



**UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL**

**INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS'
EXPERIENCES OF ADJUSTING TO SOCIAL SCIENCE HIGHER DEGREES AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL**

BY

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**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Clinical
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A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

DECLARATIONS

This short dissertation was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Social Science in Clinical Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

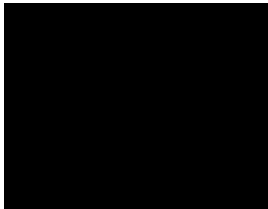
I, Nobuhle Nkosi, hereby declare that the following research project, submitted for the degree of Master of Social Science in Clinical Psychology, is my own intellectual contribution. The contributions of other scholars have been rightfully acknowledged through citations and referencing. No part of this work has been previously submitted at any university.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, family, and friends for their undying support during this period. It has not been an easy journey, however, your prayers, kind words, and presence have positively contributed to my successful completion.

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ABSTRACT

Students encounter various experiences upon enrolling in their new academic levels. One significant experience is the adjustment process, which can impact their postgraduate journey. Adversities can pose a threat to the process of student adjustment, resulting in several challenges that impede their academic pursuit. Students successfully adjusting to their studies allows them to have a smoother academic journey, complete studies within the designated time, and experience minimal attrition rates. Therefore, students must have adequate coping mechanisms to adjust. This study aims to explore the experiences that postgraduate students encounter when adjusting to their studies.

A qualitative research approach was employed for this study. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews with eight participants. The participants were all registered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus, for their Master of Social Science degree. The data collected was analysed using the six-step thematic data analysis. The u-curve theory of adjustment and concepts borrowed from the social learning theory was used as the study's theoretical framework.

Findings reveal that various challenges impact students' attempts to adjust. These challenges included the (a) nature of the academic support that the participants received and (b) the lack of orientation programs for postgraduate students. Further challenges included (c) the nature of the supervisor/supervisee relationship and (d) the need to balance social and personal responsibilities. As a result of these challenges, the participants faced longer completion times and a higher dropout risk. Participants highlighted how peer and family support positively impacted their academic progress. Some of the participants reported receiving adequate support from the university staff. In contrast, most of the participants yearned for support from the university as they felt isolated. The findings suggest that support from the university was important for the participants, primarily through the provision of resources such as funds and adequate academic support. Participants also acknowledged the vital role they had to play in laying the foundation for their studies in terms of preparations before commencing their studies. Findings suggest that when the university and the students put effort into postgraduate studies, it ensures a healthy adjustment culture within the university for current and future postgraduate students.

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The study's findings contribute to the body of knowledge by highlighting interventions that the university can implement for future postgraduate students. Part of the intervention also includes the role the students should play to ensure their success and timely completion. The findings also suggest that literature should equally explore postgraduate student experiences as they adjust to their studies. This inclusion will allow for more postgraduate students' experiences to be recorded and understood.

Keywords: adjustment, coping, experience, postgraduate student, postgraduate studies, stress, support, university.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
UCT	U-Curve Theory of Adjustment
SLT	Social Learning Theory
NDP	National Development Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

The discussions regarding the limited number of postgraduate students in South Africa draw increasing attention and concern within academic circles as well as policymakers (Cobbing et al., 2017; Council of Higher Education, 2013). With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in South Africa, which are a global action geared towards ending poverty, protecting the environment, and promoting peace and prosperity within the nation (United Nations South Africa, 2024), the country appears to have difficulties implementing these goals. According to Chankseliani and McCowan (2021), these difficulties are partially attributed to the lack of literature on the SDG, potentially causing challenges in working towards implementing these goals, specifically within Higher Education. International authors Biermann et al. (2022) report findings similar to those of South African-based authors regarding the lack of studies concerning the impact of the goals across countries and how they are received. This study highlights Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to provide quality and inclusive education, thus promoting lifelong learning opportunities (United Nations South Africa, 2024). Failure to realise the goal results in challenges in meeting the SDG mandate, consequently leading to unfavourable conditions within universities that threaten the overall adjustment experience of postgraduate studies in South Africa. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 is a state plan to eradicate poverty and to have low inequality (Matyana & Thusi, 2023). One of the NDP goals is to increase the number of postgraduate students before 2030. However, these goals are challenged due to certain socioeconomic issues caused by the aftermath of apartheid, which continuously influence the type of future an individual has (Matyana & Thusi, 2023).

Postgraduate students experience challenges similar to those of their undergraduate counterparts while adjusting to their academic studies (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Mbeve et al., 2023). The process of progressing to higher levels of education has attracted attention, with various theoretical inquiries focusing on the complex adjustment process from secondary education to a tertiary academic environment. The existing body of knowledge includes the stress associated with the adjustment, the coping strategies employed by students, concerns regarding high attrition rates, the psychological well-being of students, factors that influence motivation and academic success, and the adjustment experiences of international students (Dlungwane et al., 2017; Ickes et al., 2015; Heussi, 2012; Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Mbeve et

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al., 2023; Moss et al., 2021; Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012; Turki et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2015). Despite existing literature, it is evident that more empirical research is needed on postgraduate students' adjustment to their studies. Further clarification is necessary regarding the applicability of the current body of knowledge on adjustment to postgraduate studies.

This introductory chapter offers the background of the study, followed by a delineation of the research questions and objectives and the relevance of the current study. Finally, a brief description of the dissertation's outline is presented.

1.2. Background

Adjustment is generally defined as purposeful adaptation or modification to achieve balance and effectiveness in a situation (Buchanan et al., 2015). Adjustment involves achieving a perfect fit among the students' academics and environment (Young et al., 2013). According to Petersen et al. (2009), successfully adjusting to university is essential for a student's outcomes. However, as mentioned earlier, the current body of literature primarily focuses on the process of adjusting from secondary education to tertiary education, revealing a noticeable scarcity of academic research about the challenges associated with adjusting to postgraduate studies (Bangser, 2008; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Ho et al., 2012; Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Mbeve et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2008). The current body of knowledge needs to encompass more diversity to distinguish between what has been pursued and what remains to be explored in postgraduate adjustment (Tobbell et al., 2010).

1.2.1. *South Africa's Goal of Increasing Postgraduate Learners*

One of the goals of the National Development Plan (NDP) for 2030 is to increase the number of students pursuing advanced studies within South Africa (Mbeve et al., 2023; Ramchandran, 2022). If the government prioritises postgraduate students, universities should extend the same courtesy to assist them in their academic journey beyond financial support (Mbeve et al., 2023). Therefore, emphasising the efficient adjustment of postgraduate students to their academic pursuits is crucial, as it directly correlates with student retention rates and the successful acquisition of postgraduate degrees. According to Seabi et al. (2014), the aftermath of the apartheid system resulted in limited resources for some individuals in South Africa to pursue their studies. The apartheid aftermath affected many aspects of students' goals through problems, namely financial constraints, scarcity of resources for postgraduate opportunities, and inadequacies in providing support mechanisms (Ahrari et al., 2019). Therefore, the current

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government is making concerted efforts to expand the accessibility of postgraduate education and include a broader range of individuals (Council on Higher Education, 2013). The initiatives encompass diverse strategic measures, such as scholarships, bursaries, and mentorship programs, which support disadvantaged students (Council on Higher Education, 2013). Consequently, these measures positively influence students' progress towards their adjustment.

According to South African author McGhie (2017), there is a correlation between a university's socio-economic classification and how students adjust to their academic surroundings. The resources made available to students determine this relationship. According to McGhie's (2017) report, the availability of resources is based on the university being predominantly White or Black. Predominantly White universities are likely to possess more resources than predominantly Black institutions. Additionally, in South Africa, the distribution of resources was dependent on the socio-political structure of the apartheid system (Young & Campbell, 2014). However, a certain group of South African students still experience the lasting effects of historical occurrences despite three decades passing since the end of the apartheid regime (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; McGhie, 2017). The limited resources suggest these students may encounter difficulties in their adjustment journey.

Based on the research findings produced by the Council on Higher Education (2013), one can deduce that students enrolled in historically Black universities frequently face obstacles throughout their educational careers due to their minimal participation in higher education. According to McGhie (2017), students from educational institutions with a history of marginalisation who were granted the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education are considered 'first-generation' students. The 'first-generation' students engaging in higher education are likely susceptible to experiencing attrition (McGhie, 2017). The 'first-generation' students' attrition is attributed to their lack of adequate support from older family members who have never been university students and do not know the type of support to provide, unlike those from a family of graduates. Nel et al. (2009) suggest that the educational quality students experience during high school significantly influences their subsequent university journey. Furthermore, Young and Campbell's (2013) study provides evidence that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience psychological distress, such as anxiety, throughout their undergraduate phase compared to their advantaged

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counterparts. This may adversely impact their future endeavours in pursuing advanced academic studies.

The Council of Higher Education (2013) highlights the importance of socio-economic factors in improving accessibility and success rates in higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Transitioning from one's familial residence to a university or student residence may result in isolation as they lack a familiar support system (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; McGhie, 2017). Petersen et al. (2009) assert that this situation can predispose students to vulnerability in an unfamiliar setting. Conversely, establishing social support networks through tutors, mentors, and friends has yielded positive advantages (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022). Social networks operate as a safeguard to improve the negative consequences of distressing and adverse interactions (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Petersen et al., 2009). This argument underscores the importance of fostering interpersonal relationships among peers within the student body to facilitate adjustment to the university setting and promote academic assimilation (Petersen et al., 2009; Wu & Hammond, 2011).

The progression from undergraduate to postgraduate studies is associated with numerous demands, challenges, and a necessary adjustment to a unique and higher level of academic pursuit (Ickes et al., 2015). The adjustment is crucial since it significantly impacts the success or failure of postgraduate education. Furthermore, according to West (2012) and McPherson et al. (2017), postgraduate students experience anxiety akin to their undergraduate counterparts.

The current study clarifies the challenges encountered by postgraduate students seeking advanced degrees in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The study aims to contribute to the field of Social Sciences by investigating and analysing strategies that can effectively facilitate the adjustment process of postgraduate students. By so doing, the researcher anticipates that this study will positively contribute to postgraduate students' overall adjustment, success, and satisfaction in their studies.

1.3. Research Problem

The process of adjustment exerts a significant influence on the entire student's experience. Hence, the presence of adversities poses a potential threat to the process of student adjustment. These adversities impede the student's academic pursuit. According to McPherson et al. (2017), postgraduate studies are accompanied by self-doubt, disorientation, and anxiety

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among students. In addition, McPherson et al. (2017) and West (2012) assert that postgraduate adjustment should be regularly considered and given more attention within the academic discourse. Often, postgraduate students are perceived as field experts due to their advanced academic journey. This elevated status unintentionally contributes to the dearth of research on postgraduate experiences (McPherson et al., 2017; West, 2012). Millward (2015) argues that existing literature on the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies offers inadequate representation, often characterising postgraduate studies as a marginalised sector. There is a notion among academics that individuals pursuing postgraduate degrees are predisposed to adjusting to the demands and standards of their degrees (Huessi, 2012; O'Donnell et al., 2009; West, 2012). McPherson et al. (2017) further report that academics hypothesise that postgraduate students possess enhanced skills that facilitate effortless adjustment, such as managing increased workloads and learning with less guidance from lecturers. However, Dlungwane et al. (2017) report that postgraduate students face challenges managing their time and workload. Dlungwane et al.'s (2017) study is thus inconsistent with earlier studies that portray postgraduate students as self-sufficient and knowledgeable individuals who do not require guidance.

Symons (2001) asserts that the similarity of some aspects of postgraduate courses to undergraduate coursework causes people to mistakenly believe that postgraduate courses are easy. Tobbell et al.'s (2010) study correlates with Symons's (2001), asserting that using the same seminar rooms and professors (or lecturers) from the undergraduate to the postgraduate program has been noted as contributing to the belief that postgraduate studies are easy to adjust to. Based on these studies, postgraduate students are expected by the academic staff and the university administration to instantly adapt to their academic pursuits. However, according to Symons (2001), taking on postgraduate courses may lead to feelings of nervousness and uneasiness in students, causing delays in their academic adjustment and functioning.

Huessi (2012) reports that universities tend to treat students as traditionally homogenous rather than acknowledging and addressing their inherent diversity. Universities that fail to recognise the inherent diversity of their student body may inadvertently expose their postgraduate students to difficulties. This is because the study programs may lack the necessary interventions to effectively accommodate the wide range of abilities and diversities (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Students may feel inadequate and experience psychological distress due to a perceived lack of preparation and a potentially challenging academic workload (Huessi, 2012;

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Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022). Therefore, institutions should recognise postgraduate students as a diverse group and establish frameworks that consider their specific needs and circumstances to address this problem.

According to McPherson et al. (2017) and West (2012), postgraduate students feel unprepared and uncertain about their academic tasks' expectations. Postgraduate students experience difficulties learning new skills and academic methodologies because there is no preparation for advanced education and potential marginalisation by the university decision-making processes (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Academic writing is one of the challenges that students face (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Symons, 2001). Moreover, global and national research studies suggest that students face significant challenges in effectively using scholarly article resources from university libraries (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2018; Sonn, 2016). Based on these studies, difficulties in engaging with research methods and academic writing are a global issue.

Huessi (2012) and Symons (2001) note that students often require clarification about their studies due to the lack of explicit curriculum or instruction. Imposter syndrome is characterised by an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, unworthiness, and a perceived inability to effectively fulfil one's postgraduate academic responsibilities (McPherson et al., 2017). This may develop among students due to the ambiguity surrounding their studies (McPherson et al., 2017). Huessi (2012) argues that universities must incorporate a thorough introductory component into their educational curricula for postgraduate students. This strategy will aid students in gaining sufficient knowledge of their academic endeavours and eliminate any confusion that may permeate their understanding.

According to Symons (2001), postgraduate students should demonstrate expertise. Therefore, they may hesitate to show inadequacies or inconvenience their lecturers by seeking assistance (Symons, 2001). Hence, research notes that it is important for students to develop social relationships with classmates, as this facilitates meaningful conversations within the classroom context and reduces feelings of isolation (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Mbeve et al., 2023).

According to O'Donnell et al. (2009) and West (2012), postgraduate students are encouraged to be autonomous, which results in isolation and the need for more friendships with classmates among students. On campus, postgraduate students are subjected to time

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restrictions, which could exacerbate their tendency to socially isolate, essentially hindering the development of their interpersonal relations (Dlungwane et al., 2017). Menzies and Baron (2014) highlight how social support and interpersonal connections help students adjust optimally and positively impact their psychological well-being.

A study by McPherson et al. (2017) further supports the importance of social connections in postgraduate lives, especially for those who have completed their undergraduate studies at different universities. These findings emphasise the inconsistencies in the scholarly discourse regarding the continued use of university procedures. These inconsistencies contribute to students feeling isolated and excluded, compared to creating support systems for students. However, encouraging autonomy in postgraduate students has resulted in feelings of inadequacy. Conversely, engaging with classmates regarding the course material assists students in feeling more in control and improving their mental well-being (Menzies & Baron, 2014).

1.4. Research Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions

1.4.1. Research Aim

This study explores postgraduate students' as they were experiences adjusting to the relatively demanding Social Sciences postgraduate program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The study explores students' experiences in their academic journey as master's students in a South African university. Furthermore, factors contributing to these stressors and adjustment difficulties are explored.

1.4.2. Research Objectives

- To explore students' understanding of adjusting from undergraduate to postgraduate studies in the Social Science program.
- To explore students' experiences of postgraduate studies.
- To determine what support structures are made available by the university for students.
- To make possible recommendations for addressing students' challenges and assisting with better adjustment into postgraduate studies.

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1.4.3. Research Questions

- What is the student's understanding of adjusting from undergraduate to postgraduate studies in the Social Science program?
- What are the students' experiences of postgraduate studies?
- What support structures are available for students at the university?
- What recommendations can the students make to assist with improving adjustment to postgraduate studies?

1.5. The Significance of this Research

This study's findings could better equip the university to create a conducive environment for students to complete their studies in record time by improving student support systems. In addition, the findings could contribute to strategies aimed at reducing the reported high attrition rates, thus enhancing postgraduate students' overall experience (Styger et al., 2015). O'Donnell et al. (2009) report that developing inclusive university environments catering to postgraduate students' needs can be achieved through understanding their adjustment process. These inclusive structures can lessen the numerous difficulties faced by postgraduate students, enabling a decrease in the frequency and severity of adjustment problems experienced by students (Styger et al., 2015). The lack of inclusion at universities contributes to increased dropout rates and fosters a threatening environment for students seeking postgraduate degrees (Sengane & Havenga, 2018).

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] (2018), postgraduate students are reportedly declining in their academic progression, especially among Black South African students. Meela et al. (2023) conducted a study which tracked the progress of postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand (WITS) over ten years. The findings show that student completion and non-completion rates are a concern for higher learning institutions, where an average of 71% of students took longer to complete their degrees (Meela et al., 2023). However, 16.84% of White students completed their degrees within record time (Meela et al., 2023). These findings correlate with the DHET's (2018) report, which revealed a decline and slower progress in Black students' academic performance. Regarding the time to graduate, Meela et al. (2023) report that at least 40% of postgraduate students

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complete their master's degrees between 4 to 7 years, while approximately 30% would complete their master's in approximately 1 to 3 years. Moreover, during Meela et al.'s (2023) cohort study, an average of 36% of students from both genders failed to complete their degrees. These findings are a glance at the situations at many South African universities, portraying the difficulty some institutions encounter, including (1) a decrease in postgraduate student throughput (drop-out) rate, (2) duration of the degree, and (3) the actual graduation period.

At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, postgraduate students starting their master's degrees in Social Science courses may encounter various challenges as they navigate the complexities of their academic and social environments. These difficulties include adjusting to a new academic environment, handling the demands of academic work and time constraints, building meaningful relationships with respected faculty members and fellow students, and successfully navigating the difficulties posed by cultural and linguistic differences (Ntinzi, 2019). These circumstances may cause social withdrawal, heightened anxiety, and a lack of confidence in students' academic abilities, hindering academic success and general psychological well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the nature and scope of the challenges Social Science postgraduate students face at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The data obtained from this current study can be used to develop effective interventions that will support students' academic and social integration into the university.

1.6. Dissertation Outline

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter One is the introduction to the study, consisting of the study's background, research problem, research aim, research objectives, research questions, and the research significance. Chapter Two provides a literature review of South African and international studies on postgraduate students' adjustment experiences. Chapter Two also discuss the theoretical framework adopted in the study: the u-curve theory of adjustment (UCT). The UCT borrows from the social learning theory (SLT) to provide an in-depth theoretical conceptualisation (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Lawson & Shepherd, 2019).

Chapter Three presents a discussion of the research methodology. Firstly, the research design is outlined, followed by sampling methods, data collection methods, data analysis procedure, and research trustworthiness. Thereafter, the researcher's reflexivity is discussed, along with the ethical considerations that played a significant role in shaping the study's methodology and subsequent write-up. Chapter Four compromises a thematic presentation of

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the research findings. Chapter Five provides an extensive deliberation of the results and their significance. The deliberation employs existing literature to substantiate the findings. The u-curve theory of adjustment and the SLT will be used to conceptualise the findings. Chapter Six concludes the study and presents a delineation of the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Postgraduate student rising attrition rates in South Africa are a cause for concern. Therefore, understanding the factors associated with students' adjustment to postgraduate studies becomes crucial, as it may determine success or failure at the postgraduate level (Styger et al., 2015). Previous studies have identified various factors contributing to the challenges encountered by postgraduate students in adjusting to their studies, which affects student retention. These include poor academic preparation for postgraduate studies, personal coping mechanisms, increased work volume, poor time management problems, low self-efficacy, and relationships with supervisors (Dlungwane et al., 2017; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2015; Magano, 2011; Roach et al., 2019; & Wright, 2006).

This study explored postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to the Social Sciences postgraduate studies program. The study also examined the students' experiences in their academic journey as postgraduate students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Furthermore, as outlined in the research objectives, the researcher explored the factors contributing to these stressors and the adjustment difficulties. The study's findings can assist in enhancing student support systems and prepare the university to assist students in completing their studies within record time. Dominguez-Whitehead (2015) reports that universities evaluating their postgraduate student preparedness could assist in developing new interventions that will benefit students' adjustment.

2.2. Adjusting to Postgraduate Studies

Adjustment is a change or shift made to make a situation more suitable or practical for an individual (Buchanan et al., 2015). Adjustment also reflects a healthy balance between academics, the social environment, and a student's life (Young et al., 2013), thus aligning the needs and challenges within the environment (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Buchanan et al. (2015), Mesidor and Sly (2016), and Young et al. (2013) each report comparable definitions of adjustment to Quan et al. (2016). However, Quan et al. (2016) added that adjustment occurs through cultural learning and individual change. Adjustment occurs through a learning process of modelled behaviours that will assist the student in fitting into the new environment. A study by Brown and Holloway (2008) suggests that adjustment is measured from various perspectives; therefore, there is no single, universally agreed-upon definition. Ahrari et al.'s

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(2019) study echoes Brown and Holloway (2008), further reporting that adjustment is a dynamic process that ultimately leads to homeostasis between the student and the environment. This suggests that people uniquely experience the adjustment process and that adjustment is defined based on the context or perspective, indicating that it is context-based. According to Chen (2012) and Wang et al. (2015), students experience three types of adjustment in university. These are academic, psychological, and socio-cultural.

Wang et al. (2015) explain that academic adjustment pertains to the adaptation of students to the university environment, including the influence of various teaching methods and the learning styles employed by the university. Additionally, Ahrari et al. (2019) assert that to achieve academic adjustment, students need to cultivate their learning and develop coping mechanisms continuously. Other factors contributing to academic adjustment include language proficiency, various teaching and learning styles, learning environment, and different education systems (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Wang et al., 2015). These contributing factors have been associated with potential challenges in achieving adjustment, as will be discussed in later sections.

A study by Thamrin et al. (2019) on working-class postgraduate students reports that employed postgraduates had not established healthy coping mechanisms, suggesting that these students struggled with achieving academic adjustment. In a South African study by Summers and Mpande (2014) on factors that influence completion rates among master's students, they report that students experience challenges accessing their supervisors. There is poor communication between students and their supervisors, causing delays in students' progress. Academic adjustment is affected by the communication breakdown because it encompasses challenges related to various teaching and learning styles, learning environments, and different educational systems to which the student is exposed. According to West (2012), in their study of the formative evaluation of the transition to postgraduate counselling and psychotherapy students, their participant's academic adjustment was impacted because they had experienced academic difficulties from the onset of their studies. In a study by Quan et al. (2016) on Chinese postgraduate students' academic adjustment in the United Kingdom (UK), language proficiency was identified as an academic adjustment determinant. Quan et al. (2016) found that Chinese students encountered difficulties due to English being the predominant spoken language in the UK. Their language proficiency difficulty affected their ability to contribute to seminar discussions, produce well-written work, and demonstrate critical thinking abilities.

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Ahrari et al. (2019) suggest that language proficiency is challenging for students who must become fluent in the dominant spoken language within a university setting. Therefore, it predisposes them to difficulties with achieving academic adjustment. These factors associated with academic adjustment highlight areas where universities can focus on creating appropriate student support programs. This, in turn, can positively impact completion rates and enhance the pleasant experience of postgraduate studies.

Cho and Yu (2015) posit that psychological adjustment is classified as emotional satisfaction or psychological well-being. According to Roslan et al. (2017), psychological well-being is a sense of control an individual has over their situation. There is a positive relationship between psychological well-being and psychological adjustment. Quan et al. (2016) explain that psychological adjustment is a component of acculturation into a new environment. Psychological adjustment is influenced by many environmental changes at the beginning of university (Ahrari et al., 2019; Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022). Factors contributing to this distress include homesickness, loneliness due to inadequate social support in the new environment, and feelings of disappointment (Ahrari et al., 2019; Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Psychological maladjustment results in negative psychological symptoms such as anxious and depressive symptoms, further suggesting a loss of control over the situation (Ahrari et al., 2019; Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Cho and Yu (2015) echo studies by Ahrari et al. (2019) and Thurber and Walton (2012) on how a lack of psychological adjustment predisposes students to distress and physical harm. Thurber and Walton (2012) report that this results in students having poor academic performance and potentially withdrawing from their studies.

Lucas et al. (2018) suggest that some postgraduate students lose social support from colleagues during their undergraduate years, which can impact their sense of having a 'safe space.' Students having their 'safe space' compromised suggests that their psychological adjustment has been affected, particularly with limited social support from new colleagues. Li et al. (2014) report in their study on East Asian students' psychological well-being that their participants' psychological well-being was significantly associated with depression and stress, further suggesting psychological maladjustment.

Wang et al. (2015) state that socio-cultural adjustment involves students experiencing culture shock as they transition to a new level of study, encountering new norms, rules, and traditions. Students may struggle to achieve socio-cultural adjustment if unfamiliar with their

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field's new norms and rules (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022). Studies suggest that students benefit from assimilating these new norms and regulations with the assistance of those already in the field to achieve adjustment (Pedersen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2015).

O'Donnell et al. (2009) posit that postgraduate students experience culture shock when university staff neglects them, where the staff assume student's adjustment will occur naturally, without assistance. West (2012) reports that students who had left the university system and returned after a few years found it difficult to adjust and blend with the homogenous students. These returning students fall under the heterogeneous category with various roles and responsibilities. West (2012) further reports in her study that the students' socio-cultural adjustment was compromised because the university only catered for traditional homogeneous students. This neglect affected heterogeneous students' norms and rules, compromising their socio-cultural adjustment. The occurrence of culture shock suggests that universities need to pay attention to their students so they can be assisted with their adjustment and not be neglected.

Postgraduate students have long been considered mature, goal-oriented, and focused, thus not requiring attention from the university staff (Huessi, 2012). However, West (2012) and McPherson et al. (2017) challenge the discourse on postgraduate students as experts and state that they are anxious and require guidance. This misconception about postgraduate students is also attributed to the unstructured nature of their studies (McPherson et al., 2017; Roslan et al. (2017). This finding suggests that student's academic performance becomes affected as they manoeuvre unstructured and autonomous work. Furthermore, their performance may also be affected by various teaching and learning styles as well as a lack of familiarity with the norms and culture of postgraduate studies (Wang et al., 2015), especially without guidance from the staff. Therefore, their academic and socio-cultural adjustment becomes compromised.

McPherson et al. (2017) and Poock (2004) posit that postgraduate students experience anxiety and confusion related to their academic journey in the same manner as undergraduate students. According to Reddy et al. (2014), postgraduate students experience more stress and anxiety compared to undergraduate students. Postgraduate students face challenges like compromised psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, finances, time constraints, and social-cultural being (McPherson et al., 2017; Wang, 2004). Not achieving psychological

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well-being leads to students experiencing less confidence and no sense of control over their studies, further compromising their psychological and academic adjustment.

2.2.1. Adjustment and Stress Levels

The start of any life-changing experience may stress individuals. Similarly, postgraduate students experience stress when adjusting to their new study level, a life-changing experience (Reddy et al., 2014; Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012). They may face stressors such as role conflict, time constraints, a lack of support from their respective families and the university, financial pressure, and academic challenges (Ickes et al., 2015; Motseke, 2016; Roslan et al., 2017). Stress leads to academic decline, deterioration of the quality of interpersonal relationships with family and friends, and general dissatisfaction with life, affecting students' adjustment capabilities (Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012). Due to stress influencing students' adjustment, it needs to be understood.

According to Asokan et al. (2021), stress is a biological reaction that disturbs an individual's state of homeostasis in an attempt to respond to an internal or external incitement. Greenberge and Baroon (2000) further explain that stress can also be an emotional and a physiological reaction. Studies suggest that psychological distress occurs when an individual lacks the necessary resources to cope with a stressful situation (Hussien & Hussien, 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Studies also suggest that students appraise challenging situations based on their available resources, such as finances and support networks (Hamdan-Mansour & Dawani, 2008; Lazarus, 1990). Reddy et al. (2014) further posit that environmental demands strain an individual's available resources and adaptive capacity. Therefore, if students cannot make a change suitable or effective for themselves, this occurrence will lead to stress and, consequently, compromised adjustment.

Studies by Ickes et al. (2015) and Myers et al. (2012) report that the minimal studies on postgraduate students put them at a disadvantage, especially with stress being one of the leading factors impacting students' academic lives. The lack of literature leads to inadequate support structures to enhance students' development of coping skills. Furthermore, Par et al. (2015) report that some policymakers and universities ignore stress. Literature must address this gap to develop appropriate interventions and train students on coping methods to respond to stress. Par et al. (2015) explain that the global neglect of stress on postgraduate students inadvertently perpetuates the current dilemma of minimal information known about them.

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Ickes et al. (2015) state that participants did not consider stress's impact on their studies. However, Brook et al. (2020) participants could observe stress's impact on their studies upon the realisation that they lacked the resources to cope. Due to the assumption that postgraduate students were experts in their studies, Ickes et al. (2015) participants lacked insight and dismissed the thought of being under stress and its impact on their studies. The inconsistencies highlight earlier discussions on postgraduate students being overlooked by literature, prompting more research to address the inconsistencies.

According to Ickes et al. (2015), lacking the skills to cope with stress can lead postgraduate students to adopt risky behaviours as a coping strategy. Examples of risky behaviours include restricted food intake, overeating, alcohol abuse, and smoking (Ka Thao, 2012). Dumlao et al. (2000) suggest that experiencing high stress levels without positive coping strategies leads students to engage in avoidant behaviours. This results in depression and anxiety, consequently affecting their academic as well as psychological adjustment. As earlier discussions allude, unsuccessful stress management prevents students from adjusting to their studies, leading to heightened stress levels.

2.2.1.1. Adjustment and Gender-Related Stress

Guruprakash et al. (2018) report that gender did not influence the stress levels experienced by students. Instead, the study states that gender influenced the severity of depression among students, suggesting psychological maladjustment (Guruprakash et al., 2018). Other studies report that female students experience more stress than males (Ickes et al., 2015; Myers et al., 2012; Saleh et al., 2017; Stanely & Bhuvanewari, 2016). Furthermore, females reportedly experience increased stress over the years. In contrast, Thawabieh and Qaisy's (2012) study reports that males experienced increased stress and portrayed poorer well-being than females. This finding challenges the former studies on increased stress and gender. Par et al. (2015) state that men express their physical illnesses more than stress. This proposes that males are unaware when they are under stress. Consequently, they do not act on their stress symptoms with the same energy as they do for their physical illnesses. Male under and inaccurate reporting propose the reason why they reportedly experience less anxiety and depression.

Research has found that female students will likely practice avoidant coping skills with stress (Dumlao et al., 2000; Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012). Avoidant coping skills lead to physical

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and psychological difficulties such as depression and anxiety, thus contributing to difficulties in achieving socio-cultural and psychological adjustment (Cho & Yu, 2015; Staten et al., 2012). Based on the studies reviewed, females are prone to having depression and anxiety. Par et al. (2015) assert that female students seek positive assistance to cope because they know their stress. These findings suggest inconsistencies between Dumlao (2000) and Thawabieh and Qaisy (2012) on female help-seeking behaviours. Depression and anxiety in female students are associated with low self-esteem, which affects their psychological well-being (Saleh et al., 2017).

2.2.1.2. Societal Context and Age-Related Stress as Factors of Adjustment

Motseke (2016) reports that among masters and doctoral students, there is slow completion and that African adult students took longer to complete their studies. Motseke (2016) assert that this is partly because of the education that African adult students received in townships as part of the apartheid aftermath. Motseke (2016) further reports that African adult students needed clear guidance and support to assist with their writing, especially with the lack of training in numeracy, literacy, and information. This finding proposes that postgraduate students who commence their degree as educationally disadvantaged are predisposed to stress because of the deficiencies in their previous training. Based on the studies reviewed earlier (Ickes et al., 2015; Roslan et al., 2017; Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012), it is apparent that stress can cause students to become susceptible to adjustment difficulties and possibly extend their study period. Furthermore, these studies suggest that students who were educationally disadvantaged at the start of their degrees are vulnerable to stress.

Par et al.'s (2015) study in Canada found that stress decreases as one ages. These findings are inconsistent with those from a South African study by Motseke (2016). Stanley and Bhuvaneshwari (2016) assert that individual and contextual factors affect students' stress, which is a plausible reason for the literature inconsistencies on stress versus age. For example, South African literature suggests that the post-apartheid laws mobilised an increased intake of previously marginalised students. However, universities have not established interventions to address the education deficit (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Motseke, 2016). This resulted in blind spots where students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to adjust (Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Motseke, 2016). Hence, there is increased stress towards academic writing and, consequently, challenges with achieving academic adjustment for African adult students.

Shete and Garkal's (2015) study, which was conducted in India, reports that younger students had increased stress compared to adult students, a similar finding to Par et al. (2015) but inconsistent with Motseke (2016). Shete and Garkal (2015) attribute the relationship between age and stress to the new responsibilities and increased workload that younger students assume. Stanely and Bhuvanewari (2016) report on two contradicting findings in their study, namely that younger students experience more stress than older students; therefore, their argument is similar to Par et al. (2015) and Shete and Garkal (2015). However, they further report that older and more advanced students exhibit increased stress; in this case, these findings are similar to those in Motseke (2016).

Stanley and Bhuvanewari (2015) purport that older students in their study had additional responsibilities, such as family responsibilities, which contributed to their increased stress levels. These findings support the narrative that stress is contextual and individual-based, and other students do not relate to this type of stress. Guruprakash et al. (2018) conclude in their study on the relationship between perceived stress and coping patterns among postgraduate students that there is no correlation between stress and the age of students. Such inconsistencies probe for more research within this field to provide somewhat coherent results regarding age, context, and stress.

2.2.2. Adjustment and Coping Skills

A study suggests that coping is a constant change in cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific internal or external demands appraised as exceeding the available resources (Shin et al., 2014). Earlier discussions highlight that one of the predictors of academic adjustment relies on the students' development of coping skills (Ahrari et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding how coping skills impact student adjustment is relevant to the present study. Studies by O'Brien et al. (2012) and Cherkil et al. (2013) explain that students strategically planning how to cope with their negatively appraised situations is beneficial. Therefore, when the cognitive and behavioural efforts of the students are not alleviating stress, they will remain stressed.

Studies report that students demonstrating practical coping skills engage with the stress they face to assess how to best deal with it (Enns et al., 2018; Hamdan-Mansour & Dawani, 2008; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Gibson-Cline et al. (2000) further report that the students' lack of practical coping skills in response to a new environment results in difficulties within

their new level of study. These findings suggest that students will struggle to cope positively with the perceived stressors and experience difficulties adjusting to their studies. According to Shin et al. (2014), students coping with a negatively appraised situation leads to the development of protective factors that will be useful in the future. This indicates that as students appropriately cope with the perceived stressor, they develop skills that will be useful as the journey continues.

Students have the potential to use specific skills and abilities to cope during stressful times. Esmailmotlagh et al. (2018) posit that various psychosocial abilities can help a person cope with a stressful situation. Enns et al. (2018) explain that these psychosocial abilities include problem-focused coping, acceptance, social support, and positive reappraisal, all of which may contribute to yielding lower levels of perceived stress. According to Hamdan-Mansour and Dawani (2008), students developing these strategies assist in decreasing the impact of stress on them. Bazrafkan et al. (2016) purport that students' developing psychosocial abilities benefit them because they can tackle the emotional exhaustion and decreased goal achievement caused by stress. Hamdan-Mansour and Dawani (2008) explain that being a social being and developing social support positively correlates with good psychological well-being as it buffers against stress. This correlation facilitates students' achieving three adjustments: (1) they would demonstrate the ability to develop coping skills, (2) they would have social support, which would help them with psychological well-being, and (3) they would learn the appropriate styles and norms with the help of the models identified within the university.

2.2.2.1. Psychosocial Strategies: Active versus Passive Coping Strategies

In the face of adversity, students can practice approach or avoidance coping strategies, also called active and passive coping. Guruprakash et al. (2018) and Shin et al. (2014) report that active coping attempts to change or minimise the stressor, while passive coping avoids the stressor. Wood and Bhatnagar (2014) assert that the coping mechanism used can cause stress susceptibility. This finding indicates that students can use coping mechanisms that will protect them or make them vulnerable to stressors. Therefore, the student is responsible for choosing a coping mechanism to benefit them.

Wood and Bhatnagar (2014) argue that active coping behaviours include forming secure social support through family and friendships. These behaviours are consistent with findings by Ahrari et al. (2019) and Wang et al. (2015) on how students forming social support

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systems play a positive role in their adjustment, leading to less exposure to stress if successfully achieved. Furthermore, Bazrafkan et al.'s (2016) findings correspond with Wang et al. (2015) and Wood and Bhatnagar (2014) on how social support systems positively influence student adjustment and reaching out for help. Other benefits of adopting an active coping strategy include the ability to exercise self-control, having an accurate perception of an oncoming threat, and practising problem-focused coping (Enns et al., 2018; Moses, 2015; Wood & Bhatnagar, 2014; Yi et al., 2005). These coping strategies highlight the importance of students being in a good space psychologically so that they can adopt appropriate active coping strategies and be in control of their studies.

According to Hsu et al. (2008), passive coping relates to emotional regulation and disengagement. Wood and Bhatnagar (2014) assert that passive coping strategies include avoidant behaviours such as binge drinking, the development of psychological problems such as anxiety and depression, and blaming others. Passive coping also includes listening to music or watching movies, which is a way to avoid thinking about stressful situations (Bazrafkan et al., 2016). As suggested earlier, females use passive coping strategies (Dumlao et al., 2000; Hsu et al., 2008). Ickes et al. (2015) state that the female students in their study experienced continued stress than their male counterparts due to females choosing avoidant coping mechanisms, thus continued stress exposure and poorer adjustment experience. These findings confirm Wood and Bhatnagar's (2014) findings on how the chosen coping method can predispose an individual to stress.

2.3. Secondary School Preparedness Impact on Postgraduate Adjustment

Jones et al. (2008) report that primary education influences the experience that postgraduate students encounter, suggesting the importance of earlier education stages. Jama et al. (2008) posit that the South African government's redesign of the education system is due to influences from the apartheid era. Although the education system has been amended, Mzangwa (2019) reports that the new systems have not materialised nor benefitted previously disadvantaged students. Mouton (2011) asserts that the systems are not working, indicating further possible disadvantages to learners and their future academic endeavours.

Nel and Troskie-de Bruin (2009) and Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) posit that disadvantaged schools experience resource scarcity, low socioeconomic status, low parent involvement, and inadequately trained teachers. Spaull (2015) further assert that previously

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disadvantaged schools are still experiencing low availability of resources and possibly remain dysfunctional. Bitzer (2011) and Nel and Troskie-de Bruin (2009) purport that primary education in disadvantaged schools produces students who are at risk of experiencing difficulties in their studies as they progress. These findings suggest that students from underprivileged backgrounds commence their academic journey already vulnerable to the challenges ahead.

Spaull (2015) asserts that only a few disadvantaged students progress to pursue a university degree/diploma. Spaull (2015) further reports that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who continue to university are considered lucky or talented. Studies suggest that at least 30% of first-time students complete their three-year degree after five years because they lacked adequate preparation and resources (Foxcroft & Stumpf, 2005; Nel & Troskie-de Bruin, 2009). These findings propose that the lack of student support services from the early stages of a student's academic career creates a negative ripple effect on their studies, placing them at risk of not achieving adjustment. Therefore, designing supportive interventions for students early in their careers will positively impact their studies.

Jama et al. (2008) report that South African disadvantaged students in their study experienced culture shock when arriving at the university because of the student diversity and being in a new environment. Earlier discussions highlighted Wang et al. (2015) study, where they report that experiencing culture shock affects students' socio-cultural adjustment as they attempt to navigate the new environment. The study by Jama et al. (2008) is similar to international studies by Juni (2018) and Wu and Hammond (2011), who elaborated that students in their studies experienced socio-cultural adjustment challenges because of language difficulties, social integration, uncertain surroundings, and academic expectations which emanated from being in a new environment. Similarities exist between international and national societies, suggesting that culture shock, language barrier, social integration, new surroundings, and academic expectations are likely common postgraduate challenges globally.

2.4. Postgraduate Status and Preparedness Effects on Students' Adjustment in South Africa

The postgraduate student dropout rate has become a growing concern in South Africa. Consequently, this results in postgraduate development and growth in education, which is considered a national priority (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2015; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017).

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Bunney (2017) asserts that the rising dropout rates are caused by the challenges and experiences postgraduate students encounter. In a United Kingdom study on transitions from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, McPherson et al. (2017) report that universities overlook postgraduate students as requiring support because they are perceived as experts based on their experience during their undergraduate studies. In contrast, a South African study (Petersen et al., 2009) reports that students in their study received support from the university because they were not treated as experts. This finding suggests that the university in Petersen et al. (2009) believed that postgraduate students were not experts and had support systems. Petersen et al. (2009) further posit that this type of support yielded a positive adjustment experience for students towards the university and their academics, arguing for the importance of postgraduate support systems by universities.

Spearing (2014) contends that the existing narrative of postgraduate students as experts leads to the preparation for postgraduate studies not being prioritised and lack thereof. This narrative is illustrated in Magano's (2011) study, which asserts that students who were not prepared for the postgraduate level workload were affected by their coursework and research. Studies by Karazsia et al. (2013) and Maasdorp and Holtzhausen (2009) suggest that preparation and support programs are mandatory to assist students in developing appropriate skills to tackle the coming year. Without the university support interventions, these studies infer that students will experience difficulties, resulting in minimal adjustment, delayed time to complete their studies and possible dropout.

South African postgraduate students are dropping out gradually over the years. Hanyane (2015) reports that 60% of postgraduate students dropped out in 2008. Styger et al. (2015) report that the student dropout at the postgraduate level was 67% for master's degrees and 50-68% for doctorate in 2010. Dlungwane et al. (2017) also report that in 2010, 30% to 67% of master's students left their postgraduate program. These studies suggest a slow but consistent rise in the dropout rate of postgraduate students, pointing to various situations negatively affecting students' adjustment. The above studies prompt adequate research to combat the paucity of preparation and support programs (Maasdorp & Holtzhausen, 2009), consequently addressing the South African concern of postgraduate dropout.

Critical concerns for the Department of Higher Education in South Africa include retaining students for their postgraduate degrees and ensuring that the completion rates stay within the record time. However, the reviewed literature thus far suggests that this is a struggle

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for some students (Havenga & Sengane, 2018; Kritzinger & Loock, 2012; Styger et al., 2015). This concern is essential as the National Development Plan (NDP, 2030) aims to produce more graduates before 2030 (Ramchandran, 2022). Studies by Dlungwane et al. (2017) and Dominguez-Whitehead (2017) assert that retaining students is challenging in South Africa as the studies report increasing attrition rates in postgraduate studies. This suggests that students encounter adjustment difficulties, hence the rising attrition rates. Furthermore, Styger et al. (2015) report that South Africa has one of the lowest graduation rates for higher education globally, while some international universities produce a substantial amount of graduates. To compete globally, Styger et al. (2015) and Summers and Mpanda (2015) assert that South Africa would have to increase the number of graduating postgraduate students to help accelerate human capital development.

According to Mutula (2011), postgraduate studies are a platform for students to develop their systematic investigation skills in research. However, students experience various stressors and challenges threatening this opportunity and, subsequently, a possibility of continued dropout rates. Studies by Petersen et al. (2009) and Makoni (2010) correlate with earlier studies that reported that some postgraduate students experience stressors related to under-preparedness and psychosocial factors, which are predetermined by their socioeconomic status and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Postgraduate under-preparedness is associated with difficulties such as a lack of research method skills and poor academic writing skills, consequently affecting students' academic adjustment. Hanyane (2015) reports that approaches and strategic methods must be implemented to prepare postgraduate students for their studies. Hanyane (2015) further suggests that these strategies include a broad exposure to research methods, the associated techniques, and practicals that will assist students when the theory is implemented. Hanyane (2015) suggests that during undergraduate studies, these strategies should be part of a comprehensive curriculum plan in preparation for postgraduate studies.

Conducting research and academic write-ups forms a considerable part of postgraduate studies. South African author Sonn (2016) states that a language barrier causes difficulties with articulation, yet language is a necessary component for research and academic writing. Sonn (2016) reports consistent findings with those of Juni (2018) and Wu and Hammond (2011) on language barriers posing threats to students' academic endeavours. In South Africa, Jones et al. (2008) report that the quality of early education students receive impacts their language abilities

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and overall academic performance. However, Juni (2018) asserts that in international studies, language difficulties were attributed to students being in a foreign country. These contradicting findings indicate that language barriers are contextual and occur due to unique occurrences.

International author Brown (2008) has comparable findings to those of Juni's (2018) study, where the students in their studies report experiencing a language barrier only because they were in a foreign country and had poor English abilities. These results are not comparable with Jones et al. (2008) because earlier discussions highlighted the state of the South African education system and the influence of the country's history on postgraduate academics (Nel & Troskie-de Bruin, 2009 & Spaul, 2015). Therefore, in South Africa, part of the driving force behind students experiencing language barriers is entrenched in the context and history of the country, which is an experience that international studies do not relate to. Hence, there are differences in the cause of the language barrier between national and international studies.

Petersen et al. (2009) and Makoni (2010) allude to socioeconomic status and socio-cultural background as determiners of the psychosocial factors that students are susceptible to. These findings are similar to those of Dominguez-Whitehead (2017), who assert that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are predisposed to experiencing challenges and risk delayed study completion. Dominguez-Whitehead (2017) and Singh (2015) found that the more financial and human resources available to the students and the university, the easier the experience will be for students, thus positively contributing to their adjustment. These studies suggest that students from universities with scarce resources likely experience difficulties as the university lacks the appropriate support structures (Sonn, 2016). A study in Nigeria reported difficulties similar to those experienced by South African studies by Dominguez-Whitehead (2017) and Singh (2015) on the psychosocial challenges experienced by students. Supervision difficulties were the most highlighted challenge in Nigeria as in South Africa (Ekpoh, 2016; Magano, 2011; Mutula, 2011). These authors' findings suggest possible trends in postgraduate students' experience in developing countries.

2.5. Student Diversity Issues

Students returning to university after being away for years experience difficulties with reintegration, especially considering the change in the type of student population and how the university operates (Brus, 2006; Dlungwane et al., 2017; Polson, 2003). Brus (2006) reports that returning students encounter difficulties relating to new and younger classmates. The

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progression into the future causes reintegration difficulties as the student population has changed from a homogenous population to a heterogeneous one (Brus, 2006; McPherson et al., 2017; Polson, 2003). According to Bunney (2017), the traditional assumptions about homogenous postgraduate students' academic abilities no longer apply to students of this era. These assumptions suggest a gap in the literature and probe for new studies to be conducted in order to accommodate the current heterogeneous postgraduate students.

According to McPherson et al. (2017) and West (2012), universities are responsible for accommodating heterogeneous students. West (2012) further postulates that student inclusivity is essential as the psychological and sociological factors experienced during postgraduate studies can cause psychological and socio-cultural adjustment challenges. Singh (2015) asserts that universities must collaborate with students to determine the strengths and challenges that students bring to the postgraduate setting that causes diversity, therefore making the environment more heterogeneously student-friendly.

2.5.1. Student Social Responsibilities

Students who left for the labour market after completing their undergraduate degree were compelled to do so because of various financial and familial responsibilities. Some postgraduate students face the task of playing various roles in their lives as students, parents, or spouses, preparing for their future by making job applications or drafting PhD proposals, and even being full-time employees, which are different responsibilities from the conventional homogenous students (Motseke, 2016; Zaitseva & Milsom, 2016). Ekpoh (2016) and Motseke (2016) assert that students have divided attention between their academic and personal lives, resulting in low commitment to their studies. Silinda and Brubacher (2016) report comparable findings and further assert that postgraduate students in their study found it difficult to balance academics, work, and family. This results in students' delayed study completion and possible loss of morale (Summers & Mpanda, 2014).

2.6. Poor Academic Writing Skills

Postgraduate studies aim to educate students on conducting a systematic investigation and contributing to the body of knowledge (Mutula, 2009). In Magano's (2011) study, only after the students had commenced their studies did they realise they needed to prepare for their studies adequately. The postgraduate journey is where students' motivation and dedication are tested and possibly decline over time, especially concerning thesis writing (Ekpoh, 2016;

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Magano, 2011). Wellington (2010) found that 34% of their participants found academic writing stressful, 27% found it frustrating, and 49% described it as hard work.

Student's lack of knowledge about research methods and academic writing affects academic, psychological, and socio-cultural adjustment. A study suggests that this lack of knowledge can result in students experiencing feelings of loneliness and poor coping abilities (Wang et al., 2015). According to Pedersen et al. (2017), it is challenging to achieve socio-cultural adjustment because it is affected by new norms and culture (research methods and academic writing) foreign to the student. Ekpoh (2016) reports that postgraduate students need guidance from their supervisors and lecturers to adjust to their studies. This guidance will improve students' experiences by reducing their challenges with research methods and academic writing. This finding suggests the importance of receiving guidance from the faculty staff (models) as beneficial to the student's experiences, which can support the students and positively impact their psychological adjustment.

Singh (2015) alludes to postgraduate students not receiving guidance in their studies, thus leading to rising uncertainty and stress. The lack of guidance results in students being unfamiliar with the research processes, unable to select appropriate and realistic research topics, and lacking previous exposure to research methodology, subsequently affecting their everyday experience (Ekpoh, 2016). The studies reviewed thus far indicate that lack of guidance affects the student's academic adjustment. Mutula (2009) suggests that problems experienced in academic writing in South African universities further include students' insufficient ability to retrieve information and the inability to write and present findings. Furthermore, Mutula (2009) assert that the problem of experiencing difficulty with academic writing stemmed from the copying and rote learning practised during undergraduate years and minimal critical engagement with literature.

2.7. The Nature of the Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship

Studies assert that the supervisor/supervisee relationship is vital to students' academic performance and degree completion (Friedruch-Nel & Kimnon, 2015; Ramchandran, 2022). Therefore, understanding the nature of this relationship is essential as it may point to future directions on how a healthy relationship can yield positive results for students achieving adjustment, consequently raising record completion rates.

According to Hewawasam (2021), the supervisor's role is to assist students in learning how to learn, where the relationship ideally ought to be a mentorship and collaborative by nature. Ezebilo's (2012) study found that the supervisor/supervisee relationship is perceived as a formal relationship where the supervisor is in control. The contrasting findings suggest an improvement in how the supervisor/supervisee relationship was previously perceived and experienced. Research also suggests that creating an easy-going relationship less characterised by fear and power dynamics benefits students' success because this directly affects academic adjustment.

According to Ekpoh (2016), when supervisors constructively review and comment on a student's work, they are helping to shape the thesis into an academic piece, thus contributing positively to a student's adjustment experience. According to Hewawasam (2021) and Ramchandran (2022), through supervision, students can receive guidance on conducting academic searches, engaging with the literature and academic writing, and skilfully organising the information in appropriate thesis form. A study conducted by Ezebilo (2012) in Sweden suggests that students in their study had more freedom and did not depend on their supervisors. Research in South Africa (Mutula, 2009; Singh, 2015) and in Nigeria (Ekpoh, 2016) alludes that students in their respective studies required support and guidance from their supervisors and lecturers, therefore contrasting the autonomous teaching practices in Ezebilo's (2012) study.

According to Magano (2011) and Mutula (2011), several factors can challenge the supervisor-supervisee relationship. These include delays in receiving feedback on submitted work, minimum supervision guidelines, the unavailability of the supervisor, and the delivery of feedback to the student. Additionally, specific student characteristics that hinder progress include the quality of students admitted, the struggle to balance jobs and academics, and delays in submitting work (Mutula, 2011; van Rensburg et al., 2016).

Hewawasam (2021) asserts that universities are responsible for providing support structures for students and staff to ensure quality supervision. Bitzer (2011) identified a gap where minimal emphasis was placed on the university's role in knowledge and wisdom production. This finding encourages the universities to be as proactive as the students by providing a conducive and resourceful learning environment. A healthy supervisor-supervisee relationship is directly proportional to the student's success in their research projects. However, this process is challenging for some universities in South Africa. Pillay and Karlsson (2013)

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found that the better a university is equipped with human capital and financial resources, the less challenging the supervision relationship will be, leading to greater student success. This finding indicates that a well-resourced environment fosters a supportive and conducive relationship between supervisors and students.

The supervisor-supervisee relationship must consider a student's language and cultural background. In addition, Pillay and Klarsson (2013) report that these characteristics can cause difficulties for students engaging with supervision, potentially leading to further isolation. This, in turn, can negatively affect the nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the experience of both parties. This finding underscores the importance of the university's active role in providing adequate resources to support students with their language and cultural barriers.

2.8. U-Curve Theory of adjustment (UCT)

The chosen theoretical framework for this study is the u-curve theory of adjustment (UCT), coined by S Lygaard (1955). The UCT states that individuals experience an emotional rollercoaster when adjusting to a new culture. It explores how individuals adapt and interact with another culture when moving into a new place (Ahmad et al., 2014; Chien, 2016). The theory highlights that sojourners or students undergo different adjustment phases in a new environment. The u-curve graph illustrates the relationship (Forman & Zachar, 2001). UCT is often used to explain the successful cross-cultural training of expatriates. This theory applies to students adapting to a new university environment (Ahmad et al., 2014; Yu, 2016). The UCT is employed as the theoretical framework for the current study to conceptualise the journey that postgraduate students experience as they transition from undergraduate to postgraduate. Research suggests that when sojourners adjust to a similar culture, they experience fewer adjustment difficulties. Fewer difficulties minimise the stress of psychological uncertainty often accompanying a new learning situation (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016; Hung-Wen, 2006). This experience is valid for students with family members who have undertaken postgraduate studies and who will guide them in their academic journey.

Earlier discussions highlighted that postgraduate students are susceptible to adjustment difficulties as undergraduate students (Bangser, 2008; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Bokana & Tewari, 2014; Hoffman & Julie, 2012; Heussi, 2012; Mbeve & Mhlanga, 2022; Ross et al., 2008). Hung-Wen (2006) highlights that measuring adjustment entails assessing a student's

comfort level and satisfaction with their environment. This suggests that students begin to enjoy the new setting when they start experiencing comfort, satisfaction, a change in attitude, and fewer difficulties within their environment. According to Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016), failure to achieve this adjustment leads to suffering due to the incompatibility between the students and the new environment.

Lawson and Shepherd (2019) report that the UCT forms the letter 'U' shape over time, and the adjustment can be specific or general. Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016) assert that the theory was initially designed to assess international students' adjustment trajectories. However, it applies to this study because it is hypothesised that postgraduate students experience similar experiences (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016). The u-curve theory has four prominent stages describing an individual's adjusting journey (Forman & Zachar, 2001; Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018).

The four stages of UCT consist of the honeymoon, culture shock, recovery from the culture shock, and exerting control over the new environment, i.e. adjustment. Stage one, the '*honeymoon*' stage, occurs when students arrive in their new environment and are intrigued by the unfamiliar culture awaiting exploration (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). At this stage, students feel optimistic and fascinated as they appreciate the novelty of the new environment (Pires et al., 2006; Yu, 2016). The optimism marks the beginning of the students' postgraduate journey and involves being captivated by the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate studies, including the newfound freedom and autonomy. While there may be similarities with the previous environment, there is also an element of the unknown, such as new course expectations.

Stage 2 involves experiencing *shock* from engaging in a new and different culture, often accompanied by frustration, confusion, and hostility (Ahmad et al., 2014; Hung-Wen, 2006; Yu, 2016). This stage highlights the noticeable differences between the students' known culture and the challenges of adapting to the new environment (Chang, 1997). At this stage, differences may manifest in the intensity of course material and the necessity to learn to work independently or in groups. Students might experience feelings of low mood, depression, or physical symptoms of being ill (Hung-Wen, 2006). These adversities cause students to struggle with psychological and socio-cultural adjustments, leading to mental illnesses (Cho & Yu, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). Furthermore, such maladjustment could lead to complications in how students engage with their studies. Therefore, students will struggle with academics and further

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challenges in achieving academic adjustment. Such experiences can leave students overwhelmed and under-prepared for the journey ahead (Hung-Wen, 2006). This prompts students to learn how to cope with real-life conditions presented by their environment.

Stage 3 of the UCT is when students start *recovering from the culture shock* and gaining a sense of mastery over the new environment (Ahmad et al., 2014; Yu, 2016). Recovering from the culture shock stage occurs when students find their footing and settle into their new environment, thereby gaining control. Achieving this stage indicates that students also experience psychological well-being and, thus, psychological adjustment (Roslan et al., 2017).

Psychological well-being is attributed to students adapting gradually to the norms and values of their new level of study (Hung-Wen, 2006). A study by Pires et al. (2006) indicates that students may experience familiarity with the new environment at this stage. This results in students having realistic expectations and being more informed of the norms and values. Stage 3 further asserts that students start to achieve socio-cultural adjustment and establish a secure social network.

Stage 4 is when students *exert some control over the new environment* and recover from a culture shock (Forman & Zachar, 2001). At this stage, an individual would have completed the cross-cultural adjustment and can function within the new environment (Hung-Wen, 2006; Yu, 2016). For example, this might be when students have a sense of control in the new environment and perform well without experiencing many difficulties. At this point, students would have learned how to cope effectively and no longer experience high enthusiasm but a moderate attitude that can be sustained in the long run (Hung-Wen, 2006).

2.8.1. Critique of U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (UCT)

Critiques of the u-curve theory suggest examining gaps in the study. The theory is criticised for not comprehensively exploring the four stages because it lacks sufficient theoretical grounding (Chien, 2016). For instance, Black and Mendehall (1991) and Chavoshi et al. (2017) have questioned how students transition from one stage to another and why the theory lacks a theoretical explanation of each stage. To address the lack of theoretical data, suggestions have been made to borrow and integrate from the Social Learning Theory (SLT), which comprehensively explains the adjustment stages through social interactions (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Lawson & Shepherd, 2019).

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Furthermore, the UCT oversimplifies the process of cross-cultural adaptation by suggesting that all individuals experience the same stages and reactions (Lawson & Shepard, 2019). A study by Haslberger (2005) reports that cross-cultural adaptation is beyond prediction and is seen as a complex and dynamic process, different from what the UCT had initially proposed. This inconsistency suggests that people differ in their backgrounds, experiences, and psychological makeup, leading to different adjustment patterns. Lopez (2020), in a study focusing on the challenges Mexican students encountered in adjusting to the studies they were enrolled in the United Kingdom, found that the extent of cultural disparity between students and their new environment correlated with the difficulties they faced.

According to Jones and Bond (2019), UCT has not been used in a longitudinal study. Longitudinal studies will elucidate which characteristics students employ to interact with new cultures, facilitating adjustment patterns. This critique highlights concerns about the potential over-generalisation of findings without longitudinal exploration. However, Hirai et al. (2015) and Wang et al. (2015) both conducted longitudinal studies that supported the use of UCT. The contradicting results prompt more empirical studies to clarify this critique of the UCT.

According to Brown and Holloway (2008) and Lopez (2020), the first stage of UCT is characterised by feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed. These findings contradict the first UCT *honeymoon* stage, characterised by fascination and excitement for the new environment. Brown and Holloway (2008) further assert that few empirical studies support the discourse on students' excitement upon arrival at a new environment. Hence, recommending further studies. In addition, studies by Brown (2008), Kim (2001), and Schartner (2014) report similar findings to those of Brown and Holloway (2008) on the first few weeks of the adjustment process being stressful for students. These inconsistencies may also be linked to previous discussions on adjustment lacking a most agreed-upon definition. According to Chien (2016), adjustment is perceived as a complex experience influenced by internal, external, and cultural expectations, as well as how the student interacts with the environment and the challenges. Chien's (2016) study highlights that this experience is different for every student.

2.8.2. Integration of Social Learning Theory (SLT) with the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (UCT)

Social Learning Theory (SLT) is a theory coined by Albert Bandura (1977) that conceptualises how individuals learn. According to SLT, individuals learn based on the

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consequences of their actions. Furthermore, people learn certain behaviours based on what is modelled. Consequently, they attempt to imitate the modelled behaviour (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Piers et al., 2006), a behaviour that helps facilitate the adjustment.

The first stage of UCT is the *honeymoon phase*. According to SLT integration with UCT, this phase occurs when an individual identifies aspects of the new environment similar to theirs. Thus, there is less incompatibility with the new environment. Additionally, such a transition provides familiarity and comfort for the individual (Black & Mendehall, 1991). Familiarity draws attention to aspects of the new environment that are similar to the individual's. As a result, they likely behave in ways approved by their native environment. The similarities are identified when students perceive certain aspects of postgraduate studies as similar to undergraduate experience. For example, they may encounter modules with similar routines to those of their undergraduate years and possibly have the same lecturers as undergraduates.

Consequently, the factors contributing to the continuation of the honeymoon phase outweigh those contributing to the incongruences or negative consequences of being in a new environment. Such factors include the likelihood of the individual having fewer incidents that result in incongruences. Therefore, those situations can be easily overlooked (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Pires et al., 2006). Another factor to consider is when an individual wants to preserve their self-concept, thus ignoring the adverse situations they encounter, which might be against their established self-concept (Black & Mendehall, 1991). Due to previously learned behaviours from their socialisations, students will focus on aspects similar to their native socialisation and ignore the dissimilarities (Pires et al., 2006).

The second stage of the UCT is *culture shock*. In the application of SLT to this stage, students experience frustration, anxiety, and anger in the new environment because of negative feedback and performing less acceptable behaviours (Piers et al., 2006). At this point, students behave in less modelled behaviours and cannot respond appropriately to various situations, hence a culture shock phase. This behaviour is portrayed when students realise they are unsure how to approach academic writing effectively. If they have not adequately prepared for academic writing and require more exposure, they will experience a culture shock, particularly in the early stages of the academic year. Piers et al. (2006) assert that for individuals to engage in appropriate behaviours in the new environment, there must be a certain level of attractiveness and role models to emulate. This finding indicates the importance of establishing a supportive

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supervisor-supervisee relationship for postgraduate students. It encourages the university staff to serve as models for their students, guiding them through their academic journey.

Time is required for newly adopted behaviours to become natural. It necessitates plenty of student observations for the behaviours to positively impact students, leading to better retention and fewer incongruences with their studies (Black & Mendehall, 1991). Therefore, it decreases frustration, anger, and anxiety. Studies suggest that prolonged exposure and observation of the environment leads to adopting norms, values, and culture of postgraduate studies, resulting in the achievement of academic, psychological, and socio-cultural adjustment (Cho & Yu, 2015; Pires et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2015).

Stage three of UCT is when the individual *attempts adjustment*. Applying SLT to this stage, as the individual identifies those models and receives exposure over time, they behave congruently to the situation, yielding more positive and fewer negative consequences for them (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Pires et al., 2006). This shift leads to minimal frustrations and anxiety, less culture shock over time, and ease of adjustment into the environment. Positive consequences may encourage individuals to perform more appreciated behaviours, increasing their self-worth and self-confidence (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Piers et al., 2006). This positive change is seen by students becoming more confident in their research skills as they receive thorough training and guidance through the university resources designed for postgraduate students.

Stage four is when the student has adjusted. Applying SLT to this stage proposes that adjustment is achieved, there is less additional learning, and adaption becomes evident in the student's behaviour (Pires et al., 2006). Students gradually learn vicariously from observing and incorporating the desired behaviours into their daily lives. This assimilation is identified when students engage successfully in academics and have fewer dissimilarities in their postgraduate studies.

The diagram below is a visual representation of the UCT.

Figure 1:

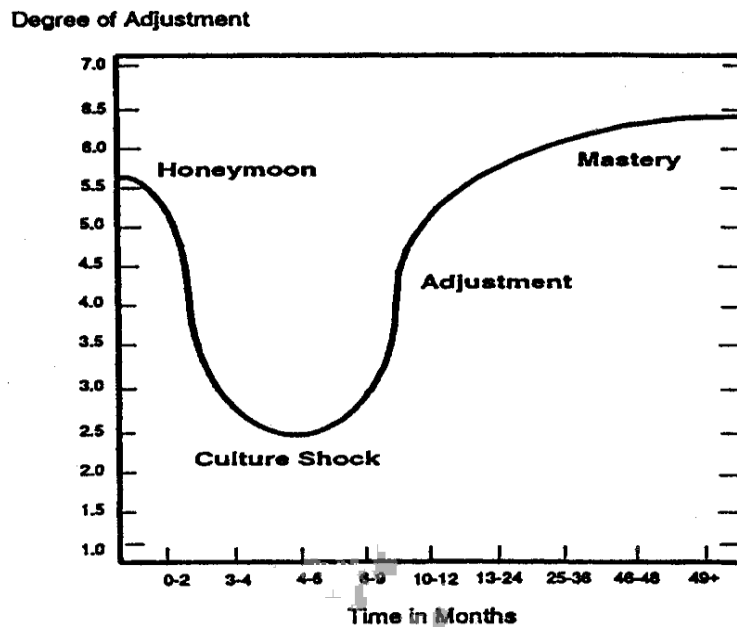


Figure 1: U-curve theory of adjustment (Source: Lee, 2006)

2.9. Conclusion

This chapter discussed adjustment and the factors affecting how students adjust to their studies. Part of the debate was around the state of postgraduate attrition and its broader impact on the country. This issue raised growing concerns among various stakeholders within the universities and countrywide. Postgraduate preparedness was also discussed, as well as the impact the lack of it had on the student's postgraduate experience.

The UCT, coined by S Lysgaard (1955), was introduced as the theoretical framework employed in this study. The four stages of UCT discuss how students adjust to their studies. However, due to the criticism that UCT lacks a theoretical explanation of how students experience the stages, the theory borrowed insights from SLT coined by Albert Bandura to provide a more comprehensive theoretical framework (Black & Mendehall, 1991). SLT suggests that individuals learn by observing the consequences of their actions and by assimilating modelled behaviours observed by others. As students engage in observational learning, they acquire appropriate behaviours that aid in reducing adjustment difficulties over time.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology employed for this study. It discusses the research design, sampling method, data collection steps, and data analysis methods. It also discusses measures employed to ensure the study's reliability and validity. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the researcher's reflexivity, how possible bias could have affected the research, and actions taken by the researcher to address these concerns. The ethical considerations adopted for this study will also be discussed.

3.2. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a systematic collection, organisation, and interpretation of an individual's social life from multiple points of view (Grossoehme, 2014; Neuman, 2011). The design allows the researcher to focus on the students' experiences from their perspective, accumulating the uniqueness of data to be obtained (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Additionally, qualitative research explains how identities are constructed when studying individuals in their natural settings. According to Grossoehme (2014), the context and experiences of participants provide meaning. Cypress (2019) asserts that qualitative research design can change or emerge in naturalistic settings, unlike quantitative methods' structured, rigid, and pre-set nature. This finding suggests that qualitative research is flexible and accommodating towards participants and the researcher.

A qualitative study design is appropriate for this study because it provides descriptive data and in-depth explorations (Nieuwenhuis & Smit, 2010). In addition, it allowed descriptive data to be extracted from participants on their experiences within the university environment and to explore their experiences for clarity. Furthermore, employing qualitative research prevented the participants' experiences from being simplified in a reductionist manner. Each participant had the opportunity to elaborate on their responses to their satisfaction, and the researcher would probe further where the participant indicated a particular thought.

A study by Cypress (2019) raised arguments about qualitative research's rigour, validity, and reliability. According to Grossoehme (2014), these arguments stem from the poor quality of earlier efforts made in qualitative research practice. Grossoehme (2014) further posits that qualitative researchers inaccurately documented the methodological processes and decisions undertaken in their studies earlier. This behaviour made it difficult for future

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researchers to replicate the same study and obtain similar results. Without the 'audit trail', qualitative studies lack rigour and transparency. Consequently, the trustworthiness of the qualitative research design was scrutinised (Mackieson et al., 2019). Also, qualitative research was criticised for lacking objectivity due to researcher bias, implying that the researcher's expectations influence the research design, data collection process, and data analysis (Mackieson et al., 2019). The use of researcher reflexivity assists in addressing this concern. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research accounts for the researcher's bias and expectations (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Hence, researcher reflexivity promotes fairness during data collection and analysis, without researcher influences dictating the nature of the data.

Hammarberg et al. (2016) argue that qualitative research receives criticism for using small sample sizes that do not represent the entire population. However, a smaller sample size can still be valuable and should not be dismissed based on quantitative requirements for large population samples (Wallace & Kuo, 2020). Inferences are drawn from the selected sample to seek in-depth insights into what the broader population with similar characteristics to those who were part of the study might be experiencing (Vehovar et al., 2016; Turner, 2019). Regardless of the sample size, the data obtained from the participants will provide comprehensive insights, and the sample size itself does not compromise the comprehensiveness of the data (Cypress, 2019; Wallace & Kuo, 2020).

3.3. Sampling

According to Turner (2019), sampling is used when a small portion of the population of interest is needed. Using the entire population is not economically friendly. The researcher is responsible for choosing an appropriate sampling technique that best represents the selected population of interest based on the research topic. Turner (2019) further argues that the results from the population chosen must be used to infer about the broader population. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the data obtained contributes to the database during the analysis and conclusion stages.

3.3.1. Snowball sampling

This study employed the snowball sampling technique, which is a network chain referral (Neuman, 2011). The method enabled the researcher to access potential participants through word-of-mouth referrals. According to Parker et al. (2019), snowball sampling often commences with a few initial participants, referred to as 'seeds' who meet the requirements of

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the study. Subsequent potential participants are obtained through referral or recommendation by the 'seeds' within the same network (Johnson et al., 2020; Neuman, 2011). The researcher is responsible for using their research knowledge and contacts to obtain the 'seeds' and maintain the momentum throughout the sampling process (Parker et al., 2019). For this study, once the first few participants (or seeds) were obtained, they were asked to refer other potential participants. The researcher contacted the referrals, explained what the study was about, and inquired if they (potential participants) would be interested in the research or for a referral from them to other potential participants who might be interested.

In qualitative research, data collection occurs until saturation. However, Johnson et al. (2020) and Parker et al. (2019) assert that there is a probability of failing to achieve data saturation, especially with limited participants. A study by Turner (2019) reports that snowball sampling is a technique used for participants who are not easily accessible. This finding is relevant for this study due to the scarcity of master's students on campus.

The snowball sampling technique has received criticism because it is based on network referral. Therefore, Parker et al. (2019) assert that obtaining population representativeness from the sample might be unlikely. Turner (2019) further argues that the snowball sampling technique is susceptible to bias because the researcher has minimal control during recruitment. This led to the inclusion of participants with more extensive social connections in the study. To address the snowball sampling technique bias, the researcher clearly described the study and the type of participants needed. The sampling frame was written on the information sheet of the kind of students the researcher was interested in interviewing. Upon approaching the potential participants, the researcher verbally explained the study's aim, expressly informing them of the type of master's degree the researcher was interested in. This allowed the researcher to closely match the potential participants to the target population, reducing sampling bias. Furthermore, the researcher followed up with those students whom she could not get a hold of. However, upon screening the referrals, it appeared that some did not meet the inclusion criteria and thus could not participate.

3.3.2. Selection of participants

The researcher of this current study approached potential participants at the university library in the Research Common Area, which only master's and PhD students have access to. The sample size of the current study is eight participants. This realistic size paved the way for

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the researcher to get an adequate understanding of the students' adjustment experiences to postgraduate studies. The inclusion criteria required students to be registered for their Master of Social Science degree at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN), Howard College Campus. Participants were aged between 26-41 years. All races and genders were eligible to participate. However, the actual sample of this study consists of only females, seven Black, and one Coloured. Due to the nature of the sampling technique in snowball sampling, the initial participants approached by the researcher were female. Potential male participants were also approached; however, two did not meet the inclusion criteria because they were not registered during the data collection period due to financial constraints. When the researcher asked for other male referrals, she was informed that they had no male referrals to which they could refer her. This experience could be explained by Meeta et al. (2023), stating that males in their study were generally reported to be less than females on campus at a master's level. They further report that males have higher chances of not completing their postgraduate studies (Meeta et al., 2023).

It is important to note that the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is based in a city (Durban) that predominately has Black people. Bhana (2014) reports that in 2005, the race classification at UKZN consisted of 49.1% Black students, 15.2% White students, and 32.6% Indian students. They further report that in 2012, UKZN had 63.9% Black students and 26.2% Indian; therefore, the study demographics are representative of the actual demographics of Durban. Regarding the participants' race for the current study, most referrals were from Black students, mainly because the participants were in similar social networks. The referrals received from the Coloured participants were of students who did not meet the inclusion criteria because they had already completed their master's degrees and were no longer registered as students at the time of the data collection. These potential participants also happened to be White. They had completed their dissertations within the designated 2-year period, further supporting the findings of Meeta et al. (2023) on White postgraduate students being more likely to complete their studies in record time.

3.4. Data Collection

Before data collection, the participants were informed about the intentions of the study. An information sheet with the details of the study was provided in writing and verbally communicated before the interview commenced. Participants were only permitted to continue the interviews after reading and signing the information sheet and informed consent (Appendix

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C) with audio consent. In addition, each participant was reminded that they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. They were also notified that there were no direct benefits for participating in the study. However, participants' invaluable input would contribute to the body of knowledge in this study.

Participants' identities were concealed throughout the data-gathering process by using pseudonyms. No part of the participant's identity is identifiable in the recording. Furthermore, participants were reminded of the confidentiality clause that was applied to protect them throughout the process. The data obtained was stored in a password-protected Dropbox account. All the handwritten notes were stored in a locked room that only the researcher could access.

3.4.1. Data collection instrument

Data was collected using one-on-one interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the participants and through online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, which UKZN permits. According to Neuman (2011), the purpose of an interview is for the researcher to gather specific information from the participants. The study's interviews were semi-structured, guided by an interview schedule with pre-determined open-ended questions. Grossoehme (2014) argues that semi-structured interviews are appropriate because they allow the researcher to probe further as opportunities arise and facilitate a conversation style, thereby making participants feel at ease. The interview schedule was written in English, and questions were posed in English. However, some participants alternated between IsiZulu and English during the interview. The researcher did not experience difficulties using both languages since she is fluent in both. The interviews lasted for at least forty-five minutes to two hours.

The instrument used was a laptop with Zoom and Microsoft Teams applications. A secondary phone recording device was used for participants who preferred face-to-face interviews. In addition, the researcher used a notepad and a pen to take notes of qualitative information before, during, and after the interview.

3.5. Data Analysis

The six-phase thematic data analysis was employed to analyse the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Byrne, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2012) suggest that thematic analysis is suitable for qualitative studies because it systematically analyses data to uncover the main

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themes from the findings. Therefore, the data obtained is likely to be descriptive and detailed. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic data analysis assists in identifying, analysing, and reporting the consistent patterns in the obtained data. In addition, thematic data analysis helps the researcher make sense of the data received and make meaning from the data received through patterns identified. Braun and Clarke (2012) raised concerns over using thematic analysis due to the necessity for clear guidelines for its execution. However, improvements have been made to offer more precise direction, such as the reflexive six-phase thematic data analysis (Byrne, 2022). Thematic analysis is done using either software or manually. The researcher thematically analysed the data manually.

Phase one requires the researcher to become familiar with the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In the current study, this process involved reading the data multiple times and making notes of any impressions extracted from the data set. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), phase two requires the researcher to generate initial codes by systematically organising the data to reduce its magnitude into a succinct data set. This phase paved the way for the researcher to code the data set, compare, and modify the codes accordingly. This involved the researcher reading the transcripts multiple times to familiarise herself with the data and generate initial codes from the responses. This consequently decreased the data set as the data was collated into appropriate codes. According to Byrne (2022), codes should be concise yet detailed enough to stand alone as themes.

Phase three involved searching for possible significant themes from the data and assembling appropriate codes for the identified themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher did this by rereading the data and codes and identifying themes from the codes. Phase four required the researcher to review the identified themes by exploring if the collected data supports the emerged themes. In this study, the researcher assessed if any sub-themes could provide further details on the themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Phase five involved defining and naming themes through identifying the gist of each theme. The themes were named based on the gist of the data on each theme. Lastly, the researcher wrote the identified themes and sub-themes in phase six. The findings are presented as a completed master's thesis (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

3.6. Ensuring trustworthiness

Qualitative research is understood as attaining knowledge to understand the nature of the studied phenomenon (Krefting, 1991). Smith and Firth (2011) assert that thematic analysis is systematic and enables the researcher to explore the data, maintaining a transparent audit trail that enhances the rigour of qualitative research. However, qualitative research is criticised for lacking scientific rigour (Mays & Pope, 1995). This critique highlights why qualitative research needs a transparent account of methods and data that can be independent. Mays and Pope (1995) state that if another researcher conducted the same study and analysed the data using a detailed account of methods, they should reach conclusions similar to the original study. This finding examines the researcher's role in thoroughly describing their research methods, assumptions, and data analysis procedures. Hammarberg et al. (2016) assert that replicating previous studies is crucial to establishing the reliability and validity of the study. They also emphasised the importance of assessing validity and reliability in qualitative research through considerations such as applicability, consistency, conformability, and credibility (Hammarberg et al., 2016). To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, conformability, transferability, dependability and credibility are illustrated below:

3.6.1. Credibility

Credibility evaluates the truth, meaning that the researcher accurately presents what the study is exploring (Kakar et al., 2023; Shenton, 2004). Ensuring credibility promotes confidence in the study. According to Hammarberg et al. (2016), credibility is ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the chosen context and selecting participants who have shared similar experiences of sentimental value, therefore ensuring credibility. Hammarberg et al.'s (2016) findings are supported by Kakar et al. (2023) regarding the credibility of a study depending on participants recognising the explanations and interpretations provided by the researcher. The current study ensured credibility by selecting participants with shared experience and reality, namely registered Master of Social Science students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The study's credibility was apparent when most participants shared the importance of establishing social support systems to better cope with their studies, thus sharing similar experiences. Furthermore, paraphrasing and summarising the participants' responses demonstrated the researcher's understanding of what the participants shared. The participants of this study recognised the explanations and interpretations given by the researcher.

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The study's credibility was also ensured using tried and tested empirical research methods. The data collection and data analysis research methods used are also scientifically proven, thus aiding in the accuracy of the research.

3.6.2. *Transferability*

Transferability is external validity (Kakar et al., 2023) and is achieved when research findings fit similar contexts, not the original study (Cope, 2014). According to Kakar et al. (2023), a study is considered transferable when an individual not part of the original study can relate their own experiences to the study's findings. The more people recognise and relate to the study findings, the more transferable the study is. Qualitative research uses a small sample size. Therefore, it is unsuitable to be generalised to larger populations (Kakar et al., 2023). Thus, the researcher must thoroughly describe the sampling procedure and population to provide fellow researchers with a detailed study blueprint. Providing this type of information assists in determining whether the findings may be applied to similar situations to determine the transferability of the original study.

The use of a smaller sample size is essential as larger samples typically lead to conflicting data, making it less applicable to similar contexts. There were only 8 participants in the current study, and the researcher provided a detailed account of their demographics. Furthermore, the researcher comprehensively described the research methods, including the data collection and analysis methods, to name a few, to ensure transferability/ applicability.

3.6.3. *Dependability*

Dependability assesses reliability, which questions whether the study can be repeated (Kakar et al., 2023). Hammerberg et al. (2016) argue that comparable studies should yield theme similarities. However, comparable studies may not produce identical themes or patterns, even if participants were sampled within the same context. This is because different participants are likely to experience and perceive situations differently (Hammerberg et al. (2016). Similar themes become apparent when participants relay their subjective experiences during the interview phase, which also enables the researcher's awareness of their biases against the participants' responses.

Moreover, researchers need to ensure dependability by paraphrasing participant responses, which enhances the understanding of their communicated responses (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Reflective practice and diarising the research procedure during each stage, such

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as decision-making, enable other researchers to obtain similar results when repeating the study. Hammarberg et al. (2016) state that documenting each study's progress increases the likelihood of fellow researchers finding similar results.

In this study, the researcher documented all the steps taken during the research process, including (a) the decisions taken in the process, (b) supervision meetings, and (c) the notes taken during supervision meetings. These steps will benefit future researchers who seek to engage in comparable studies.

3.6.4. Conformability

According to Kakar et al. (2023), conformability is the degree to which the researcher is unbiased during the entire research and data interpretation process. Conformability mitigates researcher bias during the data analysis phase, enabling an accurate representation of participant responses. Conformability ensures that the findings are based on the participant's responses instead of the researcher's opinions and viewpoints (Cope, 2014; Kakar et al., 2023). To assist in maintaining the conformability of the current study, the researcher used direct quotes from the participants, which were used to inform the findings. Berger (2015) states that researcher bias is inevitable. So, researchers must utilise appropriate instruments and skills, such as reflexivity, to control researcher bias and maintain conformability (Kakar et al., 2023). This study utilises researcher reflexivity to ensure conformability.

3.7. Reflexivity

Earlier discussions highlighted criticism against qualitative research for researcher bias when conducting the studies. So, the researcher adopted reflexivity. According to Berger (2015), reflexivity is a significant part of qualitative research. Barrett et al. (2020) assert that researchers must acknowledge their bias due to their position and influence in the study. Mackieson et al. (2019) maintain a similar outlook, asserting that reflexivity involves the researcher's awareness of their influences and assumptions about the study and how the research process affects them.

Since snowball sampling was used for this study, the researcher had access to mainly female students due to the social circles the researcher was exposed to. This limitation might distort the dataset obtained. This distortion is due to a lack of male representation in the study since the data collected was mainly from a female perspective; therefore, inferences are drawn

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cautiously. Secondly, some of the initial participants were the researcher's classmates. This situation might have influenced the findings of the study. The researcher is also a master's student with experiences similar to those of the participants. Therefore, her subjective experiences of adjusting to postgraduate studies could impact how the results are perceived and analysed. This shortfall was combated by the researcher's supervisor, who assisted in providing an objective opinion, which limited the researcher's bias. Lastly, some participants may have felt restrained, guarding the information they provided, fearing possible judgment, as they are in the same social network as the researcher. The researcher established a good rapport with the participants, mitigating the aforementioned concern. Moreover, practising transparency made the participants feel comfortable and contained during their interview sessions.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

The university Registrar was contacted to obtain the Gatekeepers' approval letter for conducting this study in UKZN, Howard College Campus (Appendix A), and approval was granted. Ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee was granted to commence this study (Appendix B) – protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004885/2022. No participants reported the interview process as stressful. Even so, the researcher planned to provide a debriefing session to stabilise participants who may perceive the interview process negatively or as stressful.

3.9. Conclusion

Eight female participants were part of the data collection process for this study. They were interviewed about their experiences adjusting to a master's degree program at UKZN. This chapter presented the steps to recruit research participants and data collection and analysis procedures. A discussion of the reliability and validity measures was also provided. Thereafter, the study revealed that keeping detailed records of the research design and methodology procedure enables the study's replication by other researchers, which further enhances the study's reliability and validity. Subsequently, research reflexivity was discussed to mitigate the possibility of bias experienced throughout the study. Lastly, ethical considerations were deliberated to ensure that no participants were harmed. The next chapter discusses the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter consists of the study's findings. The study employed semi-structured interviews. Data was obtained from eight female students who met the inclusion criteria. The demographics are included to provide clarity on the participant's characteristics. This dissertation reports on six themes in total: (1) preparation as a factor for master's student adjustment, (2) perceptions of undergraduate compared to postgraduate studies, (3) challenges that hinder the master's student's ability to achieve adjustment, (4) the impact of the challenges on student mental health, (5) mechanisms of coping that master's students employ to adjust, (6) master's student recommendation to the university to assist master's students with achieving adjustment. Each theme has one or more sub-themes (see Table 2).

4.2. Demographic information

The study participants were all full-time registered Master of Social Science (MSS) students. The study was open to all races in South Africa. However, the current study had two races participating: Black (n=7) and Coloured (n=1). During the data collection process, two participants had recently submitted their dissertations, while the rest (6) were still working on theirs. The table below presents detailed demographic information of the participants:

Table 1: Detailed demographic information

	Age	Race	Gender	Master's Degree
Participant 1	35	Black	Female	Master of Social Science (Industrial Organizational Labour Studies)
Participant 2	26	Black	Female	Master of Social Science in Culture, Communication & Media studies

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Participant 3	27	Coloured	Female	Master of Social Science (Clinical Psychology)
Participant 4	28	Black	Female	Master of Social Science (Anthropology)
Participant 5	26	Black	Female	Master of Social Science (Psychology)
Participant 6	27	Black	Female	Master of Social Science (Industrial Psychology)
Participant 7	29	Black	Female	Master of Social Science (Clinical Psychology)
Participant 8	41	Black	Female	Master of Social Science in Culture, Communication & Media Studies

4.3. Themes

This section displays the themes and their respective sub-themes from the data set (Table 2). Subsequently, each theme will be expanded on through excerpts from the participants.

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Table 2: Summary of themes and sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Theme 1: Preparation as a factor for student adjustment	i) Understanding student's experiences of adjustment based on their preparation level
Theme 2: Perceptions of undergraduate versus postgraduate studies	i) The student's perception of the nature of postgraduate studies
Theme 3: Challenges that hinder the master's student's ability to achieve adjustment	ii) Academic support: what is taught versus what is expected iii) Perceived lack of orientation and integration into the university for postgraduates iv) The nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship as a factor of adjustment v) Family and societal responsibilities as an obstacle to adjustment vi) Full-time master's student as an employee vii) Juggling family responsibilities and societal pressures as a master's student
Theme 4: The impact of the challenges on student mental health	i) Mental health and student adjustment
Theme 5: Coping mechanisms	i) Establishing a peer and family support system ii) Support provided by the university for students
Theme 6: Master's student recommendations of support services that can assist with student adjustment	i) Resource availability for students ii) Equal distribution of available academic resources

4.3.1. Theme 1: Preparation as a factor for student adjustment

Most of the data under this theme leaned toward Participants' (P) P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P8, who experienced some difficulties with starting their degrees. A lack of information before their postgraduate studies impacted their preparedness and adjustment abilities. Participants P1, P3, and P7 highlighted that they had information through conducting their own research and thus felt better prepared.

Participant 2 expressed that she did not have much information regarding postgraduate degrees. Therefore, she was underprepared, she said:

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"I think I was underprepared. It wasn't much when I started, but I knew that it has to do something with research, you know? That's what I just knew. So that is just the surface level. That's the only thing I knew. I didn't know what I was about to embark on. So when you enter your master's, most of the people like myself, I just didn't know what I was doing. How many chapters, how many words? Even though they write 15,000 to what, but I still know it's not 15,000, it's 40, 30,000 or something to whatever to make a dissertation."

Participant 4 expressed that she was unaware that there were postgraduate studies at the beginning of her academic career. She further asserted that if she had more information about postgraduate studies, she would have been better prepared for her master's degree:

"What I can say is that when I first arrived, when I first arrived as a first-year or as an undergrad, I was not even aware that there is something called a postgrad, and I was not interested on starting that journey... I think if I knew, I would have been able to better prepare myself that, okay, I have to study further; you see, right now, there's no energy, but you have to push because you have that dream that you want to achieve."

Participant 5 shared similar experiences to those of Participant 2 and Participant 4 regarding having no prior information and not feeling prepared at the start of her master's degree. She then reflected on how lack of information placed her at a disadvantage:

"Ehh. It placed me in a position whereby I... doing other things like getting into the hang of things of how the programme is going. It sorts of delayed because I didn't understand what is next from here, what to do you see? And if you ask people, they would say "ask your supervisor; your supervisor is the one who is supposed to." But you know, not knowing put me at a stage whereby I was lost. I felt like I was just working, but I don't even know what really, what am I doing, you see?"

Participant 6 expressed how beneficial it would have been if she had done thorough research before commencing her studies. She also reported that if she had actively sought guidance, she would have been aware and better prepared:

"It's not an easy journey. Uhm, I would say it's not something linear. And also, uhm, the benefits (to having information about the course) is to understand that you need to

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involve yourself to, uhm, maybe to uhm, certain organizations about the course to better prepare yourself."

Participant 1 reported being prepared for her studies. However, she reflected that if she had not prepared herself, she might have dropped out of her studies:

"Emotionally, I think I would have dropped out, you know, academic-wise. I don't think I would have had the knowledge of so many of... not really facilities, but rather, let me say, opportunities that are there available. So, if I wasn't prepared to learn, if I didn't position myself that I'm coming on a clean slate and I want to learn and to add to the knowledge that I already have, then I don't think I would have made it."

Contrary to Participant 1, Participant 3 expressed that even though she was prepared academically for her master's, she still faced challenges due to the actual postgraduate experience she encountered:

"And the thing is, I think some things are experiential. No matter how prepared you can be, like you could literally have consumed a whole DSM. And at the end of the day, you go, you experience something, and it's a learning experience. It's something that's going to either change your mind-set or change your way of seeing things. So I could have, yeah, I feel like academically, I learned the book I did the readings. But it was more about the experience of being in postgraduate studies that you are not ready for. It's not really the work."

4.3.2. Theme 2: Perceptions of undergraduate versus postgraduate studies

The participants were asked for their understanding of the process of adjustment from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies. This was to determine if they understood what it takes to become an adjusted postgraduate student.

4.3.2.1. The student's perception of the nature of postgraduate studies

Most participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7), based on their experience, highlighted that postgraduate studies are more intentional and autonomous and require increased effort and discipline. They further argued that as much as master's studies need an initiative from the student, they also need support from the university staff.

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Participant 1 expressed that she started taking her studies seriously and being more intentional when she was in her master's since she plans on being an academic:

"...It's actually something that I, one day, I need to share with other people or other students that will help them also to grow, to nourish them in whatever sense. In whatever... sorry, uhm, module that you will be sharing with them. So for me, I started being more disciplined. I started doing more research, studied, started learning more about the area, understanding more about my degree as a whole. You know?"

Participant 2 agrees with Participant 1 and further adds:

"You are now a researcher. Yeah, it's academic writing. Undergrad... undergrad, yeah. Undergrad, you're just freestyling, you're cramming, you're freestyling. But now you actually have to be an academic. You have to contribute to the body of knowledge. What a gap of knowledge, what is out there that is...yeah, basically."

Participant 3 expressed that she felt more pressure to perform well as a master's student due to the relationship she had established with her lecturers:

"But it's a very different thing when it's now its masters, and I'm... say... writing an essay for another lecturer who I have previously worked with. And now I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I'm submitting so-and-so such terrible work." So now you're managing the interpersonal dynamics of it. And it adds another layer of, I would say, a different lens to your work. So there's more pressure."

Participant 4 also agrees with the above participants. However, she shared how she wanted to be supported by the university staff but received less support from her lecturers, consequently resulting in a negative experience:

"A lot, that in undergrad you get all the information you need, you get information... I don't know how to put this. But I feel like you get the school's attention, you get support, so I don't know what I can say, but you get a lot, a lot of support. Then, in postgrad, it's more like you are on your own, nobody cares about you, you see, you are on your own, and you figure things out on your own, nobody cares about you, you are on your own. You figure things out for yourself."

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Participant 5, in agreement with Participant 4, further adds that there is a lack of information on what is expected from a master's student. This includes a lack of timetables and set due dates, which made it more difficult for her:

"I think they assume that you're a postgraduate, you know everything. Often, that is not the case because we don't know anything, we don't know. This is our first time; we've never done masters before. We don't know how things work, and also, it is not communicated. You just submit you have your own time, and then when you do not submit on your time, your supervisor will respond on his/her own time. It's sort of... you end up losing that element that you are a student because, for me, I like keeping up with dates. So, if I don't know when is the due date, I can submit whenever, at any time and get a response at any time. That causes a difference. That is why I say the transition, like moving from the undergrad to the postgrad was very, very, very difficult."

Echoed by Participant 8:

"I think the whole journey from undergrad to postgrad, like no one prepares you. There's no real bridge. It's like you get thrown into the deep end, and like, what the hell is going on, you see? But I found honors better in the sense that you had to attend and you had to submit assignments. Like there was that thing where you had to do things (referring to timetables)..."

Participant 6 expressed that due to the increased pressure in postgraduate studies, lecturers ought to provide sufficient support to master's students because it is noticeable when they do not receive support from the lecturers or in their personal lives:

"Yoh. It's... I think it's the lot of work. A lot of work, at Masters compared to undergraduate is totally like, you know... That's when you notice if you really have strong support system when you are at your postgraduate level. You notice... you even notice friends who are distant, you notice family members who are distant, which you didn't even notice when you're in undergrad. You even notice the lecturers themselves if they do give you support. Yoh!! You know it's a lot, but it's a lot I don't want to lie."

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4.3.3. Theme 3: Challenges that hinder the master's student's ability to achieve adjustment:

4.3.3.1. Academic support: what is taught vs what is expected

Participant 8 shared how limited teaching on academic writing during her undergraduate years was not enough for her master's degree:

"I don't think the preparation in undergrad is enough. Uhm (thinking), are we expected to reference at undergrad? We are, but in... Music is very practical, that is another thing. You do very little writing, uhm, and it's not real academic writing, you see? It is, but then not really. All of a sudden, the class changes, you think that 'I know English', and English shows you who it is (laughs), at- at postgrad!"

Participant 3 echoed Participant 1, realising the discrepancy between what was taught and what was expected:

"I had to do a lot of self-teaching. I was guided as to what I should look at. But the thing is, research methods like reviews are not taught at the higher level. They're not even taught at the lower level, where I think they should be taught, to be honest. So I actually taught myself scoping review. I taught myself a systematic review, only to figure out that my work was neither. And it was what's called a content analysis."

Participant 5:

"Yeah, it is. It was shocking. Because I asked myself, is there a difference? Maybe in undergrad, they require another type of academic writing, and then in masters, you must have another type of academic writing; if so, which one is it? Then they need to teach it to me because the only academic writing I know was the one I received from the writing place from my undergrad and honours. So which one is it that they want for masters because clearly, it is different. So maybe if I was not taught th-that academic writing and be told that in masters this is how you write then I would have learned it then."

Although Participant 1 experienced discrepancies during her undergraduate training, she expressed that learning about research methods during her postgraduate years was fruitful for the rest of her journey as a master's student:

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“You know, you are always... we as individuals are always learning. So for me, it was very fruitful. It was very productive. I can take a script. Well, I'm a hoarder, by the way. So, I do sometimes go back to my scripts that I wrote at undergrad and at honors level, and I compare them to what I'm writing now. And I can tell that there's a huge difference between the three.”

4.3.3.2. Perceived lack of orientation and integration into the university for postgraduate

Participant 7 reported that since there was no orientation for her as a postgraduate student, she experienced a lack of support from the university staff. As a result, she created her own support group with peers:

“Okay, can I start with the institution cause I feel like if you are admitted at UKZN as a student, it's the institution's duty to make you feel welcomed to know where to go and how? Which I feel they failed dismally. If you are new to the school, you... they can't only focus on first year's right. For me had it been that I did not associate myself with people who had been at UKZN before, I wouldn't even know where the bursaries are or the finance offices I wouldn't have known. So, for the institution, I feel like maybe if they, what do you call this... the first year's program orientation program, I feel like they are focusing more on grade 12's who are coming into the school and not people who are just new to the school. But I hope you get what I'm saying?”

Participant 5 shared a similar experience as Participant 7 and expressed how she wished there was an orientation program for postgraduate students. She also wished for the staff to not assume master's students should know everything, minimising uncertainty:

“Us as postgraduates, we do require orientation because moving from undergraduate to postgraduate is not the same. So now you won't even consider your honours that you are well equipped with research, so the orientation... for them to orientate us that this degree of yours is like this, this is what you do, this is what we expect from you, this is how it goes. That is what would have helped because, as a student, you would not be going back and forth, being frustrated, being anxious of what really is happening.”

Participant 4 expressed a similar experience to Participant 5 and hoped for an orientation program for postgraduate students like there is for undergraduates.

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4.3.3.3. The nature of the supervisor/supervisee relationship as a factor of adjustment

Participants P1, P4, P5, P6, and P8 each reported challenges regarding their supervisor/supervisee relationship and how that had negatively impacted their progress. P1 and P4 reached the point of having to change their supervisor:

“Let's just say I'm in a phase where I have to hunt for my supervisor. I don't know where my supervisor is. And uhm, when I email my supervisor, I get no response, and you know, it things like that. You don't know where you stand, and you're worried, you're not sure. You see when you don't know whether you're moving forward or you're going backwards. You can't continue improving your work because you don't know if that's what the the supervisor wants or not. So I'm just in that point where I am just, I feel like, okay, you know what? Maybe giving up is-is (sounds hesitant) the right option for me right now.” (Participant 1)

Participant 4 reported the challenges she had with her first supervisor. However, she highlighted that she managed to change her supervisor and is now motivated to work again:

“I have not even applied for ethical clearance, I am trying, I am pushing. I write my chapters, but I see this as useless to do this because there is no progress. Then, on my third year (of master's), things got worse... things got worse... So I requested another supervisor and started once I found a new one... I can say it is only now that I feel like a student at UKZN. All this time, I saw myself as just playing games, I would wake up in the morning and just sit because I was not a student. So, I started this year... last year. I felt like a student, I started being consistent and started adjusting. I started pushing. My supervisor was also pushing me.”

Participant 6 experienced delayed responses from her supervisors, resulting in her supervisors not recalling if they received work from her or not:

“Sometimes you submit, maybe two months waiting for them. Someone even said I shouldn't wait for them. Maybe if I submitted the chapter on Friday and then they didn't say they received it. I should maybe email them again on Monday, ask if they received the chapter. Because usually when you submit, they tell you that they received it and they will look at it, and then they don't come back to you (pause) like for two months. Then they will email you saying, “hey, it's been so long. How's everything? How's the

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progress?" Then you don't understand if they didn't receive your work, why they didn't give you the feedback. I know it's actually hectic on their side. I know it's also hectic on their side, but they need to give some support to us because we want to complete this."

Participant 3 expressed that due to the limited resources the university has, the lecturers and supervisors might not prioritise their master's students:

"I think I did expect them to kind of prioritize their postgrad students, which I don't think is always the case. But at the same time, I think I need to acknowledge the dynamics at UKZN. There are not enough staff members. For them to actually do that at a master's level, to provide what should be provided, they would need so many more people."

Contrary to the experiences of Participants P1, P4, P5, P6, and P8, who had challenges with their supervisor, P7 expressed how she received sufficient support from her supervisor. P7 was also one of the two students in this study who managed to complete their dissertation in record time:

"And my... I... I will speak about my supervisor, my research supervisor, in the way that I've never spoken about anyone. Cause had it been like we have a problem, he would go as far as calling you... "what's happening" you know? So I feel like they-they did that (providing supervision support) successfully" (Participant 7)

4.3.3.4. Family and societal responsibilities as an obstacle to adjustment

Most participants have multiple societal and family roles and experience some level of pressure from each of these roles (Participants P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8). This includes being employees while being full-time students. Participants P1, P3, P6, and P8 resorted to seeking employment due to financial obligations.

4.3.3.4.1. Full-time master's student as an employee

Participant 3 highlighted that she has retired parents and needs an income to help at home:

"I have parents who are retired, so I contribute at home. And so I had to take on jobs. To the extent that I'm now working four part-time jobs on top of a thesis. Personally, that's been extremely difficult. I've gone from having periods where I was unemployed, and I would say, relatively low about it. I wouldn't go as far as to say depressed, but

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relatively low about it. To now, having times where I'm completely overworked. No sleep, constant deadlines, constantly juggling different things at work."

Participant 6 shared how she had to assume responsibility for her younger sister by getting a job to contribute at home while being a full-time student:

"Like a lot was happening, especially at personal level. I had to explain to my lecturers what is exactly happening. Because when I was doing my coursework, I was a tutor also, resident assistant, also a mentor. Can you imagine all at once? Because I wanted to support my family and also my little sister. With this pressure they told me that I don't wanna work and everything you know? Trying at least to have some channels of some sources of income. At the same time, I need to focus on my studies."

Participant 8 expressed how she struggled to stay consistent on her dissertation as a full-time employee and a full-time student:

"Once I start working (on her dissertation), I'm consistent, but once I stop, it's as if I've never been consistent. And as I said at the start that with everything else like with every department of your life, having to just keep it balanced, it's quite difficult especially if you've registered full time but you've got like three jobs you see?"

4.3.3.4.2. Juggling family responsibilities and societal pressures as a master's student

Participant 7 expressed that as a parent, she had to send her son to go live with her parents while she completed her dissertation because she struggled to be a mother and a full-time student:

"I, for one, I'm a mother. This year, I needed to take my baby back to my parents. So he's living with my mom and dad cause I needed to finish (pause.) Cause you know for children just... if you are awake he comes and stays with you, you can't even press your laptop he is coming to stay here, he's pressing... so it's driving you mad. You-you- you see? It's not easy. It's your social life because you are not just an academic; you are a mom, you have to go to church, you have all of those things to do, so it wasn't easy. It's not easy."

Participant 1 is also a mother and expressed the challenges she experienced in this regard and how this affects her progress academically, considering she also has two jobs:

"It's a challenge. I remember there was a time where my daughter had to go for an op, and she was literally in bed. She couldn't move for three months. And you know, that was emotionally draining because she'll see you, you are up, you're trying to read, and she's crying, "Mah, I'm in pain." So when the bone is healing, it will obviously be painful. So those were the hardest things because you can't concentrate during the day. You are drained. You are emotionally drained because of what's going on. So things like that. That, for me, has been a challenge."

Participant 4 expressed experiencing pressure from home and her society as an adult expected to be working and providing for her family instead of studying:

"My family is putting pressure. It's like they are saying, why are you not applying? Why are you not this... of which you do apply, but your time has not come yet. The society you stay in, on the other hand, they start seeing it as useless going to study when you end up coming back home to stay with them. As much as they say don't pay mind to people and so forth, but those things when you are alone depress you, you see? Because people have expectations, your parents especially have expectations that maybe you will change the standard of living for them, but it is not happening you see, it's not happening, yeah"

Participant 2 reported a similar experience to Participant 6 on having to take on certain family responsibilities after the passing of a parent. She reported that after the passing of her mother, she received pressure from her family and society to take over the household, thus affecting the progress of her studies:

"...because I won't lie to you, there's so much societal pressure, whereby people are asking, "Participant 2, what about the car? What about this? What about that?" I know I'm the firstborn, but I'm not my mother. People should not put me in things that I'm not... I'm not her. I know I understand that maybe I look like her, but I'm not her. So these are part of the things that have distracted me, even as a student. And I used to cry a lot in my room and be like, other students don't have the same plate as mine. They don't manage home and still try to... to look at master's. No, they're just kids. I also want to be a child."

4.3.4. Theme 4: The impact of challenges on student's mental health

Participant 2 shared that due to financial and family pressure she had been experiencing, it became difficult for her to work on her dissertation, and she was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder in early 2023:

"I'm thinking about what am I going to eat in Durban? Where am I going to sleep? What am I going to clothe and all that? How am I going to even take my things out of campus, inside campus to off campus? I don't have money. So when am I going to have the mind to even write chapters or something? That's not possible... I never anticipated that I'll not be able to sleep for one. I will not... I'll have stomach aches, headaches all the time. I was actually diagnosed with major depression earlier this year."

Participant 4 reported that due to lack of support and financial constraints, she would find herself falling into depression and at times considered dropping out because she had no viable solution:

"You figure things out for yourself. In terms of funding, how you do your school work, nobody cares about you. You figure things out for yourself ...Wow! Wow, shame! It left me wow! Sometimes I would lose hope, and what I have noticed is that because of those experiences I went through, I would have times where I can see I am falling into depression because of this, because of being a postgrad. I had times where I thought about dropping out of school."

Participant 5 expressed that due to challenges she had with her supervisor and the university's limited resources, it negatively affected her academic performance:

"It is very, very stressful. At times I feel like I am depressed. I would be depressed because I can see that like you send your supervisor work, when you send your work, you don't get a response from your supervisor. And, when you do a follow-up, your supervisor will be like, "I'm supervising 12 master's students. You are not the only one that I'm dealing with". So, it sort of demotivates you as a student."

Participant P1 and Participant P3 shared similar experiences with P2, P4, and P6 regarding the challenges they faced and the negative effect it had on their mental health, consequently affecting their adjustment.

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4.3.5. Theme 5: Coping mechanisms

4.3.5.1. Establishing a peer and family support system

Participants P1, P3, P5, P6, P7, and P8 all agree that creating a support group among peers was helpful for them:

Participant 6 expressed the positive role her peers played in helping her cope:

“And I'm so grateful of my colleagues. I'll say that again, I'm so grateful of some of my friends who were always there for me, even when I can't reach out to them.”

Participant 5 asserted that seeking support from those who have done their postgraduate before her helped her cope:

“Uhm... I... for me what helps me to cope is sourcing support from people who have done the same degree as mine. And also my family, they support me you see, they help me cope by telling me that it's fine.”

Participant 3 agrees with P6 and P5:

“It-it def... so that was my coping mechanism. Have-have... I am going to call it a community from now on. Like, having that community. And even now, even though we don't meet as often, that's still my go-to people. It's still like, will you look at my work, will you, like, how did you do this? Like, it feels reciprocal. It feels mutually beneficial.”

Participant 8 reported the importance of peer support as her coping mechanism:

“...well, I am not successful in getting this degree, am I? (chuckles). So I don't know if I'm the best in terms of... you know, success stories of coping mechanisms. But the one thing I tell people who are starting out that it's not a solo project. Your postgrad is not a solo project. So, like, where you can find partners, people you can work with, people you can sit in the space with, people you can be accountable to, people who are going to be like, 'how is it going with your school?' So you need to find partnerships of people who are in the same boat of people who are walking the walk and will get it.”

Participant 1 elaborates on how beneficial it is to have a peer support system as a coping mechanism:

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“There's a saying in IsiZulu that says, ‘Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’ (you are a person by other people). So, uhm, you learn from people's journeys, whether you would like to take... But you have actually... you're the one who takes what you want to take from them. So, people around you have got a very big influence whether you make it in life or you don't. Yes, at the end of the day, you make your own decisions, you're an individual. But there are things that help you cope with life or gain knowledge about life or whatever that you are doing that you draw from other people's experiences.”

While the above participants highlighted the importance of establishing support systems either from family or peers as a coping mechanism, Participant 4 and Participant 6 struggled with receiving support from their family, thus affecting their coping abilities and motivation:

“Ayy shame, I am not coping, for real I am not coping because I feel pressure... You see the support... the support from family, maybe it ends up being that one person, maybe because they also have an idea of what is happening and they keep pushing you. But others, you can see that they are tired of you telling them the same thing that you are studying.” (Participant 4)

Participant 6 expressed that after the loss of her mother, it felt as if she lost her entire support system at home because her siblings were not as supportive as her late mother:

“So, starting my postgraduate without kind of support, Yoh! Was so exhaust...so exhausting for me because my siblings didn'...don't, not even that they didn't, they don't understand the field of psychology. They said bad things to me, like uhm, “why you're going to school? You don't want to work. You are wasting time. You don't want to work. You don't want to get out of UKZN.” Yoh! They said bad things to me.”

4.3.5.2. Support provided by the university for students

On a positive note, Participant 2 and Participant 8 both shared that their department provides academic support:

Participant 2 expressed:

“I think CCMS does try, but do I really go there? Not really... CCMS does have a support group system. What-what for Masters Mastering your Masters? Something like

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that. Yes, they do... do those things. I think I went there once, wasn't really interested (laughs)."

Participant 8 shared the availability of these resources by her school and the positive impact they had on her journey at the beginning by providing clarity on what is expected from her:

"So my school, I will speak for CCMS, they've got weekly 'colloquials', they've got boot camp at the start of the year. So there's a lot of watching others present, and the students are invited to comment on each other's work. So, you end up finding things because even if you have not reached that chapter, you get to see what is expected, you see? So CCMS is bomb in that sense."

4.3.6. Theme 6: Student recommendations of support services that can assist with student adjustment

4.3.6.1. Resource availability for students

Participants shared standard views on the availability of resources to help ease their stressors as master's students. Participant 2 and Participant 4 both stressed that postgraduate students are not catered for when it comes to finances. However, receiving financial support would be helpful:

Participant 2 expressed her concern about financial assistance:

"Yeah, could they just? Get funding for-for just funding-funding for Social Science specifically. Because if you look at the the-the-the Science parts the Sciences, they have a lot of funding. Outside NRF, there's a lot of funding for those people, but we don't have funding at all. There's less funding for us Social Science students. Can the university do something about it? (Pauses)."

Participant 4 stated that the university should provide job opportunities to everyone pursuing their master's degree. For her, financial assistance should be in the form of a job from the university:

"Yeah, that will help students (university job), postgraduates that-that money they will get from the job they can pay for their studies so that they can get their qualifications at the end so they can be able to do other things you see? Like you see, if your mind is

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at peace, you know that, okay, I can support myself financially, I can focus on school... okay, let me focus on school. Now, if there are other things I have to focus on... do they have food at home? So and so, you see? So I would recommend that there be opportunities available for everyone."

Participant 3 expressed that the university should find ways to increase its resources to reduce pressure on the staff. Consequently, the less pressure on staff members positively affects students' progress:

"So please first check your staff. Check the amount of work your staff has and the amount of students you are taking on. Stop thinking about your bottom line before taking on students that you don't have capacity to supervise."

Participant 8 echoed Participant 3 on the amount of work the staff has as this often has a negative impact on the student's academic progress:

"Do you know there was a time in my life where... You know that-that fees, that fees two months where they get 18000 emails a day and they working like dogs and they trying. So-so where you say, here's my proof of payment please clear me. There was a point where I have paid, I have registered online, but the system kicked me out. Kicked me out of even my emails. I was no longer a student in the middle of my masters because fees couldn't clear me because they hadn't gotten to my 18000th email on time."

4.3.6.2. Equal distribution of available academic resources

Participants P3, P4, and P5 reported witnessing unequal distribution of the available resources to postgraduate students. Hence, they would prefer if there was equality in the provision of these needed resources:

Participant 5 expressed her concern:

"And also, there's this thing I once saw from another that we are doing the same degree. And I asked myself, why is it specifically for... Or why do they randomly select people to teach them how to write? If this is... When they are supposed to offer all of us as master's students, PhD students in, that matter. Or let's say master's because even the PhD they also have but I think these things are good for us, as much as they may suffer but I feel like it is not the same like us in master's. That they say... they say

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that “we randomly select master’s student’s”. How? Because what if the person you randomly selected doesn’t really need that workshop about academic writing? Why not host it and have all master’s students?”

Participant 3 echoed this and reported:

“Firstly, I would want to know why on earth do some students get critical readers for free? If that is an option for one student, it needs to be an option for all the students. Whether that means the student has to pay more money, but it needs to be an option.”

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter provided the adjustment experiences of master’s students and the various factors that affect their success in achieving this adjustment. Additionally, students expressed that receiving support from the university would positively impact their studies. However, they are aware of the university's limited resources, resulting in their present challenges. The next chapter unpacks the findings encompassing the available literature and the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter is based on the eight qualitative interviews conducted during the data-collection process that explored postgraduate students' experiences as they were adjusting to their master's degrees at UKZN. Furthermore, the discussion will incorporate existing literature on postgraduate students' experiences. The theoretical frameworks will also be used to substantiate the findings. The u-curve theory of adjustment (UCT) and social learning theory (SLT) were used to conceptualise the discussion.

5.2. The Honeymoon phase

5.2.1. *Preparation as a factor of student adjustment*

A study by Thomas et al. (2023) highlights the importance of students having access to information about their postgraduate degrees. Access to information plays a vital role in how students plan and experience their educational journey. According to Zulu (2014), the lack of preparation resulted in students experiencing postgraduate studies as foreign and mysterious. The literature emphasises the importance of preparation before the commencement of studies. Moreover, there appears to be a direct relationship between students' preparedness and throughput rates (Roets et al., 2017). Bamber et al. (2019) argue that the university should inquire about students' preparedness so that postgraduate students have a pleasant study experience. Consequently, the university will be aware of their potential shortfalls. However, Roets et al. (2017) assert that students are responsible for contributing towards their academic preparation. These findings suggest that the university and the students must work together to ensure students' preparedness.

Most current study participants expressed how they did not prepare for their postgraduate journey. Resultantly, they faced difficulties with their studies, which affected their adjustment. Participants reflected on the impact of their preparedness on their journey and how being prepared would have been advantageous in their progress. Nearly half of the participants reported feeling adequately prepared by actively inquiring about the course they were about to embark on. In contrast, Bamber et al. (2019) report that unprepared students are likely to feel anxious and are at risk of experiencing adjustment difficulties. Students who reported being prepared for their studies can be conceptualised using UCT and SLT. Those

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students were still experiencing the honeymoon phase, happy and looking forward to the journey they were about to embark on. However, unprepared students were feeling anxious. Such feelings are coherent with the critique of the UCT reported by Brown and Holloway (2008) and Lopez (2020) on the first stage of the UCT. The critique states that the first stage is characterised by feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed instead of euphoria. The contrast between student's feelings of euphoria and anxiety and being overwhelmed further supports the literature. This suggests that the adjustment process is complex and is uniquely experienced by individuals. However, the contrast between the participants' feelings on this study is in accordance with the literature discussed above.

5.2.2. Perceptions of undergraduate versus postgraduate studies

The study's participants reported how they noticed a change in the new postgraduate studies regarding their role as students at a level different from undergraduate studies. Participants shared that postgraduate studies required autonomous work, discipline, and intentional working. They also noticed that the lecturers would be less involved in their studies compared to their involvement during their undergraduate years. They highlighted receiving less academic guidance and support from their lecturers. Bamber et al. (2017) assert that this is related to the minimal literature on what is expected and actual postgraduate students' experiences. According to Tobbell et al. (2009), postgraduate students are perceived as experts and should know the university's expectations of them. Bownes et al. (2017) express that this perception emanates from postgraduate students reportedly having minimal adjustment since it is a continuation of their past academic careers. On the contrary, Tobbell et al. (2009) report that postgraduate students fully adjust as they assume their new identity as postgraduates.

The lack of information about postgraduate experiences has caused current postgraduate students to be neglected and overlooked by university staff. This led to some unfortunate incidents that they have endured. This assertion is evidenced by some participants reporting that they needed more guidance and support from the staff. Resultantly, they found themselves having to engage in autonomous work. According to Bamber et al. (2017), some students react positively to autonomous working while others struggle. The study participants reported both experiences. However, the majority reported facing challenges with independent work. Participants further reported that because of the lack of guidance and support from the university's staff, they experienced increased pressure because they felt they were entirely responsible for their studies. Such incidents could have been avoided if there had been literature

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on postgraduate students' experiences because the universities would know what type of support to provide for their learners. Without the support and guidance of the staff, the participants experienced feelings of uncertainty, were overwhelmed, and had difficulty adjusting to their studies. This deduction further supports the theories of this study on the first stage of the adjustment process, characterised as being filled with anxiety and being overwhelmed.

The lack of guidance and support experienced by students in this study can also be extended to the lack of orientation and integration programs into the university. This negatively impacted the participants, making them feel isolated. Konyana (2022) reports that master's students need to be provided with information regarding their academics, the university's political information, personal development information, and financial information to know what is happening around them. This way, students will feel like they are part of the university rather than isolated. Furthermore, Cekiso et al. (2019) asserted that students in their study reported having insufficient information about their course and certain processes. They wished to have an orientation program that would assist them in feeling settled and minimise uncertainty. In this study, students reported the same experiences of wishing to be oriented to their master's degree. This would help ease the frustration and anxiety they experienced due to feeling left out.

According to the UCT and SLT, students notice the similarities in the new environment, which they automatically gravitate toward. They also notice the incongruences compared to their previous environment, resulting in a clash. The theories further suggest that students will attempt to preserve their learned socialised behaviour (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Pires et al., 2006). This study's participants attempted to preserve their learned socialised behaviour when they did not prepare for their postgraduate studies, assuming it would be similar to their undergraduate studies. This was short-lived as the incongruences grew and became noticeable. When the incongruences between undergraduate and postgraduate studies became more apparent, their preserved self-concept was challenged, thus negatively impacting their progress and adjustment. In addition, this incongruency includes participants realising they need guidance through orientation and integration programs, which perpetuates the incongruence and adjustment difficulties.

5.3. Culture Shock

5.3.1. Academic challenges: What is taught versus what is expected

Academic writing is a significant part of postgraduate studies, yet studies suggest that students often experience difficulties with it (Ekpoh, 2016; Mutula, 2009). Schulze and Lemmer (2017) report that postgraduate students in South Africa experienced difficulties in writing their dissertations. According to Zulu (2014), students experience limited awareness and inadequate exposure to academic writing. Consequently, this affects their progress since they will receive more corrections on their academic writing. The study's participants shared their belief that the research methods, including academic writing, taught during their undergraduate degree would be sufficient to meet the expectations of research methods at a master's level. However, this was not the case for them. They also shared how they had to teach themselves the expected research methods and academic writing appropriate for the master's level. Therefore, there is a gap in what is taught compared to the quality of work expected from postgraduate students.

Al Badi (2015) reports that academic writing significantly influences students' progress, especially if English is not their first language. This finding aligned with most participants in this study who had English as their second or third language, making them susceptible to slow progress in their studies. Furthermore, Samanhudi and Linse (2019) report that students face challenges with critical thinking. Consequently, this affected their abilities to evaluate, compare, state arguments, and present their perspectives on reviewed literature in their writing. Similarly, Kotamjani et al. (2018) report that academic writing requires specialised skills in reviewing the appropriate literature, organising, paraphrasing, summarising, and proofreading the information. Some participants in this current study expressed how they experienced difficulties with these processes and how it negatively contributed to their progress. Noteworthy, English was the second language for these participants.

According to the UCT and SLT, students experience low mood, confusion, and shock at this stage due to performing less acceptable behaviours (Ahmad et al., 2014; Hung-Wen, 2006; Piers et al., 2006; Yu, 2016). The participants in this study experienced culture shock and the expected feelings of low mood, confusion, anger, and frustration at this stage because their research method skills were not up to acceptable standards. Therefore, they received negative feedback on their work. Furthermore, these experiences occur because their original norms and values are challenged in the new environment. The theories suggest that for students

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to work towards adjustment, they need to be exposed to models in the environment from whom they will learn how to perform those acceptable behaviours (Piers et al., 2006). Furthermore, those behaviours must be attractive to students (Piers et al., 2006). In this study, the attractiveness would be the participants performing acceptable behaviours resulting in their adjustment. Two participants in this study reported that they received guidance from their lecturers and supervisors on specific research methods and academic writing skills. Thus contributing positively to their adjustment and boosting their morale and progress. This positive experience also resulted in those participants experiencing less frustration, anger, and fewer incongruences.

5.3.2. The nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship as a factor of adjustment

Mapasela and Wilkinson (2005) state that a healthy supervision relationship is essential for students' academic success. Yende (2021) reports consistent findings with Mapasela and Wilkinson (2005) and further states that building and maintaining this healthy relationship is essential because of its perceived benefits. Almost half of the participants in this current study reported having a healthy relationship with their supervisors, resulting in commendable progress in their work. Additionally, others managed to complete their studies within the record time. Hodza (2007) reported consistent findings with the above studies by asserting that supervision is an interactional process. Therefore, the student and supervisor must engage with professionalism, respect, companionship, and open-mindedness (Hodza, 2007). This finding suggests that a healthy supervisor/supervisee relationship positively correlates to students' success, resulting in student adjustment. This relationship would also portray acceptable behaviours for the students to learn and attempt to assimilate into their behaviours.

While some students had a positive experience with their supervisors, the rest of the participants reported unfortunate experiences. According to Yende (2021), most universities in Africa report supervision difficulties and attribute them to supervisor work overload, poor student academic writing, and the student's poor planning of their studies. When students encounter such incidents, the literature suggests they are more likely to experience delays in their studies (Alam et al., 2013; Sidhu et al., 2014). This study's participants reported experiencing delayed feedback from their supervisors, causing a ripple effect in their progress and performance. Furthermore, participants shared how a strained supervisor/supervisee relationship demotivated and confused them to the point where they wanted to give up. These negative feelings challenge the adjustment process under stage 2 of the UCT and SLT.

Noteworthy, participants shared how they observed a lack of resources within the university, which negatively impacted the nature of the supervisor/supervisee relationship. Participants highlighted that their supervisors had much work and many students to supervise, which, unfortunately, negatively affected their relationships and progress. Other participants stated that the lack of resources within the university contributed to the stagnant progress they have been experiencing. According to Abiddin and Ismail (2011), the university should provide financial support and adequate facilities for postgraduate student success. Bitzer (2011) asserts that without financial support and quality infrastructure, students will continue to experience challenges in their supervisor/supervisee relationship, subsequently affecting their performance and completion rates.

According to the UCT and SLT, students need role models in their new environment to assist them in adopting the desired behaviours necessary for adjustment (Piers et al., 2006). Furthermore, Black and Mendehall (1991) posit that for this socialisation to occur, the modelling needs to happen over a lengthy period. In addition, students need to make plenty of observations of the models (supervisors) for a positive effect and retention. At least half of this study's participants reported experiencing a hard time with their supervisor/supervisee relationship. They reported going for months without receiving communication from their supervisors. This challenge suggests that the study participants did not receive adequate time to observe the acceptable behaviours (conducting research methods) from their supervisors, resulting in students not achieving adjustment. The participants inevitably continued experiencing feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety as they were not being guided through socialisation (Ahmad et al., 2014; Hung-Wen, 2006; Yu, 2016). According to the UCT and SLT, the minimal time participants had with their supervisors resulted in the desired behaviours that had to be learned seeming attractive, making it difficult for the participants to learn those behaviours.

5.3.3. Family and societal responsibilities as an obstacle to adjustment

Ahern and Manathunga (2004) report that postgraduate students often experience periods where their academic work stalls, affecting their motivation and resulting in minimal progress. This is attributed to postgraduate students juggling multiple roles, resulting in them having divided attention between their roles. In addition, Zulu (2014) asserts that postgraduate students experience difficulties juggling their studies with work, negatively impacting their dissertation progress. These findings are consistent with Ahern and Manathunga (2004). In this

study, participants expressed having to juggle multiple roles, which was challenging and led to stagnation in their academic progress. These findings are also consistent with Amponsah et al. (2020).

Tobbell et al. (2013) report that postgraduate funding is not easily attainable due to application red tape, thus prompting postgraduate students to seek employment to fund themselves. Amponsah et al. (2020) assert that there has been less government funding for postgraduate students in England. These situations prompted students to seek underpaying employment to pay off their student debts and to sustain themselves. In this study, few participants reported having multiple jobs to fund themselves, as they were no longer receiving financial assistance compared to when they were undergraduates. Resultantly, this study's participants expressed how they would have divided attention and stagnant progress on their work due to their external responsibilities. More so, Tobbell et al. (2013) participants expressed that they would not prioritise their academics due to the increased pressure they received from their paying jobs. This finding further supports the idea that students' attention is divided among their responsibilities. Unfortunately, the participants' academics become last on their list as they are not deemed as urgent as their day-to-day jobs. Due to these challenges, students' adjustment continues to be challenged.

5.4. The impact of challenges on student's mental health

Previous discussions in this dissertation highlighted how psychological problems can negatively impact a student's psychological adjustment, suggesting that an individual may lack a sense of control over various situations (Roslan et al., 2017). The challenges faced by the participants in this current study indicate a lack of control in their efforts to cope, suggesting that their mental health has been negatively impacted. According to the UCT, when students experience culture shock while attempting to adjust, they exhibit psychological symptoms such as feeling low, depressed, angry, and anxious (Hung-Wen, 2006; Piers et al., 2006). Milicev et al. (2023) report that at least one in three postgraduate students is susceptible to developing a common psychiatric disorder. This finding is evidenced by a participant in this current study who shared that they had recently been diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder due to the various challenges experienced since the start of her master's degree. This participant's experience reiterates that without a sense of control over their environment, individuals become susceptible to psychological maladjustment, as was the case with this participant. Moss et al. (2022) assert that postgraduate students who develop mental health issues are at risk of their

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academic quality decreasing. Thus, mental health issues affect students' performance and overall progress.

Earlier discussions have noted that the challenges faced by postgraduate students since the beginning of their journey contribute to their susceptibility to developing mental health issues. Moss et al. (2022) state that postgraduate students are more likely to experience psychological distress than undergraduate students. This finding is potentially linked to the amount of support undergraduate students are perceived to receive that postgraduates do not. Another participant in this study also expressed that not receiving support from the university staff had adverse psychological effects on her, and she developed depressive symptoms such as sadness and anger. In addition, according to the UCT and SLT, these depressive symptoms contribute negatively to a student's mental health (Hung-Wen, 2006; Piers et al., 2006).

5.5. Attempting Adjustment

5.5.1. *Establishing a support system*

According to the UCT and SLT, students have started attempting adjustment at this stage. They have identified a model from whom they will observe and learn the desired behaviours (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Pires et al., 2006). This action assists students in experiencing less anxiety and frustration, thus positively influencing their adjustment process. One challenge that hinders students from seeking peer assistance is that they feel pressured to know everything. A participant in this current study expressed that asking for help was intimidating for her because, as a master's student, she was expected to know everything. van der Meer et al. (2013) assert that students in their study found it difficult to seek support as they could not fit in with their peers, consequently threatening their adjustment.

However, a study by Devenish et al. (2009) highlighted that students in their study expressed that peer support was one of the valuable strategies used to progress during their studies. They further reported that peer-supportive relationships provided them with support throughout their journey. As a result, one of the participants reached the stage of having their thesis examined, with the others soon to follow (Devenish et al., 2009). In this current study, some participants reported how creating their community assisted in coping. Therefore, it positively impacted their adjustment and progress in their studies. This community consisted of students who had walked the journey before them and those currently doing the same studies as the participants. The UCT and the SLT recommend such communities because they assist

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students in adapting to new norms and values of their studies. In addition, the study participants highlighted identifying models from these communities in which they would learn the appropriate expected behaviours, thus being able to find their footing to assist them in their adjustment journey (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Pires et al., 2006). Identifying models eased participants' anxiety and being overwhelmed, increasing positive consequences, therefore performing more of those desired behaviours. According to the UCT and SLT, these positive experiences also increase the participant's self-worth and self-confidence (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Pires et al., 2006).

The literature reviewed earlier in this current study reported that support systems assist with buffering against adverse situations that students might encounter. Tsay (2012) echoes the same sentiments in their study on graduate adaptation to their studies, as their participants expressed that social support helped them during their adversities. Noteworthy, one of the benefits of having a support system included the student's ability to exercise self-control over the environment, thus positively affecting their academic and psychological adjustment (Enns et al., 2018; Moses, 2015; Wood & Bhatnagar, 2014; Yi et al., 2005). The study participants reported similar experiences on the benefits of social support.

Dhillon et al. (2008) assert that universities should create support structures for their postgraduate students to assist in their academic (such as academic writing support, amongst other things) and personal development. This finding is supported by participants in the current study, who highlighted that receiving academic support from their schools through programs like "colloquials" and "mastering the master's" influenced them positively. They benefited from vicarious learning from other students (models) who were further in their studies, gaining insights into what should be included in their dissertations. According to the UCT and SLT, for students to attempt adjustment, they need to exert some control over the environment. This would be achieved through learning from the models in the environment (Black & Mendehall, 1991; Pires et al., 2006; Roslan et al., (2017). Some participants in this current study demonstrated this adjustment attempt.

5.6. Adjustment

The last stage of the UCT and SLT states that students should be at a point of mastery where they have adjusted to their studies and behave according to the desired and modelled behaviours (Piers et al., 2006). In this current study, only two participants completed their

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studies in record time, while the other six were still making sturdy progress. Furthermore, the two participants who completed their studies in record time expressed that they were receiving peer and staff academic support. They also highlighted mastering those desired behaviours from their models (peers and staff), which aided in the timely completion of their studies. These participant experiences align with the findings of Hung Wen (2006). This is because, in stage four, the UCT and SLT students should experience fewer dissimilarities, and consequently, no additional learning takes place, suggesting that adjustment is achieved. This was the reality for the two participants who completed their studies in record time. However, the remaining six students were still in the process of securing consistent models and learning from their behaviours. Therefore, they had not mastered their adjustment at the time of the interview. As participants expressed, the lack of models is partially attributed to the absence of academic staff. Since this study was not longitudinal, there was limited opportunity to observe all participants reaching a point where they had similarly mastered their adjustment, akin to the former two participants who had made significant progress in their studies.

5.6.1. Student recommendations of support services that can assist with adjustment

Given the need for a longitudinal study to track participants' progress in refining their coping mechanisms, participants emphasised the need for more support services tailored specifically for postgraduate students. These services would assist them in navigating their studies with fewer challenges. Previous discussions highlighted participants' concerns over the limited availability of resources and how this negatively impacted their progress and the support they received.

These discussions are similar to an international study by Abiddin and Ismail (2011), where they report that some universities wanted their students to complete their studies in record time. However, the universities did not provide the necessary resources to assist with this process, hence the continued delayed adjustment and completion rates. Contrary to Abiddin and Ismail's (2011) findings, Dhillon et al. (2008) state that the universities they reviewed provided additional academic support for their students to assist them in their journey. This contrast suggests that the availability of university resources depends on the country's socio-economic status, as the former authors are from a developing country, while the latter are from a developed country.

Havenga and Sengane (2018) report that for the university to provide appropriate support for students, they need to understand the challenges encountered by students. Some study participants highlighted that postgraduate students should be accommodated financially, amongst other needs, to help minimise the distraction of a lack of financial resources. To alleviate this situation, some study participants shared that they had to seek employment to support themselves and their families financially. If institutions were to provide financial assistance for postgraduate students, the participants indicated that it would alleviate worries and allow for a clearer focus on their studies without distractions from financial constraints. The participants' experiences are comparable to those of Machika and Johnson (2015), who argue in their study that students lacking sufficient funds throughout their studies are likely to experience adverse effects on their academic development. This emphasises the importance of tailored and adequate university support for postgraduate students.

5.7. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the study's findings. It also examined the fundamental principles of the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment and Social Learning Theory in relation to the findings on student's experiences during their adjustment process to their master's degree. Ultimately, the findings indicate that students understand the requirements to become a postgraduate student and the preparation necessary to minimise challenges. The findings also suggest that universities play a crucial role in assisting students to adjust to their studies by providing sufficient resources and support rather than side-lining postgraduate students under the assumption that they are already experts.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the conclusions of the current study. This section will highlight the experiences that Social Science postgraduate students encountered as they adjusted to their studies. The study offered insights into the groundwork students must undertake to aid their adjustment. The universities' role in supporting students on this journey was also highlighted. At the time of data collection, the study participants were at various stages in their adjustment journey. Overall, many participants exhibited characteristics aligned with the core premises of the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (UCT) and the Social Learning Theory (SLT).

6.2. Summary of Findings

This study aimed to explore postgraduate students' experiences adjusting to the relatively demanding Social Sciences postgraduate program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). So, the researcher inquired about the participant's understanding of adjusting to the postgraduate studies within the Social Science program (objective one). This inquiry was executed by the researcher asking about participants' preparation for their studies. The researcher also explored the students' experiences of postgraduate studies (objective two) by inquiring about the nature of postgraduate studies for them. Moreover, the researcher inquired about the type of support structures available at the university for students to use (objective three). This was done after the participants shared their challenges with the researcher. Last but not least, the researcher inquired about the recommendations that participants have to assist with improving postgraduate adjustment.

The study's results indicated an intense start for some postgraduate students, especially if there was no prior preparation for the coming journey. The reviewed studies emphasised that students must be well-prepared for their academic journey to succeed and adjust effectively (Karazsia et al., 2013; Maasdorp & Holtzhausen, 2009). Some participants were prepared for their journey and experienced euphoria and excitement, consistent with the first stage of the UCT and the SLT. Even so, most participants reflected on how their lack of preparation and failure to gather information about their course negatively affected their adjustment. The effects of lack of preparation lead to participants feeling anxious and overwhelmed during the first few weeks of their studies (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Lopez, 2020). These negative feelings are associated with the critique of the UCT and SLT.

This study's participants demonstrated insight into the nature of postgraduate studies and what it takes to stay afloat and progress as a student. Many participants highlighted that they recognised the need to become intentional and work autonomously as postgraduate students, which they found to be a significant transition. The participant's lack of preparation resulted in numerous challenges that they became vulnerable to. These challenges hindered their progress and adjustment. Common challenges ranked by the participants that negatively influenced their progress were (a) the quality of academic support received and (b) the lack of an orientation program specific to postgraduate students. Further challenges included (c) the dynamics of supervisor/supervisee relationships and (d) balancing social and personal responsibilities that divided their attention to their academics. These challenges align with the principles of the UCT and SLT, as they illustrate how students undergo cultural shock when facing these difficulties. Subsequently, these participants struggled to achieve adjustment.

However, despite these challenges, some participants developed positive coping mechanisms. The coping mechanisms included creating peer support networks with other students in similar situations or who had already experienced similar journeys. These participants learned the modelled behaviours from their peers. After that, they assimilated the desired behaviours with their own and learned effective ways to cope with their studies. This behaviour is consistent with the theoretical frameworks of this study, which suggests that some participants were making steady progress in their adjustment journey. Moreover, creating long-term models for participants to learn the desired behaviours was a way of adjusting. In this study, two participants recently submitted their dissertations for marking during their interviews. According to the UCT and the SLT, these two participants have mastered adjustment, behaved according to the desired behaviours and had no new behaviours to learn.

While the university is responsible for supporting students, it also became apparent that students must equally contribute to the effort. The data gathered from this study can be used to adapt targeted support interventions for postgraduate students. Additionally, the study raises awareness among postgraduate students about adequately preparing themselves for their studies.

6.3. Limitations

Employing the snowball technique might have hindered the quality of the data received from the participants. This limitation occurred because the students interviewed were part of

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the same social and academic network as the researcher, thus limiting the diversity of participants. Some participants were familiar with the researcher and might have withheld information due to prior interactions. Additionally, researcher bias could have influenced the results. However, to address these issues, the researcher employed researcher reflexivity by showing awareness of their influence during the research process. Also, the study's sample size included only a subset of the university's student population, limiting the findings' generalisability. The findings of this study are only applicable to the participants involved, and any inferences made to other postgraduate students at the university should be made cautiously. Lastly, this study represents the researcher's first academic endeavour. The researcher's lack of experience engaging in such academic work could have influenced the methodology and findings.

6.4. Recommendations

The study included only eight female participants. A recommendation for future studies on similar topics is to ensure a balanced representation of genders. This approach would be beneficial in understanding coping patterns and general experiences of postgraduate studies from male and female perspectives rather than relying solely on existing literature. In addition, there is no generalisability for qualitative research for larger populations. Future studies are recommended for quantitative studies, allowing more student feedback and easy data generalisability to a larger population. Furthermore, other researchers based at UKZN can conduct this study. However, they should be from departments other than Social Sciences to determine if students from other departments encounter similar experiences as the students in this study. Moreover, some South African universities may yield contradictory results since the study was only done at one university. Therefore, future studies should consider doing this study at their respective institutions.

It is recommended that future studies adopt a longitudinal approach to address criticisms of the UCT, which lack empirical support from longitudinal studies. Such studies will provide insights into how students interact with their environment over an extended period, particularly regarding their behavioural adjustment. It is recommended that future researchers use another theoretical framework in participants that is similar to the current study's in case the theoretical framework yields different results.

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APPENDIX A: Gatekeeper's Letter



13 May 2022

Ms Nobuhle Nkosi (SN 211507244)
School of Applied Human Sciences
College of Humanities
Howard College Campus
UKZN
Email: 211507244@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Dear Ms Nkosi

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

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

"Postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to higher degrees: A qualitative Study."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews and/or focus group discussions with students from the College of Humanities at UKZN (Taking in account the regulations imposed during the lockdown i.e. restrictions on gatherings, travel, social distancing etc. ZOOM, Skype or telephone interviews recommended).

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

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

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

Yours sincerely



Dr K Cleland
Registrar

Office of the Registrar

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

Providing Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Mkoko of School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX B: Ethical Clearance



26 October 2022

Nobuhle Phumelele Nkosi (211507244)
School of Applied Human Sc
Howard College

Dear NP Nkosi,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004885/2022

Project title: A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 06 October 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

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

This approval is valid until 26 October 2023.

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

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

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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

Telephone: +27 (0)31 290 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/research-Ethics>

Founding Campus: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

APPENDIX C: Information Sheet and Informed Consent

INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Prospective Research Participant

My name is Nobuhle Nkosi, I am a Masters' student in the Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Science at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Howard College campus. My research title is: *A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.*

I would like to extend my invitation to you to participate in this study which seeks to explore the stressors related to difficulties in adjusting to postgraduate studies at UKZN. The study will also explore how students cope under stressful situations, which in turn affect their adjustment abilities. Student preparedness to cope with postgraduate studies will be explored and the support students might be receiving from the university. The results may assist the university to have a better understanding of challenges faced by postgraduate students and therefore provide adequate support.

Participation in this research will involve an interview session that will take approximately an hour. The study will ideally add to the current literature and provide insights for the university to consider creating a system that will allow for better preparedness for prospective postgraduate students and those who are already pursuing their postgraduate studies.

Kindly note that you have the right to withdraw from the study should you no longer wish to participate without any consequences. All responses and participants' identities will be kept confidential and if the need arise pseudonyms will be used. Data obtained during the research will be kept on university premises in a locked storeroom for a period of 5 years, thereafter will be properly disposed of in accordance with the Supervisor, the School of Psychology, and the University Ethics committee.

There is no compensation for participating in this study, however, your participation is valuable to this research.

[HSSREC/00004885/2022]

In the event of any problems or concerns/queries, you may contact the researcher at:

Email: 211507244@stu.ukzn.ac.za

A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel: +27 31 260 4557 Fax: +27 31 260 4609 Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

I, _____, have been informed about the study entitled *A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal* by Nobuhle Nkosi.

I fully understand the purpose and procedures of the study and I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study where clarity was required, and I have been answered adequately.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits I am usually entitled to.

If I have any further concerns, questions or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher on her email address 211507244@stu.ukzn.ac.za

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel: +27 31 260 4557 Fax: +27 31 260 4609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of witness: _____ **Date:** _____

APPENDIX D: Interview Schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the study: *A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal*. Please be assured that your responses will be kept confidential and that there will be no part of the interview that might be linked back to you. Should the need arise, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. You will not be coerced into answering the questions in the event you feel uncomfortable. You are able to opt-out of the study with no repercussions if you do not wish to continue. Please note that this session will last approximately one (1) hour and will be recorded.

- **To determine whether students feel prepared and what they feel would have prepared them for postgraduate studies**
 - What information do you have about postgraduate degrees and how has that information helped you prepare for your postgraduate career?
 - Do you feel you are adequately prepared? Please elaborate.
 - Do you think being prepared for postgraduate is beneficial? What are those benefits?
- **Exploring students' perceptions and experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate studies**
 - What differences have you noticed between undergraduate and postgraduate studies?
 - What were your expectations of postgraduate studies and can you explain how these have been met?
- **To identify how students' adjust to postgraduate studies**
 - How has the process of progressing to postgraduate studies been like for you?
 - Would you say you have adjusted well? Please elaborate.
- **To identify what are the challenges postgraduate students experience**
 - What challenges were experienced upon the assumption of postgraduate studies, if any?
 - Were there any difficulties? Please elaborate.

A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

- **To identify how students cope with adjusting to higher levels of study**
 - What are your mechanisms of coping when you are facing difficulties?
 - Would you say your mechanisms of coping are/were effective? Please elaborate.
- **Student support**
 - What support structures are there at the university?
 - How effective are these support structures?
 - What would you praise or change in the support structures available at the university?

APPENDIX E: Turnitin Digital Receipt



The screenshot shows a Turnitin Digital Receipt. At the top left is the Turnitin logo. Below it, the text reads "Digital Receipt". A paragraph states: "This receipt acknowledges that Turnitin received your paper. Below you will find the receipt information regarding your submission." Another paragraph says: "The first page of your submissions is displayed below." A list of submission details follows: Submission author: Nobuhle Nkosi; Assignment title: Submission; Submission title: Nobuhle Nkosi 211507244 Short Dissertation 15 July 2024 (1)...; File name: Nobuhle_Nkosi_211507244_Short_Dissertation_15_July_2024,...; File size: 669.94K; Page count: 110; Word count: 33,646; Character count: 195,435; Submission date: 15-Jul-2024 07:48PM (UTC+0200); Submission ID: 2415786218. Below this is a thumbnail of the first page of the dissertation. The thumbnail shows the University of KwaZulu-Natal logo and the title: "A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ADJUSTING TO SOCIAL SCIENCE HIGHER DEGREES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL". It also lists the author as Nobuhle Nkosi and the submission ID as 211507244. At the bottom of the receipt, it says "Copyright 2024 Turnitin. All rights reserved."

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APPENDIX F: Proof of Editing



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The tenacity and innovation in our clients' research work keeps us humble and strongly dedicated to excellence as well as professionalism!

21/06/2024

To Whom it May Concern

RE: Confirmation of editing

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited a master's dissertation authored by **Nobuhle P Nkosi**.

The **title of the dissertation** is: *A qualitative study exploring postgraduate students' experiences of adjusting to social science higher degrees at the university of KwaZulu-Natal*. To be submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Clinical Psychology Master's Degree in the School of Applied Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus, Durban, South Africa

In this dissertation, I conducted language and structure editing.

Note: The author made further inputs after my editing.

If there are any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

Kindest Regards
Oncemore Mbeve



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