, they will get a job and be able to help the family financially or be able to alleviate some of the families' financial responsibilities. Therefore, when the graduate student proceeds with postgraduate studies rather than looking for a job, this can be met with opposition, resulting in the family being unsupportive in the pursuit of a postgraduate qualification.

The awareness of this expectation caused some participants to work part-time jobs while pursuing postgraduate qualification in order for them to at least be financially independent from parents during the pursuit of their postgraduate degrees. Participant 4 stated that:

For my family it is very tricky, because as much as I know that they do have the funds to give me to study, but I made a decision when I was graduating for my undergrad, because like I knew already my parents had expectations of me that now that I'm a graduate. So even me I made the decision to be independent from this particular moment, even if it meant I had to go tutor, be an R.A, be outside my comfort zone [so be it]. I was very introverted when I was doing my undergrad but because I didn't want to be dependent on those people, I just wanted to do my own thing.

That why I applied to be a tutor, to be an RA for me to like to save up and in rainy days be able to take from my savings and pay for whatever fees or situations that needed payments for me to continue with my studies. For my family it is support emotionally, they don't know they are my support, but they are and so for funding I made it clear to them that I don't like to take money from them, I just want to teach myself to be independent as I felt they had done

their job to get me my first degree but then on I wanted to be independent and do things for myself. As much as it was challenging, I think I was successful in doing that, but I learnt a lot about myself also.

Other participants also shared that they also received academic, emotional support and financial assistance from people they were romantically involved with. Participant 7 stated that:

My boyfriend has been the biggest support ever he has a different career but when I complain about work, he offers to read up on my topic and understand it and summarizes my topic for me he just, he is literally the best!

Participant 4 also asserted that:

My boyfriend was [also] really supportive, I think it is because he had gone through this journey of doing his masters and honors so he knew how much it can take a toll on your mental health and from him it was emotional and financial support.

Participant 8, however explained that:

I have to ask my boyfriend for money and that actually makes me more or have this mindset that I can't leave this person even if he does something wrong to me. I can't leave him even if he hits me (he hasn't done that) but then I always think about these things because now he knows that I do not have funding. He knows that I depend on him so what happens when he gets tired of me? What happens if he wakes up tomorrow and he is like I no longer want to be with you? you are a burden, then what happens? I don't think I would be able to basically go on with my studies then I would have to basically deregister, because if he stops tomorrow to basically support me financially then I will have nothing. I will have no one to support me.

Thus, also highlighting the vulnerability and anxiety of solely relying on a romantic partner for financial assistance.

The study concluded that there were different kinds of support mechanisms that make life easier during postgraduate studies, some tangible some intangible. Support included words of encouragement, peer support, the research supervisor's responsiveness, and emotional and financial support. Limitations to support were evident in cases where there was a mismatch between the

family's financial support expectations from the graduate student and the graduate student deciding to continue with postgraduate studies.

4.8.1 The Families Education Background and Support

Another theme that came up in the study was that when students had immediate family members who had university qualifications, those family members would be much more supportive during the postgraduate journey. Participant 5 pointed out:

Both parents have academic qualifications, they know about these challenges and so they don't put too much pressure. They are very supportive, and their expectations are that if your registered for a course you just push on and they are very supportive.

Participant 7 also stated that:

I have the most beautiful family ever! not a day goes by without my family checking up on you, video calls and helping me to manage my work. In my family there are people who have a number of degrees and it's also helpful because some of them are still in school pursuing their masters, their PhD's. It is something that, as much as I may be the youngest (inaudible), but it is a journey is understood by those who have walked it before you.

Eminent from the study was also that participants that had siblings who possessed university qualifications expressed to have felt much more pressure from their siblings to also excel in their academics. This was proclaimed by participant 2:

Two or three of my sisters went to university and like they were smart, and I don't know I felt like they expected more from me towards the end of the year or when it came to graduation, they wanted to see me excel. They wanted to see my marks yeah, and I expected them to understand because they went through the same thing but for them, they didn't. I remember when it came to one of my modules during undergrad when I told them that I had a sup (supplementary exam) they were not supportive. They told me that during their years of studying they never had a sup, 'I had good marks I never ever had a sup So what is wrong with you?' and for me I was like how can you say this thing? because you know the kind of experiences that students go through but later, I understood that they just wanted to push me to that level but yeah, I felt like they expectations were a bit too high.

Participant 4 also stated that:

My big sister has a Btech in Electrical Engineering the second one has a Diploma in Electrical Engineering and a PGC majoring in Mathematics and Mathematics literacy, then there is me and my younger sister who is doing her grade 12 right now. Their expectations are just like duh, you need to go to university. Like it's like a tradition and there is nothing special about you going to university because it is like something that you need to do. It's a need, there's nothing special and we won't treat you like a golden child it is a need. That is something that our parents taught us from a very young age. So, it's just like ja, you need to get this master. They are also very supportive when it comes to come to me doing my postgraduate studies and my dad is always saying, you are very young even if you want to do your PHD, do it. As long as you still have the capabilities, do it because I think they do understand that it is very hard to study so they are supportive, but they won't glorify you. They will just congratulate you and give you support in life.

Nonetheless, participants who were first generation graduates also expressed that their families expected them to complete their studies and obtain good marks. This was affirmed by participant 3 in the statement:

academically, they expect me to perform well first of all and they expect me to finish off my degree and [get] good results.

Participant 8, also stated that:

Unfortunately, there is no one in my family that has a university qualification so all of them they just expect me to be this smart person and to make it

Therefore, the study results suggested that there is no relationship between the family's education history and support rendered to the student. Families educated or uneducated supported students in their academic pursuits.

4.9 Policies Informing Postgraduate Studies

Eminent from the study was that bulk of the students are not aware of any policies that inform postgraduate studies. This was affirmed by participant 3 in the statement:

Ummmhh to be honest I don't know of any policies specifically because no one ever taught me of any policies. So, I think whatever I want, I have to find for myself. So, there is no policy that I am aware off. The only one that I know is the one that I am studying and not the UKZN one. So, any institutional policies, regarding postgraduate study No.

Participant 8, asserted that:

Policies? Maybe they are, but I haven't read them, and I haven't accessed them and I'm sure they are, and I haven't read any of them.

Participant 1 also stated that:

Nope. There's none that I' am aware of.

Furthermore, participant 2 also asserted that:

Not really, I'm thinking right now and there is nothing that is coming to mind right now. I don't know maybe I'm not informed. Maybe I don't seek out information, as much as others. I'm trying to think but there is nothing that is coming to mind.

Nonetheless, participant 5 made mention of the UKZN student rule book and guidelines in the statement:

I know that there is the Uni calendar, they send information, student notices, the communique, there is also that blue book. That blue book is very important it can give you the upper hand on certain issues. Students should really know that blue book.

The study concluded that majority of the postgraduate students are not aware of policies, rules or guidelines that inform postgraduate studies.

4.10 Recommendations to improve the postgraduate program

When students were asked how they think the postgraduate program could be improved, different themes came up. The first theme was the need to reevaluate postgraduate programs wherein students are admitted to a master's program only after having done their undergraduate degree. This was asserted by participant 5 in the statement:

First of all, for a person, who doesn't have an honors degree, I just went from an undergraduate degree to masters, I think they should be a reevaluation on that. I really really think because it does become challenging, there are challenges. So, for instance, you don't have any experience on doing research and if it's the course such as the one I was doing, where you are doing 14 modules, it does become very much strenuous and if you are not staying at residence, the travelling also, where you have to take two taxis, that becomes strenuous, you get home, you need to also engage in household, chores that does become strenuous. I think there should be a reevaluation of the actual program, where you would have to go through the route of the undergraduate degree, honors and then masters and maybe then instead of making it two years then maybe we can make it three years, where the first year is like your honors years and the rest of the two years can be your coursework and your dissertation year. In that way students could be assisted with research.

The problem of skipping of the honours degree to doing a master's degree was highlighted in that it hinders students from gaining actual research experience and therefore becomes detrimental to the student's research self-efficacy at master's level. The lack of research experience and skills instils self-doubt in the student's research capabilities.

Another theme that was revived was the importance of having financial assistance being made available for students who come from less fortunate backgrounds to pursue postgraduate studies. Participant 1 pointed out that:

I think I'm gonna go back to this thing, over and over again, first things first its funding for students who comes from arhh, maybe I don't know, a tough background, those who need assistance the most. Then I think maybe it could lessen the stress when it comes to studying masters.

Participant 3, also emphasized that:

My view is that first of all funding, funding is the most important thing before any policy before anything. The availability of funding is most key.

In addition, the need to reevaluate the model used to allocate the UKZN postgraduate bursary was also brought up. Participant 8 explained that:

Firstly, I have to basically bring this up I don't know how the university funds people, who do they fund and how did they fund people I do not know their structure, but then I would basically look at that the top achievers however I would also look through our... because we provide [pay] slips, your family income. They should look at those slips [as well]. Other than just giving people who can survive without having the [UKZN] funding, because I feel like the people that have funding are the people that actually don't need funding. It is what I have seen here [at res] like I live with people here that are doing postgraduate that come from a very rich homes, but they still received [the UKZN] funding.

Therefore, this highlighting the need for the UKZN postgraduate bursary to not only be allocated on the basis of good academic performance, however, to consider both good academic performance and the recipients family income. Participant emphasized that funding opportunities are an absolute necessity at postgraduate level and therefore that there should be interventions aimed at attaining funds for postgraduate students.

Another theme that came up was that of the need to reevaluate the supervisors' qualification requirements and competence. This was noted by participant 4 who stated that:

The supervisors, I didn't have a challenge with mine, but the interaction I had with other students, they experienced really hectic stuff. So, I think the qualification of supervisors must also be really looked into. I think for honors the supervisor, must be doing PHD, and for masters the supervisor must already have PHD. I think it is unfair when doing your masters to be supervised by someone who is doing their PHD they might know so little, because then they just have a masters. But when they have a PHD it's like they really know what they're talking about.

In addition to supervisor competence, one of the participants noted that there was limited pastoral care and social skills from some of the course facilitators, which needed to be addressed. Participant 2 asserted that:

I don't know I feel like the people who are facilitating the whole program, I feel like those people are the (pause) or they have a great impact on the whole outcome of everything and the experience of the students who are enrolling in those programs. So, I feel like employ like people with the right sort of like interpersonal skills, social skills in a way. I don't know what I am trying to say but I feel like the people who would make the whole experience much better

for students. I feel like we want people that are strict, who would try to push you to that level, but I also feel that we need people who are much warmer, kind, supportive and that are understanding. I feel like the people who were facilitating the whole program, they were, I don't know but I'm not trying to say they had a lot of issues, but they weren't really much supportive or sort of like encouraging and helpful in a way.

Lastly the participants also highlighted on the need to revert to in contact learning especially for postgraduate learners as they are normally fewer in numbers, then undergraduate classes. Therefore, emphasizing the feasibility of social distancing in, in contact learning and teaching sessions for postgraduate students. This was emphasized by participant 8 in the statement:

Inasmuch as there is Covid, but postgraduates are not that many [in their programs] so I don't think it would be a problem for supervisors to basically come back on campus and meet us on campus because the whole zoom seminars thing is just not working for most of us.

From the findings it can be concluded that some of the things in which the participants felt that they should be reviewed are the master's degree programs that admit students with a bachelor's degree, the need to raise funding for postgraduate students and the reevaluation of the UKZN postgraduate bursary's allocation model, improved pastoral care from the academic staff and looking into the feasibility of reverting back to in contact learning for postgraduate students.

4.11 Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the research study and the themes that arose. The chapter also highlighted the participants transition experience from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies and the challenges they have encountered. The chapter further discussed the effects of postgraduate studies on the student's mental health and the coping strategies utilised by students to relieve stress were discussed. Moreover, the chapter highlighted students' the recommendations on how to improve the postgraduate program and experience.

Chapter 5- Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The study aimed to conduct an in-depth socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university. The objective was to explore the experiences of postgraduate students while at university and to explore some of the challenges and coping mechanisms adopted by postgraduate students. This chapter provides a discussion of the findings that emerged from the process of inquiry. The study findings will be discussed in relation to Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory and under the following themes: (I) student's motivation to enroll in postgraduate studies, (II) Implications of lack of funding at postgraduate level (III) Exploring non-monetary challenges at postgraduate level (IV) Social relationships and Support during postgraduate studies. Furthermore, the study limitations and recommendations will be discussed. Lastly, the study conclusion will be made by specifying the factors that shape postgraduate students' experiences while at university, the challenges postgraduate students face, and the coping mechanisms adopted by postgraduate students while at university.

5.2 Research Findings and Discussion

5.2.1 Students' motivation to enroll in postgraduate studies: the graduate unemployment problem.

Students' reasons to enroll in postgraduate studies were found to be influenced by the inability to secure employment post-graduation due to the high youth unemployment rate in the larger socio-economic and political context or macrosystem. In South Africa currently, youth unemployment is 65% and general unemployment is 40% (ChangeOrg, 2022). In a study conducted by Oosthuizen (2006) it was discovered that since 1995, the fastest-growing type of unemployment in South Africa is graduate unemployment. Similarly, Olubuajodu, Blaauw, Greyling, and Kleynhans (2015) posited that as South Africa is experiencing a growth in numbers of its graduate labour force, it is simultaneously experiencing a rise in graduate joblessness, along with its overall unemployment rate.

In the third quarter of 2021, the graduate unemployment rate had already exceeded the crisis level at 1.2 million (Kosie, 2022). Thus, the elevated proportion of graduate joblessness in South Africa gives rise to students enrolling in postgraduate degrees in an attempt to increase their employability post receiving a postgraduate qualification.

Contrary to long-held beliefs that a tertiary qualification leads to better employment prospects and a better quality of life, the case of graduate unemployment in South Africa proves otherwise. This can be best understood through the chronosystem lens of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory which explains that contextual factors are subject to change over time. Therefore, a much valued and weight-holding tertiary qualification in the past may for instance be redundant in the present or the future. Moreover, when considering graduate joblessness, it is also important to examine the factors around it in more detail such as the tertiary graduate output versus workplace readiness and employability. Lie (2007) argues, that there is to an extent a mismatch between the graduate skill supply and the skills being required for the workplace as graduates are highly academic orientated and lack insights on the latest developments and workplace applicable skills.

Mncayi (2021) explains that there is a mismatch between educational institution's throughput and the labour market skills demand. Consequently, this gives rise to graduate redundancy or under-employment – where an individual is employed in a position that is lower to them by some standard (for example: low income, longer working hours, over qualification etcetera). This conundrum represents a persistent silo approach and a disconnect between the higher education system and the workplace thereby shaping redundancy trajectories for the tertiary graduate outputs. According to Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory, this represents a dissonance at the mesosystem stage, as the training received by a university student from interacting with the university lectures is deemed incongruent with the potential employers' requirements. Thus, the negative interaction of these two microsystems results in negative unemployment implications for the graduate student. Hence, if producing skilled graduates for the South African workforce is part of the Higher Education Institution's mandate, it would be fair and rational to consult the employers regarding curriculum formulation and essential skills required from the graduate when they enter the world of work.

It is apparent that there is a necessity to consolidate information on the factors that lead to employment between employers and tertiary institutions. Moreover, programs such as vacation work for university students should be looked into as a means to ensure that workplace readiness is incorporated during the student's training years. Another factor contributing to graduate redundancy includes the graduate field of study. A study conducted by Moleke (2005) revealed that the field of arts and humanities accounts for the highest percentage of graduate unemployment, therefore highlighting an over-supply of these graduates and a misalignment with the job market requirements. Mncayi (2021) argues that this is an issue that should be interrogated with the Higher Education Institutions as to why students are enabled to continue to enroll in non-critical courses that do not contribute to the skills demand of the labour market.

Noticeable in the literature is that some groups bear an unequal share of the burden of graduate joblessness than others, namely the African graduate group (Backer, 2007, Oosthuizen, 2006, Mncayi 2021, Van de Rhee, 2012, Du Toit, 2003, Moleke, 2005, Van Broekhuizen, 2005). Oosthuizen (2006) elaborates that African graduates account for the highest share of graduate unemployment, with the black graduate unemployment rate being six times more than that of white graduates. In a study done by Mncayi (2021) on graduate unemployment, 80.8% of the unemployed graduates were African. Therefore, distinguishing that graduate unemployment is more prevalent among African graduates. This is attributed to that majority of African students tend to enroll in courses such as the arts and humanities which have low employment prospects as they do not qualify to enroll in courses which have greater employment prospects such as mathematics and science, as a result of having attended disadvantaged secondary schools Oosthuizen (2006).

Du Toit's (2003) research, however, contends this contribution as he stated that approximately 97% of white graduates, that held qualifications in the business and commerce field were employed in 2003 when compared to the 53.3% of black graduates that held degrees in the same fields. Which highlights the subliminal however prevalent employment or human capital discrimination directed at African graduates. More especially if they have attained their qualifications from previously disadvantaged institutions (Du Toit, 2003). A phenomenon that Van de Rhee (2012) explains as

being the resistance from the white leaders of the economy to embrace the idea of diversity and inclusion and to acknowledge human talent and progression based on merit alone.

Most of the African graduate's employment discrimination seems to be based on the perception that Africans have received inferior rural or township secondary school education or tertiary education from Historically Black Universities (HBU's) such as the University of Venda or Zululand (Pauw, Oosthuizen and Van der Westhuizen, 2006). This fragmentation in the South African education system was founded during the Apartheid regime. During this system, Black South Africans were highly oppressed, and this oppression was imposed amongst other things through education. Therefore, the disintegration of the education system and the founding of colonial schools and universities was an operative tool to unequally allocate resources Chisholm (2004).

Schools founded for Black South Africans were under-resourced, underfunded and inadequately staffed. Mabokela and Mlambo (2017) state that the participation of Black students in higher education was historically banned and began to rise in 1994. There was increased and open access to higher education for previously disadvantaged groups. Coupled with increased access to higher education is the rise in numbers for graduate unemployment. This is partly attributed to the skills mismatch and the perception of low-quality graduate outputs from (HBUs). This coincides with the findings of Moleke (2005) who noted that students from Historically White Universities (HWUs) were found to have better employment prospects than persons who graduated from (HBUs).

The Development Policy Research Unit (DPRU) administered a firm survey in 2006 where it was discovered that employers were biased and preferred to not employ graduates from (HBUs). Some of the firms that participated in the survey bluntly stated that they do not approach (HBUs) during tertiary recruitment drives because of the scepticism about the quality of education in these institutions. This highlights the need for (HBUs) to be well funded, to have a good budget allocated to attaining quality educators and to have research orientated focus to increase research breakthroughs, publications, or inventions to publicly redefine themselves and diminish the employment discrimination faced by their graduate yields.

5.2.2 Implications of lack of funding at postgraduate level

Lack of funding is one of the main challenges faced by students at their honours and master's level of study. Moreover, national government funding schemes such as the National Research Foundation fall short of satisfactorily funding qualifying applicants. Lebeau, Stumpf, Brown, Luchesi and Kweik (2012) rationalize that the funding scheme's deficiencies are due to an increased number of enrollments of poor but talented students into South African universities than there are available financial resources. Furthermore, the study's results collaborated with the findings of Naidoo (2021), regarding the NRF who stated that in the year 2021, the NRF received 6524 honours applications however they were able to fund 2698. For the master's level, 1 555 applications were received and 848 of the applicants were funded. For the doctoral level, 356 applications were received, however, 239 applicants were funded.

The government's main postgraduate funding body does not sufficiently fund financially disadvantaged postgraduate students, as a result of exosystemic decisions, because it is the state regulators that decide on the financial budget allocated for funding postgraduate students. This challenge has negative implications for postgraduate students' and introduces a new dynamic and added responsibility of having to balance postgraduate studies and part-time work to be able to pay for their living and educational expenses. Consequently, this new dynamic can add a different level of difficulty and elongate the time taken to complete a postgraduate qualification. This is supported by literature (Evans, Gbadamosi & Richardson, 2014., Curtis & Shani, 2002., Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003) that working whilst studying has negative effects on academic performance as the critical time that should be spent studying becomes dedicated to working. Thus, the lack of funding opportunities for postgraduate students, in South Africa poses added challenges to the university student journey.

In 2018 former President Jacob Zuma announced free higher education for poor working-class students, whose combined household income is less than R350 000 per annum. This was to be achieved through the conversion of the then NSFAS student loan to a government-funded bursary

scheme. However, ongoing debates around this announcement were around the question of how the state would sustainably mobilize revenue to pay for free tertiary education. On the other hand, some European countries such as Norway, Finland, Sweden, Germany, France, and Denmark have managed to make free or low-cost higher education attainable for national and international students. However, (OnlineCollegePlan, 2020) points out that in these countries the burden of the tertiary education cost falls back on the taxpayers as most of the countries in the European Union have a sales tax of 20% plus and an average income tax of 37.80%.

Compared to South Africa's 18% income tax and 15% sales tax (South African Revenue Service, 2022) the European tax range is much higher. Other foreseeable challenge with South Africa emulating the European model to make free tertiary education feasible are the government's excessive spending of the national income taxes and the widescale corruption. Furthermore, according to the (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020) the average net income per South African household is USD 9 338 (roughly R149 408). Thus, if South Africans paid 37% income tax it would mean that the average household monthly income would be at a low R7 843.

The problem with this blanket approach model to funding tertiary education is that South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Therefore, this model would be sourcing money from the poor to fund the education of the rich. As it is children from rich backgrounds who dominate in numbers the higher education institutions because they attend quality secondary schools and therefore gain easy access to universities Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete (2008). The United States of America (USA) adopts a different kind of system to pay for higher education tuition fees. The students' federal loans system and private loans are predominantly used to pay for college tuition (Hanson,2022). Some of the loans only expect repayment when the student has completed their education, nevertheless, this is still an extremely flawed system as some of the loans immediately acquire interests.

Lim (2016) further criticises this system as students' debt in the United States of America is equating to 1.3 trillion, with more than 7 million students struggling to repay their loans and defaulting.

payments. This is a system that deeply entrenches students into debt before their lives even begin. Hence there is a rising concern amongst policymakers in the (USA) education sector to launch a student debt forgiveness program. This would be an irrational system to attempt to espouse to the South African economically stunted context, as the rich would be lending the poor money and expecting to collect it with interest even more so in the context of gross graduate unemployment.

Differing from the Americans, Asians have their education heavily subsidized by the government. From the free or government-funded nine-year compulsory education from grade one to grade nine to tertiary education. In addition, most of the top universities in China are public and low costing to enable wider affordability even with an entry-level salary (Lim, 2016). Despite China having the largest education system in the world (ChinaEducationCentre,2022), the quality thereof is pointed out to lag that of the United States' quality of education and the student accommodation thereof, with some university offered student accommodation in China being a six-sleeper shared dorm room (Lim, 2016). Therefore, which leaves the question "can quality education be free?".

The South African government has managed to subsidize higher education for the majority of poor working-class students earning their initial degrees. This has been achieved through the state funded NSFAS bursary scheme. However, the same could be done for students earning their postgraduate degrees. This could be done through the implementation of a government spending accountability system, as over 1.5 trillion rands have been embezzled from the country's revenue through corruption from the period of 2014 to 2019 Buthelezi (2021). This is money that could have been used to finance and prioritise the country's higher education system among other things. One such African country that has prioritised making free education a reality for its citizens is Kenya (OnlineCollegePlan,2020).

In 2018, Kenya was ranked by the World Bank as the top African country for quality education outputs (Pattillo, 2020). Moreover, public education has been funded through public funds taxes, private companies' contributions and individual or international sponsor agencies (Itigi, 2016). A funding model that could be adapted to South Africa with the appropriate management of the country's revenue. Nonetheless, a noteworthy higher education funding model in South Africa

remains a work in progress, more specifically the funding of postgraduate studies. Valuable conclusions are made by (Illing & Sloan, 2018. Phakeng, 2017. Naidoo, 2021. Black & Visagie, 2020) that postgraduate studies are critical as they help grow the country's knowledge economy in science, innovation, and technological advancements.

Postgraduate students are further resourceful in producing research that aims to solve problems in the various fields of health, education, business, engineering, technology, law etcetera. Furthermore, postgraduate research is essential to aid the country's much-needed progression into a more equal and inclusive society. However, the scarcity of funding opportunities at the postgraduate level in South Africa impedes the postgraduate student's education journey, the country's postgraduate outputs and research development. Thus, this is an issue that the government needs to give urgent attention to by establishing a postgraduate funding model that will be beneficial to a greater number of financially disadvantaged postgraduate students.

5.2.3 Psychological and Educational challenges at the postgraduate level

Additional challenges faced by postgraduate students as demonstrated by the study results were mental health related issues, increased academic workload, and challenges with online learning. In a similar study conducted by Huang, Zhang, Wang, Xu, Lui, Wang, Guo, Xu & Lu (2021) challenges faced by postgraduate students were discovered to be academic, economic, interpersonal, workplace, marriage and physical and or mental health issues. Thus, highlighting the need for the university to better support postgraduate students. Academically, support can be rendered in several ways for example through having the academic staff available for consultations with students and or conducting workshops to help students develop skills needed for academic success. Moreover, having faculty or student support services driven peer support groups and effective on-campus student counselling services.

5.2.3.1 Mental Health Issues

The study further highlighted that the postgraduate journey is not merely an academic journey however that it is multifaceted. One dimension thereof that is overlooked in the literature, however that was notable in the study is the emotional aspects of the postgraduate journey. The study results indicated that feelings of low research self-efficacy, anxiety, depression, self-doubt, and isolation, can be crippling to the postgraduate student's mental health. These results support the finding of a study by Forrester (2021) where mental health issues for postgraduate students were found to be the imposter syndrome, burnout, anxiety, and depression experienced due to an immense pressure to secure funding, request for funding extensions (due to studies not being finalized in time), publish academic work, and land a job in highly competitive job markets.

In another comparable study by Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, and Vanderford (2018) it was discovered that postgraduate students are six times more likely to experience mental health issues such as depression and anxiety compared to the general population. This is due to the determination and yearning to succeed by postgraduate students that they end up compromising work-life balance to put in long hours towards academics and research work. In so doing neglecting that a work-life balance is related to mental and physical well-being. The aforementioned results emphasize the necessity to expand mental health support for postgraduate students. Currently, at this South African tertiary institution, student counselling services are offered on an online basis. However, the current study's results discovered a general dissatisfaction and negative experiences with online counselling services offered by the university's student support services.

Online counselling services are experienced to be impersonal, ineffective, and an impediment to the effective formation of the client-therapist relationship. In a comparable study by Békés, Aafjes-van Doorn, Luo, Prout, and Hoffman, L. (2021) similar challenges associated with online therapeutic sessions included difficulty reading the patient or therapist's emotions, internet or technical problems, problems feeling or expressing empathy, patient-therapist struggles to form human connections, difficulties to find a safe and professional space for online counselling sessions, problems adhering to professional boundaries, risk of getting distracted during the sessions and concerns of confidentiality of the online sessions. These challenges, therefore, emphasize that there are inherent challenges with the reliance on technological tools to render a human interaction-based service.

Huddleston (2021) however, argues that online counselling is better than contact counselling as it is more accessible, flexible, eliminates travel expenses, has increased privacy and is more comfortable as both parties get to choose spaces that they will be comfortable with, to conduct or attend therapeutic sessions. The core fundamentals in counselling are the counselling micro-skills, which are the basic skills in counselling that aid with rapport building and consequently the beginning of a counselling process. Micro-skills include listening, paying attention to nonverbal communication cues, the appropriate use of silence, empathy and responding (Beck & Kulzer, 2018). Therefore, if an online therapeutic session hampers rapport building, impose difficulty in reading nonverbal communication cues or emotions and ultimately impose problems with feeling or expressing empathy as was found to be the challenges of online therapeutic sessions in a study done by Békés, Aafjes-van Doorn, Luo, Prout, and Hoffman, L. (2021), then it defies the purpose of the counselling session.

The university's decision to solely offer online counselling services despite the student's discontentment is a phenomenon that can be understood using the exosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory. This level highlights the broader social frameworks or institutions, such as the university wherein do not include the individual's contribution in decision making, however, the decisions made therein affect the individual. The decision to transition from contact counselling sessions to online sessions was made by the university during the early months of the Coronavirus pandemic. However, with the decline in Covid 19 cases and the easing of lockdown regulations, the university has kept to its decision of offering solely online counselling sessions without seeking the students' input on the matter. Consequently, highlights the institutions' power to make decisions that will affect the students at an individual level without having to consult them.

5.2.3.2 Postgraduate workload

Students to some extent felt overwhelmed by the work capacity at the postgraduate level. These findings are in line with the proclamation by (Oliver, 2007) who stated that most often at times graduate students are not well prepared to deal with the challenges that come with pursuing

postgraduate studies, the vast workload and the increased academic demands and pressure. This could be attributed to the fact that there is limited availability of information (and research) on the transition challenges that undergraduate students may undergo as they navigate from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies. Furthermore, there is limited information on how universities can sufficiently support postgraduate students (McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017 & Lovicu, 2021). Thus, the limited knowledge and expectations of postgraduate studies may result in them being overwhelmed and underprepared for the immense postgraduate workload.

5.2.3.3 Online Learning Challenges

The current study further produced results that indicated that online learning is inherent of challenges and exacerbates the isolating aspect of postgraduate studies. In a different study, challenges experienced by students with online learning were multiple distractions, challenges with staying motivated, technical problems, being left behind with work, and the diminished social aspect (Klawitter, 2022). In a similar study by Kumar (2015) challenges associated with online learning were found to be challenges related to adapting from conventional classroom learning to virtual classrooms, the internet, and technical challenges, diminished self-motivation which becomes an essential part of the eLearning process, time management difficulties resulting in being left behind with work and computer literacy or unfamiliarity with online learning computer programs. As in the case of the UKZN student counselling services, lectures and seminars were moved from the face-to-face traditional classroom setting to computer-based virtual classrooms amid the Covid 19 pandemic.

However, with the easing of the lockdown regulations, the university has not restored the learning arrangement to its former traditional classroom setup. Herein again the power of the broader social frameworks or the exosystem is demonstrated as decisions affecting the individual are made at the institution level without the institution having considered the individual's opinion or contribution. On the other hand, Gautam (2020) advocates for online learning as he states that it is efficient, it reduces costs for parties involved, is easily accessible regarding place and time, improves the students' attendance, and new technical skills are being learned and imparted. Despite the benefits of online learning, it is important for the university to consider that not all students do well in online learning.

Moreover, before the Coronavirus pandemic, the students at this South African tertiary institution had intentionally chosen a contact-based learning institution, despite there being other online-based institutions such as the University of South Africa (UNISA). Therefore, with the easing of the lockdown regulations and the country gradually opening up, it may be worthwhile for the university to engage with the students and ascertain their preference for online versus contact learning and or consider a hybrid approach to learning then to solely limit lectures, seminars and lecturer or supervisor consultations to an online basis.

5.2.4 Coping Mechanisms

Bearing in mind the aforementioned study results it is apparent from the study that postgraduate studies can be taxing and stressful to the student. Thus, the study further explored coping mechanisms utilised by students during their postgraduate studies. Coping mechanisms utilised were taking a break from academia, spending time with loved ones, physical exercise, praying, overdosing on medication and alcohol use, which are emotion regulating coping strategies. In similar studies conducted by (Sharma, 2003, Baker & Berenbaum, 2007, Popa, Schenk, Rus, Szasz, Suci, Szabo & Cojocaru, 2020) it was discovered that coping strategies employed by students were generally both emotions focused (seeking social support, physical exercise, use of drugs to escape reality etc.) and problem-focused (planning, generating different possible solutions, implementing the solutions, breaking down the task etc.) coping strategies.

The limitation of the current study's results to that of the previous study's results on coping mechanisms can be explained by Sharma (2003) who states that an individual's choice of coping strategies is subject to the resources for coping that are available to the individual. Resources for coping include knowledge, skills, attitudes, social, material, physical and societal resources. Therefore, the study participants may have not been conversant that problem-focused strategies such as planning, breaking down tasks, problem- solving etcetera can be used as a means of coping.

5.2.5 Social relationships and Support during postgraduate studies

Positive social relationships (with the research supervisors, colleagues, peers, family, and friends) were discovered to positively impact students' motivation, academic performance, and mental health. In line with these findings, Kosi (2020) explained that having people to converse with and or approach during tough times helps to provide the student with words of encouragement, attention, and a positive self-image. Likewise, Stacey, Talbot and Coxon (2019) state that social support is crucial to creating a positive postgraduate student experience and that it is vital for students to build a social network with colleagues, friends, peers, and family to help combat feelings of stress and social isolation. Moreover, Beutel and Anderson (2008) declared that parental support has a positive influence on the student's academic performance. This phenomenon can also be understood through the application of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory, the mesosystem level.

As the theory states that the interaction of the different primary socializing agents in the individual's life are interconnected and exerts influence on the individual. Meaning that if all the socializing agents in the individual's life prioritize education and support the individual's academic pursuits, this will influence and affect the individual's academics positively. Moreover, the study findings indicated that support included, words of encouragement, financial and emotional support, practical research support and the supervisor's responsiveness to student queries and research assistance needs. However, contrary to the existing literature that views the student-supervisor relationship in a somewhat negative light (Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary & Ryan, 1999, Kumar & Stracke, 2007, Johnson & Burnard, 2002) the results of this current study indicated that participants who were doing their master's degrees were content with the supervision they received from their supervisors.

The student's contentment was attributed to that they started their master's degree before the Covid 19 pandemic and before postgraduate supervision had transitioned to being solely online. Therefore, they had met their research supervisors face to face and had already formed a preexisting relationship with them. Thus, they had experienced subjective support (the perception that they had social support from their supervisors) as they could go and knock at the supervisors' offices whenever they felt stuck during the research process and objective support (the actual support they received from their supervisors). Nonetheless, students that were doing their postgraduate studies post-Covid 19 were

disgruntled by the lack of quality working relationships with their supervisors, ineffective communication imposed upon by the utilization of technology as a medium of interaction and having to wait prolonged periods to have their emails and queries responded to by their supervisors. Similar to a study conducted by Zaheer and Munir (2020) the challenges with online learning were discovered to be inadequate supervision interaction, students' perceptions about online learning being difficult, challenges with online syndicate work amongst students and irregular contact, and technological issues.

5.2.6 Limitations and Recommendations for future research

The study interviewed eight postgraduate students from a South African tertiary institution, therefore restraint should be exercised to not overgeneralize the results of the study. The study focused on the experiences of postgraduate students at the one South African tertiary institution and therefore may not necessarily apply to students in other universities. Furthermore, other factors such as race, age, the families or students' income, and place of residence (on-campus or at home and the proximity thereof) that may affect the postgraduate students lived experiences while at university were not considered in this study. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to consider such factors in future studies. Future studies may also benefit from increasing the number of study participants and or using a different study design to be able to include a larger research sample. Moreover, it is recommended that researchers conduct similar research in other South African universities. This will give an all-inclusive outlook on postgraduate students' experiences; it will also enable comparison of the study findings between various universities and further highlight the more prevalent issues amongst postgraduate students and ways in which postgraduate can be better supported in their academic journey.

5.2.7 Conclusion

Despite observed limitations, this study illustrated the often-concealed challenging nature of postgraduate studies and highlighted the necessity to better support postgraduate students in their academic journey. Moreover, the study objectives and questions (see chapter one) were answered, and the following conclusions can be drawn from the study. Factors that largely shape postgraduate students' lived experiences while at university are interpersonal relationships, finances, academics,

and interaction with the academic staff and services departments. Moreover, challenges faced by postgraduate students at this tertiary institution were around issues of financial difficulties, increased workload, time management, online learning, ethical clearance applications turnaround time, problems with the housing department and mental health issues. Furthermore, coping mechanisms adopted by postgraduate students include taking a break from academic activities, drinking alcohol, seeking professional and social support, praying, and engaging in physical exercise.

5.3 Recommendations of the Study:

5.3.1 Postgraduate students

- Postgraduate students are encouraged to join peer support groups or online postgraduate communities to share experiences, struggles, and practical advice and also draw on one another for support, which can help postgraduate students feel less alone in their experiences and also help them overcome the isolating and lonesome journey of postgraduate studies.
- Postgraduate students are encouraged to read academic blogs as this can be a source of support that students can draw on during postgraduate studies. Reading blogs can also help postgraduate students learn from the experiences and struggles of others and can help them learn useful information.
- In instances where postgraduate students are obligated to work, it is encouraged that postgraduates' students find work that is related to their postgraduate field of study as this will not solely allow them to generate an income, however, to also build up their work experience, network and build connections in their field of study.

5.3.2 The South African tertiary institution

- The university is encouraged to regularly host research skills development workshops for postgraduate students.
- Furthermore, the researcher recommends that the University reevaluates master's courses that admit students that have only completed their three-year undergraduate programs (without having done an honours degree). This study found that transitioning from a three-year

undergraduate degree to a master's degree has negative implications for a student expected to do master's level research work without having gotten prior research experience at an honours level.

- The researcher recommends that the university prioritizes the instigation of postgraduate peer support groups to help combat feelings of stress and social isolation in postgraduate students.
- The researcher recommends that the University initiate a Postgraduate Affairs Office, that will be cross-faculty and cross-discipline that will come together to support and enhance students' postgraduate experience at the university.
- Moreover, the University can induct from existing staff a board of people at the institution, that will be dedicated to raising funds for financially needy postgraduate students (they could open a go fund account for postgraduate students, appeal to the private sector companies, alumni, or any willing individuals to donate funds specifically for postgraduate students) as they do not qualify for NSFAS funding.
- It may be worthwhile for the university to reevaluate the postgraduate bursary allocation model. Additionally, to considering academic performance, it is recommended that the student's proof of family income is also considered to ensure that students qualified to receive the bursary are those that are academically talented and who also come from financially disadvantaged households.

5.3.3 Student Support Services

- The researcher recommends that the student support services revert to contact counselling sessions while ensuring to observe all Covid 19 protocols. This is because online counselling sessions are experienced by students to be impersonal, ineffective and impede the human interaction component of counselling.
- The researcher recommends that the student support services make themselves and their services more visible on campus. They could hand out flyers to the students on campus and or advertise and host mental health support groups, seminars, or workshops so that students are well informed about them and the services they offer.

5.3.4 The University Housing Department

- The housing department should be more responsive to the needs of students staying in residences.
- It is recommended that the housing department puts in place an accountability plan for Residence Assistance's or staff members that abuse their power to the disadvantage of the students.

5.3.5 Parents

- Parents are encouraged to be involved and supportive of the students' academic pursuits as it has been proven to have a positive impact on the student's academic performance, motivation, and mental health.

5.4 Summary

The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university. Moreover, the objective was to shed some insight into the following research questions: what are the experiences of postgraduate students while at university? and what are some of the challenges and coping mechanisms adopted by postgraduate students while at university? which have been sufficiently covered by the study findings. This chapter discussed the study findings in relation to the relevant literature and Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theoretical framework. Moreover, the chapter discussed the study limitations and made recommendations for future research and the overall study recommendations.

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Appendix 01

Consent Letter and Information Sheet

My name is Sisanda Khoza, and as I have requested for you to take part in my study: A socio-ecological analysis of postgraduates lived experiences while at university” Before we continue, I would like to record this interview so that I can later transcribe it and do data my data analysis.

Q) Do you give me permission to record this interview? (Then start recording)

Process: Firstly, I would like to read to you my consent form and then afterwards you can tell when you give consent or not participate in the study: After you have given consent, then we move on the 12 interview questions

Dear Participant

My name is Sisanda Khoza, and I am currently studying my master’s in industrial psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus and I am the project leader for the research study which I am asking you to take part in.

I hereby request that you be part of a study that I am conducting. The study is interested in the experiences of postgraduate students while at university. The study will be conducted amongst 8 postgraduate students at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Howard College Campus and the study title is “A socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at University”.

The study does not ask harmful questions or information that will evoke depressing emotions or discomfort. Participation in the study is voluntary, your privacy and confidentiality will be maintained at all times, and you will be allowed without any discrimination or prejudice to withdraw from the study at any given time should you so wish or feel uncomfortable to continue. I Would like you to participate by agreeing to undergo a semi- structured interview where an interviewer will ask you various questions about the topic. The interview should last for about 60

minutes, and I also request for permission to make a digital recording of the interview.

The information given (by you) will be stored safely in locked cupboard for a period of not less than five years before disposal and the study does not carry any costs, incentives, or reimbursements for participation.

If you have any queries or concerns, please feel to
contact me: khozasisanda@gmail.com / 0671856610

Kind regards,
Sisanda Khoza

I have a few questions before we continue with the interview:

- 1) Did you understand everything I have just explained to you?
- 2) Do you give consent to take part in the study?
- 3) The data will be reported anonymously and confidently, therefore in the write up I will be using pseudonyms. Do you have a pseudonym of choice that you wish for me to use in my write up?
- 4) I will also be taking notes during the interview, are you fine with that?

Contact details of the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC)

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Telephone: 031 260 3587/4557/8350

Appendix 02

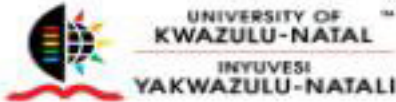
Interview Questions

- 1) What influenced your decision to pursue postgraduate studies? And why specifically your field of study?
- 2) When you were doing undergraduate studies, what were your expectations of postgraduate studies? (Probe: academically, social and on a day to day?)
- 3) How did you choose your research topic? And how do you describe your relationship with your research supervisor?
- 4) What are some of the challenges that you experience as a postgraduate student?
- 5) What could be done to enhance your experience as a postgraduate student? (Probe: academically, socially, financially?)
- 6) Are you aware of any institutional policies that inform postgraduate studies? If so, what are they?
- 7) What has been your experience with postgraduate funding opportunities, applications, or the National Research foundation (NRF).
- 8) How does student funding become a factor when pursuing postgraduate studies?
- 9) What are some of the coping mechanisms or stress relievers do you employ?
- 10) Talk to me about your family: is there anyone who has University qualifications? What are the academic expectations they have of you?

- 11) Who is your support system in your academic pursuit? Probe: How do they support you?
- 12) Suppose you we put in charge of redesigning the postgraduate program, what would you do differently?

Appendix 03

Ethical Approval Letter



04 April 2022

Sisanda Natalie Khoza (215011725)
School Of Applied Human Sc
Howard College

Dear SN Khoza,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003818/2022

Project title: A socio-ecological analysis of postgraduate students lived experiences while at university

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 21 January 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

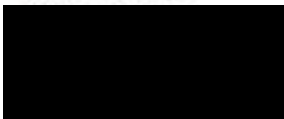
This approval is valid until 04 April 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/research-ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

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Appendix 04

Gatekeepers Letter



24 November 2021

Ms Sisanda Khoza (SN 215011725)
School of Social Sciences
College of Humanities
Howard College Campus
UKZN
Email: 215011725@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Dear Ms Khoza

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) towards your postgraduate studies, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

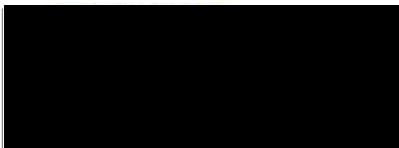
"A socio-ecological analysis of postgraduates lived experiences while at University."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with students on the Howard College campus (Taking in account the regulations imposed during the lockdown ie restrictions on gatherings, travel, social distancing etc. ZOOM, Skype or telephone interviews recommended).

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance approval letter;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the PAIA and POPI Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.



Dr K Cleland
Registrar

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 7971 Email: registrar@ukzn.ac.za Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix 05

Turnitin Report

Mss Thesis

ORIGINALITY REPORT

2 %	2 %	1 %	1 %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Submitted to University of KwaZulu-Natal Student Paper	<1 %
2	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	<1 %
3	"Coping strategies", Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health, 2013 Publication	<1 %
4	Submitted to University of Cape Town Student Paper	<1 %
5	www.apadivisions.org Internet Source	<1 %
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