

**EXPLORING PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY MASTER'S DEGREE  
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF EMERGENCY REMOTE LEARNING AT A  
SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY DURING A GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS**

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**COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES**  
**DECLARATION - PLAGIARISM**

I, Brie Parker, declare that

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Signed,



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Dr Ruwayda Petrus (Supervisor)

Date: August 2024

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Introduction**

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) compelled the world to reassess and alter our ways of interacting across all facets of living, business and education, including our approach to higher education. To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, universities prohibited campus-based academic activity and initiated Emergency Remote Learning (ERL), requiring students to study online, which had varying effects on their learning. Previous studies focused on universities, staff, and students, but little is known about the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students studying in an ERL context. This study explores the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students using emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 epidemic. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy was used to frame the study by exploring how the experiences of using ERL during the pandemic informed the students' self-efficacy beliefs of their studying.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research approach to explore the experiences of Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) of professional psychology master's students at a South African university during COVID-19. The data were generated using semi-structured individual interviews. Six purposively selected professional psychology master's degree students were interviewed. These participants were obtained through snowball sampling at a university in KwaZulu-Natal. Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

### **Findings**

The shift to ERL distinguished three major themes to examine how participants in my study experienced a time of unprecedented uncertainty while being pushed further into the digital world of teaching and learning without the experience of using the technology or navigating the new learning management systems. The participants persevered to finish a master's degree and grappled to self-regulate their studying in the ERL context. Their wellbeing- physical, emotional, and psychological- was affected as they also tried to manage their work-life boundaries and understand the change in their living spaces and to the way they engaged with other students and lecturers. In terms of facilitators and barriers with regard to students engaging with their studies, three further themes were developed. The participants

considered the cost of studying, how matters around space and technology affected their ability to focus on their work and the role that social support played in their academic experience.

### **Implication of these findings**

The professional psychology master's degree students' experiences of studying at an organisation such as a university are complex and entangled in the way they made meaning of their studying using ERL in a global health crisis. They seemed to approach the ERL in a pragmatic way that focused on getting their studies done, despite the barriers they experienced in their unique set of circumstances. This study has implications for university management in setting emergency plans in place for teaching and learning when it is abruptly halted. Furthermore, to enable an efficient and supportive remote learning environment for postgraduate students.

**Keywords:** *Academic support, COVID-19, Emergency Remote Learning, Learning Management Systems, Motivation, Self-Efficacy, Social support, Student wellbeing*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction to the study

The novel coronavirus disease of 2019, otherwise known as COVID-19, was a severe acute respiratory syndrome first emerging as an outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December 2019/January 2020, and the World Health Organisation officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Baloran, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Tull et al., 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Wallace et al., 2021; WHO, 2020; Ye et al., 2020). When COVID-19 struck the world, emergency remote learning (ERL) was suddenly thrust upon Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The impact of the global health crisis was large-scale and pervasive, with people all over the world experiencing its impact. Worldwide, universities had to unexpectedly pivot to remote online learning in March/April 2020 when lockdown measures were introduced (Crawford et al., 2020). The shift was abrupt, as all university faculties had to move their teaching and learning to online platforms to utilise ERL and continue educating students (Rahiem, 2021). Most universities whose programmes were designed to operate in person were not prepared for the shift to emergency remote online teaching and learning, as the teaching methods were not meant for nor suited to engaging students online (Crawford et al., 2020). Throughout the pandemic, many teaching platforms initiated academic modules online. However, most emergency teaching and learning used the same face-to-face teaching and learning strategies but on an online platform (Crawford et al., 2020). It was clear that universities and faculty were unprepared for the sudden conversion of their programmes or for the need to create quality online teaching and learning programmes. Evidently, they did not have enough time to discuss the way forward in depth with their stakeholders, such as the students (Feldman, 2020; Lobos et al., 2022; Rahiem, 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2021).

In South Africa, the lockdown started in March 2020 when the government declared a National State of Disaster and continued until 5 April 2022, with restrictions continuing until June 2022 (CoGTA, 2022; Government, 2022; Health, 2022; Phaahla, 2023). South African universities moved their operations online in 2020, requiring an extensive adjustment to online modes of teaching and learning. While these universities had already been using some online platforms, the progress was slow compared to the accelerated integration into the digital world during the pandemic. The South African universities were slow to return to regular face-to-face functioning, which occurred in phases and depended on the stage of COVID-19, the majors of

the students, the year of study and, ultimately, the decisions of the universities (Petersen, 2022; Segar, 2020). The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was one of the universities to gradually return to face-to-face teaching and learning modalities, using a phased approach over the months of February to March 2021 (Nair, 2021). While South African universities such as UKZN had used learning platforms such as Learn and Moodle before COVID-19, these platforms were not used to their full extent, with some features being used more frequently than others (Padayachee et al., 2015). The pandemic accelerated the use of these applications more extensively.

While some universities had implemented online learning prior to the pandemic, ERL was different, and student experiences would have been different too (Hussein et al., 2020; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students of ERL while studying at a South African university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **1.2 Background**

### ***1.2.1 The COVID-19 pandemic***

There was no global pre-existing immunity towards the virus, nor were there vaccines and/or cures to mitigate it. Most nations worldwide instituted various nonpharmaceutical interventions or public health containment measures to limit the transmission of COVID-19 to and in countries (Ye et al., 2020). Some smaller-scale interventions included policies around sanitising, washing hands, and wearing masks (Cleland, 2020; Peters et al., 2020; Praghlapati, 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020). Larger scale interventions included nationwide lockdowns, suspension of crowds from gathering, stopping social activities, and various other restrictions on freedom of movement. Governments encouraged their citizens to stay at home as much as possible and practise social distancing (Cleland, 2020; Peters et al., 2020; Praghlapati, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Tull et al., 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020). In many cases, people experienced drastic changes and disruption in their daily lives and lifestyles, containing their living, exercising, working and studying to the confines of their homes (Baloran, 2020; Maison et al., 2021; Oster et al., 2022; Tull et al., 2020).

This extraordinary experience had a noticeable global psychological impact (Oster et al., 2022). Literature has explored various stressors that impacted individuals. Some stressors were financially or economically founded, such as a concerns about food supply and job loss

(Feldman, 2020; Gupta & Agrawal, 2021; Karavida et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021; Unger & Meiran, 2020). Other stressors arose from uncertainty and fear perpetuated by myths and misinformation in the form of fake news, conspiracy theories, erroneous news reports and public misunderstandings associated with social media. Often, this information was unverified by its recipients and taken as fact, thus amplifying feelings of uncertainty, fear and mistrust (Lovrić et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2021; Stamatis et al., 2022; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Wallace et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2020). Studies further noted people's fears and concerns about themselves or their loved ones infecting one another in their homes or exposure to the virus elsewhere. Those with family who were vulnerable or older were especially anxious (Baloran, 2020; Gupta & Agrawal, 2021; Oh et al., 2021; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Wallace et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). A further source of stress related to the disruption of social life and feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Meeter et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2020; Tull et al., 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Wallace et al., 2021). These stressors placed a strain on the mental health of people in the forms of increased stress, tension, fear, depression, uncertainty, isolation, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and anxiety, which in cases lead to anxiety disorders such as panic attacks, Acute Stress Disorder (ASD), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Baloran, 2020; Feldman, 2020; Gupta & Agrawal, 2021; Kamaludin et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2021; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Peters et al., 2020; Pillay et al., 2021; Praghlapati, 2020; Stamatis et al., 2022; Tull et al., 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Wallace et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2020). Some studies noted that the negative impact of the pandemic-related stressors was mitigated by an increase in social support seeking, social cohesion and closeness (Tull et al., 2020).

South Africa recorded its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 5, 2020, and its first reported COVID-19-related death on March 29, 2020. From then on, South Africa experienced several waves of cases spiking and then subsiding, as well as a few other variants of the virus (Crawford et al., 2020; Jassat et al., 2021). President Ramaphosa of South Africa declared a national state of disaster on March 15 2020, leading to interventions such as lockdowns, limitations of gatherings, restrictions on travel and the closures of all schools from March 18, 2020 (Crawford et al., 2020; Feldman, 2020). At its peak in the first week of April 2020, UNESCO reported that approximately 195 countries had implemented national school closures, which impacted 91.3 per cent of the global student population or affected 158 099

000 learners (Hussein et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). Other academic institutions, such as universities, soon followed suit and closed with the schools of South Africa (Crawford et al., 2020).

### ***1.2.2 The pandemic, the university, and the students***

As noted by Cohen et al. (2020), university campuses are, by nature, designed for the intersection of many people and were thus deemed a hotspot for virus transmission. Consequently, the closure of educational facilities was considered as an effective intervention (Hussein et al., 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Su & Guo, 2021). Most universities around the world eventually instituted temporary closures which suspended face-to-face teaching and learning to explore online options, resulting in rapid digitization of curriculums to save the 2020 academic year (Baloran, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Unger & Meiran, 2020). The closure of universities and colleges mostly started between January and March 2020 globally and from March 18 until April 15 2020, in South Africa (Baloran, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020).

Students' ability to perform well academically might have been influenced by their resilience and coping in such a global health crisis, and their attitude towards the pandemic. Several areas have been indicated as affecting students' attitudes towards studying during COVID-19, which assisted in their ability to cope with this stressful event. An array of personal, social, and environmental dynamics played a role in the attitudes students held towards their studies while using ERL during COVID-19 (Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Tull et al., 2020).

The ability of students to focus on their academic work was also influenced by numerous facilitators and barriers framed by their physical and socioeconomic environment and, furthermore, the kind of academic support they received (Barklam & Felisberti, 2022; Karavida et al., 2021; Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Soria et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). Their socioeconomic status, for example, influenced their access to technology and the internet (Feldman, 2020; Pillay et al., 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021). Thus, the quality of the learning environment has been found to facilitate or be a barrier to a student's ability to learn (Rahiem, 2021).

Critical to a successful move from face-to-face to online modes of learning is access to appropriate technological equipment and competent digital skills, as Magni and Sestino (2021)

point out. Not all students in countries like South Africa can access resources that engage with their studies online, specifically because of a lack of technology or internet access (Mlambo & Ndebele, 2021). In the South African context, students come from diverse backgrounds with different levels of access to technology and varying levels of skills, adding to the complexities of postgraduate students' challenges of studying during the COVID-19 pandemic. This informed the problem that I researched in this study.

### **1.3 Rationale for research**

The sudden shift to ERL challenged students to navigate their studies through a novel and 'semi-apocalyptic' scenario, whereby routines and ways of learning had to change drastically (Crawford et al., 2020). Postgraduate students, accustomed to face-to-face contact during class, had to engage with their studies from an unfamiliar perspective, affecting their overall learning experience. The latter included their relationship with their lecturers, supervisors and their academic peers. Moreover, for those studying for a professional master's degree such as the Psychology master's degree, the completion of a thesis, as well as placement in an internship and practical training, such as counselling, could no longer occur in person and had to be done in a new and uncharted way (Bell et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020).

Much of the research focused on widely analysing the impact of COVID-19 on students, using quantitative surveys to understand the general impact of ERL. This approach exempted a specific observation of postgraduate students' experiences of ERL. Hence, it is necessary to qualitatively explore postgraduate students' experiences of studying remotely online during COVID-19 and consider a deeper understanding of their lived experiences of emergency remote learning. Notably, the qualitative research paradigm used in this study assumes that reality is a social construct, a position that situates me, the researcher, as a part of the socially constructed experience of the participants, leading to my use of a first-person voice (Mack, 2010).

A group of students who might experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and thoughts and actions relating to suicide than the general population, are psychology students in particular, necessitating an exploration of the lived experiences of this group (Daniel et al., 2022; Hobaica et al., 2021; Laher et al., 2021; Syropoulos et al., 2021) during the pandemic. Furthermore, psychology students, whose profession provides a healthcare service, "disproportionately experienced moderate to severe mental health symptoms... during

graduate school before COVID-19” (Daniel et al., 2022, p. 2282; Hobaica et al., 2021). Thus, it was essential to study the experiences of groups such as psychology students. Concerningly, in the South African context, these rates of mental illness may be higher than other countries (Laher et al., 2021). The literature indicates that COVID-19 had a role in intensifying the mental health toll on the people affected by the pandemic. This study’s participants were, therefore, professional psychology master’s degree students from a South African university, as understanding the experiences of these students of ERL during a global health crisis is crucial to improve future institutional policies and practices in similar circumstances. In the study, I explored their unique experiences of studying using ERL during the pandemic, focusing on the facilitators and barriers of engagement. A deeper understanding of these experiences could inform future university policies regarding access to technology, learning, teaching, and assessment, as well as programmes regarding the well-being of postgraduate students.

#### **1.4 Problem statement**

Postgraduate students, unprepared or underprepared for emergency remote learning, encountered a different experience of studying for a master’s degree due to COVID-19. Indeed, the pandemic accelerated university teaching and learning into the digital era, forcing staff and students to adapt to ERL and, without the necessary preparation and training for such a change, master its platforms, pedagogies, and techniques. Preparing professional psychology master’s degree students for ERL could lead to better outcomes of experiences in the context of a global health pandemic. For this reason, it was necessary to explore professional psychology master’s degree students’ experiences of ERL in the pandemic, their attitudes to studying online, and the facilitators and barriers they encountered. I draw on Bandura’s Self-Efficacy theory to frame the study in considering the participants’ experiences of ERL, their attitudes towards it, and the facilitators and barriers of engaging with their studies in light of Bandura’s constructs such as performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional and physiological states, i.e. how it informed their self-efficacy in the context of using ERL in the pandemic.

#### **1.5 Aim and objectives of the study**

This study explores how professional psychology master’s degree students at a university in South Africa experienced ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve this, the following research objectives were formulated:

Objective 1: To explore the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students in relation to the shift to emergency remote online teaching and learning.

Objective 2: To explore the attitudes of professional psychology master's degree students towards studying remotely in an institution of higher learning.

Objective 3: To explore facilitators and barriers with regards to professional psychology master's degree students engaging with their studies.

### **1.6 Research questions**

In line with the objectives, the following research questions were formulated for this study:

Research question 1: How have professional psychology master's degree students experienced the shift to emergency remote online teaching and learning?

Research question 2: What are the attitudes of professional psychology master's degree students towards studying remotely in an institution of higher learning?

Research question 3: What are the facilitators and barriers with regard to professional psychology master's degree students engaging with their studies?

### **1.7 Location of the study**

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, one of the nine provinces of South Africa. UKZN is one of 26 South African public universities. UKZN has five campuses, structured into four colleges, each with several schools. This study was located in the College of Humanities, in the School of Applied Human Sciences, in the Psychology Department, drawing on professional psychology master's degree students. According to the University website the School of Applied Human Sciences has 4462 registered students; undergraduate: 3635, and postgraduate (honours, master's and doctoral): 827. It is a large, research-intensive university. It moved its programmes online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The psychology department offers the following professional psychology master's programmes: Clinical Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Industrial Psychology and Research Psychology. I studied a psychology master's degree at this university, in the psychology department, and hence located the study conveniently in the

context of this organisation. In addition, I studied during COVID-19 and shared some of the participants' experiences of ERL.

## **1.8 Research design and methodology**

The nature of the research questions informs the research design and methodology. I used a qualitative research design in an interpretivist paradigm and drew on a phenomenological research strategy/methodology. I studied the lived experiences of the six purposively selected professional psychology master's degree students of emergency remote learning at a South African university in the context of a global health crisis. A phenomenological study enabled me to acquire first-hand knowledge through semi-structured individual interviews via Zoom or MS Teams, allowing me to explore the experiences, attitudes, facilitators, and barriers to studying online. A part of the phenomenological research strategy included bracketing to ensure I was aware of any potential biases I may experience based on my position as an insider who shared one or more identities with my participants, allowing me to set aside my predetermined opinions about the phenomenon. I also used thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013b) to analyse the transcribed data and develop themes and subthemes, and Guba's four criteria for ensuring trustworthiness. I carefully adhered to the required research ethics throughout the study. I further elaborate on the design in chapter three.

## **1.9 Clarification of concepts**

### ***1.9.1 Professional psychology master's degree***

Professional psychology master's degrees refer to those postgraduate degrees that consist of a coursework programme and include practical training (such as counselling clients and conducting psychometric assessments), theoretical learning, and a dissertation (or short dissertation). Psychology master's degree students must complete an internship and write the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) board examination to register as professional psychologists with the HPCSA. The dissertation requires that the student is supervised by one to two supervisors, while the internship requires two supervisors (one internal and one external to the university).

### ***1.9.2 Students***

Students refer to those studying at a university. For this study, students refer to university postgraduate students registered for a professional psychology master's degree who were doing their coursework or dissertation or had completed their master's study.

### ***1.9.3 Emergency remote learning***

ERL refers to temporary, stand-in programmes that adapt traditional learning content to online platforms to maintain academic programmes in a crisis context, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Lobos et al., 2022; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021). In this study, ERL refers to the psychology master's degree programmes that were offered remotely.

### ***1.9.4 University***

University refers to a higher education institution (HEI) where students enrol for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. In this study, it refers to a research-intensive university in KwaZulu-Natal where the professional psychology master's degree students were enrolled.

### ***1.9.5 Global health crisis***

A global health crisis refers to a public health crisis which affects people all over the world. For the purposes of this study, it refers specifically to the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019.

## **1.10 Delimitation of the study**

This study transpires in one South African university's Industrial Organisational Psychology specialisation. It focusses on the lived experiences of a small group of postgraduate professional psychology master's degree students using emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic during a particular time frame, that of 2020-2022. The place of study, the mode of study, and individual ways of being all possibly affect the study life, behaviour, and wellbeing of the postgraduate students.

## **1.11 Structure of the dissertation**

Chapter One introduces the study in Industrial Organisational Psychology and sets out the background and rationale for this study, the problem statement, the aim, objectives, and research questions. It also introduced the selected research design, the location of the study, the delimitation of the study, and clarified the concepts.

Chapter Two explores the literature surrounding the topic of COVID-19, the response of universities - including the transition to ERL, the tools used and the digital divide between those who can afford technology and internet connection and those who cannot. The literature review also explores the learning experiences of university-level students in terms of their attitudes towards the pandemic and whether and how they were able to cope, remain motivated

and/or procrastinate when exposed to ERL. The literature review also explores the students' living environment and its effect on their experience of ERL in terms of mental health and wellbeing, access to technology, support systems, gender, and financial and other resources. Following this, I present the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter Three offers an exposition of the research design and methodology, which is qualitative in nature, drawing on an interpretive paradigm and using a phenomenological research strategy. A qualitative approach and an interpretivist paradigm, whereby reality is a social construct, enable me to use first person in writing the dissertation. The context, the selection of the six professional psychology master's degree participants, the interview method of data collection and thematic data analysis are explained, as well as issues around ethics and trustworthiness.

Chapter Four presents the results of the study, set out as themes with related subthemes.

Chapter Five concludes the study, offering a discussion of the findings recontextualised in existing literature, a conclusion for each research question which informs the recommendations for universities and their faculties, some limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

### **1.12 Summary of chapter**

This concludes chapter one of this study, where I provide an introduction and background to the study, leading to the problem statement. I explained the aim and objectives of the study and the related research questions. In the next chapter, I will explore the literature surrounding the topic of the experiences of university postgraduate students studying through ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic and then explain the theoretical framework.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of research on higher education teaching and learning and its students in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review focuses on three broad areas: the university, the university student and the student's living environment. A final section explains the theoretical framework of this study.

### **2.2 Higher education institutions and teaching and learning**

A higher education institution (HEI) is a tertiary-level university with a social and relational learning environment where students are encouraged to develop and use problem-solving, innovation, rational thinking, language, and personal skills. This results in a country's knowledge-building and socioeconomic development (Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). Students who attend such institutions consist of individuals undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate levels of education. Typically, these students begin university from the age of eighteen years. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and South Africa's National Qualification Framework (NQF) Act of 2008 recognise 10 levels of registered qualifications in defining the education that can be attained in South African HEIs. A bachelor's degree is at level 7 in the NQF, while postgraduate degrees are at levels 8 to 10. Level 8 consists of qualifications such as an honours degree, a master's degree is a level 9 qualification in the NQF, and a level 10 qualification consists of doctorate and post-doctoral research degrees.

Various kinds of learning designs have been used by universities globally and in South Africa. Of these, I will expand briefly on face-to-face (F2F) learning, sometimes referred to as traditional mode of learning, online learning, blended learning, hybrid learning, and flipped classroom (Hwang et al., 2023). F2F learning refers to traditional learning in a physical class where students learn from a lecturer in person. Online learning involves learning via web-based systems, where the student does not need to be in the same geographical location as the lecturer, and the classes can occur synchronously, in real time, or asynchronously, outside of a given time using applications such as email (Hwang et al., 2023). Hybrid and blended learning combine e-learning with traditional tools such as note-taking (Hussein et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020). More specifically, blended learning is a design that combines both F2F and online teaching, which can occur synchronously and/or asynchronously. It uses learning materials from both modes to add to rather than replace traditional learning (Hwang et al., 2023). The percentage of the blend varies depending on the course design (Hodges et al., 2020). Hybrid

learning allows students to attend an F2F class or go online from the “location of their choice” using “tools such as video-conferencing hardware and software” (Hwang et al., 2023, p. 3). For example, a class might be streamed on YouTube or via Zoom while also being taught in person on campus. Flipped learning occurs when materials are given before class via an online platform for students to engage with. Later, during their class, the lecturer used activities to expand their understanding of the materials, which the students were given to engage with on their own time. This may lead to significant engagement within the class and between peers (Hwang et al., 2023). Prior to COVID-19, the university from which the participants were drawn primarily focused on F2F traditional modes of contact, with an aspect of blended learning using online platforms and forums such as Moodle and email to disseminate certain course materials.

Universities in South Africa have used various virtual applications, such as Moodle, and tools, such as video streaming, WhatsApp, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, for e-learning to align with the global trends of e-learning prior to COVID-19 (Cleland, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Maison et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2020; Praghlapati, 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). These tools and platforms existed before the pandemic and were not explicitly created to connect people during the pandemic.

### ***2.2.1 University shift to emergency remote learning***

To continue educating students during the pandemic, many university faculties around the globe moved their academic programmes to online platforms, utilising ERL (Emergency Remote Learning), referred to as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) by authors such as Hodges et al. (2020) and Shin and Hickey (2021). Some studies emphasised distinguishing between ERL and online learning in universities due to the nature of the digitisation process. More specifically, online learning has been intentionally designed to use technology tools and internet access to create a quality learning experience, and there are intentional efforts to mitigate the disconnectedness experienced while learning online (Feldman, 2020; Lobos et al., 2022; Shin & Hickey, 2021). On the other hand, ERL was not designed for online platforms, meaning that the experiences of students learning via these two platforms will be different (Hussein et al., 2020; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). The purpose of emergency remote learning was for the programme to temporarily transition to an online mode of learning during extraordinary crisis circumstances to maintain academic programmes until they could return to traditional modes after the pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020; Hussein et al.,

2020; Lobos et al., 2022; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021). This was intended as a short-term solution where the delivery mode would return to the previous format as soon as the crisis ended (Shin & Hickey, 2021). Many instructors had a few days, up to a week or two, to develop the necessary skills to use new online platforms and design programs that transfer their traditional lectures to online ones (Lobos et al., 2022; Shin & Hickey, 2021). With this in mind, the context of ERL meant that it may have had lower quality results and infrastructure than teaching pedagogy that was designed to be taught online (Hussein et al., 2020; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). In particular, the findings from Moodley (2022) noticed that students experienced feelings of alienation and disengagement within the ERL programmes themselves. These programmes lacked the personal element, making it feel dehumanising, which would likely be something that a typical online programme focuses on mitigating. Hussein et al. (2020) warned that it was important to emphasise the difference between ERL and online learning since some individuals who had a negative experience with ERL may have assumed that all online learning was inferior to traditional modes when this was not the case, leading to stigma towards online learning (Hodges et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, many universities used a mixture of synchronous (for example, real time online lectures) and asynchronous (for example, self-directed videos) learning systems (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Maison et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Su & Guo, 2021). There was some debate about whether primarily synchronous or asynchronous learning systems are better for students (Kim, 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Praghlapati, 2020). While it has often been noted that synchronous methods allowed students to remain more engaged in their studies, the challenge with synchronous teaching and learning related to a disparity in access to technology among South Africans; thus some were unable to attend real time classes (Hanekom, 2020; Mlambo & Ndebele, 2021). According to the Mail and Guardian online news article: “37% of South African households have consistent access to the internet through cell phones or computers, and 83.5% of these learners could, with minimal disruption, continue learning from home through online platforms” (Hanekom, 2020, para. 4). This means that while some individuals were able to find ways to access education through online platforms, others were unable to receive this form of education. Another challenge associated with synchronous methods is the unprecedented phenomenon of being in front of a screen for long periods, leading to Zoom fatigue (Amponsah et al., 2022). Conversely,

asynchronous methods was a challenge for students who were prone to procrastination and struggled to engage with the materials if they were not required to be actively present (Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021).

Furthermore, lecturers had to determine the best way to conduct assessments during the pandemic and used various methods to facilitate assessments and exams via ERL. Exams took the form of electronically submitted assignments and essays, or questions answered on a computer, often in a multiple-choice format. These could have involved linear order electronic testing or computer-adapted testing methods, a programme that adjusts the difficulty of tests based on the ability of the test taker (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

The above discussion notes the robust and flexible nature of emergency remote learning. Many HEIs have had to adapt quickly and assist students in maintaining their academic performance during the ambiguous and uncertain time during COVID-19. However, while many individuals have been able to transition uneventfully, some were left behind.

### ***2.2.2 Unequally resourced universities and people***

Some of the available literature noted that universities from different countries, and even those within the same country, were unequally resourced in terms of technology, internet connectivity, and information access, among other things (Baloran, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Maison et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021).

Hussein et al. (2020) noted that poorer and less-resourced HEIs were slower to adapt to ERL than those which were well-resourced. A study by Mlambo and Ndebele (2021) highlighted how South African public HEIs were divided between historically black universities and historically white universities, rooted in the post-apartheid context. They found that historically white universities were better resourced than historically black universities and were able to respond to the pandemic and transition to ERL much quicker than historically black universities. Likewise, educators and students at historically black universities had less access to the technology and information resources necessary for studying online (Mlambo & Ndebele, 2021).

According to Shin and Hickey (2021, p. 975), “over 45% of global households do not have internet connection”. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were particularly susceptible to what could be termed a digital divide. In this context, some students had access to internet that is fast and often costly, with infrastructure that enables these high speeds, data connectivity,

adequate provision of electricity, and technology and technical equipment such as computers, laptops and other devices, while others could not afford these necessities (Baloran, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Maison et al., 2021; Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). According to Rahiem (2021), people from countries that are low to middle income are more likely to have inadequate resources necessary for ERL. Those with more material resources could take better advantage of educational opportunities and were more likely to have a positive experience of ERL (Pillay et al., 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021). This is important to note as technology is seen as the minimum entry-level requirement to be a part of the current world of work sparked by the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) (Frederick, 2019).

In the South African context, some students had adequate resources. Others came from “overcrowded, poverty-stricken homes in areas characterised by social ills such as hunger, crime, and violence” (Pillay et al., 2021, p. 32) and encountered more obstacles to attain the tools necessary for ERL. Inconsistent internet connection, regular electricity outages as well as loadshedding, which occurred randomly and, at times, frequently (Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021), all served to compound their challenges.

#### **2.2.2.1 The context of UKZN.**

While UKZN was not explicitly listed as a historically black university in the study by Mlambo and Ndebele (2021), according to the university website: “UKZN formed on January 1, 2004, as a result of the merger between the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal.” The former started in the 1960s as a college for Indian students (UKZN, 2022). Today, UKZN has a large body of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, challenging the university to provide all students with an equal level of access to ERL. UKZN and other institutions attempted to rectify this disparity by providing data packages and technological devices to students in need (Feldman, 2020). However, challenges arose, even within this solution, following reports that students experienced delays in the delivery of laptops and often ran out of data due to the excessive modules, consequently hampering the ability of these students to engage in the learning process (Feldman, 2020; Pillay et al., 2021).

Importantly, sociopolitical factors impacted UKZN students prior to the pandemic. UKZN often experienced on-campus strikes and protests, resulting in closures and delays to the academic year (Moosa, 2023). Frequently, the cause of these strikes stemmed from issues

around fees, student housing, and a call to ‘decolonise’ the curriculum, a movement intent on shifting the focus of education from solely Western and Eurocentric perspectives and incorporating more Afrocentric paradigms and worldviews. According to an online news article in the Mail and Guardian (Moosa, 2023), one primary example is that of the 2015 and 2016 “#FeesMustFall” movement, where “protests centred on free education, decolonising education and outsourcing work” and led to a period of many South African universities shutting down. Strikes of this kind occurred regularly at the beginning of the semester leading up to COVID-19 and continued during the pandemic, which at times required that students would learn from home when the strikes were prolonged. Thus, universities such as UKZN have explored the use of online learning for reasons other than the pandemic. However, the need for these tools became essential during the pandemic.

While the restrictions of COVID-19 came to an end in 2022, they had a significant and lasting impact on many students, especially those who were studying throughout the pandemic. Of importance were the professional psychology master’s degree students who were required to complete internships and had practical training components such as counselling, assessments and supervision which were all affected by the restrictions - this necessitated an exploration of these students’ experiences to assist future students affected by the same or similar circumstances, leading to the first objective of this study:

Objective 1: To explore the experiences of professional psychology master’s degree students in relation to the shift to emergency remote online teaching and learning.

RQ 1: How have professional psychology master’s degree students experienced the shift to emergency remote online teaching and learning?

### **2.3 Students’ learning experiences during COVID-19**

The following section focuses on the literature about the students’ learning experiences, their attitudes towards having to study online remotely, how they sustained their focus while studying in terms of the coping mechanisms they used, how they motivated themselves, the learning styles they used to focus, and procrastination behaviours and sources used by the students.

#### ***2.3.1 The attitudes of HEI students towards studying remotely***

The literature has noted that students have a paradoxical experience of ERL (Rahiem, 2020). On the one hand, the literature found that some students had interpreted the move to ERL as

beneficial and positive. Some students enjoyed the flexibility, autonomy, and convenience of studying from home. They had more control over their use of time so they could manage how they engaged with their learning materials while also being able to develop and pursue hobbies, practice self-care, exercise, and care for or form closer bonds with their family members (Feldman, 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Su & Guo, 2021; Wallace et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). They experienced reduced costs in transportation while enjoying comfortable and quiet home environments, also observing the positive effect that the pandemic had on the environment in the form of reduced pollution (Hussein et al., 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Wallace et al., 2021). Some students felt safe because they were not risking COVID-19 infection (Feldman, 2020; Hussein et al., 2020). Research also noted that some students enjoyed the opportunities presented by COVID-19 in terms of new skills they had to learn as well as novel research topics (Feldman, 2020; Peters et al., 2020). Some noted that they remained motivated and were adapting well to ERL programmes in terms of maintaining attendance and keeping up with their assignments and studying habits. For example, there is a possibility that students performed equally, if not, better during the pandemic, possibly due to less distracting working environments (Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Walsh et al., 2021).

On the other hand, there were negative associations between ERL and studying during a pandemic period. Some authors argued that students struggled to maintain their mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19. For example, a study in South Africa by Onwuegbuzie and Ojo (2021) highlighted that at least 10% of their participants reported having mental health challenges during their study, ranging from anxiety and depression to suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts, which they noted were particularly concerning. COVID-19 often exacerbated existing challenges faced by students before the pandemic (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021). Being confined to their homes during a pandemic amplified the anxiety and vulnerability of students who faced additional challenges relating to economics and mental health strain over and above their academic expectations (Magni & Sestino, 2021; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Praghlapati, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). Some students experienced the transition from face-to-face to ERL as a stressful, uncertain, and volatile period that created feelings of helplessness and a lack of control or autonomy over how to continue their studies (Karavida et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021). Postgraduate students who studied during the pandemic

harboured feelings of self-doubt due to being unable to compare how they were faring in relation to others whom they were studying with and to previous cohorts (Morris et al., 2022). Furthermore, some students struggled with motivation, often working long hours with low productivity, aggravating the feeling that they were falling behind (Feldman, 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2021). They lacked the energy necessary to remain disciplined and maintain their usual study rituals from before the pandemic (Hussein et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

Various studies found that students negatively perceived the transition to ERL, concerned that it would not be the same as traditional modes (Hussein et al., 2020; Maison et al., 2021). There were concerns about the quality of their degree. For example, Lobos et al. (2022) observed that students believed they had learnt less but performed better than they had anticipated during the pandemic; the students were concerned that they were losing out on the principal qualities of training necessary for real-world conditions and scenarios. Gonzalez et al. (2020) and Unger and Meiran (2020) add that students were concerned that plagiarism and cheating in exams could occur with less difficulty due to ERL being an online format, where cheating may be unmonitored. Feldman (2020) noted that students felt they could not go into the same depths of challenging and intellectually stimulating engagement as they could in classes. In addition, they missed the support from their peers and lecturers, both formally and informally. Without their care and support, some students felt alone and isolated (Feldman, 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

It is important to understand the attitudes towards ERL, whether they are positive or negative, as these beliefs and attitudes may determine how students coped and engaged with their learning materials. Ultimately, it could have determined whether they completed their academic goals successfully (Lobos et al., 2022).

### ***2.3.2 Students' ability to focus while studying using ERL***

While exploring literature about attitudes towards studying during a stressful event such as the pandemic, coping, motivation, and procrastination stood out. These impacted the student's ability to engage with their academic work and influenced their overall performance.

**2.3.2.1 Coping.** As it has been well established, students experienced heightened stress levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stress has been associated with an individual's coping behaviours and how they appraise stressful events. According to Kamaludin et al. (2020, p. 2) and Ye et al. (2020, p. 1077), coping is defined as the constantly changing behavioural and

cognitive strategies or efforts that modify or manage a demand or threat that is internally or externally sourced and appraised as threatening, taxing or excessive. A person could use adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies to deal with a stressful event such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kamaludin et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2020).

People who believe they have control over the source of stress might use adaptive coping strategies such as active coping, problem-solving and seeking social and emotional support. Adaptive coping allows a person to integrate the experience into an amended view of themselves and the world, which can reduce stress and improve mental and physical wellbeing (Kamaludin et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2020). Alternatively, maladaptive coping is often used when a person does not have control over their environment; it involves behaviours of substance abuse and avoidance behaviours such as procrastination, negative thinking, and self-blaming. This form of coping can lead to psychological symptoms such as distress, depression, and anxiety (Kamaludin et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2020). Stress and states of severe depression can lead to demotivation and intensify distraction and procrastination (Cleland, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Kusrkar et al., 2013; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

Other concepts related to coping include resilience and mindfulness. Ye et al. (2020) noted a link between stress and reduced resilience. Resilience is a valuable coping resource that assists in overcoming stressful experiences such as the pandemic. Huang et al. (2021) noted the buffering effect mindfulness could have during a stressful life event, such as a global health pandemic, can improve a person's mental health and wellbeing and assist in reducing distress. On the other hand, mindfulness involves "purposeful awareness and attention, as well as non-judgemental reactions, to the present moment," the here and now (Huang et al., 2021, p. 1). Through self-regulation of what they pay attention to, a student may have found that they could cope better and focus on remaining socially and emotionally competent during a pandemic while maintaining academic performance. Given the significance of coping on students' experiences of ERL during a pandemic, it was clear that the emotional response of students could impact on their academic behaviour (Cleland, 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

**2.3.2.2 Motivation.** Motivation refers to a "complex aspect of human psychology and behaviour" where individuals' behaviour and ways of thinking determine "how they choose to spend their time, how much energy they expend on each task, how they think and feel about the task and how long they are engaged in the task" (Rahiem, 2021, p. 5). Many studies have

noted a link between motivation and academic performance, where higher levels of motivation tended to lead to better academic performance, and individuals who were not motivated were more likely to underachieve (Kusurkar et al., 2013; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020). As motivation has been associated with improved academic performance, it was important to consider whether COVID-19 impacted the motivation of students (Hussein et al., 2020; Kusurkar et al., 2013; Maison et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020). Given the findings of these studies, it can be hypothesised that academic performance could decrease with the reduced motivation levels associated with studying from home during a life-changing pandemic event. In confirmation, several studies found that students experienced a lack of enthusiasm and motivation to study online in the face of COVID-19 disruptions, which impacted their academic performance (Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Wallace et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). However, some studies found their results contrasted with their hypotheses. Meeter et al. (2020) found that lower motivation levels did not negatively affect performance. It is logical to proffer that students may have lost their drive to maintain their academic performance as the pandemic seemed to continue without a foreseeable end.

**2.3.2.2.1 Environment and motivation.** The behaviour of a person is influenced by the complex interaction between their environment, social situation, and their current state of physical, mental, and emotional being, according to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Rahiem, 2021). Often, the social environment impacts the student's behaviour, especially regarding how the student engages with others (Rahiem, 2021). For example, if they have a family who encourages their learning behaviour, they may be more likely to continue than if their family does not support them. If they are anxious and stressed because of the overwhelming emotions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, they may struggle to focus and engage in positive studying behaviours.

**2.3.2.2.2 Sources of motivation.** Literature indicates that certain sources of motivation could lead to more successful academic performance. Kusurkar et al. (2013), Meeter et al. (2020) and Rahiem (2021) all referred to Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory to understand how some students motivated themselves differently from others and how different sources of motivation may have led to better academic performance. In their theory, motivation lies on a continuum, and the source of motivation may determine the student's academic behaviour, especially in terms of the quality of their motivation (Kusurkar et al., 2013). Those whose

primary source is extrinsic motivation, based on external sources, may find themselves struggling more than those whose motivation is rooted intrinsically within themselves when they do not have their usual support system around to assist them (Cleland, 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

Sources of motivation range from amotivation to extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. Amotivation refers to when a person lacks intention and motivation to learn. Students who were amotivated displayed study behaviour that was the least autonomous and with the lowest level of self-determination (Kusurkar et al., 2013; Rahiem, 2021). Extrinsic motivation lies on a continuum between amotivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsically motivated students expect some form of gain or outcome when they behave or think in a certain manner (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021). Extrinsic motivation benefits short-term tasks and goals since it often leads to rote learning (Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021). On the less autonomous end of the continuum of extrinsic motivation lies controlled motivation. Those using controlled motivation are motivated to conduct learning behaviour due to them being rewarded or punished (Kusurkar et al., 2013; Rahiem, 2021). Those displaying introjected motivation, which incorporates slightly more intrinsic motivation, find their source of motivation is based on partially internal and partially external control of their actions, which pressure them to act or behave in a certain way based on feelings of guilt, desire for acceptance or self-esteem (Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021). Identified and integrated regulation lie closest to intrinsic self-motivation as their behaviours are still extrinsically motivated but are strongly influenced by intrinsic motivation. This source of motivation is highly autonomous as the student understands the importance of acting and incorporating this into their self, leading to better use of studying habits and strategies (Kusurkar et al., 2013; Rahiem, 2021). Those who are intrinsically motivated are most autonomously motivated. These students tend to develop a deeper meaning and understanding of their learning materials since they are genuinely interested in the activity and are voluntarily involved (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

A mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation may assist students to focus during COVID-19, since one leads to short-term goals and the other to long-term investment in learning and understanding. Intrinsically and extrinsically motivated goals or aspirations are tempered by various social factors such as autonomy, competence, and a need for relatedness, which lead to students' improved performance and wellbeing (Kusurkar et al., 2013; Rahiem, 2021). This

observation was further supported by Shin and Hickey (2021), who noted that students were more motivated through social support systems. According to Su and Guo (2021), students who self-manage their studies will likely use self-discipline to achieve their goal, as they expect certain results. This indicates that those who are intrinsically motivated might employ self-discipline in their study habits.

**2.3.2.2.3 Learning management patterns and styles.** Other literature focused on studying during a pandemic highlighted the importance of learning management patterns and styles on the academic performance of students. For example, some studies found that individuals with good study habits and who manage their learning resources well in the face of unprecedented COVID-19 circumstances managed their academic workload better (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Maison et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021). These students could self-regulate their learning and studying habits if necessary and were more responsible and proactive in their learning process. Students who employed self-management in their learning styles and habits were suggested to have resulted in better academic performance and a more positive experience of ERL (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020).

Rahiem (2021) further explored how students' learning patterns or styles, along with their general aims of the study process, could result in different kinds of performance. These styles used by students were distinguished as reproduction-directed learning, meaning-directed learning, application-directed learning and undirected learning (Rahiem, 2021). The choice of study style was determined by the goals of the student and the effort they wished to engage with and implement in specific learning situations. For example, reproduction-directed learning focuses on passing exams with a sole aim of information replication. Thus, little information is consolidated and understood, and the learning style is systematic and focused on recalling and reproducing specific information with unrelated learning units. Meaning-directed learning, as well as application-directed learning styles, enable the learner to form a deeper understanding of their learning material. Students can self-regulate their learning habits by reading further and exploring how their understandings can be transferred and applied to the real world. They may explore case studies and examples to test their applications. Overall, this allows them to create a sense of meaning in the things they learn. Students will utilise one of these learning styles to adapt to new environments. Either they will adapt well by self-regulating their learning habits to use meaning-directed and application-directed learning styles, or they will use old techniques that once served them well, but may not be beneficial in a pandemic, such as

reproduction-directed learning and undirected learning. Individuals who are unwilling to take on new methods and styles are likely to struggle in the context of ERL (Rahiem, 2021).

Thus, the kind of learning that was most necessary in the COVID-19 context was the kind that created meaning and enabled the learner to apply this meaning to real-life situations. This would have allowed them to be intrinsically motivated to learn and self-regulate their learning process (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

**2.3.2.3 Procrastination.** While some students motivate themselves to perform academically (Kusurkar et al., 2013; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020), others procrastinate. Procrastination is associated with impaired academic performance (Meeter et al., 2020), so it is crucial to consider why students procrastinate to determine how it can be changed or prevented (Maison et al., 2021).

Procrastination is the behaviour of task avoidance, which can develop into a habit and then into a personality trait if remained unchecked (Maison et al., 2021). In certain cases, it can involve perfectionism, where a person may be so afraid of failure that they would rather not start working towards their goal (Maison et al., 2021). Procrastination can originate from or lead to situations where a person is overwhelmed by the amount of tasks to complete in a given amount of time or if those tasks are all due at the same time. This leads to overnight speeding and leaving work to the last minute while expecting to receive a burst of energy to complete this work (Maison et al., 2021). Those who procrastinated may have found themselves feeling distracted whenever they tried to study, especially in the face of the uncertain circumstances brought about during a global pandemic. Notably, the change from a classroom environment to an online one could have made it simpler to succumb to the distracting temptations of social media (Hussein et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Su & Guo, 2021). Environments where students experienced a lack of supervision may have also led to procrastination. This was challenging for some students whose supervisors were difficult to access via email or other electronic modes of contact during the pandemic (Maison et al., 2021).

Since students' online learning experiences were unique, it was best to explore their attitudes towards using ERL to study online during a pandemic on an individual basis. Every experience could contribute to a fuller picture of the lived experiences of being a student studying remotely during a pandemic. This leads to the second research objective:

Objective 2: To explore the attitudes of professional psychology master's degree students towards studying remotely in an institution of higher learning.

RQ 2: What are the attitudes of professional psychology master's degree students towards studying remotely in an institution of higher learning?

## **2.4 Facilitators and barriers to students engaging with their studies**

Various barriers discussed in the literature prevented or facilitated a student's continued studying under COVID-19 circumstances. These included mental health and their state of wellbeing, whether the student had access to or the ability to use the necessary technology used in ERL, the type of support given by classmates and peers as well as that given by supervisors and lecturers, what the living circumstances of the student were, and finally, their gender (as it pertains to the roles a person may have taken in their social context) (Baloran, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Maison et al., 2021; Mlambo & Ndebele, 2021; Peters et al., 2020; Praghlapati, 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020; Tull et al., 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020).

Soria et al. (2020) broadly categorised the obstacles experienced by university students as adaptive and technical. Technical problems were more concrete and easier to solve; lacking the technology to engage in ERL may have required a student to buy an electronic device such as a laptop, while adaptive obstacles were fundamental changes to a person's lifestyle, requiring "changes in beliefs, roles and approaches to solve problems" (Soria et al., 2020, p. 3). COVID-19 brought about changes in the lifestyles of people globally, requiring adaptation. For example, students may have had to adapt to new living circumstances, requiring them to find a balance between their home life and academic commitments (Soria et al., 2020).

### **2.4.1 Mental health and wellbeing**

Students with poor mental wellbeing related to the pandemic have expressed feelings of mental strain, stress, anxiety, and fatigue, as well as challenges in concentrating. The experience was tempered by individual personality and personal history (Stamatis et al., 2022). Furthermore, poor mental health and wellbeing may have been exacerbated by a flood of information and misinformation about COVID-19 on social media (Kamaludin et al., 2020).

While irrational fear has had a hand in ensuring that people are more likely to heed the COVID-19 restrictions, this may have led to maladaptive learning behaviours and reduced levels of motivation (Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020).

A student's age may have further contributed to differences in mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Stamatis et al. (2022) observed that younger students experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than older students in the early stages of COVID-19. This indicates that age was important to consider when exploring factors that may have been a barrier to managing studying during a pandemic.

#### ***2.4.2 Technology***

Some literature noted that students lack the technical equipment, such as laptops and computers, necessary to study online. This shortage can be attributed to the cost of devices or a need to buy new appliances, as well as issues with and disruptions of the device (Magni & Sestino, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021). Some studies also noted that students had to buy equipment usually provided by the university, such as printers and desks (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Pillay et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). There were further challenges related to internet access, connectivity/network issues and data costs (Baloran, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2020; Pillay et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021).

The design of the course, in terms of the structure of the content and implementation of the structure, was noted as essential to a satisfying and effective ERL experience. The choice of websites and technological tools used to access learning resources and their courses was critical to the learning experience of the students using them (Su & Guo, 2021). Students who lacked the necessary technology or information communication technology skills or experience may have struggled to participate in lectures or use online learning modalities, or they may have found it difficult to use new programmes, applications, or platforms (Hussein et al., 2020; Maison et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021). Soria et al. (2020) also noted that some tools may have been difficult to integrate into online classes, leading to concerns about the flexibility of these tools. On the contrary, exposure to ERL platforms and tools may have been an opportunity to gain new technological skills (Feldman, 2020).

Overall, a lack of necessary technology and internet access were exclusionary, as those without the necessary applications and technology were unable to engage in classes and submit assignments on time (Pillay et al., 2021). Those who were unable to use, adapt to and understand the technology and how it works within a class environment may have also struggled to keep up with their peers. This challenge was relevant to explore from the South

African context, as there was still a difference in access because of the inequality still prevalent in the country (Francis & Webster, 2019).

### **2.4.3 Support systems**

Social support was necessary since it was a driving force for certain students' academic behaviours and played a role in reducing the levels of stress students experienced. It assists a person in coping with stressful events and allows them to reframe the event in a positive manner (Ye et al., 2020). It should be noted that those who lack social support are more likely to experience stress disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet those who suffered trauma are less likely to seek social support, leading to further issues (Ye et al., 2020). According to Hussein et al. (2020) and Rahiem (2021), most students felt they experienced inadequate social support (and COVID-19 most likely had a role in this), so it is necessary to keep this in mind.

**2.4.3.1 Peer relationships and support.** The social environment of a student may have an impact on how they perceive their academic programme. The pandemic played a role in reducing the potential for students to form and build relationships on campus. Often, students identify with and build relationships with those who are similarly motivated or achievement-orientated (Rahiem, 2021). Colleagues in the academic sphere are able to support and assist one another as they navigate similar circumstances (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022), and some studies noted that students felt the lack of interactions with other students had reduced their ability to socialise with their colleagues and support one another. This situation was especially disruptive for those with high levels of the extraversion personality trait. This means that students felt less connected to their academic process since they were less connected to the people with whom they were studying (Hussein et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020).

Some students were able to gain virtual peer support through online groups such as WhatsApp groups (Feldman, 2020). Within the context of COVID-19, the social support of peers played a role in maintaining the emotional wellbeing of one another (Shin & Hickey, 2021).

**2.4.3.2 Educator and university support.** According to the literature, a primary concern of students was the reduction in support from teachers, educators, lecturers, or supervisors. According to several studies, students noticed a lack of communication and feedback from their lecturers and supervisors; they found them to be less accessible and felt that their lecturers were

unable to assist them in changing their learning styles and adapting to ERL programmes (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Hussein et al., 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Soria et al., 2020). This impersonal experience of isolation exacerbated feelings of stress, helplessness, and frustration (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Rahiem, 2021).

Despite the seeming lack of support, some students acknowledged that their supervisors and lecturers were also navigating uncertainty and stressful changes while adapting to the pandemic (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022). Educators and students both felt ill-equipped for the abrupt transition to ERL and needed time to familiarise themselves with the tools and techniques for online teaching and learning. This could have been why students felt overwhelmed by excessive assignments and struggled to manage their time and workloads (Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020). Educators were tasked with designing and planning quality programs within unrealistic timeframes. Some had to learn how to use virtual platforms with little training and prior knowledge (Shin & Hickey, 2021). However, those who took the time to manage their online modules well found positive results. Students also felt supported by lecturers who actively engaged with virtual platforms, for example, by sending voice notes on WhatsApp, which showed that they still cared about their students despite not being together (Feldman, 2020).

Finally, the nature of the sudden changes evoked a need for some assurance. Students desired more communication and engagement from the structures of their university. Attending university was a significant financial investment for students, and they anticipated that their funders and universities would engage with them concerning the path forward (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022).

**2.4.3.3 Living environment and family support.** Students found their living environment and study arrangements severely impacted during COVID-19. Some were stuck in unfavourable or distracting living circumstances and could not access quiet and suitable working spaces for studying, such as libraries (Feldman, 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). Inadequate workspaces stifled productivity and the wellbeing of the students using them (Feldman, 2020; Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Soria et al., 2020). According to studies by Onwuegbuzie and Ojo (2021) and Pillay et al. (2021), some students had to find time to study during the night when there were fewer distractions, which would have disrupted their sleeping patterns and further impacted their wellbeing.

Researchers observed that many students shared their living spaces with various people, often siblings, children, and other family members, creating a distracting environment very different from a campus setting. Students also took on additional caretaking roles and responsibilities to assuage the stress that the pandemic brought on families, leading to increased strain on the individual learner (Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). Increased expectations of home duties and less understanding from some family members about academic responsibilities lead to a conflict between their academic requirements and family responsibilities (Feldman, 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021). In some cases, this felt like a loss of independence and increased the risk of depressive symptoms (Stamatis et al., 2022). In some households, students had to share their devices with other family members, which may have also prevented them from performing academically (Hussein et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the research found that online learning in a home with supportive parents and family had a positive influence on the experiences of those students (Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). Stamatis et al. (2022) highlighted how parents had a role in protecting the psychological wellbeing of the students living with them. Families were able to support the students by encouraging them, listening to them with understanding, giving advice, offering moral support, and allowing for flexibility in terms of their household responsibilities. They were also role models, which inspired the students' resilience during the pandemic (Pillay et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). According to Barklam and Felisberti (2022), pets also possibly played a role in improving the wellbeing of their owners and in assisting people who are less resilient in managing their feelings of stress, uncertainty, and isolation.

Beyond the variances at different socioeconomic levels, some evidence suggests a difference in challenges between rural and urban areas. Stamatis et al. (2022) indicated that while living in urban areas had more psychologically protective factors, those louder city areas also made it a struggle for students to engage with their online classes. Those from rural areas had difficulties connecting to the internet, affecting their ability to participate in their studies (Feldman, 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2021). Often, lower socioeconomically resourced homes had less access to the technology needed for remote learning programmes. They found it too costly to use the internet or struggled with weak internet connectivity. Overall, they struggled to

benefit from the ERL process as much as their more privileged counterparts (Mlambo & Ndebele, 2021; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Soria et al., 2020; Tull et al., 2020). Some students who are the first generation in their family to enter an HEI struggle to balance their family expectations and academic responsibilities. This was burdensome and stressful for those students, adding to the stress surrounding the pandemic (Walsh et al., 2021).

In the context of COVID-19, barriers and facilitators within a person's living environment could have inhibited or supported the student's experience of studying using ERL. Thus, it was beneficial to explore the experience of students who studied in their various living contexts.

#### ***2.4.4 Gender differences***

Authors such as Tull et al. (2020) noted no difference in effects on gender in terms of the impact of COVID-19. Conversely, Lobos et al. (2022, p. 10) noted that males and females adapted to ERL differently and that females tended to be "more optimistic, satisfied, and committed to the online learning experience than male students." However, other researchers disagreed. Pillay et al. (2021), Praghlapati (2020), and Stamatis et al. (2022) suggested that females struggled more emotionally than males during the pandemic and reacted with higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, fear, and depressive symptoms than males. Shin and Hickey (2021) further emphasised a disproportionate effect on the mental health of females than males. They alleged that this was due to the many extra household roles females take on. Often, females had the additional stress of unpaid domestic work. Furthermore, they took a caretaker role, if necessary, to the extent that some had to choose between their profession and caring for their children. This meant that females had to balance maintaining continued academic performance, family wellbeing and any other obligations they had (Shin & Hickey, 2021). An American study by Walsh et al. (2021) noted that students who were parents of colour, those with children with disabilities, and those who lived in impoverished circumstances were most impacted during the pandemic and often less supported by the university.

Pillay et al. (2021) further delved into the experience of the African female. The researchers observed an intricate balance between traditional cultural norms, family, and academic responsibilities. These norms were based on a patriarchal ideology, which often required females to fulfil more household responsibilities, such as helping their family and unpaid domestic work. These expectations could impede their academic pursuits, especially in cases where chores supersede their academic requirements, and a challenge in terms of establishing

an understanding with their elders while also maintaining their expected respect for them (Pillay et al., 2021). Pillay et al. (2021, p. 34) emphasised African women as being particularly more susceptible with, statistically, a “greater risk of abuse, sexual violence, trafficking, social exclusion and forced labour,” and their academic careers are considerably more vulnerable during circumstances such as COVID-19, if studying was not economically feasible.

#### ***2.4.5 Resources***

The literature highlighted a general lack of access to on-campus resources and development opportunities. Learning materials, library resources, counselling services, legal services, and other services provided on campus were either difficult or impossible to access during the pandemic due to university closures (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). Certain research materials were restricted to research facilities, such as laboratories, which stalled the continuation of research projects (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Soria et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021).

Students were concerned that a lack of access to training and development opportunities would impede their future career prospects because they were not privy to the same experience that pre-pandemic students received (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022). Various studies discussed how students have had internships, assistantships, scholarships, and funding delayed, cancelled, or lost due to COVID-19. Furthermore, they might not have the opportunities for funding, or might lose what they had already secured (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Gupta & Agrawal, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Wallace et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). Students with funding for research projects struggled to maintain the funds after their project dates had to be extended (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022). Moreover, some universities continued to charge high fees despite the lack of access to resources and on-campus materials and support (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022). This created a financially stressful circumstance for students who may have already been under financial pressure.

Students with a stable family income were more likely to experience psychologically protective factors than those without the material resources. The latter may have felt they lacked control of their circumstances (Pillay et al., 2021; Stamatis et al., 2022). Students who took part-time jobs to fund their studies were subsequently impacted by the pandemic. Others had to take part-time jobs during the height of the pandemic for their families’ welfare (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Walsh et al., 2021). Overall, these students experienced an increased financial burden or

additional stress related to finances and a lack of opportunities. In some cases, this led to maladaptive coping behaviours such as alcohol and substance use, which in turn led to substance use disorders. Substance abuse played a role in behaviours of reduced compliance with COVID-19 protocols, such as social distancing, and possibly extended the stay of the pandemic (Stamatis et al., 2022).

The above exposition leads to the final question explored in this dissertation. What did the postgraduate students at UKZN, a university known for being inclusive of people from multiple socioeconomic backgrounds, experience when they had to move to emergency remote learning?

Objective 3: To explore facilitators and barriers with regards to professional psychology master's degree students engaging with their studies.

RQ 3: What are the facilitators and barriers to professional psychology master's degree students engaging with their studies?

## **2.5 Theoretical framework**

This study was underpinned by the Social Cognitive Theory. The Social Cognitive Theory, based on Albert Bandura's 1960s Social Learning Theory, is concerned with how society and environmental factors impact on an individual and their learning. The Social Cognitive Theory assumes that people have the ability to self-reflect and self-regulate and play an active role in shaping their environment (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995). The way people respond to an event is influenced by a reciprocal (but not necessarily at the same time nor to the same level) interaction between "environmental events, inner personal factors (cognition, emotion and biological events), and behaviour" (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995, p. 5). Learning is significantly influenced by the larger social context, and the complex, reciprocal interactions between individuals create a change in the actions and behaviours of others. Bandura later proposed his Self-Efficacy theory.

Self-efficacy theory focuses on how cognition affects and is affected by behaviour, emotional and environmental events (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995). Albert Bandura (1977) coined the word 'self-efficacy' to refer to a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation. In his theory, he put forward that "expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behaviour will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (Bandura, 1977, p. 191;

Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). Self-efficacy includes the belief people have the capability to control the events that affect their lives and the belief in the resources available to them to complete a task (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995). In this, the efficacy beliefs people hold (which are the judgements on how capable they are of using their motivation and cognitive resources to take action) and the consequences they expect from their actions will determine their behaviours. Thus, it informs outcomes, further enforcing their efficacy beliefs (Bowden et al., 2021; Carr, 2004; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). COVID-19 was a particularly notable global health crisis that impacted most people worldwide, and their actions would have been tempered by their self-efficacy. The anticipation that a person will be self-efficient arises from four sources of information: performance accomplishments (containing personal mastery experiences), vicarious experiences, verbal (or social) persuasion, and emotional and physiological states (Bandura, 1977; Carr, 2004; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). Some scholars have expanded on some aspects of Bandura's theory, such as Maddux (1995) who expanded the sources of self-efficacy to include and distal and proximal sources (Maddux, 2016). The following paragraph expands on these sources.

Regarding performance accomplishments, a person who succeeds in something will have a higher mastery expectation for similar tasks in the future. If they fail, they are more likely to expect failure. The more one succeeds, the more one can expect to succeed, thus increasing self-efficacy. Early failure considerably reduces self-efficacy more than failure after many successes (Bandura, 1977; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). Performance experiences incentivise a person's self-efficacy beliefs. Performance experiences imply that the experiences of performance outcomes, such as clear success or failure, will impact the strength of self-efficacy of an individual (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). Vicarious experiences are based on the observation of the behaviours of others and the consequences thereof (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). In terms of vicarious experiences, a person who observes another person successfully performing a risk-taking task is likelier to try to perform the task themselves, as they believe they can also do it (Bandura, 1977; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). The strength of self-efficacy depends on various factors, including whether the person appears to be similar to the observer, if the case observed is similar, and how many and how powerful the models are (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995). According to Bandura (1977, p. 198), "people are led, through suggestion, into believing they can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past." Given this, verbal

persuasion is determined by the levels of trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise of the source of persuasion (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). Finally, physiological states also influence self-efficacy when that state is associated with a particular performance or failure thereof (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). Emotional states can also influence a person's self-efficacy. For example, while in a state of anxiety, they are less likely to have self-efficacious beliefs about their performance than when calm (Bandura, 1977; Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). This theory suggests that people who have not had the opportunity to learn together with one another or vicariously learn through the experiences and consequences of their peers may have received a learning experience that leaves them wanting. Furthermore, their social circle may have assisted them in better coping with their academic pursuits compared to a lack of support during a pandemic.

In my study, the circumstances of COVID-19 could have impacted the self-efficacy beliefs of students studying within an arguably stressful global health crisis. Therefore, I use Bandura's self-efficacy theory as a theoretic lens to frame the exploration of professional psychology master's degree students' lived experiences of emergency remote learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2.6 Summary of chapter**

In this chapter, I explored how universities responded to the COVID-19 pandemic when they were compelled to change to other modes of teaching and learning, in this instance, ERL. Next, I analysed the literature on the experiences HEI students had while studying online, and I touched on how the students' living environments impacted their learning. Finally, I provided an explanation of the theoretical framework of my study, i.e. that of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and its usefulness in my study. The following chapter will detail the methodology of this study.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students of ERL at a South African university during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter explains the paradigm, approach, methodology, sampling, data collection method, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical issues. I justify the methodological choices in the sections that follow.

### 3.2 Research design

The research questions informed the choice of research design. Hence the study used a qualitative approach located in an interpretive paradigm, using a phenomenological research strategy, which is discussed next.

#### 3.2.1 *Qualitative approach*

In this study, I used a qualitative approach to explore the research problem. A qualitative approach uses a “reflective, interpretive, descriptive, and usually reflexive effort” (Fischer, 2006, p. xvi) to describe and understand the perspectives of people situated in various socio-cultural contexts and how they understand their complex reality in a given situation, social context or phenomenon (Fischer, 2006; Fura & Negash, 2020; Groenewald, 2004; Tuffour, 2017). It also explores the meaning they make based on these lived experiences, allowing the researcher to understand the participant's life-worlds (Fura & Negash, 2020; Groenewald, 2004; Tuffour, 2017). Qualitative research generally involves a small number of participants to explore the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of a given experience, creating contextual, meaning-saturated data, allowing for the emergence of themes and patterns in the data (Fischer, 2006; Tuffour, 2017).

A criticism of qualitative research is that it is based on subjective experiences rather than objective measures and cannot be generalised to the larger population (Shenton, 2004). Qualitative research is often viewed with mistrust by those adopting a quantitative approach since it is challenging to ensure that qualitative research findings are valid and reliable according to quantitative research criteria (Shenton, 2004; Taylor & Medina, 2013). However, the in-depth and rich nature of the data gathered justifies this approach as it creates deeper understandings of specific experiences. Moreover, qualitative researchers use different criteria to ensure their research is legitimised, specifically those of trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004;

Taylor & Medina, 2013). A key aspect of qualitative research is bracketing, encouraging researchers to be open about how they understand the experience and set aside their predetermined opinions (McCaffrey et al., 2012; Neuman, 2014; Tuffour, 2017).

With this consideration, a qualitative approach is essential to this study as it assisted in contextualising the research in the South African historical and social context, as it assumes that the experiences of all participants are embedded in their own unique circumstances (Fischer, 2006; Fura & Negash, 2020; Groenewald, 2004; Tuffour, 2017). It further enabled me to gather rich data on the lived experiences that the participants had of the phenomenon of emergency remote learning in the context of a global health pandemic.

### ***3.2.2 Interpretivist/Constructivist paradigm***

Thomas Kuhn (1972, cited in Mack, 2010) was the first person to refer to a paradigm as an overall framework for research. The choice of paradigm reveals how a researcher sees and understands the world, the type of research they are likely to involve themselves in and “their choice of research questions, methodology, methods and intentions” (Mack, 2010, p. 6). In this study, I opted for an interpretivist paradigm for the reasons offered in the next paragraph.

This paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities, perspectives and interpretations which are socially constructed and interpreted by people based on their beliefs and interactions with others (Mack, 2010; Neuman, 2014; Tuffour, 2017). A researcher who uses the interpretivist paradigm assumes that social beings are constantly making sense of the world around them subjectively. Thus, they are studying a phenomenon that has already been interpreted through shared meaning-making (Blaikie, 2004; Tuffour, 2017). In this study, I assumed that my participants were actively participating in the social construction of meaning in the world (Mack, 2010; Tuffour, 2017). Furthermore, I used a social constructionist orientation, as it assumes that the process of creating shared knowledge is continuous and based on the shared knowledge of people and the way that those people understand how the world works while that meaning is being made (Gergen, 2004; Tuffour, 2017). I explored how professional psychology master’s degree students experienced studying during emergency remote learning within their unique living circumstances during the pandemic. Thus, I required a paradigm that allowed me to explore how individuals made meaning in a social setting, necessitating the interpretivist and social constructionist paradigm.

### ***3.2.3 Phenomenological research methodology***

In line with a qualitative approach and an interpretivist paradigm, a phenomenological research methodology was chosen to explore the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students. A phenomenological study aims to interpret and describe participants' lived experiences from their perspectives, as if standing within their shoes (Neuman, 2014; Taylor & Medina, 2013). As the research question focused on the lived experiences of professional psychology master's degree students studying ERL during COVID-19, a phenomenological research design was suited to this study. The aim of the phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of people, more specifically, to understand their experience of phenomena and how they make sense of it (Dowling, 2007; Eatough & Smith, 2017). Merriam (2009, p. 26) elucidates that "phenomenological research is well suited for studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences". Hence, I focused on understanding the subjective experiences of my participants and getting to the essence of these experiences. This also means that the experiences of the students were seen as unique to each participant and required me to carefully and purposively select participants who could provide information on their unique experiences of the phenomenon.

## **3.3 Study sample**

### ***3.3.1 Location of sample***

As I am a student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in the psychology department, I used convenience sampling to locate my study within the context of this organisation (Neuman, 2014).

### ***3.3.2 Sample population***

A sample must resemble the target population in terms of elements related to the study (de Vos et al., 2005). The participants were selected from those who were registered and studying for a professional master's degree at the conveniently selected university in South Africa, in particular in a School of Applied Human Sciences in the discipline of Psychology in 2020 or 2021. The sample elements included a Master of Social Science in the departments of Clinical Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Industrial Psychology and Research Psychology. Of these cohorts, six were students studying Educational Psychology, 15 were studying Clinical Psychology, eight were studying Counselling Psychology, and four were studying Industrial Psychology across the campuses. All the students in these cohorts, aside from one, were female. The study was conducted with professional psychology master's degree

students who began their master's degree in 2020 or 2021 and participated in face-to-face classes until COVID-19 struck in March 2020, whereafter face-to-face classes stopped and they had to study using emergency remote learning from their living space for the rest of 2020 or 2021.

### ***3.3.3 Inclusion criteria***

In order to explore the research questions, specific inclusion criteria were set up and met, which I now highlight.

- Participants should have been registered to study an honours degree in psychology before 2020, preferably in 2019. They should have registered to study their professional psychology master's degree's first year (M1) in 2020 or 2021. Students who completed their honours before the pandemic have experience in a rigorous face-to-face postgraduate course which they could reflect on and compare with their master's degree studies during the pandemic.
- They should have been postgraduate students from across campuses and across psychology programmes in the year of 2020 or 2021.
- The participants should include men and women.
- The participants should be willing to share their experiences.

### ***3.3.4 Sampling strategy***

Nonprobability sampling was selected because the probability of selecting a particular participant was unknown as the size of the population was unknown (Athanasou & Maree, 2012; de Vos et al., 2005). There are various sampling methods within non-probability sampling, this includes "accidental, purposive, quota, dimensional, target, snowball and spatial sampling" (de Vos et al., 2005, p. 201). In this study, I used purposive and snowball sampling to select my participants.

The purposive sampling method involves the researcher's judgment to select cases with a specific purpose in mind, i.e. information rich participants (Neuman, 2014). The snowball sampling method selects "cases in a network" (Neuman, 2014, p. 275). A researcher will approach a potential participant who is related to the phenomenon of research and ask them to refer further people in their network who can make up the sample until there are sufficient people to make up the sample group and until data saturation has been reached (de Vos et al., 2005; Neuman, 2014). In this study, I used nonprobability purposive sampling and snowball

sampling to gain access to the 2020 and 2021 professional psychology master's degree students - who studied during the COVID-19 pandemic and who completed their honours before the end of 2019 - at the university.

Upon approval of ethical clearance (Appendix A) from the university and gaining permission from the university registrar (see Appendix B), I designed a flyer with the research project information (Appendix D). I posted it, along with the Gatekeeper Permission letter (Appendix B), Ethical Clearance Number, and Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) on the University Notice System to invite the participants to volunteer to participate in the study. Attached to the invite was a link to a Google Form enabling them to accept the invitation and for me to contact them.

Initially, I planned to use the University Notice System to purposively select participants and snowball sampling to locate participants. However, despite following the university guidelines, the University Notice System did not yield participants, leading to the exclusive use of snowball sampling. I initiated snowball sampling by asking acquaintances who studied for a professional psychology master's degree in 2021 to refer me to students they knew had studied in 2020. Subsequently, I asked each participant who joined the study if they could refer the invitation to anyone else who met my inclusion criteria of a professional psychology master's degree student at the selected university, studied their M1 (the first year of their master's degree) in 2020 or 2021, and studied their honours before the pandemic. Some students were part of cohort WhatsApp groups, and I asked them to share the research flyer on the group, leading to more participants. Other participants were the acquaintances of the participant who referred them.

Six participants responded to the invitation, and we made arrangements via email or WhatsApp (depending on the method of contact requested by the participant) for an individual interview. I stopped searching for participants at the data-saturation point, when "the researcher begins to hear the same information repeatedly being reported and no longer learns anything new" (de Vos et al., 2005, p. 294).

### 3.3.5 Participants

The biographic information of the six participants, using their self-chosen pseudonyms, is offered in Table 1. This is followed by a brief narrative about each participant.

Pseudonym	Master's Programme	Sex	Age
Alex	Clinical Psychology	F	26
Happy	Industrial Organisational Psychology	M	26
Lauren	Counselling Psychology	F	28
Sasha	Industrial Organisational Psychology	F	30
Tshego	Industrial Organisational Psychology	F	28
Zia	Clinical Psychology	F	26

Table 1 Biographic information of the participants

“Alex”, a female student, was 26 years old at the time of data collection. She enrolled for an honour’s degree in 2018 and a clinical psychology master’s degree in 2020 at UKZN. At the time of the interview, Alex was still in the process of completing her dissertation. She also had to do her internship during COVID-19. Alex also did part-time work over weekends, which stopped when the COVID-19 lockdown happened. During COVID-19, she lived with her parents in their family home.

“Happy”, a male student, was 26 years old at the time of data collection. He enrolled for an honour’s degree in 2019 and an industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) master’s degree in 2020 at UKZN. At the time of the interview, he was still in the process of completing his dissertation. He worked part-time while studying for his M1. During COVID-19, he lived at his family home with his father, mother, sister, grandmother, uncle, and aunt.

“Lauren”, a female student, was 28 years old at the time of data collection. She enrolled for an honour’s degree in 2017 and a counselling psychology master’s degree in 2020 at UKZN. At the time of the interview, she had completed her dissertation and completed her degree. She worked part-time while studying for her M1. During COVID-19, she was a private tenant who lived with her partner.

“Sasha”, a female student, was 30 years old at the time of data collection. She enrolled for an honours degree in 2017 and an industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) master’s degree in 2021 at UKZN. At the time of the interview, Sasha had finished her dissertation and

completed her master's degree. She was a full-time student while studying for her M1. During COVID-19, she lived in private accommodation near one of the university campuses. She stayed with another roommate but in separate rooms.

“Tshego”, a female student, was 28 years old at the time of data collection. She enrolled for an honour's degree in 2017 and an industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) master's degree in 2020 at UKZN. At the time of the interview, she was awaiting the results of her dissertation to complete her degree. Tshego embarked on her internship in 2022. She was unemployed while studying her M1. During COVID-19, she moved to live in her mother's home with her mother and two sisters.

“Zia”, a female student, was 26 years old at the time of data collection. She enrolled for an honour's degree in 2019 and a clinical psychology master's degree in 2020 at UKZN. At the time of the interview, she had recently submitted her dissertation and was awaiting the results to complete her degree. Zia was a full-time student while studying her M1. She lived in Durban before COVID-19 to study at UKZN and then she moved back to live in her family home in another city during the pandemic. There she lived with her mother, grandmother and three brothers.

### **3.4 Data collection: Individual semi-structured interviews**

In this study, I used qualitative data collection methods that could most appropriately access the contextual experiences of students studying at a South African HEI using ERL during COVID-19. One of the techniques connected to a qualitative research approach is the collection of data through interviewing. An interview is a flexible method that allows the researcher to explore the experiences of their participants in detail. The process draws on an interview schedule that has predetermined questions which act as a guide during the interview (de Vos et al., 2005). Individual interviews are often categorised as structured, semi-structured and unstructured. A structured interview has a set of specific questions the researcher poses and the participant answers. An unstructured interview involves a single open-ended question with a follow up of prompts to gather further data. A semi-structured interview schedule offers a middle ground, as the researcher allows the participant to share their thoughts on a topic with fewer constraints as the questions are open-ended, leading to richer data but with more structure than a single open-ended question, ensuring the research questions are covered sufficiently (Evans, 2007). For example, the participant can change the interview's direction within the

boundaries of the topic, allowing for new or different information to what the researcher assumed they might acquire during the interview (de Vos et al., 2005). This approach is beneficial when exploring a novel topic, such as the experiences of studying using ERL during a unique situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, I used semi-structured individual interviews as it allowed me to cover complex topics and gain insights from the participants' perspectives and how they made meaning of the phenomenon they had experienced (Evans, 2007). The semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the main themes determined from the literature review, as well as through discussions with my supervisors (Appendix E).

Individual interviews can be held face-to-face, via cell phone, social media, or platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams. According to Neuman (2014), interviews over the telephone have a response rate of 80 percent, while interviews in person are also found to have high response rates and can cover complex topics. My participants were given the option to have their interview via Zoom, Microsoft Teams or in person. The course of action for using Zoom or MS Teams involved arranging and setting up a Zoom or MS Teams meeting with each participant, scheduling an hour. Each participant was requested to find a quiet and comfortable location with good internet connectivity to conduct the interview. The interview was recorded via the Zoom or MS Teams platforms with audio and video, with the participants' consent. I set up a time and location for each of the participant's interviews. The prerequisite for the location was for it to be quiet and comfortable. The participants were informed that the interview would last for around an hour. I used Zoom and MS Teams to record the interviews. Of the three options for the meeting - Zoom, MS Teams and in person - four participants opted to use Zoom and two selected MS Teams. None of the participants chose to meet in person.

During the individual interviews, I introduced myself, reminded the participants of the purpose of the study, and discussed the consent form they had signed, ensuring that they understood what they were consenting to. I used a semi-structured interview schedule to pose three open-ended questions - complemented by clarifying and probing questions - which enabled me to collect data for the three research questions. The interviews varied from between 1 hour, 11 minutes and 37 seconds for the shortest interview to 1 hour, 59 minutes and 18 seconds for the longest interview, with an average time of 1 hour, 25 minutes and 58 seconds. While this indicates that some participants had more to say than others, all the interviews lasted for longer than the expected hour. After the introductory and biographical questions, the interview

schedule began with a segment where I asked questions relating to the participants' honours degrees. The honours degree is also a postgraduate degree, which means that the experiences may be more similar to a master's degree than a bachelor's degree would have been, with the main difference being that their honours degree occurred face-to-face, while their master's degree occurred over ERL. In asking about their experience, the participants were able to think about how this experience had changed in their master's degree year, allowing them to answer the questions with more depth. One of the interviewees experienced particularly disruptive connectivity issues, leading to some gaps in our conversation. In these cases, I asked the participant to repeat what they had said. I listened to the recording multiple times, which assisted in piecing together some of the gaps while transcribing.

I transcribed the interviews verbatim, using the following process: I uploaded my recording onto Word Transcribe and copied the transcript onto a Word document, including time stamps, then I went through the transcript in detail, editing word for word while listening to the audio to change and correct any that were incorrect and to add in information such as certain verbal fillers "uhm" and "hmm". I attached my name or the participant's pseudonym in front of the relevant segments where we spoke for the reader to distinguish and ensured the time stamps correlated to each segment where a single person spoke. I wrote the sentence as it was, including verbal fillers. If any words were difficult to distinguish due to a change in the quality of the audio or due to connectivity issues distorting the audio, I added what it sounded like in square brackets in place of the word. Furthermore, I added actions such as laughing, giggling, and chuckling in square brackets. After transcribing the recording, I added page numbers and inserted line numbers to the layout. At the top of the transcript, I ensured that the information about whom the interview involved, which included my participant's pseudonym in place of their name, the name of the audio file/s related to the respective transcript, the overall time of the interview recording/s (and the time of each recording if there were multiple), the date of the interview and the name of the transcriber (myself).

After completing the transcribing, all recordings and transcripts were saved on a cloud file on my laptop and backed up on an encrypted USB drive, accessible only to me and my supervisors. Interviews via Microsoft Teams and Zoom were recorded and then stored securely.

### **3.5 Reflexivity**

It was essential to practice reflexivity during the research process. According to Clarke and Braun (2013a, p. 6) and Clarke and Braun (2013b), reflexivity involves a “critical reflection on the research process and one’s own role as a researcher.” While qualitative research and interviews allow a researcher to gain insights from the participant’s perspective, the potential limitation of this approach and method is that the interviewer’s behaviour could lead to biased results (Neuman, 2014). In this study, I was also a student who studied during COVID-19 and shared some of the participants’ experiences of ERL. Due to me studying a similar course to the participants, a professional psychology master’s degree, my position was that of an insider who shares one or more group identities with their participants. This shared experience might have impacted the responses of the participants if I had attended the interview with expectations about their responses. For example, when the pandemic had emerged, I had recently begun my honours degree, and I started to study my master’s degree in the second year of the pandemic. In my journal, I made note of some of the experiences I faced during this time. During the first year of the pandemic, I had experienced anxiety resulting in several panic attacks, which led me to anticipate that others may have also had similar experiences. In the second year, I experienced a lack of practical opportunities which led me to feel less confident in my abilities as a psychologist. I had to pay attention to my expectation that my participants have had similar situations to avoid this tempering the kinds of questions I asked and my interpretation of the data. To mitigate this, I used exercises proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013b, pp. 7-8) to practice reflexivity to ensure not to impact the types of answers the participants gave because of my personal experience. More specifically, I used journalling, peer reviewing and discussions with my supervisor. I set aside time to journal and reflect on my assumptions about the research topic and how my values and life experiences may shape my interpretation of the data. I freely wrote these down before I began to conduct my data collection and before I began to interpret the data. In addition, in the discussion of my data, analysis and results with my supervisors, their questions contributed to the criticality of my own interpretations and biases, which enabled me to bracket my own assumptions. Finally, an independent coder acted as a peer reviewer by reviewing the results drawn from the data to confirm whether I coded the results without bias and actually coded what the data said.

### **3.6 Data analysis: Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis is a data analysis method where a researcher separates qualitative data into themes and then uses these themes to develop interpretations in response to the research questions. It has become a widely used method to analyse and interpret data in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2013b). The practice of thematic analysis (TA) is theoretically flexible and described by Clarke and Braun (2013b) as an analytic method rather than a methodology. Accordingly, I utilised a thematic analysis method to analyse the data.

The following steps were taken once the research data had been acquired and transcribed:

The participants had the option to select their pseudonyms. Thus, all the participants had a pseudonym, and their identities are only known by the participant, my supervisor and I to ensure their anonymity in the transcription and in the study. Thereafter, the following six phases process of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used.

#### ***3.6.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with data***

I immersed myself in the data by reading and rereading it and listening to the audio from the interview while taking notes. This phase aligned with the process of transcribing, I would listen to a segment multiple times as I transcribed and edited each transcript, which allowed me to familiarise myself with the data. This process allowed me to actively engage with the data to find patterns of meaning within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013b). (See Appendix F).

#### ***3.6.2 Phase 2: Generation of initial codes***

Codes occur when “data are broken down, conceptualised and put back together in new ways” (de Vos et al., 2005, p. 340). In this phase, each transcript was read and coded line by line using open coding. To use open coding, the transcript was read line by line, and for each line, I broke down the data into discrete parts, compared and contrasted the data, and asked myself what each data segment was about in relation to the research question (de Vos et al., 2005). I further asked what the data segment meant in relation to the phenomena I was studying. I highlighted and selected each data segment on the transcript and used MSWord comment boxes to note down a relevant code, in other words; I wrote down two or more words which explained the meaning of what that data segment was about in a comment linked to the segment, which became my code. The codes were organised into meaningful groups and then they were collated with relevant data extracts. This coding was data-driven rather than theory-driven (Clarke &

Braun, 2013b; Herzog et al., 2019). An example of generating initial codes can be seen in Appendix G.

### ***3.6.3 Phase 3: Searching for themes***

Themes are “coherent and meaningful patterns in the data relevant to the research question” (Clarke & Braun, 2013b, p. 3). I actively read through the list of codes in the MS Word document comment boxes, which contained the codes linked to data segments, to search for and construct themes and subthemes from the data (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). I then created a provisional list of potential themes and subthemes in a Word document, printed and cut them out and used them to group the codes. The codes were highlighted with different coloured lines to distinguish one participant’s data from another and make linking data segments to participants easier. I then placed the provisional themes and subthemes onto a large A1 paper, grouped in their relevant areas with enough space to place the codes. Next, I placed each code under the most relevant provisional themes and subthemes. Any codes that were irrelevant or not connected to the research question were winnowed out. In some cases, themes and subthemes that initially seemed relevant were also winnowed out or altered as the codes indicated they were not as relevant. In other cases, new themes and subthemes were added as the codes indicated their necessity. Some of the emerging themes were informed by Bandura’s self-efficacy constructs, while others were determined by drawing together the meaning of the contents to make up the theme. This mapping of themes and subthemes with the codes visually (See Appendix H) created a broader understanding of the essence of the phenomenon (Clarke & Braun, 2013b; Herzog et al., 2019).

### ***3.6.4 Phase 4: Reviewing themes***

This phase finalised the themes based on the provisional themes from step three by verifying that the themes connect with the coded segments selected and the broader data set. I considered how the themes could create a storyline about the data and how those themes were unique and connected to other themes. This phase involved refining a thematic map (Clarke & Braun, 2013b; Herzog et al., 2019). The resultant themes and the subthemes were then labelled in a final Word document.

### ***3.6.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes***

This phase specified the themes regarding the research question and the overall research study in a detailed analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013b; Herzog et al., 2019). I collaborated with my

supervisor to ensure that the themes were concise and had a name that accurately described the theme. There are two general approaches to name codes, themes, and subthemes. First, the researcher uses their logic based on what is represented in the data. This approach must easily remind the researcher of the themes and subthemes they refer to. In the second approach, the researcher can source the names of their codes by using “in vivo” codes. In this case, the researcher uses words and/or phrases of participants that are catchy and apply appropriately to the data (de Vos et al., 2005). In this study, I created the themes and subthemes names based on the what the data represented.

### ***3.6.6 Phase 6: Produce the report***

In this phase, I created a narrative within the context of current literature on studying during COVID-19. It included the analytic narrative and data extracts to give the data a coherent story in response to the main research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013b; Herzog et al., 2019). In my study, I added each theme into a Word document, used the thematic map, and created and added each participant quote from each code to this document within each theme or subtheme section. I moved the participant’s pseudonym to the end of the quote within brackets. While placing the quotes in each section, I edited the quotes to include ellipses at the beginning and end if the quote was taken from a longer section of speech and grouped the quotes into topics within the subthemes. Upon completion, I went through the document from the beginning and winnowed out any irrelevant quotes and parts of quotes (replacing those with ellipses and cleaned the data), creating a narrative for each theme and subtheme, selecting two to three quotes that were most relevant for each theme and subtheme. I then collaborated with my supervisors to further narrow down which themes, subthemes, and quotes to keep in the final document, and to ensure that the remaining themes aligned with the theoretical framework. Finally, I discussed each theme and subtheme, using the participants’ quotes to substantiate the themes and subthemes and recontextualising the findings within existing literature.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness**

As the study centred around a qualitative approach, applying an equivalent construct to validity and reliability, that of trustworthiness was essential. This process assisted in creating research that is true, applicable, consistent, neutral and has integrity (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014; Shenton, 2004). According to Shenton (2004), the construct of trustworthiness as an alternative to validity and reliability was proposed by Guba in 1981 and required four main criteria to be fulfilled. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### ***3.7.1 Credibility***

Credibility is considered an alternative to the internal validity of quantitative research methodology (de Vos et al., 2005). Credibility is concerned with the level of confidence about the truth of one's research findings and whether the information presented in the findings is plausible or truthful to the experiences of the original data source - the interview transcripts arising from the engagement with the participants (Anney, 2014). de Vos et al. (2005, p. 364) add that credibility is concerned with whether the study was "conducted in a manner as to ensure that the subject was accurately identified and described." Credibility is ensured when the questions asked are not leading, biased, loaded, partial but attempt to explore all sides of the topic (Becker, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Some ways to ensure credibility include leaving a detailed audit trail about the processes and actions taken during the research project, avoiding bias by ensuring the perspectives that are included are balanced, practicing reflexivity and using peer examination (Cope, 2014; Neuman, 2014).

I worked with my supervisor to review and refine the data collection instrument and my interviewing technique. I endeavoured to avoid bias by not taking sides and provided a picture of the essence of the phenomenon. I engaged with the research and have an audit trail of selecting participants, collecting and analysing the data, of the interview schedule and the notes created during the research process. I attempted to practice reflexivity by writing down my thoughts about the topic prior to my interviews and the potential areas of bias I may have, such as experiences of privilege that might have led me to take certain things for granted, such as electricity, quiet living spaces, and access to my own technological equipment such as a laptop and cell phone. I also discussed my thoughts with my supervisors to identify my potential biases. I further used peer examination to determine the study findings and whether the themes and quotes I had chosen were true to the flow of the story of the participants.

### ***3.7.2 Transferability***

Transferability is an alternative to external validity or generalisability (de Vos et al., 2005). Transferability looks at the extent to which the results or findings can apply to other settings or groups and if they have meaning to those not involved in the study. This is used instead of making generalisations about a phenomenon (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014). While it is difficult to ensure that qualitative studies fulfil the traditional sense of generalisability, de Vos et al. (2005) noted that there are measures to take that assist the generalisation of qualitative research. They argue that researchers should state a theoretical parameter of the research to allow other

researchers and policymakers to interpret whether the study findings could be transferred to their own research and policies. The authors also suggested the use of triangulation as a method to ensure multiple points of reference. One such measure, the use of multiple participants (de Vos et al., 2005), was used in my study as it would increase the usefulness of my study to other potential settings.

I provided a thick description of the context, the research methodology, process and analysis (Anney, 2014), drawing on my notes and observations during the research process, so that future researchers can decide whether the findings are transferable to their contexts.

### ***3.7.3 Dependability***

Dependability is used as an alternative to reliability (de Vos et al., 2005). Dependability is focused on the stability and constancy of the findings over time in similar situations (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014). This means the research is shown to be replicable with similar participants in similar conditions through the use of audit trails, peer examinations and code-recode strategies (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014). An audit trail shows how the researcher reached their conclusions by jotting down their thought processes and the research activities that occurred (Anney, 2014). A code-recode strategy is used by creating codes for the original data and then recoding after a couple of days to ensure that the codes are as accurate as possible (Anney, 2014). Peer examination involves the researcher asking their peers for their opinion of the codes and discussing codes with their supervisor to ensure the accuracy of the codes (Anney, 2014).

I provided a comprehensive account of the research process, including the information related to the participants' selection, the research design, the data collection, and analysis, to ensure a traceable audit trail. I coded and recoded my data and discussed the coding and themes with my supervisors. I also used an external independent coder to further ensure the coding was as accurate as possible, thereby augmenting peer examination.

### ***3.7.4 Confirmability***

Confirmability is a qualitative methodology alternative to objectivity (de Vos et al., 2005) that determines if a study's findings can be confirmed by another. Confirmability requires the researcher to ensure that their conclusions about the data are not based on their personal biases but are representative of the participants (de Vos et al., 2005; Neuman, 2014). It is crucial to bracket any prior preconceptions and place these assumptions aside about the research findings (Neuman, 2014).

Considering that I was a student during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflexivity assisted me in avoiding bias and ensured the integrity of my findings. I established conclusions and interpretations by being reflexive in selecting significant excerpts that exemplify each theme, which was corroborated by my supervisors (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014). I wrote down my experience of studying during COVID-19 to bracket my perception of the phenomenon (Cope, 2014).

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

According to the Belmont report (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979), researchers must ensure the following in their research endeavours: respect for persons (acknowledging the autonomy of all participants and protecting those whose autonomy has diminished), beneficence (ensuring no harm to the participant and ensuring their benefits are maximised, or harms are minimised), and justice (ensuring that the participants are treated fairly, and that any benefits given in the study are distributed equitably). The following section pertains to the measures used in this research project to ensure respect, beneficence, and justice.

Ethical clearance was acquired from the research ethics board at the university (Appendix A). It is important to adhere to ethical principles throughout the research process to ensure that no harm is done to the participants.

According to the 1979 Belmont Report, informed consent is necessary for a research project, allowing a participant to choose which things they are willing to do, and the consent form must include the elements of “information, comprehension and voluntariness” (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979, p. 7). A letter requesting gatekeeper permission was sent to the university registrar (Appendix B). The participants were informed about the nature of the research and asked to consent to participate by signing the informed consent form (Appendix C). In the interview, I went through the informed consent form again to ensure the participants were participating voluntarily. I, as researcher, ensured participant autonomy by informing the participants that they could withdraw from the research project at any time without being penalised in any way. The data they generated would be deleted immediately.

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and no data was linked to a participant. Personal information of the participants remained anonymous. I collaborated with the participants to create their own pseudonyms, which replaced their names in the transcriptions. The pseudonyms were only known by each respective participant, myself, and my supervisors.

To further ensure no harm to my participants, in case a participant was distressed or upset in any way, as talking about COVID-19 could have been sensitive, I had arranged to refer them to the university Student Counselling and Careers centres, which provided personal counselling and therapy. None of the participants appeared notably distressed or upset, nor did they say anything about needing support, and I thus did not need to refer anyone.

All interview data was stored on a password-protected USB flash drive and stored on a file on a cloud on my personal laptop, protected with a password. A copy of raw data, coding sheets, instruments, and participant identification data were kept at the university by the supervisors and would be deleted five years after the research project had ended.

### **3.9 Summary of chapter**

In conclusion, in this chapter, I explained that I used a qualitative research approach to explore and understand the experiences of using emergency remote [online] learning of professional psychology master's degree students who studied for their master's degree in 2020 or 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, the context is of university students from one university who were studying from home during the pandemic. The study was underpinned by an interpretivist, constructivist ontology and epistemology which enabled me to use a phenomenological research strategy to explore the lived experiences of the participants - which are subjective and unique to that particular participant in that particular context. I used purposive sampling to locate and select the participants based on specific inclusion criteria. More specifically, I used snowball sampling to locate the participants. I provided the relevant biographic information of the participants. I explained how I used an individual, semi-structured interview to collect the data. I discussed the method I used to analyse the data, using thematic analysis. Finally, I explored some relevant ethical considerations related to my project, as well as the criteria of trustworthiness. The next chapter will present the results of the research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results emanating from the data analysis. As indicated in Chapter One, the study explores the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students of emergency remote learning during a global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter presents the main themes and subthemes supported by quotations from the participants' data to respond to the three research questions.

### 4.2 Results

First is an illustration of the overview of the results in the form of a thematic map (Figure 1) and then the results. Based on the data collected, nine main themes and four subthemes emerged that addressed study's objective.

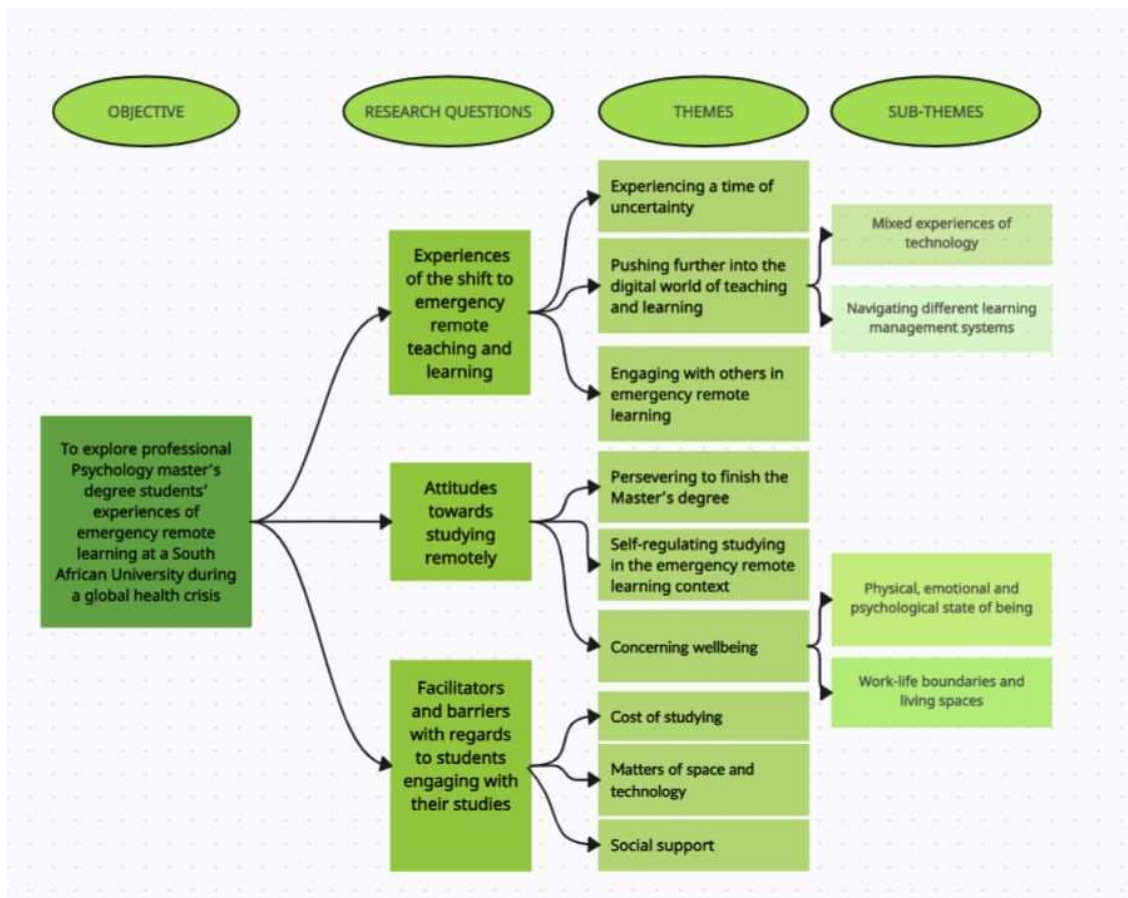


Figure 1 Thematic map of results

#### ***4.2.1 Experiences of the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning***

One of the first questions posed to participants concerned the shift to ERL: “*Early 2020 COVID-19 forced universities to transition from face-to-face to remote online learning. Can you share your experience of this shift?*”. This question was intended to evoke a response from the participants about their experience of the shift from learning on campus to learning from home using ERL during the pandemic. The results reflect the data generated from the interviews with the six participants, which revealed the following themes: i.e. experiencing a time of uncertainty, pushing further into the digital world of teaching and learning, which contained the two subthemes: mixed experiences of technology; and navigating different learning management systems, and engaging with others in emergency remote learning.

**4.2.1.1 T1 Experiencing a time of uncertainty.** The first theme, *experiencing a time of uncertainty*, in this instance refers to that which is not known or certain and reveals the way the participants talked about the shift as the university tried to deal with moving to online teaching and learning. The pandemic hit South African universities, as all other sectors of the country, without warning and plans to keep the university with all its departments, programmes, staff, and students going in such an unprecedented situation had to be made quickly, without anyone knowing what exactly to do to ensure that the university business kept continuing. The participants experienced uncertainty around the information provided or not provided by the university to its students, often being left in the dark or trying to figure out their lecturers’ attempts at adjusting to ERL. The uncertainty also influenced their psychological responses and seemed to create a sense of loss of control. This theme is supported by data from participants (N=6).

“Zia” expresses the uncertainty about the shift to ERL:

Because of the online learning and COVID and stuff, I think the university kept changing their minds. Like, at some point they're like, okay, classes, all classes have to be suspended. Even online, everything has to be suspended. And then they'd be like, okay, well, actually, maybe we might resume. Uhm, and then they'd be like, oh, you can come back to campus and then they'd be like, no, you can't come back to campus ... So, you don't know what's going on half the time.  
(Zia)

This uncertainty was exacerbated by poor communication from the university. During these times, the participants expressed that they felt left in the dark regarding how the shift would happen, receiving little information from the university about the direction to be taken. The long silences from the university also seemed to contribute to their anxiety:

And then I just felt like things were not communicated properly with us ... Like, we would be in the dark. (“Tshego”)

We were all panicking in some ways, uhm, ... I think the silence did scare us a bit. I'm not going to lie. Uhm, I remember at one point, I think in, uh, one subgroup, we were pretty much concerned why it's so quiet (“Happy”)

However, the experience outlined above differed from that of other participants. According to Alex, she experienced an information overload in the form of emails that lacked clarity and direction from the lecturers. The intimation that some of the decision-making was left to her and her peers also contributed to her uncertainty:

So, I ... remember being bombarded with emails ... how to move online, how to move classes online. And lecturers were not, like, filtering this at all. We were just getting things, like, we were getting their e-mail chains discussing with colleagues what to do. And I was just like, hold on, like, what the hell? We're still students at the end of the day, it felt like ... a lot of the impetus to go online was on us. It was on us to decide that. (Alex)

During this initial phase of the shift to online teaching and learning, the participants observed that the psychology lecturers, like everyone else, also had to adjust to the move online, often not knowing what to do, but trying their best with the skills and knowledge available to them:

I think lecturers tried the best that they could. They definitely tried hard to do that. I think it was just a case of being in a really, I don't know, really not great situation that was out of everyone's hands. (“Lauren”)

The lecturers didn't know what was happening and what to do, and given the intensity of a master's programme, they tried their best. Did they always get it right? No. (Alex)

A consequence of the uncertainty of the pandemic and shifting to ERL was evident in the emotional wellbeing of the participants. It seemed that the uncertainty of the shift to ERL and

the pandemic were intertwined. The participants noted that they experienced psychological effects such as trauma, stress, anxiety, and a general fear of uncertainty, as the following relays:

Obviously, granted, everyone was taken by surprise or whatever, but it was not a good time ...  
(Tshego)

It's more like, a trauma, like, ... I'm trauma bonded to this degree. (Alex)

I think mostly just COVID itself, no one really knew, like, it hadn't really happened before in our lifetime, so there was that. There was the fear of, obviously just the general fears associated with that. So, like, people were scared for their families and for themselves. (Lauren)

Lauren noted that she experienced uncertainty about the length of time she would need to study online. The uncertainty experienced by Happy led to a sense of loss of control:

At the time, like, you don't know when this is going to end, I think that's also the hard thing in situations like this. You can enjoy a lot of things if you know when the end date is. And because we didn't know what that was, it just becomes a lot more messy. (Lauren)

I like a bit of certainty ... I don't mind uncertainty, but not too much of uncertainty. So that did play a massive impact in my emotions. To know that I have absolutely no control of what's going to happen moving forward. Uhm, and my mind kept on dwelling on that, that I have no control and having to feel that feeling wasn't very pleasant. (Happy)

This theme highlighted the participants' experiences of uncertainty, focusing on the shift to ERL in the context of COVID-19. These uncertainties seemed intertwined, mutually affecting each other. Despite these uncertainties, teaching and learning in the digital world seemed to open new experiences for the participants, as the next theme demonstrates.

**4.2.1.2 T2 Pushing further into the digital world of teaching and learning.** When posing the interview question about the university's transition from face-to-face to remote online learning, a further probing question was asked about their use of technology to learn in the context of ERL. The participants seemed to experience that the shift to ERL *pushed them further into the digital world of teaching and learning*, referring to their experiences of fully embracing the digitising process of teaching and learning, only now without having the choice of face-to-face teaching and learning. The theme consists of two subthemes. One, the participants expressed mixed experiences of technology, and two, navigating different learning

management systems. The data of the participants (N= 6) support this theme, for which I offer selected quotations:

**4.2.1.2.1 Mixed experiences of technology.** The participants had mixed experiences of using the technology. They had to use what was available in their individual circumstances, without regard to their technical skill set, to make their online learning happen. The initial shift to ERL was a significant change, as the following quotations indicate:

The shift overall in terms of the education was, as I say, a massive switch. (Happy)

It's still very new. It's still kind of like, oh online, that's a bit scary. (Zia)

If I had to be honest ... it was weirdly exciting at the beginning. (Happy)

There were conflicting experiences of the shift to ERL. Some participants disliked the transition, while others welcomed it:

I hated it. I think just because on campus you have so many additional resources. We had, you know, we had all the tests that we could look at. We had people we could speak to. (Lauren)

Virtual learning for me personally, I enjoyed it in some ways, although, I did experience some strains, but looking back, uhm, it was something that, I guess, it was a good experience, something to, I could never take away, like, no one can ever take away that experience. Uhm, and realise that I do like virtual platforms. (Happy)

To be honest, on the one hand, it was extremely different and on the other hand it wasn't that different. The only thing that really changed was that our lectures were on Zoom. (Lauren)

The participants noted that online teaching and learning was not necessarily suited to a professional psychology programme:

It's an adjustment. And I think that it's more conducive to some fields than others (Zia)

All of the participants in my study had access to hardware such as laptops, computers and cell phones and some even had printers which enabled them to access digital means of teaching and learning. Besides having access or not to the technology, the ability to use it effectively and smartly or not was critical to their experience of being able to successfully engage in this digital world:

In terms of the tools, I would use my laptop and I would use my cell phone. I think those were the only two, and I also had a printer if I need to print it, anything. (Happy)

I would say I'm no tech wizard by any means, but for the things I needed it for like email and word and stuff, pretty comfy (Lauren)

I think the fact that I did have a bit of use, usage of technology before the COVID-19, uhm, I think also helped a little bit. So, with that I don't think I needed much support with digital use. So, the digital use part of it, support, I didn't really need it. (Happy)

Others, however, were less comfortable using technology and had to adapt to the tools necessary to learn, Sasha highlights:

I used to be more, uhm, anxious about presenting online and my laptop switching off than my actual presentations and class ... Or, I'll be concerned about, you know, typing slow during an exam because I know that when I write, I write faster ... the use of technology was definitely nerve-wracking. Uhm, how to, like, you know, uhm, what's this? Operate your Zoom, and how to, like, you know, uhm, mute yourself. Sometimes you talk without unmuting yourself and you realise halfway into the sentence, like, nobody's hearing you out, and now you have to repeat yourself ... I remember I learned for the first time that you can actually have a shared document, uh, during my master's year with some of my colleagues. And we could, like, make, you know, work on the same document at the same time. For me it was like, oh wow, this is rocket science. (Sasha)

While technology was necessary in digital online teaching and learning, central to it all was connectivity. The participants in my study had access to the internet via Wi-Fi, fibre, mobile data, and modems, and most could switch when there was a problem with one. The following quotes highlight the participants' experiences around internet access and connectivity:

So, I used Wi-Fi and, if there was something wrong with the Wi-Fi, end up using the data that's on the phone.” (Happy)

Fibre was up, I was good. (Tshego)

I had a small modem. (Alex)

Some participants experienced no issues with internet connectivity, while others noted regular connectivity problems:

Well, for the most part it was stable. (Tshego)

Unfortunately, network I think was just an issue for everyone. (Happy)

And I think what it made even more clear was the technology was fine to use, the technology was easy to use if you had a good Wi-Fi connection. (Alex)

The internet connectivity issues experienced by the participants were in the form of glitches (malfunctioning) and lag during online classes, which resulted in participants missing out on information and, in some cases, even led to the cancelling of online classes:

your lectures start to glitch, and spending your time trying to relog on ...that was frustrating ... or maybe someone else is using the Wi-Fi and now it's lagging on your side. (Zia)

Network was a challenge. There was one part of the, that had an impact on learning, because sometimes the network would just go off and then you can't do webinars. I think at some point I had a presentation and the network just refused to work. Uhm, and that was my day to do the presentation. So, we had to even postpone it. (Happy)

The participants experienced the high cost of data. In some cases, the students in online classes worked with their microphones and cameras off to save data and money:

So just Wi-Fi, yeah ... and it wasn't uncapped. So, there were times that I was just forking out, I think ... the best month was like one four [R1,400], one five [R1,500] on Wi-Fi ... I would just be like, getting more data to hotspot. (Alex)

Data was a big issue, so we'd go into lectures and you would have, if you weren't talking, your mic is muted or your camera was off. (Lauren)

The university provided data to students to enable online teaching and learning; some participants found the amount of data to be sufficient, while others said that they ran out quickly:

They also gave us data at school ... I think it lasted the whole month actually. Uhm, maybe it'll get depleted a day or two before I got my other refill, recharge ... So, it worked well for me. (Sasha)

So, the university did give us ... data during this time. I think we got like 20 gigs a month ... But that goes really quickly if you're sitting on Zoom the whole day. Like,

that did not last long at all. So, we had Wi-Fi ... the connection was really bad. So, I would have to, like, switch over and then I would run out of my university data quite early on in the month. (Lauren)

**4.2.1.2.2 Navigating different learning management systems.** The participants navigated different learning management systems, which included web-based technology such as Zoom and software applications such as WhatsApp to complete their academic requirements. The interview led the participants to ponder embracing the technology drive of the fourth industrial revolution and how other students could have been left behind due to not having easy access to the necessary technologies and infrastructure. This, in turn, led to a discussion about how strike action changed when classes went online.

The various software applications and platforms necessary for ERL each had different and, at times, overlapping purposes, which the participants in the study were prompted to explore in the interview. The participants explained how they used WhatsApp to form groups; some consisted only of students, while others included their lecturers. WhatsApp was used for informal communication to clarify knowledge gaps in their understanding quickly:

We had, uhm, WhatsApp groups with our lecturers in them. We had our own WhatsApp group as students aside. (Sasha)

WhatsApp groups was one of the things we used in terms of communication. I think we actually found that quite easy to communicate, quick because we, if someone like our lecturer had something to explain, she would just automatically use her phone and just chat with us. (Happy)

The participants discussed how emails were often used for formal communications between lecturers or supervisors and students:

In terms of school-related tasks, we would be using our emails. (Happy)

We would share [PowerPoints] via e-mail amongst ourselves. (Alex)

You also use emails as a ... very popular mode of communication with the lecturers.” (Sasha)

The participants used the university’s online learning platforms, Learn and Moodle, primarily to upload and download virtual learning materials, such as their slides or notes, or to access pre-recorded lectures. As one participant mentioned, it was used by students as a library:

I think it very much depended on the lecturer [whether they used Learn]. If they were using the platform, we would use it. (Lauren)

Moodle would be for you to access your notes or whatever it is, but I don't think we were taught as in they would upload a pre-recorded session. (Tshego)

Yeah but just because our lecturers had put up, would put up all our slides there [she used Moodle/Learn] and we would submit our slides ... up and so forth. So, it was a matter of going in, downloading, and done. (Alex)

The participants recalled using Zoom and MS Teams for lectures as an alternative to see the class face-to-face:

Sometimes they [lecturers] want to see us face-to-face. They will use Zoom. (Happy)

But I think with my co-supervisor, my co-supervisor kind of pushed us to the Team part because she realised the flexibility of using SA Teams [MS Teams]. (Happy)

The shift to online teaching and learning seemed to catapult the participants into the fourth industrial revolution. Yet, they were also cognisant of some students being left behind in the shift. The nature of the pandemic and the requisite closures of university campuses rapidly pushed academic work online out of necessity. With the necessary tools already existing, positioning teaching and learning in the fourth industrial revolution was a given and irreversible, which some participants perceived as positive:

Right now, technology is growing. Uhm, I think before COVID-19, fourth industrial revolution was an absolute conversation, which COVID pushed us into it. (Happy)

I think, if we never had the pandemic, I don't think we'd be ever exploring and embracing technology the way we do now. (Happy)

It helped us realise that ... not everything needs to be physical. We can actually do so much online, work can be done online, school can be done, so many things, that we can have social parties online as well ... So, you know, uhm, it has just really opened up our eyes and I think, uhm, there's no going back to pre-COVID world now that we know what it's like to, like, have digital everything ...(Sasha)

However, some participants noted that while they were able to continue, such a move could also exacerbate existing inequalities for some students at university. In their interviews, the participants explained how systemic inequality could deepen the digital divide:

So having to be very, very aware of different peoples' realities, uhm, I think is very important. Like, it's very easy to be like, agh, why can't we just, and I noticed that a lot, people just being like, oh, why can't we just move things online. It's not hard. And, like, just no consideration for the fact that, okay, but the vast majority of people in South Africa don't live the way you do ... Uhm, yeah, it's a huge adjustment having to be intentional, having to be very considerate about other people's lived experiences and the differences in those. (Zia)

But there wasn't a recognition that systemic inequality was at play. (Alex)

While the fourth industrial revolution fundamentally changed teaching and learning, it also influenced the way strike action occurred. Although students were not learning on campus, strike action still required the suspension of classes:

I remember thinking okay, at least you know this year we'll be spared from strikes because 'oh online. Who's going to strike?' No, didn't happen [laughs] ... online classes were suspended I think two, three times really in the first semester. (Tshego)

The participants perceived that one of the purposes of the virtual strikes was to raise awareness of and prevent students from being left behind in this online world. They, however, noted that the virtual strikes made the disparity easier to ignore, thus exacerbating the effects of the digital divide:

I think just being very aware of the vast majority of socio-political change it makes [protest action], uhm, which only kind of realised last year and this year... But now everyone's like, cool, you want to protest, that's your problem. You're only harming yourself because we're all going to go online. We're going to continue without you. So, the socio-political climate shifts a little bit. I think it makes wealth disparity a lot more obvious. Uhm, yeah, so, I think it has opportunity to highlight a lot of different issues ... And, to be cognisant in attending, ah, to those. (Zia)

While participants had varied experiences of being pushed further into the digital world of online teaching and learning, the effects of the move to ERL on their relationships with others in the academic sphere also influenced their experiences.

**4.2.1.3 T3 Engaging with others in emergency remote learning.** The third theme, *Engaging with others in emergency remote learning*, refers to engagement between the participants and their lecturers, supervisors, and peers who played an essential role in the master's students' learning experiences. The role of lecturers and supervisors remains crucial in facilitating and scaffolding learning and extending the knowledge and skills of a student or creating opportunities for self-learning. In some cases, the participants experienced valuable supportive engagement. However, others felt forgotten due to poor engagement with their supervisors and lecturers. At the same time, peers acted as sounding boards for ideas, provided camaraderie, and facilitated coping. The participants noted how they missed this engagement and how online classes sometimes alienated them from their identity as students. They found themselves unable to sense the body cues of one another and observed poor class engagement in online classes. This left the participants with what seemed a dull experience of engagement. The data of the participants (N= 6) support this theme, for which I offer selected quotations:

Some participants spoke about valuing the engagement with their lecturers and supervisors, although communicating with them became more formal and less spontaneous when not being able to engage face to face:

There's things in in your M1 [first year of Master's degree] that you can't teach yourself. There's some things that you have to have a lecturer teach you ... having someone scaffold your knowledge for you, I think I took it for granted beforehand. (Alex)

Our lecturers, lecturers were quite wonderful and you could e-mail them and ask them questions, but we weren't able to organically just sit in the room and chat to them and ask them, or get advice or whatever. It became a lot more formal, like, instead of informal. (Lauren)

There was also a mention of positive experiences of engaging with their lecturers and supervisors:

Some of them [lecturers] were great, were lovely, very easy to get hold of, very helpful. Very much, like, okay, I understand that you're struggling. I understand this is a lot to take in." (Zia)

They really tried to be there for us ... they put themselves out there, you know, they made themselves available for us. So yeah, I think the lecturers were very supportive ... given the circumstances that we were in that, you know, we can only learn online and stuff, they really

were responsive to, like, emails. You know, they would, uhm, pick up our phone calls when we did call. (Sasha)

I had such a wonderful experience with both of my clinical supervisors. They were both just really fantastic. They essentially gave me access to them as much as I needed ... if I needed to discuss something straight away, I could phone my supervisor and we would talk about it. (Lauren)

Other participants expressed less positive experiences about trying to engage or receive feedback from lecturers, leaving them feeling unsupported and likening it to being a forgotten stepchild:

You didn't have any engagement with your lecturers, so there wasn't asking questions of uhm, what do you think of this idea? What, like, there was no feedback for some things, and that made it hard. (Alex)

We kept saying we felt like a stepchild ... like Cinderella before she, the godmother fairy came along ... There was absolutely no relationship. (Tshego)

... for me it was a little on the lonely side ... And, not in terms of my peers though, but in terms of the relationship with my lecturers ... there was just, like, a disconnect ... Yeah, probably lonely, a little unsupported. (Tshego)

Zia spoke about the challenge of engaging with her lecturers and not having her concerns addressed, while Alex raised the point that the pandemic created an abnormal situation where she felt misunderstood:

Life, just was not normal, and lecturers were just, like, acting as if life was normal. And I'm like, I don't know about y'all ... But I'm going through it over here, and I, please, let's stop gaslighting each other, because this is not a great situation. (Alex)

I felt there was a lack of understanding from the lecturers and supervisors. I think it would have been a lot easier if they had kind of been like, 'listen, we get it' and ... been honest as well and been like 'we're also anxious, we're also a bit uncertain, but we're doing our best to figure this out'. Uhm, 'we hear all your queries. We hear all your concerns. This is, this is what we have to say'. Because I felt like some of them ... asked us to voice ... our concerns, but they didn't respond. It was sort of like, 'okay, cool, but I get that you're worried about this, but you do understand that you, you just need to figure that out for yourself. (Zia)

As observed, lecturers' interaction varied from supportive in some cases to distant in others, putting more importance on the role that peers play in each other's academic lives, which, due to ERL, became more strained by the absence of face-to-face engagement:

I don't do well without people. I am talkative. I am, like, I run ideas by people, like, that's also how I like to work." (Alex)

The participants found their peers provided them with academic support and camaraderie:

We played around with this technology that we've got, and I think with the peers that we had, I think the five of us were able to communicate and figure it out ... So, uh, my peers were quite a support system in that sense of the whole experience of the learning. (Happy)

I think what was good about our class is because we were all in the same situation, we usually if we required additional support or if we needed something as a class, we would often present it as a unified front. So, in terms of my, my class peers there definitely was that, as much as there wasn't, like, a lot of interaction with people, we just kind of all banded together. (Lauren)

Some participants highlighted missing out on the pre-pandemic peer engagement and relationship-building opportunities:

There's a trade-off with anything and the trade-off a lot of the time is then that in-person interaction and having space for, like, organic learning situations or ... conversations to come up, or learning experiences, or being able to interact and build really great relationships ... It's probably do-able online, but you do lose that, like, people-interaction element. Which I think is so important in our degree, first of all, but just in general to get through something that's really difficult. (Lauren)

little things like access to also, like, a study group ... you have that support. You have someone bolstering your intellectual capacity and your ability to focus. So, I did also, I did miss out on stuff like that. Like, I think the peer support and the learning you get, the sort of informal or unplanned learning you get just from hanging around other master students. (Zia)

The participants noted how the transition to ERL was alienating in the sense of not feeling being treated as a human:

I think it's really easy to take away the humanity and the feeling, when you're speaking to someone across the screen ... It's very easy to remember [forget] that this is also a human being facing a pandemic, not just your student who is a master student. (Alex)

It felt like a third person, Zoom was like a third person. Like you weren't just speaking to your lecturer or whoever it may be, you were speaking via something to your lecturer.” (Alex)

If you're going to do it remotely or online, then you don't get to see, like, the softer side of them or the more chilled or, like, not them as a lecturer or supervisor ... and they also don't get to see you as anything else other than students. (Tshego)

This disconnect made it difficult to engage fully and get a sense of others by reading their body cues:

It's really difficult to get a sense of everyone. (Lauren)

Maybe you misconstrue or misinterpret what they're [lecturers] actually thinking or going through because you can't see their bodily cues, you can't see their facial reactions. They can't respond to yours. So, it becomes very impersonal. It becomes very objective ... for psychology, where it's very, it is a very personal thing ... it feels very out of touch ... I think the fact that they're also not able to respond to you ... usually a lecturer will say something and ... you'll have a confused look in your face, or they'll see that you have something to say ... here they're not reacting to anything. They're kind of just, like, reading off their slides or explaining things. So, it's less interactive ... it does become very unemotional. (Zia)

Furthermore, the participants experienced silence when class engagement was required:

In terms of classes and engagement, like, literally, you could have inserted cricket noises when it came to like people answering questions. Which was irritating because then the certain few, of which I was one, has to bear the damn load of answering questions in the classroom. It is inauthentic. (Alex)

This lack of in-person interaction seemed to make the anticipated 3D, lively, colourful, and vibrant master's experience into a flat and dull one:

I think it just became, I don't know, I don't know if this is going to make any sense, but, almost, it felt like very 2D compared to something that would have been 3D. (Lauren)

At the end of the day, it's also, like, psychology is human interaction, and when you have that human interaction and you're watching things play out in person, uhm, and discussing it with people and you're bringing it to life, it comes alive, it becomes very colourful. Whereas here it's relocated, or it remains on the book [theoretical]. You know. There's nothing to make it come alive. (Zia)

The participants experienced a period of uncertainty during the transition and adjustment to ERL during the pandemic, particularly in times of inconsistent communication. The participants further delved into their experiences of transitioning to online technology, and, in the face of the call to digitalise, they observed the inequality faced by those left behind in the digital divide. Clearly, the participants experienced engaging within their academic community during ERL not quite as anticipated, as they needed their lecturers and peers to provide academic support, understanding, and connection. While this engagement was fulfilling for some, others were met with an online learning experience that seemed to lack connection and felt alienating.

#### ***4.2.2 Attitudes towards studying remotely***

The question: “*How did studying during COVID-19 make you feel?*” was posed to stimulate participants’ reflection on their attitudes towards studying remotely during the pandemic. Hence, attitudes here refer to the participants’ feelings or opinions about studying remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three themes became evident: persevering to finish the master’s degree, self-regulating studying in the emergency remote learning context, and concerning wellbeing, which incorporated the two subthemes: the physical, emotional and psychological state of being, and facilitators and barriers regarding students engaging with their studies.

**4.2.2.1 T4 Persevering to finish the master’s degree.** The fourth theme, *Persevering to finish the master’s degree*, refers to feeling the need to continue despite the difficulties or doubts experienced. In this case, even in the face of a disingenuous atmosphere, feeling that the program was insufficient, or in the cases where they doubted their abilities, they still persevered. This theme revealed that the participants (N= 6) felt they had no choice but to continue with the master’s degree remotely amid the global health pandemic. However, even though they persevered, there was a mindset of not getting the training they would have for the professional master’s degree if they had had face-to-face classes. This perception, in turn, made

them think that they were underprepared for their profession, making them feel like an imposter.

Some of the participants recalled the experience of learning during a life-changing global health pandemic. In the words of Zia, she reflected on trying to be present in her studies amid the pandemic and how she felt guilty and disingenuous because people were dying around her while she was focusing on finishing her studies:

It also felt a bit bizarre to still be doing this very important master's degree at the same time that people are literally like getting sick and dying around you and businesses are closing and, you know, life is completely changing ... So, I think it also it induced a lot of feelings of, sort of, guilt, and, I want to say, a depersonalization almost. (Zia)

Despite the above, some participants spoke about the need to carry on with their master's degree, undeterred by the pandemic:

The last thing that's going to stop you is a pandemic. (Alex)

You've got to kind of just snap into it and be like, okay, this is happening, I need to figure out what to do and how to move forward. (Zia)

Some participants had, however, built up expectations about what the master's degree would be like based on feedback from students from previous cohorts. They felt the resulting online programme failed those expectations and robbed them of the usual face-to-face master's degree experience:

And you hear from previous classes like how it [the master's degree] was and how they all did things. And then it just felt like it fell short ... the learning fell short, the content fell short, the experience. (Lauren)

The perceived falling short of the programme led to some participants questioning how valid the degree actually was as they persevered to complete the degree:

Not knowing like, oh, is this degree even going to be valid because of the way it's being done? (Zia)

As this degree is a professional master's degree, the participants had certain expectations around the inclusion of practical elements in the degree, which would have assisted in preparing

them for the professional working environment. The participants explained that the degree acted as a bridge between theory and practice, and hence felt that the practical part was important, as the following quotation shows:

At master's level, I think that's [practical components] just more important, because I mean you've been learning about these theories since since [the beginning of our studies], right? So, at master's level, the practicals are actually what, where the value is for me. (Tshego)

Part of the practical element of the professional master's degree involved counselling clients, which had to occur remotely and in a different way during ERL, as they had to fulfil their practical hours online:

We have [had] to make a plan to get our [counselling] hours because we obviously couldn't go into placement during M1. So, we had to figure out how we would meet all of our hours. (Lauren)

To fulfil their hours, the participants had to adhere to the ethical guidelines, which, in this instance, were tailored for online practical therapy:

Like APA was like sending out things like introduction to online therapy, ethics of online therapy. (Alex)

At the time I don't think HPCSA had many guidelines [for online therapy], or if they did, they weren't in relation to COVID. Uhm, so that was, we had to get that approved by the university. (Lauren)

It was discussed that we would have, would need to, like, develop an informed consent form, a screening form. (Alex)

The participants felt that their efforts to persevere had upskilled them to be more proficient online while they engaged with their clients, as they were now confidently familiar with the nuances of using online modes of engagement:

I thoroughly know how to see a patient online, deal with the nuances and the ethical dilemmas. (Alex)

It opened up, especially psychologists, to the opportunities for, uhm, so, online therapy and I think that was a brilliant thing. I'm so grateful for being skilled in online therapy I can deal with

the nuances of 'did you hear me?' 'No, I missed that'. And the nuances of, like, longer silences.  
(Alex)

Alex, however, felt she had to justify her training, explaining to others how hard she worked to find and keep clients in therapy to ensure that she had sufficient practical training:

I think I get a bit touchy when people are like, oh, the psychologist's training in COVID didn't, like, didn't get enough training and we've let them out there and I'm like, excuse me [laughs], like, I worked damn hard to find people to keep online, because people can, like, during COVID people would just cancel therapy like there was no tomorrow. It felt like I was begging people to stay on for therapy." (Alex)

Despite their efforts at persevering with their master's degree, some participants felt their online learning experience did not prepare them for their internships:

We had to arrive at our internship and be like oh, I don't know this or can you teach me this.  
(Lauren)

I still don't know how to do assessments properly because I was like, I didn't learn how to do this properly doing masters. So, during internship I was like, I don't feel confident doing any assessments, I didn't do many. And even now I'm like, I, no, I feel like I didn't learn how to do this properly, I don't want to do it. (Zia)

The participants were met with various setbacks while pursuing their master's degree, which included feeling like their opportunities had not prepared them sufficiently for their field of work. Feeling unprepared seemed to be rooted in concerns about the practical exercises, which they were not able to do as they had anticipated and which was considered necessary for the degree:

Our practicals were structured for physical ... So, I don't think they [lecturers] could come up with the contingency plan on how to then make those more remote or anything. I think the only ones that we did were the counselling ones, but for every other module we actually ended up not doing the ... practical. (Tshego)

Tshego felt that the process of practising counselling on her peers rather than with real clients created less opportunity to learn the counselling skill:

It took away from me actually being able to practice my skills because I have some sort of relationship with you [peers practicing counselling skills on each other], it's actually not working ... Whereas had we been able to do the practicals [counselling] as was scheduled, I would be dealing with a complete stranger and I'd be able to probe more and actually see if I'm exercising, you know, the skills that I've been taught at school. (Tshego)

It was clear that participants acknowledged the difficulty in transferring practical elements to the online programme. However, some participants felt that their perseverance was wasted and were disappointed with this transfer:

I appreciate that they, their particular module was ridiculously difficult to move online, uhm, like I said, especially assessment. I think for me that was the worst one because that's ... very practical, the only way you're going to learn how to do assessment is by doing assessment. You can't, no one can teach it to you over a screen. (Zia)

Tshego noted that she was told that she would be included in some practical classes the following year, but those promises were not fulfilled. However, Happy discussed how he was able to attend some catch-up workshops:

As soon as we were done ... they kept promising us, oh, no, you guys we're going to make up for your practical ... with the next [cohort] ... [this] never happened ... Because they forgot about us. (Tshego)

We still had to attend, like ... workshops here and there with the [next cohort] ... It was, like, a catch-up game ... I think towards the end of the programme. (Happy)

Despite pushing through adversities to complete their degrees, some of the participants experienced feelings of imposter syndrome, worrying whether they had chosen the correct career path, whether they could do the work, and whether they should consider quitting:

I ended up asking myself, did I choose the right degree or not? (Happy)

There was a lot of times when I doubted myself. There were a lot of times when I feel like I'm a failure, where I feel like, oh my gosh, I'm not going to be able to do this. There was a point I thought of quitting. (Sasha)

That sort of sense of imposter syndrome carries you through, because you don't know whether you're being assessed fairly, or you're being assessed just based on, kind of, the limited things

... that your lecturers and whatnot can see from you, or your assessors can see from you ... that sense of imposter syndrome has, kind of, followed through as well. Kind of going, ahh, I feel like it wasn't a real degree. I don't actually know if I did a real in-person master's degree, how I would have done. (Zia)

The next theme shows how the participants viewed their attempts to regulate their studying in an online learning context during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**4.2.2.2 T5 Self-regulating studying in the emergency remote learning context.** The fifth theme, *Self-regulating in the emergency remote learning context* (N= 6), relates to the attitudes students held towards their online studies in terms of motivation, procrastination, and how they coped with their studies. Self-regulation refers to the ability of an individual to monitor, control, and regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours so that their goals can be achieved in changing circumstances, which, in this case, refers to the change to ERL during the pandemic. Within self-regulation, motivation prompted the participants to set goals for themselves and persist in achieving them; procrastination led to delays in pursuing their goals, and coping strategies seemed to help them manage obstacles and setbacks along the way. To focus on studying, the participants seemed to appraise the context of the pandemic, their academic load, and the personal resources available to them to study. The outcome of such appraisal seemed to be associated with their levels of motivation or procrastination. They then utilised various strategies to assist them in coping with their circumstances. ERL was new and required a new way of dealing with their studies in an online environment. The feelings held by the participants while studying during the pandemic seemed to affect their coping, further effecting their motivation and procrastination behaviours.

Some participants struggled to motivate themselves to study, some found themselves procrastinating, and other participants were able to motivate themselves to continue working hard, as the following quotations show:

So, very motivated initially uhm, but it, it was such a matter of flux, like, sometimes it wasn't it just wasn't there. (Alex)

Motivation was very, very hard to come by. That was very difficult, and procrastination was very high. (Lauren)

Sometimes I'd be ... in my zone, I'm doing this, you know. It's, like, studying, you [I] can even do more than what I had aimed for that particular day. (Sasha)

Some participants indicated that a source of motivation was the mapping of their goals and dreams and the need to appear prepared and knowledgeable about the topics being discussed in the online class:

My wall was filled with ... notes ... my timetable literally next to my bed ... My goals were on the wall ... my vision board ... I have a picture of a person I aspire to be in five years ... I literally had the topic of my research ... in big, big letters ... everything was just, like, there for me to see and just remind me and motivate me to, like, remember my goals. (Sasha)

You don't want to come across as like unprepared or you're taking advantage of the situation. So, I would, like, literally make sure, like, I over prepare, and I just felt like people can like Google whatever I'm saying as I'm saying. So, I needed to, like, if someone asked me a question, I sort of had to, like, know. (Tshego)

The participants also reflected on the reasons for their procrastination. They referred to not knowing what to do, being overwhelmed by the workload, having an inability to focus on the computer screen the whole day, and having a general sense of fearfulness:

This lack of support that I felt and not really knowing how to tackle it, that's what made me procrastinate. (Tshego)

Sometimes I get very overwhelmed in terms of, like, managing my workload, and then I just end up not even doing anything at all. (Sasha)

It took me a lot longer to learn something where maybe in the past it wouldn't have taken me as long, but I think that had to do with the environment, like, I was just ... [attached to the] computer all day you're going to zone out, look at the window. (Lauren)

[Procrastination] became a bit of an almost like a state of being paralysed in a sense, but I think it came from a place of anxiety ... there was a lot of fear as well, which impacts your learning experience because you can't exactly learn while you are terrified. (Lauren)

To remain motivated and avoid procrastination, they utilised the resources available to them to cope with the circumstances. Coping, behavioural and cognitive strategies, and efforts the

participants made to modify or manage demands and stressors, seemed to enable them to deal with the online learning. The following quotations detail if and how they seemed to cope:

In some which away, uhm, it definitely got better [coping]. I think my coping, if I look back on it at the time, maybe wasn't the healthiest, but it got me through. (Lauren)

Strangely enough, I did [cope]. Well, I mean, I had a few breakdowns. (Tshego)

You don't have time to focus on your emotions ... there's just so much going on ... I just ignored all the emotional repercussions and just focused on getting through it. And I thought I was doing well because I was like, I'm just going to just get things done. Just shove it all down. And then I think, by internship and I think especially after internship, there was just severe burnout because I was like, this is just too much ... So no, I actually I don't think I coped well at all. I just deflected ... repressed, like, I repressed everything. (Zia)

Lauren further spoke about not being able to cope in the ways she normally would have because of the pandemic:

The normal coping that I'd had prior to pandemic or prior to the shift, I could no longer do. So, I couldn't necessarily like go for a walk or go for a run or go exercise. I mean, I could do it in my flat, but it wasn't really the same because then my flat was where I was like resting, where I was working, where I was seeing clients, and, like, it just became everything. (Lauren)

Various activities relating to food and drink to help themselves cope were used:

I think I picked up a lot more of my cooking around that time. (Alex)

I did not eat as healthy as I wanted. I think I actually ate a lot of junk because it would help my mood, ah, even though it was for, like, a little bit of time. Like, you know, chocolate will just, like, last you what? Ha, less than 30 minutes. Feel good moment. And then after that you go back to the feeling all guilty because you had chocolate ...” (Sasha)

I drank a lot of wine, a lot of wine. (Lauren)

Exercising and outdoor activities also helped the participants maintain their sanity:

I'd still take walks. I'd still try so that I'm not, like, get cabin fever type thing ... I would still try to go out as much as I can. Take walks, I hate exercise, I don't exercise, but I'd take walks because I like the sun, uhm [laughs], I like the sun, I like nature. (Tshego)

Some participants coped by watching television, binge-watching various series, delving into social media, and reading books. These distractions allowed them to ‘escape’ their situation or to laugh out the sadness:

I read a lot of ... fiction books, like a lot of things that were just so different that it just ... felt like I was, like, in a different space. If I needed to, like, get out of my space. (Lauren)

I think I binge watched a lot. I watched a lot of Netflix, a lot of Showmax, uhm, because I was just, like, you know what, I need to do something to escape ... So basically, watching things, different things, I can take my mind off things ... I feel like it was just a sad world, so I had to watch some comedy and laugh a bit. (Happy)

Some participants used artwork and journaling as a way to cope:

I drew a lot, like, I drew and painted a lot. (Zia)

Journaling a lot. (Zia)

Participants coped in other ways too. They cried, talked to others, and sought professional help:

I cried quite a lot ... during that time ... I think it helped a little bit as well. (Sasha)

Speaking to people a lot. (Zia)

I ... started seeing a psychologist ... during my master’s year because I felt like I needed assistance. (Sasha)

Zia pointed out the need to reconsider how she cared for herself because that in itself caused her stress:

I found that if I kind of went oh, okay, I need to, now I need to relax and practice self-care because that's what everyone was saying. It became too serious. It became this, like, very formal process of okay, I'm sitting, and putting on a face mask ... Why am I not relaxed? I'm supposed to relax! ... And it's just so stressful ... I found, kind of, more silly things helped ... things where you don't have to think, where you don't, there's no pressure to achieve or to feel a certain way. You're just doing something. (Zia)

Happy noted that this experience taught him to use his coping habits to be resilient:

The pandemic really taught us how to be resilient ... we were challenged in all elements of resilience. Which was ironic considering the degree we're learning teaches us a lot about these things, especially well-being ... and realising oh my word, I have to use this to actually cope and figure this thing out. (Happy)

While the participants tried self-regulate their studying in response to remote learning and applied several coping strategies to focus on achieving their goal, they also had some thoughts concerning their wellbeing, covered in the next theme.

**4.2.2.3 T6 Concerning wellbeing.** The sixth theme, *Concerning wellbeing*, refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of the participants while studying remotely online in the context of the pandemic. Their wellbeing was considerably informed by the atypical method of studying remotely during a pandemic. In this case, the participants (N=6) referred to the two subthemes. One is their physical, emotional, and psychological states that using ERL during this period affected. Two, the participants observed a change in their work-life boundaries and living spaces, where they noted how they struggled to maintain their work-life boundaries and felt a blurring in the functions of their private spaces, and this sparked various emotions in the participants.

**4.2.2.3.1 Physical, emotional and psychological state of being.** Some of the participants' states of mind related to their physical wellbeing. The coronavirus was particularly infectious, and many people were exposed to it. Happy recounted his experience of being sick with COVID-19, while Sasha spoke about stress-induced health issues related to studying during the pandemic:

I think at some point I got very sick (with COVID-19) ... I was in bed rest for, like, a few days. (Happy)

I also had a very severe back problem ... That was caused from stress ... I had to ... lie down most of the time while I was attending classes in my bed ... [I] had some very strong pills ... that would make me ... drowsy ... I was, like, sort of, like, in pain ... I needed to, like, take care of my back while at the same time ... trying to, like, attend classes the best way that I can and ... do my work the best that I possibly could. (Sasha)

While their physical health influenced their attitudes towards learning remotely during the pandemic, they also referred to positive and negative emotional states while studying remotely.

Often, these were mixed emotions since the participants were glad to be in a master's programme, but they also were exhausted by the experience:

You are really grateful to be there ... grateful for the opportunity to be in masters. But then on the other hand, I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a level of resentment ... and just feeling a little bit ... loss maybe isn't the right word, but ... just feeling so exhausted because there was just no break from it ... there was maybe a bit of anger there. Uhm, but then it's like mixed in with, like, I'm really happy to be here. So, it was just really complicated. (Lauren)

[Feeling] nervous. Excited. I think I had a lot of mixed emotion. Uhm, uncertainty was kicking in in my mind. Uhm, because I wasn't, I [had] never experienced virtual learning before. (Happy)

There was a plethora of emotion ... If I have to put it down to one feeling, that wouldn't do any justice, uhm, in the beginning, it was, like, overwhelmed disillusionment. Ah, it moved on to, like, hope. (Alex)

Sasha felt the remote learning context caused her to feel hopeless, drained, and burnt out as a result of the stress she experienced:

I felt like I am ... showing signs and symptoms of depression, you know, uhm, being, feeling hopeless ... it took a lot for me to actually just do what I was supposed, like, normal things that a normal person would do under normal circumstances ... I was quite depressed ... Okay, maybe depressed is, like, too big of a word to use, but I was close to it ... by the end of the year I had lost so much weight. I was the thinnest I've ever been ... when I got home ... after the whole programme, my mom was like, my child what has been happening? And I was like, mom ... I was at war hey. I had gone to, like, I was, like, a soldier, like, in a warfare somewhere ... it was really hard. Emotionally it was draining. (Sasha)

I was already burnt out and tired and out of it. (Sasha)

Tshego, however, indicated that her master's study helped to distract her thoughts from her own personal life circumstances:

A lot was happening in my life and I feel like school actually gave me a sense of purpose ... it reminded me of who I am outside of people or any failed relationships, or any loss that I might have experienced in that time. So, it was like a good distraction. (Tshego)

Loneliness from social isolation was a particularly poignant emotion expressed by the participants. Social interaction appeared to play an important role in a positive learning experience, and one participant believed that a lack of people in their lives affected their mental wellbeing:

It was quite lonely. It was the loneliest year of my life. (Sasha)

[The] lack of, sort of, being regulated and calmed down by the people around you, ... not being able to see your friends or your colleagues. ... That made a huge difference. (Zia)

I need human beings in my life ... I missed those interactions ... to some extent it also affected my mental health as well ... because it was a very busy year and I did not have physical people that I could like talk to or give hugs to. (Sasha)

Tshego described feeling alone in her own home, especially when she was left out of activities that the rest of the family participated in during the pandemic:

I just feel like my siblings and mom were having so much fun and I was just bombarded with school, so I felt, like, a little left out ... they would, like, literally wake up, cook, bake and here I am working ... waking up to go to class or I'm sleeping late because I'm working on an assignment. (Tshego)

The phenomenon of remote studying not only brought about feelings of isolation, but also caused students to resent being constantly available to others online and in their living spaces.

**4.2.2.3.2 Work-life boundaries and living spaces.** Some participants felt their work-life boundaries blurring because they needed to be available at all times:

The one thing that made it bad was that you were always available ... I will get emails all times of the day. I will send emails all times of the day. I will get WhatsApp's all times of the day. I will send them. It's like, there is no boundary. (Alex)

I [had] switched off my [email] notifications because I was just like I can't deal with this ... I've been feeling pressure. Personally, I'm just not enjoying this pandemic. Uhm, I'm finding this quite a lot emotionally. (Happy)

Aligned with the blurring of their work-life boundaries was the blurring of space, as their bedroom had manifold functions during the pandemic. Often, they slept, studied, attended

classes, and counselled clients in their rooms, making it difficult to switch off and rest in their rooms:

You can't, like, close the door and go home and be, like, okay, I'm going to leave that at university, or I'm going to leave that there and pick it up tomorrow. Like, there was none of that at all. It just kind of blurred into one. So, it was really hard to distinguish, like, okay, I'm resting now, or okay, I'm going to take, like, a little break to actually to work. So, it all just became, like, this big grey area. (Lauren)

I need to know this is my study space, this is my workspace, this is my home space. Like, having that all merged, being like, okay, my home space is now my study space as well, and my workspace because we're also seeing patients online ... it was very difficult to balance all of those things. (Zia)

Psychology master's students are required to see clients as part of their practical training. During the pandemic, these meetings took place online and in the students' rooms, where they discussed sensitive matters, including their clients' emotions:

We started seeing clients via Zoom, and that was really difficult because ... It was hard to, you know, you're helping people process not only COVID, but the reason they came to counselling, which a lot of the time was quite heavy stuff. (Lauren)

This intrusion into the participants' personal space evoked various feelings, which, in some cases, they described as resentment and discomfort:

I'd have to lock myself up in my room [to counsel patients online] and that I felt very resentful over ... this is supposed to be my personal space. And now I'm including, even though the patient isn't physically in the room, they're, kind of, still physically there because they're on your computer screen ... The same with supervision sessions or the lectures. I really, really disliked feeling like I'm bringing my work and ... basically strangers, into my personal space ... And it's hard to then separate it, like, when you want to relax when you want to go to bed at night, you're like, oh, but this is also my workspace, I don't feel quite as comfortable as I used to. (Zia)

These feelings continued to linger even after the pandemic, with Alex noting that she was still unable to be productive in her room and, indeed, could work well anywhere else but her room:

Like, being stuck in this room is the worst thing for me ... It just reminds me of a time where I only could be in this room ... in trying to finish off my thesis, the biggest block I've had is working from home ... now I legit will find anywhere to work besides my house, anywhere. I have gone on writing retreats, I have gone to friends' houses. I, literally, I am, I'm, like, partly nomadic. I keep a suitcase packed. (Alex)

The participants' attitudes in my study toward their experience of studying remotely during a global health crisis included how they persevered with their online master's degree, their feelings around self-regulation in terms of motivation, procrastination, how they coped, and their sense of their own wellbeing. In the following section, I delve into what the participants perceived as environmental facilitators and barriers to engaging with their studies online during the pandemic.

#### ***4.2.3 Facilitators and barriers with regards to students engaging with their studies***

When I posed the following interview questions: *What did you find the most challenging in studying remotely during COVID-19? What made it easier for you?* The six participants reflected on what facilitated and hindered them from engaging with their studies. Although these themes relate to some earlier themes, here, the focus is on the facilitators and the barriers experienced by the participants engaging with their studies remotely from their living spaces. Three themes emerged: the cost of studying, matters of place and technology, and social support.

**4.2.3.1 T7 The cost of studying.** The seventh theme, *The cost of studying*, refers to ERL and COVID-19-related barriers and facilitators around the financial constraints of studying. A postgraduate degree is costly, whether studying on campus or studying online. These expenses include university fees, technological equipment, living expenses, transport costs, and so on. The effect of COVID-19 on the economy was widespread and ultimately hindered scholarships. Understandably, the cost of studying seemed foremost in the minds of the participants (N= 5), as the selected quotations show:

As you can imagine, especially, just to be honest, like, from a financial standpoint where you make a lot of sacrifices to be able to do this degree, uhm, to be like ... well, what am I going to do financially, was very stressful. (Lauren)

I know I experienced the same thing as a couple of people where, you know your parents' businesses are not doing well and you're kind of just like, okay, I don't know what's going to happen to them. I'm not working because I'm doing my masters. So, you're so focused on where's income coming from that, you're not really caring about, like, okay, yes, right now I'm writing this essay, but tomorrow I might not have money to pay for the Wi-Fi that's helping me write this essay. (Zia)

But, when you start taking away ... finances, ... it's very difficult. (Alex)

Some participants relied on scholarships, which, in some cases, were threatened by the financial implications of the pandemic:

Finances were very difficult ... You're worried about what next? How are you going to manage? I actually only got funding for my master's at the end of the year in COVID, So, I also was concerned about that, uhm, that affected me. (Alex)

At some point I had to reflect on a lot of things because I lost my scholarship. (Happy)

While the pandemic caused financial strain for participants, it also reduced some expenses related to transportation, food, and clothes:

The convenience of being home ... not [having] to, like, travel anywhere. No traffic. None of that. (Sasha)

I don't have to wake up in the morning ... figure out how I'm going to go to campus. Uhm, and also having to now figure out how I'm going to get home. Because, you know, sometimes I would get lifts and get fetched. (Happy)

Uhm, obviously, like, petrol costs, because I don't have to go to campus, so that was good. (Lauren)

Happy noted how he was able to save money on food since he was now at home and no longer needed to pack food or buy food from campus:

I was very excited that, okay, for once I don't ... have to worry about finances ... I don't have to worry about having to carry lunch money or carry my lunch. I just eat my lunch at home. If I want a hot meal, I can have my hot meal in that moment. (Happy)

Sasha noted that because she was studying from home, she had less of a need to dress up, consequently saving money that she would have spent on her appearances:

Uhm, we actually also do not have to buy clothes to look nice on campus [giggles]. So, yeah. Not worry too much about your appearance, because nobody sees you at the end of the day, so you can just be a mess all you want and just learn. (Sasha)

While the participants experienced barriers and facilitators relating to the cost of studying remotely, they observed further factors relating to their living space and technology, as the following theme demonstrates.

**4.2.3.2 T8 Matters of space and technology.** The eighth theme, *Matters of space and technology*, refers to the participants' environment and the technology which facilitated or hindered the pursuit of their studies remotely. Space refers to the living environment of the participants during the pandemic and where their ERL programme occurred. This environment informed the levels of convenience and flexibility, which facilitated or acted as a barrier to engaging with their classes. Furthermore, the size of their living spaces and rooms and the level of privacy made it either conducive or unconducive to engage with their online studies. Technology in this theme refers to the availability of technology in their living environments to complete their academic responsibilities, including having consistent electricity or not, as well as the fatigue experienced from constantly being on Zoom. This theme is supported by data from participants (N=5), as the selected quotations show.

As a result of the pandemic, the participants found themselves studying from their living contexts, which, they noted, provided them with a certain amount of convenience and flexibility. They were able to attend their classes from their space of comfort and were also able to manage their own time and work part-time to fund their studies:

It's a lot easier to sit in my bedroom and give a presentation than it is to stand in front of the master's class and give a presentation. (Zia)

I think it was easy in terms of, especially during, like, when we had assessments and stuff to, I could roll out of bed really early in the morning and work on it and, like, go to bed late, so ... Like, access was maybe a bit easier. (Lauren)

Although you had to attend those specific times, but in between which was quite flexible with how you operate with your own schedule. (Happy)

I was working when it [class] was in-person, but it just made it a bit easier with working [when online]. (Lauren)

However, the home space of the participants was not necessarily conducive to studying when their home or room was small, when there was no privacy, and when the living space and workspace were the same space, creating a less conducive space for engaging with their studies:

So that was difficult because we have a small home. So, you're up in ... each other's faces all the time. (Alex)

I was living in a very small space, and I was living with someone, so, that became quite a logistic challenge because if I had clients or if I had stuff that was confidential. My partner was also at the time working from home, so, he would have to, like, go sit outside the flat so I could do this. So, you know that became a bit of a logistic nightmare because he would be kicked out ... for like an hour at a time ... I think not having, like, I had a desk, but it was a desk in my lounge, so not having, like, a separate space was challenging. (Lauren)

My bed is still the only place for me to work in my damn room, so, like, things like that, just, like, some things just didn't change. (Alex)

Some, however, had spaces more conducive to studying online:

Uhm well, it was just a normal bedroom with the desk and the chair that I sit on most of the time. (Sasha)

I had space, my mom's house, basically everyone had space ... I didn't struggle in the sense of, now I need to share my room with anyone ... from that aspect I didn't struggle at all. (Tshego)

It is interesting to note how Tshego went from disliking studying from home before the pandemic to enjoying it. Still, she notes that having to study and sleep in the same room was a challenge:

It's so funny because now I prefer working from home, but I hated studying from home. Hated it ... And the reason why I hated it, I've never, throughout my, I'm a library girl. I'm going to

sit in the library, like, I do not like studying at the house ... I did not like that at all ... So luckily my room has a study, but then I ended up not sleeping because I think I just ended up having like negative feelings, well not negative, but, like, I don't know, I just felt some type of way about my room, so I ended up sleeping with my mom upstairs. (Tshego)

The space the participants lived and studied in acted as a facilitator and barrier to engaging online with their studies. While technology was crucial, without electricity, it was ineffectual. Access to a consistent electricity supply at home influenced the attention they could give to virtual classes, which had a bearing on their ERL studies. The participants, who were all studying within the South African context, experienced loadshedding, which further affected their connectivity to the internet. Added to loadshedding, according to the participants, was the theft of electrical cables, which extended periods of no electricity:

If there was actually electricity, we wouldn't struggle. But I know there was a bit of cable theft that happened, then ... we struggled. (Tshego)

There's no use if you are in an area where you have rolling black outs for nine hours, which some of the students had. (Alex)

While Zoom and MS Teams opened up the possibility of engaging remotely with their studies, another challenge appeared in the form of Zoom fatigue and frustration when all the work related to studying had to happen homogenously. As a result of the many hours spent online during ERL, the participants felt difficulties from being online:

Zoom fatigue is a thing. (Alex)

It's really difficult to sit and stare at the computer screen for three hours ... when you have a three-hour lecture. (Lauren)

I would say things like, I'm going to break this laptop, I don't want to see anybody's face. Sometimes I would say oh, I'm so sorry, my camera's not working today because I was so sick and tired of staring into a laptop that I was over it. (Alex)

Living environments were, in some instances, facilitators and, in others, barriers to engaging with their studies online. The presence or absence of social support was also referred to, as the following theme outlines.

**4.2.3.3 T9 Social Support.** The ninth and final theme, *Social support*, focused on social support as a facilitator, which enabled postgraduate students to engage in their studies. Social support, in the case of this theme, refers to the physical, emotional, or psychological support provided by those in the participants' living contexts, such as their family, close friends and even pets. This theme is supported by data from participants (N=6), as the selected quotations show.

Some participants felt that the support from their parents, particularly their mothers, was significant. In some cases, they helped prepare the participants for the impending pandemic crisis, and in others, they assisted the participants in maintaining their wellbeing and creating a safe space for them to study in:

My mom is in the health profession. So, uhm, having someone in that sense who didn't want to give us too much information for the panic, like, to give us a massive panic, but be able to give us a little bit of a realistic, optimistic mindset in the process that we're going to go through in terms of the pandemic ... I think my mom helped me in that sense to understand. (Happy)

My mom tried to be very upbeat and positive for us like, you know, we're going to get through it. We need to stop, like, sitting and sulking and sitting on our phones all day. Let's see what we can do together. Let's see, you know, maybe we can, like, watch a lecture together or learn something together, or play a game or go outside together ... So, she was very proactive, which really helped, sort of, get us out of the slump, I think, that we were falling into. (Zia)

However, Alex felt that, at times, her parental support was overwhelming:

I have very supportive parents I can't complain about that, but there's a limit to everything. (Alex)

Extended families were also an important source of stability for the participants who showed their support by checking in on them, providing empathy and even humour when it was necessary:

Things that made things a bit easier were having good support systems, having people check in on me. (Alex)

My family was very supportive ... They gave me my space. They were very understanding of everything, so that was great. (Zia)

What made my life easier was also having a support system with family ... we were able to just joke around, find time to catch up. And yeah, I think that support system helped mentally in some ways. (Happy)

While Happy found that his family were a distraction to studying, Zia was concerned that her classes would disturb her family members in the communal areas of her home:

The only thing with virtual was I had to be comfortable with the fact that, uhm, anything can happen around me ... especially if you didn't notify everyone that you're quite busy, please keep everything, the volume down. (Happy)

Uhm, in terms of, like, studying or, like, doing assignments and stuff, obviously I could do those in other areas of the house, but in terms of lectures and things I didn't want to, like, disturb people, with the Wi-Fi that's strongest in one area. (Zia)

Sasha, who studied in the second year of the pandemic, moved away from her family to study in KwaZulu-Natal. She describes the effects of the lack of familial support while studying during COVID-19:

I did not have social support, family and friends and prior to that I didn't even know how much I valued that until I did not have it anymore ... It was quite hard for me to, like, deal with and, you know, you just miss family a lot. (Sasha)

The participants further described how their families were able to support them by taking on some of their household responsibilities. The reduction in chores enabled the participants to dedicate more time to their studies:

I was at my mom's, I didn't have to worry about cooking, I didn't have to worry about, like, any chores in the house. So, my mom was very supportive ... she would literally do anything to make my life easier, right. I'd wake up, and my breakfast is already prepared for me so I can wake up and go walk or exercise or whatever (Tshego)

At home, obviously there's, everyone's sharing in the chores, so, that actually did, the responsibilities decreased. (Zia)

I think I was also fortunate enough ... to have family that understood that I'm doing my master's and them having to be like, ... we understand master's is quite intense. So having a helper, and

... there were a lot of females helping around the house. Uhm, but the males are also helping with anything that needs fixing here and there. (Happy)

Lauren noted that being at home gave her more control over her chores and Happy posited that chores allowed him to take breaks from studying:

Being home the whole day made it, kind of, makes it easier because it's really easy to, like, in between things, throw on a load of washing or so ... so that, maybe that was a pro [positive point]. Uhm, because you could just do, like, small things throughout the day. (Lauren)

I still was able to assist [with chores] because that did break me out of being in, like, one room, doing my assignments and doing schoolwork. So, that made it, like, my break for [from] my traditional learning and understanding and routine. (Happy)

Sometimes, the participants' families required a full commitment to emotional responsibilities:

I would say increase emotionally [responsibilities]. Uhm, because, like, holding space for other people's emotions was a big thing that happened a lot more. (Alex)

Beyond family support, friends and peers were also important providers of emotional comfort. Consequently, their physical absence left a void in emotional outlets for the participants:

My friends were amazing. Like, I, there was always someone to talk to, uhm, including people from, I think, the masters. (Zia)

Your friends become your therapists [when face-to-face] ... compared to virtual where now we have to find a therapist. You have to figure out ... How you are going to express your emotions and deal with the emotions. Uhm, so, and, also, not being able to instantly express those emotions was something that I learned as an experience of virtual learning. (Happy)

Pets also contributed to emotional wellbeing; whether it be the calm they exuded or the enjoyment of watching them grow, they were a welcomed addition to the social support system:

Weirdly, being around my pets, I think was a good facilitation [facilitator], like, being around my cats, it was calming, you know, being able to just sit there and, like, pet a cat, that did help. (Zia)

I had two puppies, I think, during the pandemic. So that was nice to get out of and have those two puppies, uhm, and pretty much growing, growing in front of me ... I also had a Labrador.

So that pretty much was like a little family to look after during the pandemic ... I think having pets helped. (Happy)

However, pets could also be a distraction. In this case, hindering Happy's ability to focus on his studies:

The dogs' part, I think dogs are very much, like, they're, they're loving, but sometimes they don't get the picture when you're in the middle of the class. They can just pop in and want your attention ... the distraction from family and pets was one of the things I did find it as a challenge, but it was manageable. (Happy)

The participants recalled that they were both more financially vulnerable and more able to save money during this time. Some noted that being at home was conducive to studying because of the convenience and flexibility. For others, the cramped space was not ideal. There were further observations about how electricity challenges and fatigue from being in virtual classes for long periods were barriers to them engaging with their studies, and, while it was a hindrance at times, their social support systems played a vital facilitative role in their ability to engage with their studies during the global health pandemic.

### **4.3 Summary of chapter**

This chapter presented rich data in response to the interview questions, which collectively tell about the lived experiences of professional psychology master's degree students who had studied at a university in South Africa using ERL during a global health pandemic. The next chapter discusses the findings, recontextualises them in existing literature, and provides some recommendations emerging from the findings.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

As a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, universities moved to ERL. In this study, I explored how professional psychology master's degree students experienced this move, using a qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological methodology and snowball sampling to find participants - who fit the inclusion criteria - from a university in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. I gathered data through semi-structured individual interviews and applied thematic analysis to analyse the data. I used Bandura's Self-Efficacy theory to frame the study and endeavoured to ensure trustworthiness and ethical considerations. In this chapter, I discuss the findings, draw conclusions, and offer relevant recommendations, ending with limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

### **5.2 Discussion of the Findings**

In this section I discuss the findings per the research objectives by offering an interpretation, which is then recontextualised in the literature.

#### ***5.2.1 Objective 1: To explore the experiences of professional psychology master's degree students in relation to the shift to emergency remote online teaching and learning.***

For objective one, I identified three themes: experiencing a time of uncertainty; pushing further into the digital world of teaching and learning which contained the two subthemes: mixed experiences of technology; and navigating different learning management systems; and engaging with others in emergency remote learning.

In the first theme, an experience refers to the lived experiences of people, their exposure to a phenomenon and how they make meaning thereof. In this case, the experiences related to how the professional psychology master's degree students experienced uncertainty in shifting to ERL in a global health crisis. When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, university management needed to make swift decisions. The participants identified that the university struggled to take decisive action about the way forward in the initial phase of the pandemic and observed both a lack of communication from the university and an overload of information, which amounted to a tenuous environment. The participants furthermore expressed that lecturers were

unprepared for ERL, which contributed to the insecurity. The uncertainty elevated the expected levels of academic stress of these students. From this, we can infer that universities were unprepared for a global health crisis. Academic staff and their students were compelled to do their best in the face of insufficient guidance from the university management. The literature illustrates how universities had only a brief period to develop and train their staff to use ERL (Lobos et al., 2022; Shin & Hickey, 2021), while there was further concurrence from the participants who outlined their experiences of uncertainty during the crisis (Karavida et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021). The pervasive disruption of the transition to ERL in the global health crisis proved to be a difficult period for students and those providing educational services to them, which they, nonetheless, had to come to terms with and adapt to ERL.

In the second theme, while transitioning to ERL was not ideal, participants accepted that it was necessary, and some embraced the change of pushing into the digital world of teaching and learning. The ability to use technology appeared necessary for a smooth transition to ERL. However, participants varied in their technological proficiency. Access to the internet was essential for the ERL activities, but within the context of South Africa, some participants struggled with connectivity issues, relying on expensive internet data and the data provided by the university. The findings indicate that the participants regularly used WhatsApp for informal communication and emails for formal communication, the university virtual platform to access, upload and download learning materials and Zoom and MS Teams to conduct virtual meetings. While these tools and platforms already existed prior to the pandemic, the extent to which it was necessary had been amplified and pushed the participants to embrace the world of online academia. As illustrated, the move to ERL deepened the digital divide between those who could afford and access the necessary tools and those who could not. Virtual strikes, integrated into protesting for equality, were less effective when moved online, further exacerbating the digital divide. The participants experienced a change in how they accessed and used online learning systems and tools, their ability to adapt, and the tools they had available to them, which determined their experience of ERL. The literature supported the various virtual learning tools used to learn online (Cleland, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Magni & Sestino, 2021; Maison et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2020; Praghlapati, 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). The literature also concurred with the fact that the transition to ERL had exacerbated the digital divide of those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Baloran, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Maison et al., 2021; Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021; Pillay

et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). The literature further concurred with the efforts taken by universities in South Africa to bridge the gap between those from advantaged and disadvantaged circumstances to access ERL, but the data provided by these universities was often perceived as insufficient (Feldman, 2020; Pillay et al., 2021). A new finding, not previously highlighted by existing literature, relayed how virtual student protests were less effective but, interestingly, indicates a forced transition to the fourth industrial revolution. However, while some were able to seamlessly adapt to this world with the essential technology at hand, the electricity to enable it, and the knowledge to use it, others could not afford these tools and were unable to access them and know how to use them, and they became vulnerable to falling behind.

The third theme considers how student engagement with academic staff and peers took on a different disposition within the ERL format. Participants had various insights about virtual engagement with their lecturers, supervisors, and peers. In terms of their lecturers and supervisors, the participants felt supported by those who were empathetic but felt a lack of support from those who ignored them, who were inaccessible, or who acted as though the emotions they were struggling with were disingenuous. Peers play a pivotal role in the academic context, not only in brainstorming ideas and issues but also in creating a sense of camaraderie. However, the virtual modes of communication during the pandemic made accessing peer support more challenging. Although online interaction fabricated a sense of community, participants in the study expressed a disconnect between themselves and others over a screen, citing a removal of humanness from physical engagement and going as far as to claim to feel forgotten as human beings. This left the participants with a lacklustre learning experience. Overall, this theme related how participants engaged with others in the academic sphere due to teaching and learning being online. The literature indicated that the presence or absence of lecturer and university support played an essential role in assisting students to adapt to ERL and thus supported the findings of my study (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Hussein et al., 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021; Soria et al., 2020). The literature further concurred that peer interactions became more difficult to engage in while online (Hussein et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020). The difficulty of interacting and engaging in ERL, pointing to a dehumanising experience, concurred with Moodley's (2022) findings about ERL and the virtual classroom leading to depersonalised methodologies, students not being able to learn collaboratively, and staff

desensitisation to student needs. These observations highlight the need for students to have a social element to their academic pursuits, as their perceived lack of communication and support from their lecturers and feelings of a loss of engagement affect how they perceived their academic experience.

Therefore, while learning in a time of uncertainty, the shift to ERL was challenging for the postgraduate students. Embracing technology was indeed imperative, but participants observed that some were left behind in this rush to digitalise the landscape. Although participants recognised a need to continue academic engagement, and pursued it, they experienced a change in how they engaged with others and, in some cases, felt alienated. ERL seemed to impinge on human engagement when learning at a university. Thus, while moving online allowed the university students to catch up to and be prepared for the 4IR world of work, students needed to be adequately prepared and equipped to ensure an equitable experience. ERL enabled engagement with others in the sphere of postgraduate studies, however, it was difficult to connect online and relate to others to get academic support, this oftentimes tenuous scenario resulted in alienation. While much of the literature concurred with the findings for this objective, the reduced effect of virtual protests to make student voices heard and their engagement meaningful in a virtual world seems new and contributes to the existing literature.

### ***5.2.2 Objective 2: To explore the attitudes of professional psychology master's degree students towards studying remotely in an institution of higher learning.***

The data I gathered to answer objective two resulted in three themes: Persevering to finish the master's degree. Self-regulating studying in the emergency remote learning context. The third concerned wellbeing, which included the two subthemes: the physical, emotional and psychological state of being and facilitators and barriers with regards to students engaging with their studies.

In my study, attitudes refer to people's emotions, beliefs, and behaviours about an event or thing (APA, 2018). It is evident that how professional psychology master's degree students thought or felt about studying online remotely during a pandemic significantly shaped their experience of ERL. In terms of attitudes towards studying remotely at an HEI, while the participants expressed guilt about indulging in studying during a global health crisis, they also demonstrated resilience and determination to persevere and finish the degree. By highlighting

the complex nature of their experiences, we get a broader understanding of the emotional impact of external circumstances on ERL.

In the first theme, the participants observed how the practical component of their degree was a necessary element of their qualification. As professional psychology master's degree students, a component of their course involved counselling clients or patients (depending on the degree). Participants noted that they learnt new ways to access their clients, new guidelines around the ethics of online therapy, and new skills to handle the nuances of online counselling. Despite this, some questioned the programme's quality compared with their expectations for the degree. Yet, others felt they needed to justify the experience they had gained. Participants also felt underprepared for their internships. This insecurity was rooted in concerns around insufficient opportunities to apply theory to practice, which they had expected during their master's programme, as well as feeling like an imposter, doubting their performance and being unsure how they would have performed during a face-to-face master's programme. Lobos et al. (2022) agreed that students doubted the quality of their degrees and the extent to which they prepared them for the world of work. However, there was little research discussing the feelings of guilt while studying during a health crisis, as experienced by the participants in this study. Some literature discussed how postgraduate students experienced imposter syndrome as they had little to compare their performance with while studying online (Morris et al., 2022). These observations concur with the findings of this research and specifically have semblance with the participants' desire to have opportunities to be involved in practical activities that would have enabled them to gain confidence in their skills and build a sense of self-efficacy. However, these practical feats were unattainable during the pandemic.

Within the scope of the second theme, the participants raised the issue of motivation versus procrastination, and this further linked to their use of adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Procrastination increased when there was uncertainty about how they should continue, adding to the overwhelming environment and resulting in difficulty in focusing and anxiety. However, their motivation improved by maintaining sources of inspiration such as setting goals, feeling driven to understand their learning materials, and not being caught unprepared. Those who seemed to cope adaptively may have been able to better focus on their academic pursuits. While the participants' success in coping varied, they expressed/described what they did to cope: creating and consuming food and alcohol, exercising and spending time

in nature, doing artwork, journaling, watching television series, reading books, crying, talking to others, and seeking counselling. In addition, the participants spoke about the need to be resilient and to take care of themselves in order to face the feelings they experienced while studying during the pandemic. The literature also indicated that people use various adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Maladaptive coping includes procrastinating, a form of task avoidance in the face of uncontrollable situations (Kamaludin et al., 2020; Maison et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2020), as was seen in this study. Furthermore, the literature agreed that undersupplied supervisory support could lead to procrastination (Maison et al., 2021). On the other hand, the literature also indicated that adaptive coping strategies -like the ones the participants used- enabled people to handle the threat of the pandemic cognitively (Kamaludin et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2020). The literature further highlighted the importance of motivation for academic performance. It concurred that motivation could have intrinsic and extrinsic sources but that relying on extrinsic sources of motivation may have been difficult if a person was removed from their support systems (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Kusurkar et al., 2013; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021). Finally, the literature noted the importance of resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity as a coping mechanism (Ye et al., 2020), thus concurring with the findings of my study. These findings emphasised the spectrum of different approaches that participants undertook in ERL, their different volition to study, and different coping strategies as they attempted to resolve their feelings and seemingly remain resilient.

Wellbeing, which arises in the third theme, is a delicate matter with unprecedented complexities in the context of a global health crisis. While studying remotely during the pandemic, participants experienced physiological difficulties, ranging from physical conditions like illness and stress-related pains to emotional afflictions that included hopelessness, feelings of depression, feeling drained, burnt out and disillusionment. Additionally, my participants emphasised feelings of social isolation and loneliness caused by the pandemic. This was exacerbated by the virtual learning tool which emphasised the chasm in relationships between the participants and their peers or lecturers and supervisors. The participants expressed that they had missed opportunities to build relationships with their colleagues. In one instance, a participant also felt isolated from their family, who were spending quality time together while they had to continue their studies on their own. The issue of study space in the home required a constant balance of personal and professional boundaries. For many, their bedroom became a multipurpose private and professional area that hosted many emotions. The feelings of

resentment, trauma, and negativity attached to these spaces remained even after they had completed the coursework year of their studies. The literature agreed that using ERL in a pandemic had physical and mental effects on the wellbeing of the participants and exacerbated existing mental health difficulties students may have had when studying for their master's degree (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021). The feeling of social isolation due to the pandemic concurred with the literature, which observed that the reduction of social interactions between students and their peers has a negative effect on the studying experience (Hussein et al., 2020; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020). According to the literature, this isolation is also impacted by the absence of lecturers and supervisors (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Rahiem, 2021). Moodley (2022, p. 112), refers to the “transactional distance” between students and academics when studying remotely. The literature indicated that the quality of the space a person works in may have affected their feelings of productivity and wellbeing (Feldman, 2020; Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Soria et al., 2020). However, there seemed to be no literature discussing how studying in isolation had an effect on the feelings students attached to their living spaces. This theme emphasised that the participants experienced a myriad of feelings and emotions, which cumulatively seemed to influence how well they perceived themselves to be, both physically and emotionally. Blurred work-life boundaries and inescapable living spaces further added to these feelings experienced by the participants in my study.

Hence, even though postgraduate students seemed to feel it was disingenuous to study during a global health crisis, they recognised a need and drive to complete the degree. However, they and others questioned the quality of this degree, leaving them to defend what they had achieved. ERL contributed to them feeling underprepared for their profession, influenced by the seemingly insufficient practical elements of the programme, which was online, and feeling self-doubting. It seemed difficult to learn whilst studying remotely, and, as a result, they had to resort to coping behaviours. In the end, there were elements of resilience while studying remotely. The isolation of ERL made it difficult to actualise being well. They presented with physical and emotional health challenges. This was linked to the matter of place and space, as they felt a blurring of the function of their space as they grappled with integrating work and living, leaving them feeling a loss of their safe space. Overall, it was a trying time emotionally for participants, leaving some to question the legitimacy of studying remotely, even when necessitated by a global health pandemic. While most of the findings concur with the literature,

my study expands on the existing literature relating to the feelings students attached to their living spaces when studying remotely, i.e. feelings of guilt when they considered that they had the opportunity to study in good living spaces while being aware that others were not; and the mixed feelings they held towards their living spaces, their rooms in particular, which they had to use to fulfil a number of roles which made it difficult to balance their work and life.

***5.2.3 Objective 3: To explore facilitators and barriers with regards to professional psychology master's degree students engaging with their studies.***

Three themes emerged to answer objective three: the cost of studying, matters of place and technology, and social support.

In the first theme, engagement refers to anticipating consequences based on how a student may engage academically, leading to enduring attention, interest, and optimism (Bowden et al., 2021). However, in this instance, in continuing with postgraduate studies, certain conditions and environments acted as facilitators or barriers to the engagement of the participants. The participants in my study described the paradoxical occurrence of the good and the bad in their experiences of studying remotely during the global health crisis. They pointed out financial facilitators and barriers, a reduced financial burden attributed to studying remotely from their living contexts; however, participants also encountered more financial pressures because of the pandemic, which included a loss of scholarships and internship opportunities. The participants also noted that ERL saved them time and money for transportation to campus, clothes, and food. The literature agreed that students felt a more significant financial burden during the pandemic, while those with financial resources felt psychologically buffered against the stress and loss of control experienced during the pandemic (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Pillay et al., 2021; Stamatis et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2021). The literature also aligned with the finding that students lost internship and scholarship opportunities during the pandemic (Goldstone & Zhang, 2022; Gupta & Agrawal, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Wallace et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). The literature further concurred that students felt that ERL reduced their costs for transportation (Hussein et al., 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Wallace et al., 2021). This observation calls attention to how being at home studying online can reduce the financial burdens of the participants and facilitate their opportunity to study, but that ERL within the context of the global health crisis was a barrier to engaging with their studies for those who had lost the financial means to be able to study.

Living spaces were a critical element of ERL in the second theme. My participants found their living spaces could act as a facilitator or barrier to studying remotely during the pandemic. It afforded them a level of flexibility, including being able to attend their class from their home space of comfort. It also allowed the participants some control over their own time, which was especially useful for those who also worked part-time. Some studied in small, shared spaces that were not conducive to learning, while others were fortunate to have their own spaces. The participants, however, preferred to have separate spaces for studying and living. Participants also experienced difficulties due to loadshedding and power cuts, which were seen as a barrier to learning online, as well as Zoom fatigue due to long hours in online classes. The literature concurred that students felt ERL allowed for more flexibility and autonomy regarding how they could use and manage their time; it also made it so that they could work from their spaces of comfort (Feldman, 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Karavida et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Su & Guo, 2021; Wallace et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). While working in a comfortable space was seen as a facilitator in some cases, the literature agrees that it could be more of a barrier for those living in unfavourable and distracting living spaces (Feldman, 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). The literature further notes how loadshedding can hinder the ability of students to fulfil their academic functions, such as being unable to attend classes or submit documents due to having no internet access (Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021). Authors such as Amponsah et al. (2022) also agreed that Zoom fatigue could be exhausting for students and could lead to burnout. Thus, it would be a barrier to engaging with their studies in ERL. This aspect highlights that the environmental situation of a student impacts their ability to engage with their studies. The monotony of sitting for many hours in front of a laptop in virtual classes can further influence their ability to engage, as they grapple with boredom, distraction, and fatigue.

The third theme highlights that social support, in the spheres of life and work, is critical, especially when studying remotely. Some participants maintained that parents, notably mothers, played an essential role in improving the emotional coping abilities of the participants, and improving their wellbeing. On the other hand, some parents were an overwhelming factor in the students' lives. Participants also acknowledged the helpful emotional support from other family members. However, they also noted their ability to be distracting or disruptive when trying to focus on their studies or attend classes. In some contexts, participants noted that their families often shouldered the burden of their household responsibilities. In other contexts, the

participants did not observe any change in their already existing responsibilities. Peers and friends also played a role in emotionally supporting the participants, although with the pandemic, participants could not rely on them as much, as they were less accessible. Finally, some participants observed that their pets played a role in supporting them emotionally through their calm or playfulness, but that they also could be a distraction for studying. The literature agreed that the family environment, and especially parents, could, on the one hand, be a distraction and a strain on individuals, impacting their ability to perform academically (Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021; Pillay et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Soria et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). On the other hand, parents and families could also be a significantly helpful resource for coping and providing support to the students (Pillay et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Unger & Meiran, 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). Families could buffer household responsibilities and make it easier for students to focus solely on their studies (Pillay et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). While the research from Pillay et al. (2021) suggested that women in an African context may have more expectations and responsibilities placed upon them, such as chores, the participants in my study seemed to indicate that they had fewer responsibilities during the pandemic or that nothing had changed. Thus, the study findings differed from this literature. The literature further supported the finding that peers play a role in improving the wellbeing of students (Shin & Hickey, 2021). Furthermore, there is research which observed the ability pets have to bolster the wellbeing of students in a pandemic, and thus concurred with the participants' positive experiences of pets (Barklam & Felisberti, 2022). This signifies that for some of the participants, the support of those close to them could have assisted them in pushing forward, despite the circumstances, by creating a space where the participants could recharge emotionally and by reducing their burdens, which could have created more time constraints.

These findings lead to the conclusion that for postgraduate students to engage well in their studies, they need to be cognisant of the facilitators and barriers which may affect them. The participants found their financial circumstances precarious, in many cases, not knowing what the future held, but also found that learning online facilitated some saving of money and time. The flexibility of studying online was positively perceived as it allowed for working part-time to generate income whilst studying in the comfort of their home. Not all living spaces, which became study spaces, were conducive to postgraduate studies. Electricity disruptions, a country-wide issue, were a critical barrier to using technology to learn. Zoom fatigue, which

was related to long hours of being in online classes, made it difficult to focus and learn. It was clear that social support came from parents, families, and peers, but it was not without problems, as they could be overwhelming and intrusive. Not to be overlooked was the comfort pets provided; however, they could also be a disruption. Overall, the participants felt that the conditions under which they studied enabled them to continue despite the context, showing their tenacity to complete their master's degree. While much of the literature concurred with the findings of my study, the lack of change and/or reduction of responsibilities such as chores experienced by the participants seemed to differ from that found in the literature which had suggested that there could be an increase of responsibilities for women in the African context.

### **5.3 Theoretical Conclusions**

Self-efficacy, as coined by Bandura, refers to a person's beliefs about how capable they are to organise, self-motivate and perform tasks to attain goals (Bowden et al., 2021; Carr, 2004). Self-efficacy further relates to a person's capability to control their environment with the resources they believe they have to accomplish their tasks (Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995). The pandemic was an environment which was beyond the control of the participants. Still, the participants seemed to draw on what was available to them to enable them to complete the first year of their master's degree during the pandemic. Although the participants indicated that their motivation and procrastination occurred in flux, they believed they had sufficient internal and/or external resources to complete their M1 and, in some cases, their degrees.

Self-efficacy observes a complex, reciprocal interaction between internal factors such as physical, mental and emotional states and external factors such as social and environmental contexts (Bandura, 1977; Carr, 2004; Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995). Clearly, the participants' experiences were coloured or affected by these interacting factors and their environmental contexts. When the pandemic imposed a period of uncertainty, it challenged the participants physically, mentally, and emotionally. However, it also highlighted the significant role their social support systems played in adjusting to the circumstances. Moreover, their environmental context acted as a facilitator in some cases and a barrier in others to their ability to focus on their studies while using ERL.

There are several environmental indicators that a student will use to appraise how self-efficacious they feel: performance experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion,

physiological states, and emotional states (Bandura, 1977; Bowden et al., 2021; Maddux, 2016; Maddux, 1995; Wallace & Kernozek, 2017). These factors derive meaning from the lived experiences of the participants who studied during a global health crisis. Performance accomplishments experienced by the students allowed for feelings of self-efficacy. When the participants could not receive feedback or had results with nothing to compare them to, they doubted their efficacy, which might be connected to the imposter syndrome that some of them experienced. Vicarious experiences occur, for example, when participants observe their peers bearing consequences for their actions. ERL during COVID-19 made it that the participants in my study were unable to observe their peers and embrace vicarious learning experiences. Self-efficacy through verbal persuasion may also have been affected as the communication participants had with their supervisors and lecturers reduced significantly. Finally, the period of COVID-19 itself was very stressful and yielded emotional states that affected their self-efficacy.

The study's participants faced severe doubts about completing their degrees. However, their determination to finish and perseverance to overcome the barriers invoked by the pandemic made their goals a reality. While the participants' feelings of self-efficacy were diminished compared to pre-pandemic, they showed elements of self-efficacy despite the lack of vicarious and verbal persuasion opportunities. This might have resulted from the combination of their environmental sources and internal resources, brought about by the coping habits they enacted. Their internal resources might have further been influenced by the belief that they could complete their studies, as they had the performance experiences leading up to their master's degree. Furthermore, being exposed to the rigorous enrolment process for their master's degree might have given the students assurance that only the most capable could enrol for the degree.

#### **5.4 Recommendations**

In order to improve the experience of ERL for the students, the university management could consult with the university stakeholders about an approach to emergencies and develop a plan, ready to be implemented when learning stops abruptly:

- University-based programmes could include 4IR elements, which prepare students to navigate the 4IR.

- University policy and procedures could clarify how ERL would proceed in a global health crisis.
- The university management could affect an improved model of equity for its students through the provision of internet, data, and technology (Feldman, 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Ojo, 2021; Pillay et al., 2021).
- The ICT department could create a more streamlined communication platform to keep staff, students and management up to date with communications.
- Ongoing development and training for students and staff to use online management systems could be hosted by a designated department that focuses on teaching and learning.

To enable an efficient and supportive remote learning environment in a crisis situation, the following is recommended:

- The student support services at the university could be strengthened and made more visible to assist the students, especially at the postgraduate level. The support should focus on assisting students to set appropriate work-life boundaries, to develop self-efficacy and to utilise adaptive coping behaviours.
- The designated department could host more online workshops for teaching and learning (Archambault et al., 2022). These should focus on study techniques, time management, and methods to motivate students and assess progress.

To assist postgraduate students to engage with their studies remotely, the following could be considered:

- The designated department could develop a humanising pedagogy framework for online teaching and learning (Kızılcık & Dewan Türüdü, 2022). Furthermore, a healthy approach to using Zoom and MS Teams (or any other video conferencing tools used) could be developed.

### **5.5 Limitations of the study**

The limitations to this research project included challenges with connectivity, the time between the semi-structured individual interview and the COVID-19 experience, a primarily female sample, and issues with the sampling method:

During one of the online interviews, a participant had connectivity issues, which caused some moments of erratic or broken communication. This made it challenging to keep a dialogue flowing, and, in some cases, it meant that opinions were missed or misheard. To mitigate this, the participant repeated their statements, and I inferred what was missing based on the last thing said.

There was a long gap between the time of the interviews in the latter half of 2023 and the students' experiences of studying during COVID-19. All the participants began their master's degree in 2020, apart from Sasha, who began her master's degree in 2021. Consequently, there may have been gaps in her memory about what occurred during the pandemic. To mitigate this, the students answered in-depth questions about their face-to-face honour's degree experience, the postgraduate degree that occurred before the pandemic, so that they had a point of reference to which to compare their experience during the pandemic.

The study consisted of a primarily female sample, with five of the six participants being female. However, the 2020 psychology cohorts primarily consisted of female students, with only one male student who studied for a psychology master's degree in 2020. Thus, the sample of participants reflected the group being studied.

Finally, certain obstacles prevented me from using the Notice System to locate participants, which caused a sole reliance on snowball sampling to access my participants. I drew on my connections to the cohort of Industrial Organisational Psychology master's degree students who forwarded my invitation to people who matched my research inclusion criteria. Thus, the sample group consisted of half of the participants being IOP students, and the other half consisted of counselling and clinical psychology master's degree students. As I had no connections to lead to educational and research psychology master's degree students, I was unable to find participants in these fields. Had I been able to use the university Notice System, I may have been able to include students from those fields. However, the Notice System may not have produced results since those relevant to the research criteria may have already graduated and possibly no longer have access to the student emails.

## **5.6 Recommendations for Further Research**

The following recommendations are for further research to incorporate the practical element of the professional psychology master's degree, include more males in the project, explore other learning pedagogies, and explore the digital divide.

- A professional psychology master's degree necessitates a practical element, and there is a need to explore how the practical element of these degrees could be better adapted to ERL programmes so that the students could receive a balanced exposure to the practical and theoretical elements of the degree. Research should explore further how these programmes could be structured and include the views that lecturers and students have towards moving them online.
- Future research could include more males in the study's sample group to represent their perspective and understand their experiences of ERL.
- Future research could play a crucial role in informing future educational strategies by exploring how alternative pedagogies such as hybrid, blended and flipped learning could be used by universities to assist in certain kinds of crises. The pandemic was a unique situation where classes had to move completely online to restrict human contact and the spread of the virus. However, there was some usefulness to having certain parts of the programme online. The application of the different pedagogies of learning to the current university context would be useful to explore.
- Finally, it would be useful to further research the experiences of those on the wrong side of the digital divide and explore how to mitigate this gap and how to involve them in the digitalised landscape.

## **5.7 Conclusion of the study**

In achieving the aim of the study, which was to explore how professional psychology master's degree students at a university in South Africa experienced ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic, the themes point to experiences of professional psychology master's degree students of ERL in a time of uncertainty, yet a time of learning new skills that propel teaching and learning into the digital world, finding new ways for those at university to engage. The themes also indicate that the professional psychology master's degree students' attitudes towards studying remotely online spoke of pragmatism and persevering to finish their master's degrees, yet leaving the participants thinking about the quality of their professional degree, attempting

to keep their focus on their studies, as well as to practice coping. Furthermore, they grappled with their wellbeing and felt an infringement on their work-life balance. The barriers and facilitators that affected their engagement in their studies related to the cost of studying, living conditions, technology, and social support.

In conclusion, the study explicates that the students' experiences of university education during a global health pandemic led to and were affected by their behavioural, affective, social, and cognitive engagement (Bowden et al., 2021). The accumulation of their testimonies shows that participants had many complex and interconnected experiences of studying using ERL during a global health pandemic. These had mutual or reciprocal influences on the students, the university, and their respective environments.

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## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A: Ethical Approval Letter from HSSREC of UKZN (Protocol reference no:  
HSSREC/00005691/2023)

Appendix B: Permission Letters from Gatekeepers

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Appendix D: Information Sheet

Appendix E: Research Instrument: Interview Schedule

Appendix F: Sample of Interview Transcript

Appendix G: Example of Coding

Appendix H: Photograph of the coding map

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**Appendix A: Ethical Approval Letter from HSSREC of UKZN (Protocol reference  
no: HSSREC/00005691/2023)**



30 July 2023

Brie Terry Parker (217042824)  
School Of Applied Human Sc  
Howard College Campus

Dear BT Parker,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00005691/2023

Project title: Exploring psychology master's degree students' experiences of remote online learning during coronavirus pandemic at a South African university.

Degree: Masters

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 02 June 2023 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 30 July 2024.

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.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health 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

INSPIRING GREATNESS

The title of the study was later changed to the following:

**EXPLORING PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY MASTER'S DEGREE STUDENTS'  
EXPERIENCES OF EMERGENCY REMOTE LEARNING AT A SOUTH AFRICAN  
UNIVERSITY DURING A GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS**

## Appendix B: Permission Letters from Gatekeepers



30 August 2022

Ms Brie Terry Parker (SN 217042824)  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
College of Humanities  
Howard College Campus UKZN  
Email: [REDACTED]  
Dear Ms Parker

### 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 degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

*"What are psychology master students' experiences of emergency remote online learning in a higher education institution during COVID-19?"*

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with Postgraduate students (Zoom, Skype or telephone interviews recommended) on the Howard College campus.

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

- Ethical clearance number;
- 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 Protection of Public Information 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.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]  
Dr KE 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

14 August 2023

Brie Parker (SN 217042824)  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
College of Humanities  
Howard College Campus UKZN  
Email: [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Dear Brie

**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 degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

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Yours sincerely



**Mr MA TUFTS: Director Governance & Administration**

**Office of the Registrar**

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Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

**INSPIRING GREATNESS**

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent**

# UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL  
For research with human participants

## INFORMED CONSENT

Participation in a research study titled “Exploring Psychology Master’s Degree Students’ Experiences of Remote Online Learning During COVID-19 At A South African University”.

### Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Dear Student.

My name is Brie Parker, I am a student from the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), Howard College Campus. I am currently a master’s degree student in the School of Applied Human Sciences, and I am registered in the Discipline of Psychology at UKZN.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on the experiences of Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) of psychology master’s degree students who studied at UKZN during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, the study will ask three sub-questions:

1. How have psychology master’s degree students experienced engaging in emergency remote online learning?
2. What are the attitudes of psychology master’s degree students towards studying remotely?
3. What are the facilitators to psychology master’s degree students engaging with emergency remote online teaching and learning?

In this study, ERL refers to the learning program used to provide learning during the emergency situation of COVID-19 where there was little time for the university to develop and prepare the program. This is opposed to typical online learning where universities intentionally chose to teach online, and the programs had sufficient time to be developed before being implemented.

### **Participation in the study will involve:**

1. Short semi-structured interviews to take place virtually (via Zoom or Microsoft Teams Meetings) or in person (depending on what suits you better) with a minimum of 8 participants
2. The interview will be approximately 60 minutes
3. For participants who were registered and studying a professional master’s degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Applied Human Sciences in the discipline of Psychology in 2020 or 2021. This includes a Master of Social Science in the departments of Clinical Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Industrial Psychology and Research Psychology

This study is not funded.

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in the semi-structured interview, other than potential distress that may be caused while discussing topics surrounding COVID-19, should you feel any distress, I can refer you to our on-campus counselling services. We hope that the study will create the following benefits: the study will assist the university to gain more knowledge related to students’ experiences of COVID-19. This will assist university

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departments/discipline leaders and academic staff in creating a better experience for students in the case of future crises.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00005691/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

Student/Researcher	Supervisors	HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
<p><b>Brie Parker</b></p> <p>Master student (Psychology) Howard College Campus Email: 217042824@stu.ukzn.ac.za OR brie.tparker@gmail.com</p>	<p><b>Ruwayda Petrus</b></p> <p>Senior Lecturer (School of Applied Human Sciences) Howard College Campus Email: petrus@ukzn.ac.za</p>	<p>Research Office, Westville Campus Govan Mbeki Building</p> <p>Private Bag X 54001 Durban 4000</p>
	<p><b>Nerisha Deveduthras</b></p> <p>PhD Candidate (Psychology) Howard College Campus Email: 213504989@stu.ukzn.ac.za OR nerisha.deveduth@gmail.com</p>	<p>KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA</p> <p>Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609 Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za</p>

Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without affecting any penalty or loss to yourself.

There are no incentives to the study and the costs involved are limited to data costs should you use Zoom or Teams, or transportation costs should you meet in person.

Your participation and the content of what you discuss will be kept confidential. In addition, your identity will not be revealed when the findings from the study are reported. For example, pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of the research, and any potentially identifying information about you will be anonymized. The data gathered in this research will be stored for 5 years subsequently to data collection by myself and my supervisor and will then be deleted.

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**CONSENT (Edit as required)**

I, the participant, have been informed about the study entitled *Exploring Psychology Master's Degree Students' Experiences of Remote Online Learning During COVID-19 At A South African University* by Brie Parker.

## Join my Research Project

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGY MASTER STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF REMOTE ONLINE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

### What is this study about?

This study aims to explore psychology master students' experiences of remote online learning at a South African university during COVID-19.

### Who can participate?

- UKZN professional Psychology master students inclusive of Clinical Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Industrial Psychology and Research Psychology.
- Those who were registered to study for their master degree in the years of 2020 or 2021 (during COVID-19) and completed their honours degree before the pandemic.

### What will I be asked to do?

One semi-structured individual interview to take place virtually (via Zoom or MS Teams Meetings) or in person (Howard College Campus) for approximately 1 hour

For any further information, please contact:  
Student/researcher: Brie Parker [REDACTED]  
or [REDACTED]  
Supervisors: Dr Ruwayda Petrus [REDACTED]  
Nerisha Deveduthras [REDACTED]

Please click the link to access the Information Sheet and sign up to participate:  
[Invitation to participate in research](#)

## Appendix E: Research Instrument: Interview Schedule

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

#### In-depth Individual Interview schedule with Psychology master's degree students

##### Duration: 60 minutes

- Introduction of the researcher
- Introduction to my study
- Signed consent

##### Screening Questions:

When did you complete your Honours Degree (if after 2020; consider including them)

When did you first register for your Master's in Social Science Degree: must either be 2020 OR 2021

What category of Professional Psychology Program are you registered in? (Clinical, Counselling, Industrial, Educational, Research) (probe: and are you still studying?)

##### (Biographical questions):

Participant:	
Age How old are you?	
Sex What is your gender? How do you identify? (probe: with which gender do you identify?)	
Living Conditions: Where did you live while studying during COVID-19? Who did you live with (On your own? With family? Other?)	
Studying Situation: Full-time? Part-time? Which Department	

Working situation: Full-time? Part time? Unemployed?	
---------------------------------------------------------------	--

Question 1: You are currently (/were) registered/study to be a (insert); what drew you to (insert psychology)? - this will ease them into the interview. Focus on why they want to be a psychologist?

Question 2: What made you decide to pursue your professional studies at UKZN?

The next few questions will focus on your experience of remote online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please reflect on your initial experiences during that time and answer to the best of your recollection.

*RQ 1: How have Psychology Master's Degree Students experienced the emergency remote online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic/during 2020?*

Question 3: Before the pandemic, you had the opportunity to complete your Honours Degree face-to-face. Can you tell me about your experience?

Probe for:

- Experiences around teaching and learning (workload, assessments, content etc)
- Before the pandemic, what was your level of comfort using technology? /how often were you required to use technology in your studies? (Expand on LEARN/Moodle; presentations, videos etc)

Question 4: Early 2020 COVID-19 forced universities to transition from face-to-face, to remote online learning. Can you share your experience of this shift?

[Ask probing or clarifying questions as needed]

- What was it like to move from learning on campus to learning from home?
- How did you experience the use of technology to learn? (also think of LEARN/Moodle)
- How did you experience remote learning in place of face-to-face classes?
- How did you experience online classes in terms of interaction
  - with your peers?
  - with your lecturers/supervisors?
- How did you experience online classes in terms of support?
- How did you feel about not being able to learn on campus?
- How do your experiences of studying for your master's degree compare to that of your honour's?

*RQ 2: What are the attitudes of students towards emergency remote online learning during the time of COVID-19?*

“Tell me about how studying during COVID-19 made you feel?”

[Ask probing or clarifying questions as needed]

- How did learning during a pandemic affect you emotionally?
- How did you feel the pandemic affected your ability to learn?
- How did you feel in terms of motivation and/or procrastination?
- Did you feel like you had coped during the pandemic?
  - How did you cope/not cope?
  - What did you do to cope?

*RQ 3: What are the facilitators and barriers to students studying remotely during the pandemic?*

Question 5: What did you find the most challenging in studying remotely during COVID-19?

Probe for:

- (or what made it easier?)
- Home/study environment (where you live, your study space)
- Internet connectivity
  - Quality of internet/ stability?
- Access to internet via:
  - Cell phone?
  - Laptop?
  - Modem?
  - Fibre?
  - Wi-Fi?
- Responsibilities at home; how did this impact on your ability to engage with your learning?

Question 6: What were some of the key takeaways for you in terms of online remote learning?

Probe for:

- You were exposed to online learning for a while; how well do you think you were able to adapt to an online model of teaching and supervision?

Question 7: If UKZN were to adopt this model of remote online learning going forward, what would you say would be some of the important things for them to consider before adopting this?

Question 8: Are there any other aspects related to studying during COVID-19 which we have not discussed yet?

Thank the participant for their time and conclude the interview.

Notes

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## Appendix F: Sample of Interview Transcript

209 Zia: Uh, I was. I didn't know what I was going to do. I wanted to do law. To be honest, I didn't  
210 apply for law. I just applied for BA. So I showed up, my DA, BA degree and did the subjects I  
211 thought would facilitate law. And at the last second, literally I had one opening left, uhm, for  
212 my 4th subject and someone was like, just do psych. It'll help. So, I was like, okay. And I really  
213 enjoyed it and I realized that. Uhm. By my third year, I was like, no, I want to do medicine. So  
214 I started doing a whole bunch of other subjects like ana, I did, uh, chemistry, physics and bio  
215 with my BA. And I was like, no, I don't care about all this external stuff. I really want to know,  
216 like, but what is the patient thinking? What are they feeling? Like, why aren't they adhering?  
217 How are they responding to their illness? And then I was like, okay, maybe psych is for me  
218 then. Because I think, yeah, I was in third year psych by that point. I was like, might as well  
219 apply for honours. Uhm, and then kind of, I was also doing international relations and I've been  
220 involved in a lot of student politics and I realized, like the psyche of South Africa as a whole,  
221 like, you can kind of conceptualize of South Africa as a patient within itself. Is, it's so deep, it's  
222 so extensive and it's it sometimes kind of goes unnoticed and I wanted to sort of delve into that  
223 dive in, dive into like community work. Uhm, and society as a whole and then kind of more  
224 specifically my own like Indian Muslim community as well is very like so much of stigma  
225 against mental illness. Uhm, so I wanted to address specific issues faced by especially Muslim  
226 women in the Community. Uhm, that wasn't all because there's lots of things. Uh then I've also  
227 got, ah, well, I was diagnosed with uhm ADHD and generalized anxiety disorder and I  
228 struggled so badly because, again, my community it's just like, that's not a thing. And it was  
229 only in like second year when I went to a proper psychologist that I actually started functioning  
230 and my life turned around completely. Uhm, so I was like this is really something that helps  
231 people and that's what I want to do. And then the last one is my dad passed away from multiple  
232 sclerosis when I was in my first year. And everyone spoke a lot about the physical effects of  
233 the ~~the~~ illness, like oh, it must be so hard for you, your you know, your body is deteriorating,  
234 your intelligence is going. There's like cognitive, uhm, fallout, obviously, like cognitive  
235 decline. But no one really looked at what, what must this man actually be going through  
236 psychologically? It was just completely like, oh, just be strong. Uhm, just have faith. And I  
237 think as much as my mom sent us to psychologists, people also didn't really consider that they  
238 [sounds like: expires]. So I was like, okay, we're looking at all the physical parts of life, the  
239 tangible parts of life. But I want to also focus on everything that you don't see, and the people  
240 who are struggling with that and aren't having that scene within themselves. I want to be the  
241 one who helps them to see it.

242 00:16:33

243 Brie: Sho, that is amazing.

244 Zia: Thanks. That was not my most articulate answer.

245 00:16:40

246 Brie: [giggles]. Ah, yeah, it almost sounds like uh, what landed up being a chance thing became  
247 your calling.

248 00:16:47

249 Zia: Ah, yeah, I think so. By some miracle. Yeah.

250 00:16:50-00:17:03

251 Brie: Sometimes things slowly, slowly guide you towards a specific. You know, as you go, you,  
252 you find out that this is actually, just really, something that you're passionate about.

253 00:17:07- 00:17:23

254 Zia: I think so. I think just pure curiosity like I know that's what everyone says. Like I've always  
255 cared about people and I wanted to know what drives it, but I genuinely like. Yoh. I'm so curious  
256 about everything like my, I Google everything. Have to know everything. Every relationship  
257 I'm in and I hyper analyse. So I think curiosity as a psychologist. I think that kind of draws us  
258 all in.

259 00:17:34- 00:17:38

260 Brie: Yeah, curiosity. [laughs]. Uhm, and what?

261 Zia: Yes.

262 00:17:42- 00:17:45

263 Brie: And what? So yeah, I guess that's. And then what made you decide to go to clinical?

264 00:17:50

265 Zia: Uhm, I initially wanted to do neuro to be honest and it's, you know, it's not a thing. So  
266 someone told me it's easier to go from clinical into other things. Like clinical's kind of like the  
267 easiest one to branch out from.

268 Brie: Hmm.

## Appendix G: Example of Coding

456 0:24:32.530 --> 0:24:39.370  
457 Brie: Sjo. Umm, when you were saying, uh, I don't feel like I got value for money, what did  
458 you mean by that?

459 0:24:40.430 --> 0:24:52.280  
460 Tshego: [No, it was terrible. We really didn't, uhm [laughs]. And not because our lecturers, but  
461 in terms of our practical, our practicals were structured for physical.]

462 0:24:53.350 --> 0:24:53.640  
463 Brie: Hmm.

464 0:24:52.350 --> 0:25:13.140  
465 Tshego: [So, I don't think they could come up with the contingency plan on how to then make  
466 those more remote or anything. I think the only ones that we did were the counselling ones, |  
467 but for every other module we actually ended up not doing the the the practical. | Well, we did,  
468 but it was, agh, it was terrible. Like, I just don't think it was, was what it could have been,  
469 you know.]

470 0:25:15.710 --> 0:25:15.950  
471 Brie: Yeah.

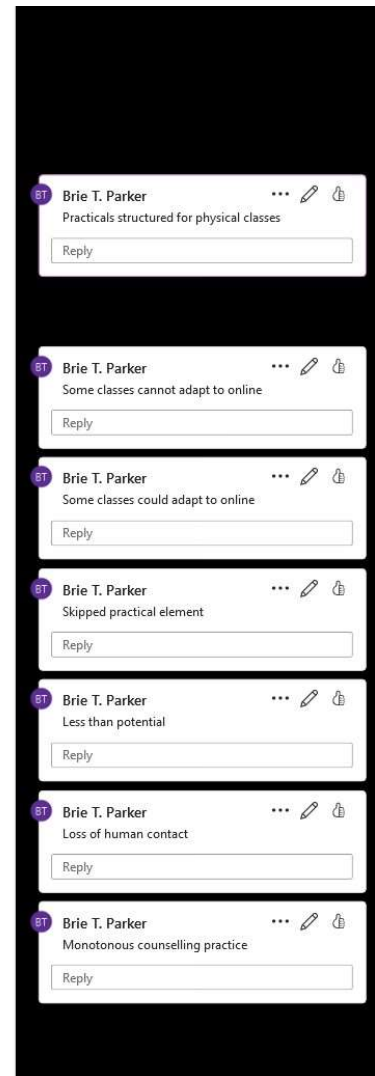
472 0:25:13.970 --> 0:25:43.980  
473 Tshego: [Uhm, because even the counselling ones, I think because we were starting, it it just, I  
474 don't know, I felt like that that human contact was sort of taken away. Uhm, so maybe even  
475 the engaging wasn't so good. Because initially, because also counselling people, you know,  
476 just doesn't work. Because we'd all, obviously if you're all doing M1 together you sort of  
477 develop some sort of friendship. Uhm.]

478 0:25:44.600 --> 0:25:44.810  
479 Brie: Umm

480 0:25:44.220 --> 0:25:48.940  
481 Tshego: So now we must go to these role plays, but I already know what's going on in your  
482 life.]

483 0:25:49.680 --> 0:25:49.930  
484 Brie: Umm.

17



485 0:25:49.0 --> 0:25:58.290  
 486 Tshego: So, for me [giggles] it took away from me actually being able to practice my skills  
 487 because I have some sort of relationship with you, it's actually not working.

488 0:25:58.630 --> 0:25:59.110  
 489 Brie: Umm.

490 0:25:58.540 --> 0:26:7.250  
 491 Tshego: Whereas had we been able to do the practicals as was scheduled, I would be dealing  
 492 with a complete stranger and I'd be able to probe more and actually see if I'm exercising, you  
 493 know, the skills that I've been taught at school.

494 0:26:10.150 --> 0:26:10.290  
 495 Brie: Yes.

496 0:26:8.870 --> 0:26:38.780  
 497 Tshego: Yeah, so for me that's why I feel like, ah, it just helped because I used to, uhm, I  
 498 used to volunteer at Lifeline, so I'd do counselling there, it's like a something that I did or  
 499 whatever, but honestly, other than that, yeah. No, because I remember we were going to go to  
 500 some trauma and rape crisis centre, and that's what we were going to do. And I think it's so  
 501 much, you actually learn better how to counsel with people that you actually have no...]

502 0:26:39.710 --> 0:26:39.940  
 503 Brie: Umm.

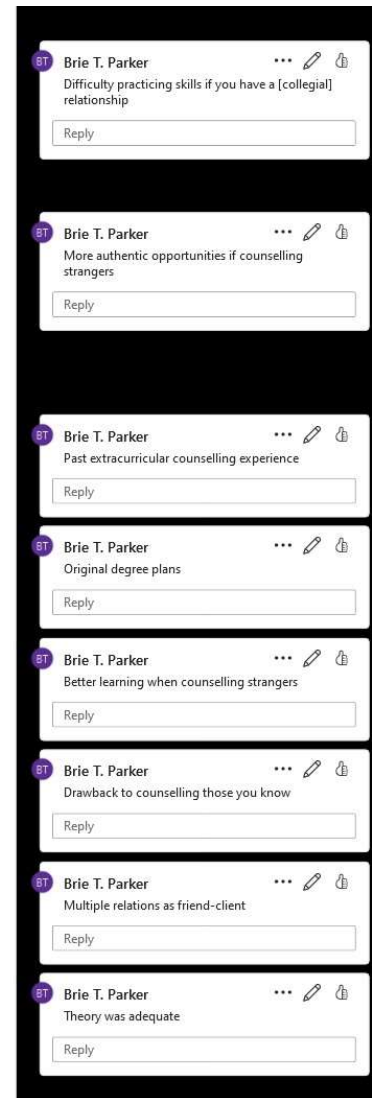
504 0:26:39.300 --> 0:26:49.320  
 505 Tshego: [There's a reason why you don't counsel people that you, you know...]

506 0:26:42.270 --> 0:26:50.420  
 507 Brie: Don't know.

508 Tshego: Or have, you you know what I mean, multiple relations, I mean, it's like now you're  
 509 my friend, but like I must now turn into, it just doesn't work. So that's what I mean.]

510 0:26:51.170 --> 0:26:51.880  
 511 Brie: I guess that's true.

512 0:26:51.120 --> 0:27:2.600  
 513 Tshego: Yeah. I feel like our practical, maybe the on the actual theoretical parts, cool, they



**Appendix H: Photograph of the coding map**





