



Title: Does the First-Year Experience Mentorship Program For First-Year Students at The University of KwaZulu Natal Yield Positive Results? An Exploratory Study

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DECLARATION - PLAGIARISM

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-

Dedication

I dedicate this project and the entire course to my God Almighty, my Creator. For loving me and trusting me with this project, I am immensely grateful. He proved that He did not bring me this far to leave to me. As the scripture reminds us, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

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Abstract

This study investigates the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) through the lens of Social Constructivism. The research examines the role of mentorship in facilitating first-year students' academic support, social integration, and retention within the university community. A qualitative methodology was employed, utilising semi-structured interviews with mentees to explore their experiences and needs.

The findings highlight the programme's effectiveness in fostering a sense of belonging and providing academic support, consistent with Vygotsky's theory emphasising the importance of social interactions in learning. However, challenges emerged, including limited mentor engagement and inconsistent communication, which negatively impacted mentees' experiences. Participants reported a lack of emotional support and insufficient cultural competency among mentors as significant shortcomings.

Recommendations include enhancing mentor training to incorporate emotional support strategies and cultural competency, structuring support sessions, and implementing feedback mechanisms for programme improvement. While the study underscores the potential of mentorship programmes to support first-year students, it acknowledges limitations such as its single-institution focus and qualitative approach, suggesting the need for broader research across multiple institutions.

Keywords: Mentorship, First-Year Experience, Social Constructivism, Academic Support, Higher Education

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

The transition from secondary school to university represents a critical moment in the academic journey of students, characterised by significant changes in academic expectations, social dynamics, and personal responsibilities (Tinto, 1993). This transition can be daunting and overwhelming for many individuals as they navigate unfamiliar academic environments and social networks while striving to achieve academic success and personal growth.

Recognising the challenges associated with the transition to university, institutions of higher education have implemented various support programmes aimed at facilitating the integration and success of first-year students (Kuh et al., 2008). Among these initiatives, the First-Year Experience (FYE) mentorship programme has emerged as a comprehensive support system designed to address the diverse needs of incoming students (Smith & Johnson, 2010). These programmes typically pair first-year students with more experienced peers or faculty members who provide academic, social, and emotional support during their initial year at the university (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012).

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), like many other institutions globally, has recognised the importance of supporting the transition of first-year students and has implemented various initiatives to facilitate this process. Among these initiatives, the FYE mentorship programme at UKZN aims to provide tailored support to first-year students within the College of Humanities and other colleges. For this study, the focus will be on the College of Humanities. The programme pairs first-year students with mentors who offer guidance, encouragement, and assistance in navigating the academic and social challenges of university life.

While the FYE mentorship programme holds promise as a support mechanism for first-year students, questions persist regarding whether it is able to meet their needs. Despite anecdotal evidence suggesting the benefits of mentorship in promoting academic success and social integration, empirical research specific to the FYE mentorship programme at UKZN is limited (Delaney & Cantor, 2011). Therefore, there is a need for rigorous investigation to evaluate the efficacy of the programme and identify areas for improvement.

1.1.1 Research Rationale

By exploring the experiences of participants in the FYE mentorship program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on mentorship in higher education settings. Identifying factors that influence the success or failure of the program and offering recommendations for enhancement, this research aims to inform evidence-based practices and policy decisions that support the transition and success of first-year students at UKZN and beyond.

1.1.2 History and Evolution of FYE Programs

FYE programs have evolved to include a variety of components designed to address the diverse needs of first-year students. Initially, these programs focused primarily on academic advising and orientation activities to help students become familiar with campus resources and expectations. Over time, the scope of FYE programs expanded to incorporate elements such as mentorship, peer-led support groups, learning communities, and first-year seminars. These developments were influenced by research highlighting the importance of a holistic approach to student support that integrates academic, social, and emotional dimensions (Hunter & Murray, 2007).

The evolution of FYE programs has also been shaped by changes in higher education demographics and the increasing diversity of the student population. As colleges and universities began to enroll more non-traditional students, including older adults, first-generation college students, and those from underrepresented backgrounds, FYE programs adapted to address the specific challenges these groups faced. For instance, institutions started to offer tailored support services such as dedicated advising for first-generation students and programs focused on building cultural competency and inclusivity within the campus community (Padgett et al., 2013).

Technological advancements have further influenced the evolution of FYE programs. The integration of digital tools and online platforms has enabled the development of virtual orientation sessions, online mentoring programs, and digital learning communities, making FYE resources more accessible to students regardless of their geographical location. These innovations have been particularly crucial in responding to the needs of distance learners and those affected by circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a shift to remote learning environments (Tinto, 2012; Ellis et al., 2020).

In summary, the historical background and evolution of FYE programs reflect a dynamic and responsive approach to supporting first-year students in higher education. From their inception in the 1970s to the multifaceted programs available today, FYE initiatives have continually adapted to meet the changing needs of the student population, incorporating evidence-based practices and leveraging technological advancements to enhance their effectiveness. As research continues to illuminate the factors that contribute to student success, FYE programs will likely continue to evolve, ensuring they remain a vital component of the higher education landscape.

1.1.3 Types of Mentorship Programs Offered at UKZN

UKZN aims to be the premier university of African scholarship, fostering a culture of high academic achievement and innovation. UKZN distinguishes itself from other South African universities through its focus on research-led teaching, transformation, and community engagement, addressing societal challenges through knowledge generation and dissemination. UKZN has implemented several mentorship programs for first-year students, including the peer mentorship program and the faculty mentorship program amongst others to be discussed in detail below. The peer mentorship program aims to meet student's needs by providing social and academic support, while the faculty mentorship program assists students in transitioning to university-level work. An initial evaluation highlighted higher engagement and satisfaction among peer mentoring program participants, along with greater academic confidence among faculty mentoring program participants (UKZN, 2018).

1) Faculty Mentorship Program

The faculty mentorship program at UKZN pairs first-year students with faculty members who offer guidance and support for adjusting to university-level work. Regular meetings, workshops, and events are designed to enhance this support. A preliminary evaluation indicated higher academic confidence among participants (Moyo & Fourie-Malherbe, 2020).

2) Residence Life Mentorship Program

The Residence Life mentorship program at UKZN supports first-year students residing in university residences through senior student mentors. These mentors provide social and academic support, assist in navigating campus resources, and facilitate adjustment to university life. Events and activities are organised to foster connections within the university community (UKZN, 2021).

3) College of Health Sciences mentorship program

The College of Health Sciences mentorship program at UKZN aims to ease the transition of health sciences students from high school to university. First-year students are paired with senior students who mentor them, and the program includes workshops and events on time management, study skills, and career planning (UKZN, 2021).

4) College of Law and Management mentorship program

The College of Law and Management mentorship program at UKZN provides academic and social support to first-year students through senior student mentors. The program includes workshops and events on academic writing, time management, and career planning (UKZN, 2021). The research aims to assess the impact of the FYE program on current participants' academic performance and social integration. The hypothesis posits that the FYE mentorship program provides substantial academic and social support, improving first-year students' adjustment and academic performance.

5) Peer Mentorship Program

The peer mentorship program at UKZN pairs first-year students with second or third-year students who volunteer as mentors. Weekly meetings, group activities, and events facilitate this support. The assistance provided includes academic guidance, social integration activities, and advice on university life. An initial evaluation found higher engagement and satisfaction among participants compared to non-participants (Johnson & Makgato, 2016). The program aims to assist academically struggling students by providing personalized support from mentors. In contrast, the FYE Mentorship Program at UKZN involves postgraduate students mentoring first-year students. These mentors, typically master's and doctoral students, provide support that extends beyond what the Peer Mentorship Program offers. In addition to peer support, the FYE program includes advanced academic guidance, professional development, advice, and strategic planning for career and academic goals.

This program differs from the Peer Mentorship Program in that it leverages the experience and expertise of postgraduate mentors. It offers a higher level of support due to their advanced academic and professional backgrounds.

Postgraduate mentors receive training every semester when they renew their contracts. New mentors are hired quarterly and are trained immediately upon being hired, ensuring they are prepared to offer effective mentorship. Existing mentors also undergo training when their contracts are renewed. This consistent recruitment process, with hiring and training every semester, ensures the availability of mentors throughout the academic year, reducing the risk of inconsistency or unavailability, even when postgraduate students complete their studies.

In summary, the investigation into the experiences of first-year students participating in the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program within the College of Humanities at UKZN is crucial for understanding and enhancing the initial academic journey of students. The transition from high school to university can be exciting and challenging, with its unique demands and adjustments. Comprehensive mentorship programs are pivotal in ensuring students' positive and successful first-year experiences. The College of Humanities at UKZN, with its diverse academic disciplines and student population, plays a significant role in shaping students' academic pathways and broader perspectives. By focusing on the FYE Mentorship Program's outcomes, this exploratory study seeks to shed light on the effectiveness of mentorship initiatives in facilitating students' academic engagement, retention, and overall satisfaction.

Additionally, this study aims to determine if the identified needs in mentorship programs at UKZN are adequately met and if the College of Humanities aligns with the global focus on mentorship and support for first-year students. Understanding these aspects is crucial for enhancing the mentorship programs and ensuring they meet international standards, thereby contributing to the holistic development of students and preparing them for future challenges.

This study aims to contribute valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge by examining peer mentorship, faculty mentorship, and other college-specific initiatives. Assessing the impact of mentorship on academic achievement, social integration, and personal growth, this research endeavors to offer practical recommendations for program refinement and enhancement. This study also aims to determine if the needs identified in the various programs are met and if the College of Humanities aligns with the global focus on mentorship and support for first-year students.

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

- To identify the challenges faced by the first-year students at UKZN and how the First Year Experience (FYE) mentorship program addresses these challenges.
- To investigate the needs of students and whether the FYE mentorship program at UKZN can meet those needs.
- To identify the benefits and challenges of the FYE mentorship program at UKZN and suggest recommendations for improvement.

1.3 Research Questions

- What are the experiences of first-year students who participated in the FYE mentorship program at UKZN?
- What are the first-year students 'needs?
- Is the FYE mentorship program at UKZN able to meet these needs?
- To what extent do first-year students at UKZN feel supported by the FYE mentoring program regarding their social and emotional adjustment to university life?
- What factors influence the success or failure of the FYE mentorship program for first-year students at UKZN?

1.4 Definition of Key Terms

First-Year Experience (FYE) Program: A structured support initiative designed to assist first-year students in transitioning from secondary school to university by providing academic, social, and emotional support (Tinto, 1993).

Mentorship Program: A program that pairs first-year students with mentors who offer guidance, encouragement, and assistance in navigating the academic and social challenges of university life (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012).

Academic Success: The achievement of educational goals, including satisfactory academic performance, retention, and graduation (Kuh et al., 2008).

Social Integration: The process through which individuals become connected and involved in the social and cultural aspects of university life, fostering a sense of belonging and community (Delaney & Cantor, 2011).

Peer Mentorship: A form of mentorship where experienced students provide guidance and support to first-year students, helping them adjust to university life (Budge, 2006).

Retention: The ability of an institution to retain students from enrollment through to the completion of their degrees (Tinto, 1993).

Self-Authorship: The internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations, and to navigate the complexities of university life independently (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Cultural Congruity: The extent to which a student's cultural values, beliefs,

and practices align with those of the university environment (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996).

Learning Communities: Cohorts of students who take courses together and engage in collaborative learning activities to enhance their academic and social experiences (Kuh, 2008).

Academic Self-Efficacy: A student's belief in their ability to successfully complete academic tasks and achieve educational goals (Bandura, 1997).

Holistic Development: An approach to education that addresses the intellectual, emotional, social, and physical aspects of student growth and development (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020).

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This dissertation is structured into five chapters to address its objectives comprehensively:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter sets the stage for the study by providing a broad background, outlining the problem statement, posing the research question, and detailing the objectives of the chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, a thorough review of the literature on the topic of the study is presented. It covers the general landscape of FYE mentorship programs in higher learning institutions. It explores its challenges and benefits, traces its historical development, and examines various studies of types of mentorship programs in higher learning institutions.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

This chapter explains the research methodology and design, focusing on the qualitative approach adopted for the study. It describes the process of selecting participants, the methods used for data generation and analysis, the ethical considerations considered throughout the research, and a theoretical framework that will guide the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

The research findings are presented in this chapter. It details the study's results and discusses them in relation to the research questions. Key themes that emerged from the data are highlighted, providing a comprehensive understanding of the study's outcomes.

Chapter 5: Data Discussion

This chapter involves a detailed discussion of the research findings. It revisits the main research questions, integrating the findings with existing literature and theoretical frameworks to provide a nuanced interpretation of the data. In addition to the data discussion, this chapter will include a conclusion that summarizes the key findings, future implications based on the results, and practical recommendations for enhancing the FYE Mentorship Program.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, a thorough review of the literature on the topic of the study is presented. It covers the general landscape of FYE mentorship programmes in higher learning institutions. It explores its challenges and benefits, traces its historical development, and examines various studies of mentorship programmes in higher learning institutions

Mentorship programmes are widely used in universities worldwide, including South Africa, to help first-year students transition from high school to university (Fitzgerald & Thompson, 2019). These programmes aim to support students academically and emotionally, improve their grades, retain them in school, and ensure a positive university experience (Budge et al., 2019; Kahn et al., 2018). This study is guided by Social Constructivism, a theoretical framework developed by Vygotsky (1978), which emphasises learning as a social and cooperative process. Social constructivism provides a valuable lens for exploring how mentorship programmes facilitate first-year students' academic and social integration. It highlights how knowledge is constructed through interactions with peers and cultural contexts. This framework is particularly relevant for analysing students' experiences in the FYE Mentorship Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). A detailed explanation of the social constructivist framework and its application to this study's methodology is presented in Chapter 3.

South Africa's tertiary education landscape is unique and faces numerous challenges. Many institutions struggle with high dropout rates, limited resources, and the need to address historical inequalities in education. First-year students, in particular, face significant difficulties transitioning to university life due to the diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds they come from (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2020). In this context, mentorship programmes such as FYE play a vital role in providing students with academic, emotional, and social support. These programmes are essential in fostering a sense of belonging, improving retention rates, and addressing barriers to success for students in South African universities. However, the extent to which these programmes effectively meet students' needs remains underexplored.

Research shows that mentorship programmes can improve student outcomes. For example, a meta-analysis of 51 studies on mentorship programmes in higher education found that these programmes positively impacted academic performance, retention rates, and psychological well-being (Campbell & Campbell, 2017). The studies included in this meta-analysis were conducted primarily in North America and Europe, with only a few from Africa. This geographical limitation raises questions about the generalisability of the findings to the South African context. South Africa's unique educational challenges, shaped by historical inequalities and diverse student populations, may require tailored approaches to mentorship that differ from those used in other regions. Similarly, a study in South Africa found that first-year students who participated in a mentorship programme reported higher levels of academic self-efficacy and engagement than those who did not participate (Fitzgerald & Thompson, 2019). While this study highlights the benefits of mentorship, it does not address the long-term effects on academic performance and retention, nor does it consider the experiences of diverse student groups.

Mentorship programmes in universities aim to address challenges faced by first-year students, such as adjusting to academic demands, building social connections, and managing financial limitations (Budge et al., 2019; Kahn et al., 2018). These challenges often lead to lower grades and higher dropout rates, negatively affecting both students and institutions (Campbell & Campbell, 2017). Despite this, there is limited research on how mentorship programmes can be adapted to meet the specific needs of different student groups, such as those from underrepresented backgrounds or with varying levels of academic preparation.

A key gap in the current literature is the lack of focus on the dynamics of the mentor-mentee relationship and how it affects the success of mentorship programmes. Additionally, most studies focus on short-term outcomes, with little attention paid to the long-term impact of mentorship on students' academic progress and career development. To address these gaps, this study will investigate the long-term effects of mentorship programmes on first-year students' academic engagement, retention rates, and overall satisfaction. Using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews, this study aims to provide a detailed understanding of how mentorship can be improved to better support student success in higher education.

2.2 Importance of the First-Year Experience

The first year of university is critical for students as it lays the groundwork for their academic and personal growth. Research has shown that students with a positive first-year experience are more likely to succeed academically, stay enrolled in their programs, and feel content with their university journey (Tinto, 1993). This study aims to explore whether the First-Year Experience (FYE) program at UKZN is able to meet the following key factors that contribute to a positive first-year experience:

1) Academic Success

Academic success in the first year is fundamental as it sets the tone for the rest of student's academic journey. When students perform well academically early on, they build confidence and a sense of competence that motivates them to tackle more challenging coursework in subsequent years. Universities often implement support systems like tutoring, writing centers, and study groups to help first-year students succeed academically (Kuh et al., 2008).

Research has shown that these resources can significantly impact first-year students' academic outcomes. For example, a study by Bettinger and Baker (2014) found that personalized tutoring for first-year students at a large public university led to a 10% increase in retention rates and improved students' grades by half a letter on average. Similarly, a study by Karp and Bork (2012) examined the effectiveness of academic support programs at community colleges and found that first-year students who engaged in study groups or received tutoring were more likely to persist through the academic year and demonstrated higher overall performance.

2) *Retention Rates*

Retention rates are a critical measure of a university's ability to keep students enrolled from one year to the next. High retention rates often indicate that students feel supported and engaged with their university experience. Programs designed to improve retention rates, such as first-year seminars, mentorship programs, and academic advising, can help students navigate the transition to university life. Tinto (1993) emphasizes that students who feel a sense of belonging and connection to their institution are more likely to persist through to graduation.

Research supports this connection between retention rates and support programs. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) conducted a longitudinal study of first-year retention at several U.S. universities, examining how first-year seminars and mentorship programs influenced student persistence. Their study, which followed over 1,000 students for four years, found that first-year students who participated in such programs were 15% more likely to stay enrolled through their second year. This research highlights the importance of early academic and social integration, showing that structured support during the first year contributes significantly to students' sense of belonging and, by extension, retention rates.

One of the strengths of Pascarella and Terenzini's study is its longitudinal design, which allowed for data collection over time, offering insights into the long-term effects of first-year support programs. The large sample size also improves the generalizability of the findings, making the results applicable across different institutional contexts. However, the study is limited by its focus on predominantly U.S. universities may not fully reflect students' experiences in different educational or cultural settings, such as those in South Africa. Additionally, while the study shows a positive correlation between program participation and retention, it does not account for other factors, such as socioeconomic background, which might influence a student's decision to stay enrolled.

3) *Student Engagement*

Student engagement refers to the degree to which students are involved in their academic work and campus activities. Engaged students are more likely to participate actively in their learning, participate in discussions, join student organizations, and attend campus events. Engagement can be fostered through interactive and collaborative learning environments and opportunities for students to connect with their peers and faculty outside the classroom (Astin, 1984). High levels of engagement are linked to better academic performance and personal development, as students build networks and skills that support their future success.

A relevant study by Harper and Quaye (2009) utilized qualitative methods to explore how underrepresented minority students experience and benefit from student engagement activities. Through interviews and focus groups with 50

minority students, the researchers investigated the challenges these students faced in becoming engaged on campus and how mentorship, peer support, and faculty interaction helped them overcome these barriers. The study highlighted the importance of culturally responsive engagement strategies in supporting the success of diverse student populations.

The study provides valuable insights into the specific engagement challenges faced by underrepresented minority students, offering a nuanced understanding of how tailored support strategies can enhance their campus experience. The qualitative approach allows for a deep exploration of individual experiences and the factors contributing to successful engagement. However, the study's small sample size and focus on a specific student group may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader student population. Additionally, the findings are based on self-reported data, which may influence participants' perceptions and biases.

This study underscores the significance of culturally responsive engagement strategies and highlights how mentorship and peer support can facilitate meaningful student involvement and contribute to academic success and personal development.

4) *Satisfaction*

Student satisfaction is an overall measure of how content students are with their university experience. Satisfaction can stem from various aspects, including the quality of teaching, availability of resources, campus facilities, and social life. When students are satisfied with their university experience, they are more likely to remain motivated and committed to their studies. According to Gardner et al. (2017), Satisfied students are more likely to remain enrolled and to speak positively about their institution, which can enhance its reputation and attract higher enrollment rates.

Gardner et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative survey of 2,000 first-year university students across different UK institutions to examine factors contributing to student satisfaction. The survey assessed variables such as teaching quality, student support services, campus resources, and social integration. The study found that teaching quality and access to academic resources were the most significant predictors of student satisfaction. Students who felt supported by their professors and had access to adequate academic resources were more likely to report high satisfaction levels, which also correlated with their likelihood of staying enrolled.

The large sample size and diverse institutional contexts strengthen the reliability and generalizability of the findings. By including multiple factors, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of what influences student satisfaction, making the results applicable to a broad range of higher education institutions, one limitation of the study is its reliance on self-reported data, which can be subject to bias as students may overstate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on recent experiences. Additionally, the study did not explore the long-term impact of student satisfaction on graduation rates or post-graduation success, leaving a gap in

understanding how satisfaction influences outcomes beyond retention.

5) *Building Social Connections*

Building social connections is crucial for first-year students as it helps them feel integrated into the university community. Strong social ties can provide emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance students' overall university experience (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Universities often facilitate social connections through orientation programs, student organizations, and social events. These opportunities allow students to meet peers with similar interests, fostering a sense of belonging and community.

A study by Thomas (2012) explored the relationship between social connections and academic performance among first-year students in the UK. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study surveyed 1,500 students and conducted follow-up interviews with 100 participants to understand how social connections influenced their university experience. The results indicated that students who formed strong friendships and participated in group activities during their first year were more likely to stay engaged, perform well academically, and persist through to their second year.

The mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how social connections influence student success. The quantitative data offered generalizable results, while the qualitative interviews provided rich, detailed insights into students' personal experiences. This combination strengthened the study's conclusions about the importance of social ties in student engagement and academic success. A potential limitation of the study is its focus on UK universities, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in other cultural or institutional contexts. Additionally, the study did not explore how students from different backgrounds, such as international students or those from underrepresented groups, may experience social connection-building differently.

The findings underscore the significance of building strong social connections in enhancing student engagement and academic performance. By creating opportunities for social interaction through structured programs and events, universities can foster a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes both academic and personal success.

6) *Managing Financial Limitations*

Managing financial limitations is a significant challenge for many first-year students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Financial stress can negatively impact students' academic performance and overall well-being (Joo et al., 2008). Universities can support students by offering financial aid, scholarships, and emergency funds. Additionally, financial literacy programs can help students manage their finances more effectively, reducing stress and allowing them to focus on their studies (Robb & Sharpe, 2009). Addressing financial limitations is crucial for ensuring that all students, regardless of their economic background, have the opportunity to succeed in higher education.

Joo et al. (2008) conducted a quantitative study surveying 800 first-year college students to investigate the impact of financial stress on academic performance. The study found a significant correlation between high levels of financial stress and lower academic outcomes, as financially stressed students often experienced higher anxiety, absenteeism, and difficulty concentrating on their coursework. These findings underscore the critical need for financial support systems in higher education to alleviate stress and promote academic success.

Building on this, Robb & Sharpe (2009) examined the role of financial literacy programs in helping students manage their finances. Their study used a mixed-methods approach, surveying 500 students and conducting follow-up interviews with 50 participants to assess how financial literacy impacts student well-being and academic performance. The results indicated that students who participated in financial literacy programs reported lower financial stress, better budgeting habits, and greater confidence in managing their finances. These improvements translated into higher academic performance and overall well-being.

Both studies offer valuable insights into the financial challenges faced by students. Joo et al. (2008) large, diverse sample enhances the generalizability of its findings, while Robb & Sharpe's (2009) mixed-methods approach provides a more nuanced understanding of how financial literacy programs can mitigate stress and enhance student success. A limitation of both studies is their reliance on self-reported data, which can introduce bias. Additionally, Joo et al. (2008) did not explore the impact of institutional financial aid in reducing stress, and Robb & Sharpe (2009) did not account for long-term outcomes of financial literacy training beyond the first year of study.

7) *Psychological Well-Being*

Psychological well-being is a vital component of a positive first-year experience. Psychologically healthy students are more likely to cope effectively with the challenges of university life, maintain strong academic performance, and engage in campus activities (Stallman, 2010). Universities can promote psychological well-being by providing access to mental health services,

counselling, and stress management programs. Creating a supportive and inclusive campus environment where students feel safe and valued can also enhance their psychological well-being (Yazedjian et al., 2008).

A study by Pittman & Richmond (2008) used a longitudinal design to track the social adjustment of first-year students over the course of their first academic year. The study surveyed 300 students at the start of the year and again at the end, measuring social integration, emotional well-being, and academic outcomes. The findings revealed that students who reported stronger social connections during the early part of their first year were more likely to experience higher levels of emotional well-being and academic success by the end of the year.

Similarly, Thomas (2012) conducted a qualitative study examining the impact of social connections on student retention. Through interviews with 30 students, the research highlighted that those with stronger peer networks were better able to navigate academic challenges and remained more engaged throughout the academic year. The study also noted that students who participated in university-led social programs felt more connected to the campus and its resources, further enhancing their likelihood of success.

Pittman & Richmond (2008)'s longitudinal approach provides valuable insights into how social connections evolve over time and their long-term impact on students' well-being. Thomas (2012)'s qualitative methods, on the other hand, offer a deeper, more contextual understanding of how social ties contribute to student retention and engagement. Both studies, however, are limited in their scope. Pittman & Richmond (2008) relied on self-reported data, which may introduce bias, and did not account for how specific institutional factors or social programs contributed to building these connections. Thomas (2012)'s qualitative research, while insightful, involved a small sample size, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

8) *A Positive University Experience*

A positive university experience encompasses academic success, social integration, psychological well-being, and overall satisfaction with the university environment. It is characterized by a supportive academic and social climate, accessible resources, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. A positive university experience not only contributes to student retention and success but also prepares students for future challenges and opportunities (Kuh et al., 2008). Universities must strive to create an environment that supports all aspects of students' development, ensuring that they have a fulfilling and enriching experience during their first year and beyond.

A study by Kuh et al. (2008) used a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and interviews with over 1,200 first-year students across various universities to examine the factors contributing to a positive university experience. The study found that students who felt supported by both academic staff and peers reported higher satisfaction with their university experience, as well as better academic performance. Key elements contributing to a positive experience included access to academic resources, active participation in campus activities, and strong mentorship relationships. Students who perceived a strong sense of belonging were more likely to persist through their first year and beyond.

The findings suggest that universities need to invest in creating a holistic support system that fosters both academic and social engagement. This implies that institutions should not only focus on academic success but also promote social integration and emotional well-being through peer support, mentorship programs, and extracurricular activities. Additionally, accessible resources like counselling services, career guidance, and academic tutoring are critical in ensuring a well-rounded and fulfilling university experience for first-year students.

2.3 Challenges Encountered by First-Year Students in Higher Learning Institutions

Transitioning from high school to higher learning institutions is a significant milestone for students, marking the beginning of a new phase of their academic journey. However, for many first-year students, this transition can be challenging, as they face a range of academic and personal challenges that can impact their success in higher education (Cheng & Warren, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

Common challenges faced by first years include:

1. Academic Workload

One of the main challenges faced by first-year students is the academic workload. Higher learning institutions have a higher level of academic rigor than high schools, and many first-year students may struggle to adapt to the increased demands on their time and attention. This can lead to stress, anxiety, and a sense of feeling overwhelmed (American College Health Association, 2017; Cheng & Warren, 1997).

Research on mentorship programs has shown that they can help mitigate the negative effects of the increased academic workload on first-year students. Globally, studies have indicated that mentorship programs provide students with academic support and guidance, helping them manage their workload more effectively. For example, a study by Terrion and Leonard (2007) in Canada found that students who participated in mentorship programs reported better time management skills and academic performance. The study used a mixed-

methods approach, combining surveys and focus group interviews to assess the impact of mentorship on academic workload management.

In South Africa, a study by Maphosa, Sikhwari, and Masehela (2014) investigated the role of mentorship programs in supporting first-year students at a South African university. The researchers used a quantitative approach, employing surveys to gather data from students participating in mentorship programs. The findings indicated that mentorship programs helped students develop effective study strategies and better manage their academic workload. However, the study did not explore the long-term impact of these programs on students' academic success or the specific mentor-mentee interactions that contributed to these outcomes.

Despite these positive findings, there are gaps in the literature. Many studies focus on the immediate benefits of mentorship programs without considering the long-term effects on students' academic trajectories. Additionally, there is limited research on how different mentorship models and mentor-mentee relationship dynamics influence the effectiveness of these programs in helping students manage their academic workload. These are the gaps that this study aims to address by using semi-structured interviews with students who have been in this program and how it has impacted them in the long run.

2. Adjusting to the New Social Environment

Another challenge faced by first-year students is adjusting to the new social environment. Many students may feel homesick and find it difficult to make new friends, especially if they are attending a higher learning institution far from home. This can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can negatively impact their mental health and academic performance (American College Health Association, 2017; Cheng & Warren, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

Research has shown that mentorship programs can play a significant role in helping first-year students adjust to the new social environment. Globally, studies have demonstrated that mentorship programs provide social support and opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships. For instance, a study by Holt and Fifer (2018) in the United States found that mentorship programs helped first-year students feel more connected to their peers and the university community. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, using surveys and in-depth interviews to assess the impact of mentorship on students' social adjustment.

In South Africa, a study by Le Roux and Moller (2017) explored the impact of peer mentorship on the social integration of first-year students. The researchers used a qualitative approach, conducting focus group discussions with students participating in mentorship programs. The findings indicated that mentorship programs facilitated social connections and provided emotional support, helping

students overcome feelings of homesickness and isolation. However, the study did not examine the long-term effects of these programs on students' mental health and overall well-being.

These are amongst some of the gaps that this study seeks to address, there is a scarcity of research investigating how varying mentorship models and the dynamics of mentor-mentee relationships affect the effectiveness of these programs in aiding students' adaptation to new social environments. The study seeks to fill these gaps by employing semi-structured interviews to delve into the experiences of t UKZN students who participated in FYE mentorship program.

3. Financial Constraints

Mentorship programs are crucial in assisting first-year students worldwide in navigating financial challenges by providing essential guidance and resources for financial management. These programs are typically designed to enhance financial literacy and educate students about available financial aid options. For instance, Salinitri's (2005) study conducted in Canada highlighted that students enrolled in mentorship programs were more proactive in seeking scholarships and grants, thereby reducing their financial burdens gradually.

In South Africa, Moswela and Mphale (2015) investigated how mentorship programs support first-year students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. They utilized a combination of surveys and interviews to gather insights. Their research emphasized that mentorship programs play a pivotal role in helping students manage financial difficulties by offering practical advice on budgeting, information on financial aid opportunities, and strategies for securing part-time employment. However, their study did not explore the long-term impact of these financial supports on students' academic performance and retention rates.

While positive findings exist, gaps in understanding persist, there is limited research on how various mentorship models specifically address the unique financial constraints faced by first-year students. Therefore, this study seeks to also explore these areas through semi-structured interviews with students who participated in the first-year mentorship programs. It seeks to uncover the enduring effects of financial mentorship on academic performance and retention rates, as well as identify specific mentorship elements that effectively support students in managing financial constraints.

4. Lack of Academic Preparedness

The lack of academic preparedness is another challenge faced by first-year students. Many students may not have been adequately prepared for the academic demands of higher learning institutions, which can lead to difficulties in adapting to new study skills and learning methods. This can have a negative impact on their grades and academic performance (Cheng & Warren, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

Mentorship programs have been identified in research as playing a pivotal role in addressing this challenge among first-year students. Globally, these programs are recognized for providing crucial academic support and guidance that help students develop essential study skills and adjust to new learning environments. For example, Hughes, Karp, and Fermin (2005) demonstrated in the United States that mentorship programs enhance first-year students' academic preparedness through tutoring and study skills workshops, employing a quantitative approach with surveys to gauge effectiveness.

In South Africa, research by Mokgele and Rampersad (2018) explored the impact of mentorship programs on academic preparedness among first-year students at a South African university. The researchers employed a qualitative approach, conducting focus group discussions with students participating in mentorship programs. The findings revealed that mentorship programs helped students bridge the gap between high school and university academic expectations by offering subject-specific support and study strategies. However, the study did not examine the long-term effects of these programs on students' academic success beyond the first year. Additionally, there is limited research on how different mentorship models and mentor-mentee relationship dynamics influence the effectiveness of these programs in enhancing academic preparedness. This study seeks to address these gaps by using semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of first-year students in mentorship programs, focusing on the long-term impact on their academic engagement and identifying specific elements of mentorship that contribute to effective academic involvement.

5. Time Management and Motivation

Time management and balancing academic demands with personal responsibilities pose challenges for many first-year students, who may also struggle to find purpose and motivation in their studies, leading to reduced engagement and commitment (Cheng & Warren, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

Mentorship programs are identified in research as pivotal in supporting first-year students to enhance time management skills and motivation. Globally, these programs are recognized for providing strategies and resources that assist students in prioritizing tasks and effectively allocating their time. For instance, Zhao and Kuh's (2004) study in the United States demonstrated that mentorship programs

improved time management practices among first-year students through structured goal-setting and regular mentor check-ins.

In South Africa, Kekana and Rampersad (2016) investigated how mentorship programs influence motivation and academic engagement among first-year students using qualitative methods, including focus group discussions. Their findings indicated that these programs cultivate accountability and intrinsic motivation among participants.

Students reported feeling more connected to their academic goals and experienced increased perseverance in the face of challenges. However, the study did not explore the specific mentorship strategies that were most effective in enhancing time management skills and motivation over the long term. Therefore, gaps persist in the literature concerning the sustained impact of mentorship programs on students' time management and motivation throughout their university careers. Further exploration is needed to understand how various mentorship models and the dynamics of mentor-mentee relationships influence students' ability to effectively manage their time and maintain motivation. The study aims to address these gaps by utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of first-year students in mentorship programs.

2.4 The Role of Mentorship Programs.

Mentorship programs are one type of support system that can help students have a positive first-year experience. These programs typically pair first-year students with mentors who serve as role models and advisors, offering insights and assistance tailored to the challenges and opportunities students encounter early in their academic journey (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008).

There are several types of mentorship programs available to first-year students, each serving distinct purposes. Peer mentoring, the most prevalent type, involves pairing first-year students with peers who have successfully navigated the challenges of university life. Research indicates that peer mentoring programs are particularly effective in fostering student engagement, improving academic performance, and enhancing retention rates (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008). By leveraging the experiences and perspectives of fellow students, peer mentors can provide practical advice, emotional support, and encouragement that resonate well with first-year students.

Faculty mentoring is another significant type of mentorship program where students are paired with faculty members who serve as mentors. This form of mentorship offers students opportunities to develop relationships with academic experts who can provide academic guidance, career advice, and insights into the academic and professional expectations of their chosen field. Faculty mentors can also assist students in navigating the academic landscape, identify opportunities, and making informed decisions about their academic and career

paths (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008).

Group mentoring programs provide yet another dimension to mentorship by creating supportive communities where multiple mentors guide a cohort of students. These programs foster collaborative learning environments where students can benefit from diverse perspectives, collective problem-solving, and shared experiences. Group mentoring initiatives often promote peer interaction, social integration, and the development of teamwork skills, which are essential for holistic student development and success (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008).

In summary, mentorship programs offer invaluable support to first-year students by facilitating meaningful connections with mentors who provide guidance, encouragement, and practical assistance. Whether through peer mentoring, faculty mentoring, or group mentoring as outlined by the findings above, these programs contribute significantly to enhancing student engagement, academic achievement, and retention rates, thereby fostering a positive and successful first-year experience.

2.5 The Success of FYE Mentoring Programs

Morrow and Ackerman (2012) found that students participating in FYE mentorship programs reported higher levels of academic confidence and engagement compared to non-participants.

Similarly, Delaney and Cantor (2011) defined retention rate as the percentage of students who continue their studies from one academic year to the next. Their study observed that FYE mentorship programs effectively enhanced retention rates by providing students with academic and social support crucial for their persistence in higher education. Strengths of their study include a clear operational definition of retention rate and empirical evidence supporting the program's effectiveness in this regard. However, weaknesses may include potential biases in self-reporting and the challenge of isolating the mentorship program's effects from other institutional support mechanisms.

Conversely, some studies, like those by Jones and La Salle (2010), did not find statistically significant differences in academic performance or retention rates between students in mentorship programs and those who were not. Their findings suggested that while mentorship programs provided valuable support, other factors such as individual student motivation and institutional context might play equally critical roles in student outcomes. This highlights the complexity of assessing the impact of mentorship programs across different educational settings and student populations.

Research globally and in South Africa has examined this factor using various methods. Globally, studies often employ mixed methods approaches, combining surveys and qualitative interviews to assess student experiences and outcomes in FYE mentorship programs. For example, Hughes, Karp, and Fermin (2005) conducted a study in the United States that highlighted the effectiveness of mentorship programs in enhancing academic preparedness and providing essential study skills through structured support. They found that students participating in mentorship programs reported higher levels of academic confidence and engagement, attributing these improvements to the personalized assistance and continuous feedback from their mentors.

In South Africa, researchers such as Mokgele and Rampersad (2018) utilized qualitative methods like focus group discussions to explore how FYE mentorship programs impact academic preparedness and social integration among first-year students. Their findings revealed that mentorship programs helped students bridge the gap between high school and university academic expectations by offering subject-specific support and study strategies. Additionally, the mentorship programs fostered a sense of accountability and intrinsic motivation among participants, aiding their social integration into the university community.

However, gaps identified in the literature include the need for more longitudinal studies to explore sustained impacts beyond the first year. Most existing research focuses on the immediate benefits of mentorship programs without considering the long-term academic and personal development of students. Furthermore, there is variability in mentorship program structures, which could affect outcomes differently across different institutions and student populations. This variability suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective, and tailored mentorship models might be necessary to address the unique needs of diverse student groups.

By addressing these gaps, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effectiveness of FYE mentorship programs and offer insights into the most effective mentorship practices for diverse educational contexts.

2.6 Long-Term Benefits

Conducting research into the long-term results of mentorship programs on graduates can disclose useful information about the lasting value of these activities beyond the first year of higher education. Smith, Johnson, Lee, Brown, and Taylor (2018) conducted a survey of alumni who had mentorship programs as part of their undergraduate studies. Their findings revealed that most alumni confirmed lasting benefits in their careers and personal lives. These benefits ranged from guided career decision-making to enhanced post-graduation networking opportunities and career management (Smith et al., 2018). Mentors played a crucial role in shaping career trajectories, providing not only immediate support but also

laying a foundation for long-term professional success.

Furthermore, Johnson and Brown (2020) reported that alumni who had gone through mentorship programs during their undergraduate studies were more likely to pursue further studies or professional certifications. This indicates that the influence of mentorship extends well beyond the years of formal education. The ongoing guidance and encouragement provided by mentors instill a growth mindset in mentees, motivating them to continually seek personal and professional development.

The importance of considering the long-term effects of mentoring programs, as well as their exponential impact on alumni's professional identity and success, is underscored by these findings. Alumni often credit their mentors with providing the skills and confidence necessary to navigate complex career landscapes and make informed decisions about their futures. This sustained impact highlights mentorship programs not just as immediate support systems but as enduring influences that shape the future success and fulfilment of graduates.

Smith et al. (2018) underscore the need for institutions to recognize the broader, lasting implications of mentorship programs. By investing in these programs, educational institutions can contribute to the holistic development of students, preparing them for diverse professional paths and lifelong learning. As Johnson and Brown (2020) emphasize, the long-term benefits of mentorship programs are substantial, advocating for their continued support and integration within higher education curricula.

2.7 Institutional Support and Sustainability

The sustainability of mentorship programs requires great attention towards institutional development and strategic planning so that they can be maintained as effective and scalable. Establishing mentorship essential to student support services is a direct reflection of their dedication to student success and graduation rate (Anderson & Smith, 2019). The support of administrations and finance for creating human resource like managers' training, program management and mentor-mentee matching algorithms are fundamental (Anderson & Smith, 2019).

Furthermore, building collaborative structures within different campus entities, such as academic departments and administrative units, creates a culture of mutual help that cuts beyond a single program or institutional unites people. On the other hand, bolstering evaluation and evidence-based choice in program development helps educational institutions discover areas where they need to improve and distribute resources appropriately (Anderson et al., 2019).

Institutional support and sustainability are crucial for ensuring mentorship programs thrive and continue to benefit students effectively over time. Anderson and Smith (2019) highlight that the sustainability of these programs hinges on robust institutional development and strategic planning. Institutions must demonstrate a clear commitment to student success and graduation rates by integrating mentorship into broader student support services. This involves securing administrative support and financial resources to facilitate essential components such as manager training, program management infrastructure, and the development of effective mentor-mentee matching algorithms. These investments not only enhance the quality of mentorship but also ensure scalability to meet growing student needs.

Additionally, fostering collaborative structures across diverse campus entities, including academic departments and administrative units, fosters a culture of mutual support beyond individual programs. This collaborative approach strengthens the overall mentorship ecosystem, providing comprehensive support that aligns with students' evolving academic and personal development needs. Anderson et al. (2019) emphasizes the importance of ongoing evaluation and evidence-based decision-making in program development. By systematically assessing program effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement, institutions can optimize resource allocation and enhance the impact of mentorship initiatives. This proactive approach not only strengthens program outcomes but also ensures compliance with regulatory standards, safeguarding the integrity and sustainability of mentorship efforts in the dynamic landscape of post-secondary education.

Therefore, prioritizing institutional support, collaborative partnerships, and evidence-driven practices, educational institutions can establish mentorship programs that effectively support student success and contribute to a thriving campus community.

2.8 Cultural Competency and Diverse Inclusivity

2.8.1 An overview of cultural competency and diverse inclusivity in mentorship programs

Cultural competence in mentorship programs is a vital factor for the successful creation of inclusive and welcoming environments that meet the needs of first-year students in colleges and universities. Recognizing cultural background, identity, and university experience should lay the groundwork for building trust and rapport within mentorship relationships (Garcia & Martinez, 2019). Mentorship programs that prioritize cultural competency provide mentors with training and guidance on civil rights-related subjects, including implicit bias, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural communication (Garcia & Martinez, 2019).

This training helps mentors develop the ability to interact with sensitivity and openness in mentorship, fostering a supportive environment for all students (Garcia& Martinez, 2019).

For instance, mentorship programs should proactively recruit mentors from different populations to reflect the diversity of the student community and ensure that mentees have mentors they can learn from by seeing the related role models (Garcia, & Martínez, 2019). The research of Nguyen and Smith (2020) showed that culturally matched mentor-mentee pairs showed more trust and satisfaction than the others. They highlighted that the cultural relatedness and congruence are the points to note while forming mentorship relationships. Besides, this model of mentorship should be supplemented by having specific discussions regarding cultural identity, intersectionality and social justice to create a more inclusive society and promote mutual comprehension across different views (Nguyen & Smith, 2020). The cultural competency and inclusivity element is an essential part of any mentorship initiatives, as this creates supportive and empowering environments where every student feels recognized, supported and encouraged to be the best academically and personally.

Local research in South Africa has also emphasized the importance of cultural competency in mentorship programs. For example, a study by Smith, Johnson, and Lee (2018) explored the impact of culturally sensitive mentorship on first-year students at South African universities. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and interviews to gather data on students' experiences. The findings indicated that culturally competent mentorship programs significantly improved students' sense of belonging and academic success. However, the study also highlighted the need for continuous training and evaluation to address the evolving cultural dynamics within the student population, which is important for future research

2.8.2 Addressing the Needs of Diverse Student Populations

In the context of FYE (First-Year Experience) mentorship programs, addressing the needs of diverse student populations is a multifaceted endeavor that requires thoughtful consideration and proactive strategies. Diversity among students encompasses a wide range of dimensions, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and academic background. Each dimension brings unique challenges and opportunities that mentorship programs must navigate to provide effective support and foster inclusive environments.

Firstly, personalized mentorship plans are important for meeting the unique needs of each student. These plans adjust mentorship activities and support to fit each mentee's preferences, learning styles, and academic goals (MacKenzie & Green, 2019). For example, mentors may need to change how they communicate based on the cultural background or language of their mentees. Technology helps make personalized mentorship possible by allowing mentors to collect and analyze data about mentees' progress, engagement, and areas where they need help. This data-

driven approach ensures that the mentorship is focused and relevant to the individual needs of each student.

Secondly, cultural competence among mentors is paramount in effectively addressing the needs of diverse students. Mentors must possess awareness, sensitivity, and understanding of cultural differences to create inclusive and supportive mentorship relationships (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020). Institutions can promote cultural competence through mentor training programs that focus on cultural humility, implicit bias awareness, and strategies for building rapport across cultural boundaries. Mentors who are culturally competent can better navigate the complexities of mentorship interactions, recognize and respond to the unique challenges faced by minority and underrepresented students, and advocate for inclusive practices within the mentorship program.

Lastly, accessibility remains a critical consideration in ensuring equitable participation in mentorship programs. Accessibility encompasses physical, technological, and financial barriers that may hinder students' engagement in mentorship activities. Technology can mitigate some of these barriers by providing virtual mentorship options, flexible scheduling, and digital resources that can be accessed remotely. By leveraging technology, mentorship programs can reach students in rural or underserved communities, students with disabilities, or those balancing work and family responsibilities, thereby broadening the inclusivity and impact of the mentorship experience (Davis & Webster, 2018).

In conclusion, addressing the needs of diverse student populations in FYE mentorship programs requires a comprehensive approach that integrates personalized support, cultural competence among mentors, and accessible resources

2.8.3 Inclusive Practices in Mentor-Mentee Matching

In mentorship programs within the First-Year Experience (FYE), inclusive practices in mentor-mentee matching are crucial for fostering effective and supportive relationships that cater to the diverse needs of students (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020). These practices aim to create matches that not only consider demographic diversity but also align with mentees' academic aspirations, personal interests, and cultural backgrounds. By implementing inclusive mentor-mentee matching strategies, institutions can enhance the quality of mentorship experiences and promote a sense of belonging among all participants.

Firstly, inclusive mentor-mentee matching involves a holistic approach that goes beyond surface-level characteristics. While demographic diversity is important, matching criteria should also include shared academic or career interests, personality traits, and learning preferences (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020). For an example, pairing a first-generation university student with a mentor who has a similar background, or shared experiences can provide valuable insights and empathy, enhancing the mentee's sense of connection and support within the mentorship relationship.

Technology plays a pivotal role in facilitating inclusive mentor-mentee matching by offering sophisticated algorithms and data analytics. These tools can analyze mentees' profiles, interests, and preferences, along with mentors' expertise and availability, to suggest optimal matches (MacKenzie & Green, 2019). By leveraging technology, mentorship programs can ensure that matches are made based on compatibility and mutual goals, rather than solely on demographic characteristics. This approach not only increases the likelihood of successful mentorship outcomes but also promotes a more inclusive and equitable mentorship environment.

Additionally, inclusive mentor-mentee matching promotes cultural competence and sensitivity among mentors. Mentors who are culturally aware and responsive can effectively navigate cultural differences, communicate across diverse backgrounds, and provide culturally relevant guidance and support (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020). Training programs for mentors that focus on cultural humility and awareness of implicit biases can further enhance their ability to establish meaningful connections and address the unique needs of mentees from underrepresented or marginalized communities.

In conclusion, inclusive practices in mentor-mentee matching are essential for creating supportive and effective mentorship relationships within FYE programs. By adopting holistic matching criteria, leveraging technology for data-driven matching, and promoting cultural competence among mentors, institutions can foster environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to achieve their academic and personal goals.

2.8.4 Impact of Mentorship on Minority and Underrepresented Groups

Research underscores that mentorship fosters a sense of belonging and community among minority and underrepresented students, which is critical for their academic persistence and engagement (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020). Mentors who share similar backgrounds or identities can serve as role models and advocates, offering guidance on navigating institutional structures, accessing resources, and developing resilience in the face of academic and social challenges. This mentorship supports and empowers students to overcome barriers and capitalize on opportunities, thereby enhancing their likelihood of academic success.

Additionally, mentorship provides minority and underrepresented students with access to social capital and networking opportunities that are often instrumental in career advancement and professional development (Davis & Webster, 2018). Mentors can offer insights into industry norms, facilitate introductions to professional networks, and provide career advice that aligns with the mentees' aspirations. This exposure not only expands students' career horizons but also equips them with the skills and confidence needed to navigate and thrive in diverse professional environments.

The impact of mentorship on underrepresented groups in South Africa extends beyond academic and career outcomes to encompass personal growth and well-being. Mentors can play a pivotal role in fostering self-esteem, resilience, and a positive sense of identity among mentees, which are foundational elements for holistic development (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020). In South Africa, where many students face challenges related to historical inequality and social barriers, mentorship can be especially crucial in helping students from disadvantaged backgrounds build confidence and navigate higher education. For example, a study by Makhathini (2021) highlighted how mentorship programs at South African universities supported students from previously disadvantaged communities by enhancing their academic engagement and social integration.

By nurturing supportive mentorship relationships, institutions demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, creating environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to achieve their full potential.

In conclusion, mentorship within FYE programs significantly enhances the academic success, retention rates, and overall well-being of underrepresented students in South Africa. By recognizing and addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by these students, mentorship programs contribute to creating inclusive educational environments that promote equity and support diverse pathways to success (Gallagher & Wentworth, 2020).

2.9 Technology and Innovation in FYE Programs

2.9.1 Use of Digital Platforms for Mentorship

In the digital age, mentorship has evolved significantly with the advent of various digital platforms that facilitate mentor-mentee interactions. These platforms have transformed traditional mentorship models by offering flexibility, accessibility, and enhanced engagement. Digital mentorship platforms provide a range of tools and features that support effective communication, resource sharing, and progress tracking, making mentorship more dynamic and responsive to the needs of modern students (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital mentorship platforms, as institutions were forced to adapt to remote learning and social distancing measures. The pandemic highlighted the crucial role of digital tools in maintaining mentorship relationships when in-person interactions were not possible. With physical campuses closed and face-to-face meetings restricted, digital platforms became essential in providing continuity of support and guidance for students. The increased reliance on digital platforms during the pandemic demonstrated their value in ensuring that mentorship could continue uninterrupted despite global challenges (Smith, 2019).

One of the most significant advantages of digital mentorship platforms is the accessibility they offer. Students and mentors can connect from any location, breaking down geographical barriers that might otherwise limit mentorship opportunities. This is particularly beneficial in the context of higher education, where students may be spread across different campuses or even different countries. Digital platforms enable synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (delayed) communication, allowing mentees to receive timely support and advice, regardless of time zones. This flexibility ensures that mentorship can fit into the busy schedules of both students and mentors, promoting more consistent and meaningful interactions (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010).

Digital mentorship platforms provide various communication tools, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and discussion forums, which enhance the interaction between mentors and mentees. Video conferencing, for instance, allows for face-to-face meetings, which can help build a more personal and trusting relationship compared to traditional email or phone communication. Instant messaging and forums enable quick questions and continuous dialogue, making it easier for mentees to seek advice and feedback as needed. These platforms often include features such as file sharing, collaborative documents, and task management tools, which facilitate the sharing of resources and tracking of progress. This comprehensive support system encourages active engagement and helps maintain momentum in the mentorship process (Smith, 2019).

Digital platforms can also offer personalized mentorship experiences through the use of algorithms and data analytics. These technologies can match mentors and mentees based on various criteria, such as academic interests, career goals, and personality traits, increasing the likelihood of a successful mentorship relationship. Additionally, digital platforms can track interactions and provide insights into the mentee's progress and areas where additional support might be needed. This data-driven approach allows for more tailored guidance and can help identify patterns and outcomes that inform the continuous improvement of mentorship programs. Furthermore, the scalability of digital platforms means that institutions can support a larger number of mentorship relationships without a corresponding increase in administrative burden (Johnson, 2020).

While digital mentorship platforms offer many benefits, they also come with challenges that need to be addressed. Issues such as digital literacy, access to reliable internet, and the impersonal nature of online interactions can impact the effectiveness of digital mentorship. It is crucial for institutions to provide training and support to both mentors and mentees to ensure they can effectively use these platforms. At UKZN, where mentors are often postgraduate students, digital platforms can help address accessibility issues, as these platforms allow for flexible communication, accommodating the busy schedules of both mentors and mentees. Additionally, incorporating hybrid models that combine digital and face- to-face interactions can help mitigate some of the drawbacks and provide a more balanced mentorship experience. By addressing these challenges, digital mentorship platforms can significantly enhance the support and development opportunities available to students in higher education (Brown & Green, 2017).

2.9.2 Innovative Approaches to Virtual Mentorship

Virtual mentorship has introduced innovative approaches that leverage technology to enhance mentor-mentee relationships and support in diverse contexts. These approaches utilize digital tools and platforms to create dynamic, interactive mentorship experiences that transcend traditional boundaries (Bogdan & Dascalu, 2015).

One innovative approach to virtual mentorship is the integration of gamification and interactive simulations. Gamification techniques, such as badges, points, and leaderboards, can incentivize mentees to actively participate and achieve milestones in their mentorship journey. Interactive simulations provide mentees with realistic scenarios to practice skills and receive immediate feedback from their mentors. This approach not only engages mentees in a more interactive learning process but also enhances their problem-solving abilities and decision-making skills in a safe environment (Bogdan & Dascalu, 2015).

Virtual and augmented reality technologies offer another innovative avenue for virtual mentorship. Virtual Reality (VR) can immerse mentees in simulated environments, such as virtual workplaces or laboratories, where they can interact with objects and practice tasks under the guidance of their mentors. Augmented Reality (AR) overlays digital information onto the real-world environment, enabling mentors to provide contextualized guidance and support directly in mentees' physical surroundings. These technologies enhance the authenticity and effectiveness of mentorship interactions by providing realistic and immersive learning experiences (Merchant et al., 2014).

Artificial intelligence (AI) plays a crucial role in modern virtual mentorship by enabling personalized learning experiences. AI algorithms analyze data from mentees' interactions with digital platforms to tailor mentorship content and recommendations based on their individual learning styles, preferences, and progress. AI-powered chatbots can provide immediate responses to mentees' queries and offer personalized advice and resources, enhancing the accessibility and scalability of mentorship programs. This personalized approach ensures that mentees receive relevant support and guidance aligned with their specific needs and goals (Baker et al., 2019).

Collaborative online platforms, such as virtual classrooms and project management tools, facilitate collaborative mentorship experiences. Mentees can collaborate with peers and mentors in real-time on projects, assignments, and research initiatives. These platforms enable mentees to develop teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills while receiving guidance and feedback from mentors. Additionally, cloud-based platforms allow for seamless document sharing, version control, and asynchronous discussions, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of mentorship interactions across different locations and time zones (Herrington et al., 2009).

2.9.3 Technology's Role in Enhancing Accessibility and Reach

Technology has revolutionized mentorship by significantly enhancing accessibility and extending its reach to a broader audience. Through innovative applications and digital platforms, mentorship programs can now transcend geographical limitations and offer support to individuals who may not have had access otherwise (Caruso, 2017).

One of the primary ways technologies enhance accessibility in mentorship is through virtual meetings and remote collaboration tools. Video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet enable mentors and mentees to connect in real-time regardless of their physical locations. This capability is crucial for individuals in remote areas or those with mobility constraints, as it eliminates the need for physical travel and allows for flexible scheduling that accommodates diverse time zones. Virtual meetings also facilitate face-to-face interactions, which are essential for building rapport and trust between mentors and mentees (Peacock & Cowan, 2018).

Another way is through mobile applications and digital platforms which are designed for mentorship. They provide another avenue for enhancing accessibility. These platforms offer mentees the flexibility to access mentorship resources and guidance anytime, anywhere using their smartphones or tablets. Mobile apps can deliver personalized mentorship content, facilitate communication between mentors and mentees through instant messaging or forums, and track mentees' progress over time. Such accessibility is particularly beneficial for students, young professionals, and individuals in rural or underserved communities who may face barriers to accessing traditional mentorship programs (Caruso, 2017).

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms also play a crucial role in making mentorship more accessible and effective. AI-powered chatbots can provide immediate responses to mentees' inquiries, offer personalized recommendations based on their interests and goals, and even simulate mentorship interactions through natural language processing. Machine learning algorithms analyze large datasets to identify patterns in mentees' behavior and preferences, allowing mentors to tailor their guidance and support accordingly. This data-driven approach not only enhances the quality of mentorship but also ensures that mentees receive relevant and timely assistance, regardless of their location or background (Gibson & Ifenthaler, 2018).

Additionally, social media and professional networking platforms broaden the reach of mentorship programs by connecting mentors and mentees across diverse communities and industries. Platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook groups enable mentees to access a global network of mentors, industry experts, and peers who can offer advice, share insights, and facilitate professional connections. These platforms foster a collaborative learning environment where mentees can learn from the experiences of others, participate in discussions, and showcase their skills and achievements to a broader audience. By leveraging social media, mentorship programs can reach a wider demographic and provide mentorship opportunities that are inclusive and accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds (Ellison & Boyd, 2013), offering a theoretical framework for how social media can enhance networking and mentorship.

2.10 Conclusion

In summary, the investigation into the effectiveness of the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program for first-year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) represents a crucial endeavor in understanding and enhancing the initial academic journey of students. The transition from high school to university can be both exciting and challenging, with its unique set of demands and adjustments. As such, the presence of comprehensive mentorship programs becomes a pivotal factor in ensuring a positive and successful first-year experience for students.

The literature reviewed underscores several key aspects of the first-year experience that are significantly enhanced by mentorship programs. Academic success is foundational, as it builds confidence and competence in students. Studies such as those by Kuh et al. (2008) illustrate that mentorship programs offer personalized support that improves academic achievement and helps develop effective study habits. Additionally, retention rates are closely linked to students' sense of belonging and connection to their institution, as emphasized by Tinto (1993). Programs that enhance retention help students navigate the transition to university through continuous support and engagement.

Student engagement, which involves active participation in academic and campus activities, is crucial for both academic success and social integration. Research by Harper and Quaye (2009) highlights the importance of culturally responsive engagement strategies in supporting diverse student populations. The formation of strong social connections, as discussed by Pittman & Richmond (2008) and Thomas (2012), is essential for reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing students' overall university experience.

Financial limitations represent a significant challenge for many first-year students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Joo et al. (2008) and Robb & Sharpe (2009) demonstrate that financial stress negatively impacts academic performance and overall well-being. Addressing financial stress through aid, scholarships, and financial literacy programs is crucial for supporting students' academic success.

All studies reviewed involve students providing input about their own experiences, with a particular emphasis on qualitative methods. In studies such as those by Harper and Quaye (2009) and Pittman & Richmond (2008), students used their own words to describe their experiences, offering deep, contextual insights into how mentorship and social connections influence their engagement and satisfaction. This approach allows for a rich understanding of students' perspectives and the impact of mentorship programs on their experiences.

The intended study, being exclusively qualitative, will continue this tradition by focusing on how students themselves describe their experiences within the FYE Mentorship Program at UKZN. By capturing students' narratives, the research will explore how the program contributes to academic success, retention, and overall satisfaction. It will also explore how the mentorship program supports student engagement, social integration, and the management of financial limitations. This approach will address gaps in the literature and provide practical recommendations for enhancing the FYE Mentorship Program, ultimately enriching the first-year experience and supporting students' academic journeys.

UKZN, with its diverse academic disciplines and student population, holds a significant role in shaping students' academic pathways and broader perspectives. By focusing on the exploration of the FYE Mentorship Program's outcomes within this college, this exploratory study seeks to shed light on the effectiveness of mentorship initiatives in facilitating students' academic engagement, retention, and overall satisfaction. Through an examination of case studies involving mentorship programs at UKZN, including the peer mentorship program, the faculty mentorship program, and other college-specific mentorship initiatives, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge. By assessing the impact of mentorship on academic achievement, social integration, and personal growth, this research endeavors to offer practical

recommendations for program refinement and enhancement.

The proposed exploratory study holds significance for UKZN as a whole. The outcomes of this investigation have the potential to inform evidence-based practices in higher education, guiding institutional efforts to create a supportive, inclusive, and engaging learning environment for first-year students. Ultimately, the study seeks to underline the vital role of mentorship programs in shaping students' experiences, fostering academic success, and contributing to the broader mission of educational excellence at UKZN. It also aims to determine if these programs meet the needs discussed above and if UKZN is aligned with the global focus mentioned in the preceding paragraphs.

By delving into the nuanced dynamics of the FYE Mentorship Program, this exploratory study seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding effective strategies for improving the first-year experience. Through rigorous research and analysis, the study aspires to illuminate the pathways toward achieving positive results, thereby enriching the educational journey of first-year students and fortifying the foundation for their future academic pursuits.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter details the methodology employed to investigate whether the First-Year Experience (FYE) mentorship program for first-year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is able to meet its needs. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate. Qualitative methods allow for a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attach to their involvement in the FYE mentorship program (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By utilizing qualitative methods, the study aims to capture the rich, detailed narratives that quantitative data alone cannot provide.

The study focused on interviewing students from the College of Humanities, as the interviewer had access to participants from this college. While the findings reflect the experiences of students within the College of Humanities, they also provide valuable insights that represent a segment of the broader UKZN student community.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of first-year students who participated in the FYE mentorship program at UKZN?
- What are the first-year students' needs, and is the FYE mentorship program at UKZN able to meet these needs?
- To what extent do first-year students at UKZN feel supported by the FYE mentoring program in terms of their social and emotional adjustment to university life?
- What are the factors that influence the success or failure of the FYE mentorship program for first-year students at UKZN?

3.2 Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism

Social constructivism, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes learning as a social and cooperative process where knowledge is actively constructed through interactions with peers and cultural contexts. This theory challenges the notion of learning as an individualistic endeavour, highlighting the critical role of social dialogue, shared experiences, and cultural norms in shaping the learning process (Wertsch, 1991).

This theoretical framework provides a valuable lens for understanding how mentorship programs support first-year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). By examining the dynamic interactions between mentors and mentees, social constructivism allows for an exploration of how knowledge, skills, and attitudes are co-constructed in a supportive environment. The following components of social constructivism are particularly relevant to this study:

1. Active Engagement and Dialogue

Social constructivism posits that meaningful learning occurs through active participation and dialogue. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that language serves as a primary tool for mediating thought and fostering cognitive development. In the context of mentorship programs, the mentor-mentee relationship is a site for continual dialogue, where mentees articulate their academic and social challenges, seek clarity, and collaboratively construct solutions. For example, research by Mercer (2000) highlights the role of “exploratory talk” in creating shared understanding, which can be directly applied to mentorship contexts. Through these interactions, mentees gain insights into academic expectations and social norms that extend beyond formal classroom settings.

2. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The Zone of Proximal Development is a cornerstone of Vygotsky’s theory, referring to the difference between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance from a more knowledgeable other (Chaiklin, 2003). In mentorship programs, mentors act as scaffolds, offering tailored support that enables mentees to overcome challenges they could not address on their own. For example, Daniels (2016) notes that scaffolding within the ZPD can enhance problem-solving skills and promote higher-order thinking. This process not only fosters academic growth but also builds mentees’ confidence in their abilities, facilitating their transition to university life.

3. Cultural and Contextual Influence

Social constructivism acknowledges the profound impact of cultural and contextual factors on learning. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is deeply embedded within a cultural framework, shaped by social norms, values, and practices. At UKZN, the mentorship program operates within a diverse cultural setting, where mentors familiar with the university’s environment and its cultural nuances can effectively guide mentees in navigating academic resources, social dynamics, and institutional expectations.

Rogoff (2003) emphasizes that such culturally relevant mentoring aligns with mentees' lived experiences, making the learning process more accessible and impactful.

4. Collaboration and Community

Collaboration is a fundamental principle of social constructivism, which suggests that joint efforts and collective problem-solving deepen understanding and foster a sense of belonging (Palincsar, 1998). Mentorship programs create opportunities for group discussions, collaborative tasks, and peer interactions, helping students build relationships and a support network. This collaborative environment not only enhances mentees' academic skills but also contributes to their social integration and emotional well-being. Studies by Lave and Wenger (1991) on communities of practice further demonstrate how shared learning experiences foster a sense of community, which is essential for student success in higher education.

This study will use the social constructivist framework to investigate how the FYE Mentorship Program at UKZN supports first-year students in their transition to university. Specifically, it will explore how the program facilitates academic engagement, social integration, and personal development. By examining the mentees' experiences through the lens of social constructivism, the study aims to uncover how the program's interactive and culturally responsive approach aligns with the principles of active engagement, the ZPD, and collaborative learning.

3.3 Research Design:

The qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it aims to explore the experiences, benefits and challenges of first-year students participating in the FYE mentorship program at UKZN. Qualitative research is particularly valuable for its ability to capture the richness and depth of participants' lived experiences, which is essential for understanding the multifaceted nature of the FYE mentorship program (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By employing a qualitative approach, the study seeks to delve into the personal narratives and subjective interpretations of the mentees, offering a comprehensive view of their engagement with the program.

This design is well-suited for investigating complex and nuanced issues, which are often difficult to quantify. The qualitative approach allows for flexibility in data collection and analysis, enabling the researcher to adapt to the emerging themes and insights that arise during the study (Patton, 2015). This adaptability is crucial for exploring the dynamic and individualized experiences of first-year students, as it facilitates a deeper understanding of how the mentorship program influences their academic and personal development. Through methods such as semi-structured interviews, the study can probe into the specific aspects of the mentorship experience that are most significant to the participants.

Furthermore, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of generating rich, descriptive data that provides a detailed portrayal of the mentees' experiences. This approach values context and meaning, allowing the researcher to interpret the data within the broader social and educational environment of the university (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By focusing on the students' voices and perspectives, the qualitative research design ensures that the findings are grounded in the participants' realities, offering valuable insights into the effectiveness of the FYE mentorship program and potential areas for enhancement.

3.4 Participants and Sampling:

The participants for this study were students from the College of Humanities at UKZN who had participated in the FYE mentorship program for at least one semester during their first year. These students were selected because their direct involvement with the mentorship program aligns with the focal point of the research, making them ideal participants.

Convenience sampling was employed to select participants based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. This sampling technique was appropriate given the practical constraints of limited time and resources for participant recruitment. Although the sample was limited to students from the College of Humanities, the insights gathered offered meaningful perspectives on the FYE mentorship program. While the study does not aim to generalize findings to the entire university, the selected participants represent a valuable segment of the student body and provide important reflections on their experiences in the program as part of the UKZN student community.

However, it is important to acknowledge that convenience sampling may introduce bias into the sample, as participants may not fully represent the diversity of the student population at UKZN. This method may lead to an overrepresentation of certain groups who are more accessible or willing to participate, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite this limitation, convenience sampling provides a feasible way to collect valuable data within the constraints of the study.

Efforts were made to mitigate potential biases by ensuring a diverse sample that included students of different genders, ages, and academic backgrounds. This diversity was intended to provide a broader range of perspectives, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the FYE mentorship program. The final sample included approximately 20 students, which was sufficient to reach data saturation and identify key themes related to the research questions (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

3.5 Data Collection Techniques

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method in this study (see Appendix 4). This approach struck a balance between structured and unstructured methods, allowing for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and perspectives while maintaining a consistent framework for data collection. Such an approach enabled participants to provide detailed and contextualized responses to the research questions (Schreier, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews were particularly well-suited to this study as they allowed the interviewer to probe deeper into specific areas of interest while ensuring a guided conversation. This flexibility was crucial for capturing the complex and nuanced experiences of first-year students participating in the FYE mentorship program. Through open-ended questions, the interviewer explored the participants' thoughts and feelings in depth, uncovering insights that might not have emerged through more rigid data collection methods (Schreier, 2019).

The interview guide included a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, descriptive data about the participants' experiences with the mentorship program. Topics included the students' initial expectations, the nature of their interactions with mentors, the perceived benefits and challenges of the program, and any suggestions for improvement. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and facilitate thorough analysis.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the data, multiple interviews were conducted with each participant. This approach allows for the verification of responses and the exploration of emerging themes in greater detail. Additionally, conducting interviews at different points in time can help capture changes in the participants' perspectives and experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the FYE mentorship program (Schreier, 2019).

3.6 Instruments Used:

The interview schedule (see **Appendix 4**) served as the main instrument for data collection. This schedule included a set of open-ended questions designed to explore the research questions and allow participants to share their experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to the FYE mentorship program. Open-ended questions are particularly effective in qualitative research as they encourage participants to provide detailed and meaningful responses, facilitating the exploration of emerging themes and an in-depth understanding of their experiences (Schreier, 2019).

The development of the interview schedule involved a thorough review of the literature on mentorship programs and first-year student experiences. The questions were critically engaged to ensure their relevance and alignment with the research objectives. This literature-informed approach grounded the questions in existing research while allowing for the discovery of new insights specific to the FYE mentorship program at UKZN. To ensure the comprehensiveness and clarity of the interview schedule, it was piloted with a small group of participants (10 participants), and the questions were amended based on feedback to enhance their ability to elicit the desired information.

Participants were identified and approached through posters displayed on campus and via social media platforms. The study employed purposive sampling, which is a non-random sampling method where participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. In this study, the aim was to select first-year students who had participated in the FYE mentorship program, as their experiences provided direct insight into the research questions. This targeted approach ensured that participants had the relevant knowledge and experiences to contribute meaningfully to the study.

By using the interview schedule as the primary instrument, the study sought to collect rich, detailed data that provided a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for the collection of nuanced responses, which were crucial for understanding the complex dynamics of the mentorship program. This approach supported the study's objective of generating in-depth insights into how the FYE mentorship program impacted first-year students.

3.7 Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for analyzing the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is well-suited for this study as it allows for a detailed examination of the participants' experiences and perceptions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the FYE mentorship program on first-year students.

3.7.1 The process of thematic analysis includes the following:

Step 1: Getting to Know the Data

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the first step involves immersing yourself in the collected data. This process includes actively re-reading the data to identify emerging themes or patterns. Additionally, transcription of verbal data, such as interviews, is crucial for familiarizing oneself with the material. Before starting the analysis, it's essential for the researcher to develop a foundational understanding of the data. Therefore, the researcher engaged deeply with the data, repeatedly reviewing the research findings and jotting down initial thoughts. Braun and Clarke (2006) also suggest that thoroughly examining the entire dataset is an effective method for familiarizing oneself with the data.

Step 2: Creating Initial Codes

After thoroughly reviewing the collected data to become familiar with it, the next stage involves generating initial codes. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), this phase consists of identifying and labeling segments of the data that are of particular interest to the researcher. These codes aim to capture various themes or patterns present in the data. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2012) argue that codes serve to specify and name aspects of the data relevant to the research question, encompassing both explicit and underlying meanings. In this study, the researcher carefully read through the data and created initial codes by highlighting key phrases and segments that aligned with the themes of the FYE mentorship program.

Step 3: Identifying Themes

Moving from codes to themes marks a critical phase in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). After initial coding, the researcher examined the data to identify patterns and similarities between the codes. Codes that shared common characteristics were grouped together to form broader themes. This process involved analyzing the relationships between different codes and identifying overarching themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. The researcher sought to ensure that the themes reflected key aspects of the research questions and represented coherent patterns within the data.

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

The refinement of themes occurs at two levels, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, the researcher reviewed and refined each individual theme based on the data extracts associated with each code. Afterward, the researcher examined the entire dataset to assess how the themes related to one another and to ensure the overall coherence of the thematic structure. This process allowed the researcher to make necessary adjustments to the themes, ensuring they accurately reflected the data and were valid representations of the participants' experiences. The final step in this phase was creating a thematic map that visually represented the relationships between the identified themes.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this step, the themes were further refined and clearly articulated. Braun and Clarke (2012) emphasized the importance of defining what each theme encompassed in relation to the data. The researcher undertook ongoing analysis to ensure that each theme accurately represented a distinct aspect of the dataset, avoiding overlap between themes. Each theme was carefully named to reflect its content and relevance to the research questions and objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Step 6: Report Writing

Finally, after thoroughly organizing and refining the themes, the researcher conducted a final analysis in preparation for writing the thematic content analysis report. This phase marked the conclusion of Braun and Clarke's (2012) outlined stages for thematic analysis. The researcher selected the most pertinent themes derived from the study findings and began composing the research report, integrating these themes into the narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

3.8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research involves the researcher's ongoing self-reflection on their role, potential biases, and the ways they shape the research process (Berger, 2015). In this study, my positioning as the researcher influences how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted. My understanding of the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is shaped by my academic background and prior engagement with mentorship dynamics, which affects the way I view and interpret the students' narratives.

As a student at UKZN and both an observer and a participant within the university system, I recognize that my presence and interactions influence the research process. This aligns with the principles of social constructivism, which emphasize that reality is co-constructed through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). My interpretations are informed by my own experiences, punctuating certain aspects of reality while potentially overlooking others. Therefore, reflexivity is crucial to acknowledge how my subjectivity may affect the analysis of students' Experiences

The social constructivist framework guiding this research further supports the importance of reflexivity. Students' accounts, collected through interviews, are expressions of their realities, and my role as the researcher influences how these narratives are framed. Social constructivism posits that knowledge is co-created within social contexts (Gergen, 1999), and as the researcher, I contribute to shaping the meaning derived from the students' experiences. Recognizing this influence ensures transparency and helps maintain the integrity of the data.

To address potential biases, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). This journal documented my thoughts, assumptions, and decisions, allowing me to critically reflect on how my position may shape the outcomes of the study. By consistently engaging in reflexivity, I aimed to preserve the authenticity of the students' voices while maintaining awareness of my influence on the research process.

3.9 Limitations:

The research design has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the small sample size, a result of convenience sampling, may limit the generalizability or transferability of the findings to the broader student population. Additionally, convenience sampling may introduce bias into participant selection, as those who are easily accessible may not adequately represent the diversity of the student population at UKZN or other colleges within the university. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting and applying the study's findings.

Another significant limitation is that the study did not attract first-year students, despite the focus on understanding their experiences within the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program. This gap limits the ability to gather direct insights from the key target group. Without the direct perspectives of first-year students, it becomes challenging to fully assess the program's effectiveness from the viewpoint of the students who are the primary beneficiaries. This limitation reduces the study's ability to reflect the direct lived experiences of first-year participants, which could have added richness and depth to the findings.

It is important to consider these limitations when interpreting and applying the findings of the study, and future research should aim to engage a larger and more diverse sample of first-year students to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

3.10 Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability:

Validity refers to the degree to which a study accurately measures what it intends to measure (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, the use of semi-structured interviews will allow for the exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences,

while also allowing for follow-up questions to ensure clarity and accuracy of responses. This approach enhances the validity of the study by ensuring that the data collected is rich and detailed, reflecting the participants' true experiences.

Reliability refers to the consistency and replicability of the findings (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, reliability will be considered by using semi-structured interviews, which will allow for consistency in the types of questions asked. Additionally, the use of thematic analysis will involve the systematic and repeated review of the data to ensure that the findings are consistent. This approach enhances the reliability of the study by ensuring that the findings are consistent and replicable.

Generalizability or transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, generalizability or transferability will be limited due to the small sample size (maximum of 10 participants) and the use of convenience sampling. However, the findings of the study will be contextualized within the UKZN setting, and the research methods and findings will be clearly reported to allow for transferability to other similar contexts.

Credibility refers to the degree to which the research findings accurately represent the participants' views and experiences (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, credibility will be ensured through the use of multiple data sources (i.e., semi-structured interviews) and the triangulation of data to enhance the validity of the findings.

Dependability will be established through the use of clear and consistent procedures for data collection, coding, and analysis, as well as the documentation of any changes made to the research design during the study.

Confirmability and conformability refer to the objectivity of the research findings (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, confirmability and conformability will be addressed by maintaining an audit trail of the research process, including the documentation of decision-making processes and any potential biases or conflicts of interest that may have influenced the research findings. This will ensure that the research findings are objective and reflect the views and experiences of the study participants.

3.11 Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations are paramount in any research endeavor, and this study has meticulously addressed them to safeguard the rights and well-being of participants. One critical aspect was obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring they comprehended the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits before their involvement commenced. This process aimed to uphold transparency and respect participants' autonomy in deciding whether to participate or withdraw from the study at any point without facing repercussions.

Additionally, the study prioritized the protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality. Measures were implemented to anonymize participants' identities in all documentation and securely store their data to prevent unauthorized access. These safeguards were crucial in maintaining trust and confidentiality, fostering an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and insights openly.

In adherence to ethical guidelines, the study obtained necessary approvals from relevant authorities. This included ethical clearance from institutional review boards, as evidenced by the documentation provided in the appendices (Appendix 1: Gate Keepers, Appendix 2: Participant Recruitment and Poster, Appendix 3: Information Sheet and Consent to Participate, Appendix 4: Interview Schedule, and Appendix 5: Ethical Clearance). This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number **HSSREC/00006278/2023**). These documents serve as a testament to the study's commitment to ethical integrity and compliance with established protocols, ensuring the ethical conduct of research and upholding standards of academic rigor and credibility.

In summary, ethical considerations in this study were foundational to maintaining the trustworthiness and validity of the research findings. By adhering to informed consent protocols, protecting participant confidentiality, and securing necessary approvals, the study upheld ethical standards essential for responsible research conduct and respect for participants' rights throughout the research process.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the qualitative results derived from the semi-structured interviews (**appendix 4**) conducted with students who participated in the First-Year Experience (FYE) mentorship program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of first-year students who participated in the FYE mentorship program at UKZN?
2. What are the first-year students' needs, and can the FYE mentorship program at UKZN meet these needs?
3. To what extent do first-year students at UKZN feel supported by the FYE mentoring program in terms of their social and emotional adjustment to university life?
4. What factors influence the success or failure of the FYE mentorship program for first-year students at UKZN?

The findings are organized thematically based on the responses from the participants. The major themes identified include the experiences of first-year students with the FYE mentorship program, first-year students' needs and program impact on students, support for social and emotional adjustment, and factors influencing the success or failure of the FYE mentorship program.

4.1.1 Demographic Representation of Participants

Understanding the demographic profile of the participants provides context to the findings of this study. Table 1 below presents the socio-demographic data of the participants involved in the research.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Data of Participants

Gender	Year of Study	Race	Age	Number of participants
Male	1 st year	Black	18-20	4
Female	2 nd year	Indian	19-21	3
	3 rd year	Colored	22-23	2
	4 th Year	White	24-25	1
		Total		10

4.2 Thematic Results

Thematic analysis of the data led to the identification of several themes and subthemes that address the main research questions. These themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes Emerged in This Study

Themes	Sub-themes
Experiences of first-year students with FYE mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Sense of belonging - Accessibility and support from mentors - Communication via WhatsApp groups
First-year students' needs and program Impact according to their experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academic guidance - Basic needs assistance (shelter, funding etc.) - Navigation around the campus and orientation
Support for social and emotional adjustment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited emotional support - Social engagement via WhatsApp - Variable mentor engagement

Factors influencing the success or failure of the FYE program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student participation - Mentor accountability - Program Awareness
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4.2.1 Experiences of First-Year Students with FYE Mentorship

The experiences of the students who participated in the FYE mentorship program at UKZN varied but were generally positive. The data collected from the participants revealed several key aspects of their experiences, reflecting both the strengths and areas for improvement within the program.

a) Sense of Belonging

Many participants highlighted the sense of belonging fostered by the FYE mentorship program. This sense of community is crucial for first-year students navigating a new and often overwhelming environment. Participant 1, now a second-year student, mentioned, "*The mentorship program has been so helpful for me during my first year of study. I felt a sense of belonging. My FYE mentor was so helpful and easily accessible when I needed her.*"

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 5, who noted that having a professional mentor made the transition from high school to university more bearable and that they did not feel out of place: "*Yooh! I don't know what I would have done had it not been for my mentors, their patience and professionalism were out of this place! Leaving high school, I was leaving my hometown, friends, and family behind, I didn't feel out of place as the mentors made it homey for me by connecting me with other first-years in the FYE program (giggles)*".

The use of phrases like "*I didn't feel out of place*" highlights how the mentorship program, through social engagement, constructed a sense of home and familiarity. This reinforces the idea that reality, including a sense of belonging, is socially constructed through shared interactions and cultural contexts (Gergen, 2009).

Participant 9 noted how, despite sometimes feeling isolated as a white female student at UKZN, the mentorship WhatsApp group fostered inclusivity: *“Although UKZN is not racist, I sometimes felt lonely as a white female student... However, the mentorship WhatsApp group created a sense of belonging and community for me.”*. This illustrates another tenet of social constructivism: multiple realities and interpretations exist, shaped by individual experiences and interactions. For Participant 9, the mentorship program helped bridge the cultural and racial divides, reinforcing the idea that a socially constructed network of relationships can transform feelings of isolation into belonging (Gergen, 2015).

The importance of a supportive community cannot be overstated. Research indicates that a strong sense of belonging can enhance academic motivation and overall student well-being (Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore, the FYE mentorship program's ability to create this environment is a significant achievement.

b) Accessibility and Support from Mentors

Accessibility and the supportive nature of mentors were frequently mentioned as significant benefits of the program. Participant 8 emphasized that FYE mentors, usually senior students (Masters and Doctoral candidates), were experienced and readily available when needed. This participant also highlighted the convenience of having WhatsApp groups for communication, stating: *“I would encourage first years to make use of the FYE mentorship program. Uhm.... It’s easy and convenient to get assistance as there are WhatsApp groups where you can engage with peers and mentors.”*

One major challenge faced by first-year students is the academic workload. Higher education demands greater academic rigor than high school, leading to stress and feeling overwhelmed (American College Health Association, 2017). Participant 6, now a third-year student, found that the FYE mentorship program was helpful in improving academic performance through guidance on study strategies, she stated that:

*“The FYE program has webinars that teach about study skills, finding resources, and how to manage one's time effectively. This was extremely helpful in helping me manage my workload and plan my things accordingly and I have carried this with me till today in my third year and it is still working **kahle nje!** (meaning very well) “..*

However, some students such as Participant 10, a first-year student, reported that the mentorship program wasn't helpful to them mainly because their mentor was neglecting them. The mentor had opened the WhatsApp group but was never available to help or answer their queries. He stated, *"University workload is a lot. I'm often confused, anxious, and frustrated. Thoughts of dropping out have visited my mind many times."* The absence of consistent support can exacerbate the stress and confusion that come with the increased academic workload in higher education (American College Health Association, 2017).

These varying experiences reflect the multiple interpretations of the same object (mentorship). While Participants 6 and 8 perceived mentorships as beneficial due to frequent communication and engagement, Participant 10 viewed it negatively, experiencing mentorship as a source of frustration due to a lack of support. This emphasizes how context gives rise to different meanings, demonstrating the flexibility of social constructionism in accommodating various student realities based on their individual experiences (Burr, 2015).

Research supports that mentorship programs can alleviate students' challenges by providing academic support and time management strategies (Terrion & Leonard, 2007; Maphosa, Sikhwari, & Masehela, 2014). Accessibility of mentors is also critical, as it ensures that first-year students have continuous support. The use of WhatsApp groups as a communication tool not only facilitates timely assistance but also fosters a sense of community and peer support. According to Vygotsky's theory of social development, learning is a social process, and peer interactions play a crucial role in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

In conclusion, while the FYE mentorship program provides valuable support through accessible communication channels and peer interactions, addressing the issue of mentor availability is essential. Enhancing mentor engagement and availability will help bridge the gap between the program's benefits and the challenges reported by students, ultimately improving the overall effectiveness of the mentorship experience.

c) Communication via WhatsApp Groups

The use of WhatsApp groups as a communication tool was a recurring theme in the participants' responses. These groups facilitated easy and timely communication between first-year students and their mentors. Participant 1 mentioned the active WhatsApp group established for convenience, which helped maintain a steady line of communication and support.

The effectiveness of WhatsApp as a communication platform in educational settings is well-documented. It allows for instant messaging, sharing of resources, and real-time problem-solving, which are all essential for first-year students adjusting to university life (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). Additionally, integrating technology in mentorship programs like FYE can enhance accessibility and engagement, making it easier for students to stay connected and supported throughout their transition to university life.

In summary, the experiences of first-year students with the FYE mentorship program were largely positive, with participants appreciating the sense of belonging, accessibility, and effective communication facilitated by the program. These findings align with Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention, which emphasizes the importance of academic and social integration in retaining students in higher education.

4.2.2 Thematic Analysis of First-Year Students' Needs and Program Impact according to their experiences

The analysis of this theme revealed that first-year students have various needs ranging from academic guidance to basic needs such as shelter, funding, etc. The ability of the FYE mentorship program in meeting these needs is discussed through the experiences shared by the participants.

a) Academic Guidance

Academic guidance emerged as a critical need for first-year students. Participant 6 highlighted the usefulness of the FYE program in improving academic performance: *"This program was so useful for me, especially in helping improve my grades. I got information about The Writing Place and where to access tutors when I had problems with my studies, this helped me pass most of my modules!"*. Participant 9 shared a similar sentiment, stating, *"Our mentors are experienced postgraduate students within our college, and they are very knowledgeable. I was fortunate that my mentor was from the same school as me within the college, and they were able to guide me really well academically and guide me on where to find relevant resources to help with my studies."*. This indicates that the FYE mentorship program plays a vital role in guiding students academically and connecting them with essential academic resources.

Academic support is a cornerstone of the mentorship program. Providing information about resources such as The Writing Place and tutoring services helps students navigate academic challenges and enhances their learning experience. According to Kuh (2008), effective student engagement strategies, such as providing timely academic support and resource access, are crucial for promoting student success. The mentorship program aligns with these principles by ensuring students know and access essential academic support resources (Kuh, 2008). The mentorship program aligns well with these principles by ensuring students know and access academic support resources.

b) Basic Needs

Several participants emphasized the need for basic necessities, such as shelter and funding, and how the FYE mentorship program assisted them in these areas by providing information and guidance. Participant 3, who came from the Free State, shared their challenges: "My needs as a first-year student included a safe shelter, funding, and finding my way around the buildings. As someone from the Free State, studying in a different province that I have never been to before was so challenging.

This participant noted that the FYE mentors helped them navigate the Humanities buildings and find classrooms and her assigned room at the university's residence, which was crucial for their transition. Participant 4 also highlighted the critical role of FYE mentors in addressing basic needs:

"I struggled with a basic need of shelter. I remember sleeping in the halls as I did not have res. That time I had applied for NSFAS. I did not know what to do. I was assisted after some time by one of the FYE mentors in telling me where to seek help, which was the financial aid office in my college. That was so helpful because after some time my issues were resolved". This underscores the program's ability to address urgent needs and providing guidance to necessary resources.

Addressing basic needs is fundamental to student success. Maslow's hierarchy of needs posits that basic physiological and safety needs must be met before individuals can focus on higher-level needs such as belonging and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The FYE mentorship program's role in addressing these fundamental needs is crucial in creating an environment where students can thrive academically and personally.

Therefore, based on participants' responses, it is evident that the FYE program meets these needs effectively. The mentorship provided through the program assists students in navigating the challenges of securing basic necessities such as shelter and funding, thereby fulfilling the fundamental needs essential for their overall well-being and academic success. Participants have highlighted the program's success in connecting them to essential resources, indicating that the FYE mentorship plays a vital role in their transition and adjustment to university life.

c) Navigation around the campus and Orientation

Navigation around the campus and orientation were identified as significant needs for first-year students, especially for those unfamiliar with the campus. Participant 3, a student from the Free State province emphasized the importance of attending orientation and how FYE mentors assisted in navigating the campus: *"I often got lost around the building to classes as I did not attend orientation. I strongly advise first-year students to attend orientation as information about finding one's way around the campus is also shared. The FYE mentors were kind enough and helpful in assisting me to navigate the Humanities buildings and help find my way to classes"*. This highlights the mentors' role in easing the transition and helping students acclimate to their new environment.

Orientation programs are critical in helping new students adjust to university life. They provide essential information and resources that facilitate students' academic and social integration. The mentorship program's involvement in helping students navigate the campus and find their classes is an extension of these orientation efforts, ensuring that students continue to receive support beyond the initial orientation period (Levitz & Noel, 2009).

4.2.3 Support for Social and Emotional Adjustment

This theme examines the extent to which first-year students feel supported by the FYE mentoring program in terms of their social and emotional adjustment to university life. The analysis reveals mixed experiences, with some students feeling well-supported, while others identify areas for improvement.

a) Emotional Adjustment Support

Social Constructivism, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the role of social interactions in developing cognitive and emotional skills. Vygotsky's theory suggests that learners' emotional and cognitive development is deeply intertwined with their social experiences. According to this perspective, emotional support is not merely an ancillary aspect of learning but a fundamental component that affects cognitive development. Therefore, integrating more robust emotional support within mentorship programs is crucial for fostering a holistic learning environment that supports both academic and emotional growth. By providing consistent emotional

Through mentoring relationships, programs can better align with Vygotsky's theory, facilitating more comprehensive student development.

Several participants noted that while the FYE mentoring program offered some level of emotional support, it was not comprehensive. Participant 2 expressed that the program was not really helpful with emotional adjustment support as all they do is refer you to the psychologists in learning support: *“Pshh! They are mostly helpful and interested in your grades and making sure you find the right assistance that you need, otherwise, all they do is send you to the psychologists in the learning support if you report emotional challenges”*. This indicates that while academic support is strong, emotional support may need more direct and consistent attention.

Participant 3 shared a similar sentiment, stating, *“I don't think there is much they can do to assist one with their emotional needs. There is the element of calming down the anxiety, but that's just it!! (giggles). For example, I am from the Free State, and I often miss home terribly, especially because I am a female from rural area having to adapt to a busy urban area was also a challenge for me, but they couldn't help me. There was nothing they could do”*. This highlights a gap in the program regarding the provision of emotional support for students dealing with homesickness and other emotional challenges.

The importance of emotional support in higher education cannot be understated. According to research, emotional well-being is closely linked to academic performance and overall student success (Parker et al., 2004). Therefore, enhancing the emotional support component of the FYE mentorship program could significantly benefit first-year students and improve the program's ability to meet its needs better. Participants have highlighted the program's success in connecting them to essential resources, indicating that the FYE mentorship plays a vital role in their transition and adjustment to university life.

b) Social Engagement and Peer Interaction

Social engagement and peer interaction are critical components of the university experience. Participant 5 mentioned that there are social engagement opportunities within the FYE program, such as WhatsApp groups and the FYE online platform, which feature fun and informative activities to keep students informed and entertained. However, the level of social engagement can vary depending on the mentor's involvement.

Participant 7 highlighted this variability, stating, *"It depends on the kind of mentor you are assigned. Some mentors are active and passionate about helping first years, while some are seldom and never available for their mentees. I did not have a nice experience as my mentor was not helpful, but my friend did and often helped me with resources and information shared by her mentor"*. This suggests that the program's effectiveness in promoting social engagement may depend significantly on the individual mentors' commitment and availability.

According to Social Constructivism, social engagement is crucial for fostering a sense of community and belonging among students. Astin's (1999) theory of involvement posits that students learn and grow more when they are actively engaged with their peers and faculty. Therefore, ensuring that all mentors are equally committed and trained to facilitate social interactions could enhance the overall effectiveness of the FYE mentorship program.

Participant responses indicate that the FYE mentorship program at UKZN meets various needs effectively, including addressing basic necessities and providing academic and social support. However, the variability in mentors' engagement levels suggests a challenge in ensuring consistent social interaction and support for all students. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory, as the quality of social interactions can significantly influence learning and development. Addressing these challenges by ensuring mentors are well-trained and committed can enhance the FYE program's effectiveness in promoting both academic success and social well-being.

4.2.4 Factors Influencing the Success or Failure of the FYE Mentorship Program

This theme explores the factors that influence the success or failure of the FYE mentorship program at UKZN according to participants' experiences and responses. The analysis identifies key factors, including student participation, mentor mentoring, and program management as follows:

a) Student Participation

Student participation is a critical factor in the success of the FYE mentorship program. Participant 1 noted, *"I think the success lies in the willingness of students to participate in the program. There are a lot of students in my class who have never heard about the program. Even after one lets them know*

about it, most just choose not to attend, more especially males, (giggles) they show no interest at all, girls show a bit of interest and ask more information about it". This indicates that raising awareness and encouraging participation are essential for the program's success.

b) Mentor Monitoring

The monitoring of mentors is another crucial factor. Participant 7 suggested that mentors should be monitored, as some do not fulfill their responsibilities adequately: *"I think mentors should be monitored as some do not do their jobs. Uhhh!..., I don't know, maybe constant workshops and evaluation can be done to keep them on their feet to do their jobs and improve the success rate of the FYE program to achieve its goals".* Participant 10 shared the same sentiment and reported that the mentorship program wasn't helpful to him mainly because their mentor neglected them. The mentor had opened the WhatsApp group but was never available to help or answer their queries. He stated, *"University workload is a lot. I'm often confused, anxious, and frustrated. Thoughts of dropping out have visited my mind many times, our FYE mentor never respond to our queries and is never available to assist! She has opened the Whatsapp group but never engage with us."*

Monitoring and evaluating mentors can ensure they provide the necessary support and engagement. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) state that effective mentoring relationships significantly impact student success and retention. Regular evaluations and ongoing training for mentors could enhance their effectiveness and commitment.

c) *Program Management and Structure*

The management and structure of the FYE mentorship program also play a significant role in its success or failure. Participant 2 suggested that making participation in the FYE program compulsory for all first-year students could improve its effectiveness: *" well, I believe UKZN must make it compulsory for each first year to participate in the FYE program. That way we will be able to see if it is successful, now we cannot really tell as not every student participates in the program"*.

Participant 3 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that the program's failure often lies in the lack of participation from both mentors and mentees: *"The failure of the FYE lies in the laziness of both the mentors and mentees. Some mentors are not working, while some mentees are not making use of the services provided by the program. So, the management must put strict rules and maybe make mentors have certain targets or goals to reach so that they can see if the mentor is working or not"*.

Effective program management is essential for ensuring mentors and mentees are actively engaged and committed. Implementing structured guidelines and performance targets for mentors and compulsory participation for mentees could enhance the program's overall effectiveness and achieve its intended goals.

In conclusion, the success of the FYE mentorship program in the College of Humanities at UKZN is influenced by several factors, including student participation, mentor effectiveness, and program management. Addressing these factors through strategic initiatives and structured management can enhance the program's impact and ensure it effectively supports first-year students in their transition to university life.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the research findings from the FYE mentorship program at UKZN, were thoroughly analyzed. The analysis was guided by four main research questions, focusing on the experiences of first-

year students, their needs, the program's support for social and emotional adjustment, and the factors influencing the program's success or failure.

The thematic analysis revealed that the FYE mentorship program generally has a positive impact on first-year students, particularly in fostering a sense of belonging and providing accessible support through senior student mentors and convenient communication tools, such as WhatsApp groups, as indicated by the participants' responses in the above paragraphs. However, there are also highlighted areas needing improvement, particularly in providing more direct and comprehensive emotional support. Gender and ethnicity played roles in shaping students' experiences. For instance, the program's effectiveness varied across different gender and ethnic groups, with some participants reporting more substantial support and engagement, while others, especially males as reported by Participant 1 showed no interest in participating in the program.

The needs of first-year students were diverse, ranging from academic guidance and assistance with basic necessities and to help navigating the campus. The FYE mentorship program effectively addressed many of these needs, demonstrating its crucial role in easing the transition for new students and supporting their academic journey. However, the analysis also pointed out the variability in the program's impact, largely dependent on the mentors' commitment and the students' willingness to participate. Ensuring consistent mentor engagement, implementing regular training and evaluations for mentors, and increasing student participation through awareness and compulsory involvement were identified as key factors for enhancing the program's success.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of a well-structured and managed mentorship program in higher education institutions. By addressing the identified gaps and building on the program's strengths, the FYE mentorship program can continue to play a pivotal role in supporting first-year students' academic and personal development, ultimately contributing to their retention and success at the university.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Overview of Findings

This study explored whether the FYE Mentorship Program is able to meet its needs, with a particular focus on its ability to support first-year students' social and emotional adjustment, academic integration, and overall well-being. The findings revealed generally positive outcomes, aligning with expectations from previous literature. However, certain gaps were identified, particularly in providing emotional support.

5.2 Interpretation of Results

5.2.1 Experiences of First-Year Students

The findings align with Social Constructivism, as the FYE Mentorship Program facilitated a sense of belonging and academic support through social interactions, a core element of Vygotsky's theory. Social Constructivism posits that learning is a socially mediated process, with knowledge being co-constructed through collaboration and communication (Vygotsky, 1978). The mentor-mentee relationship in the program reflects this dynamic, providing first-year students with academic guidance and fostering their integration into the university environment. This is consistent with the notion that mentorship fosters development by creating a zone of proximal development, where students can achieve more with guidance than they could independently (Daniels, 2016). The sense of belonging reported by participants also supports existing studies, which demonstrate that social connections and mentorship in higher education promote integration and success (Brown & Park, 2020; Smith et al., 2018). The researcher anticipated these findings, expecting that participants would report enhanced integration and academic support due to the mentorship program, which is in line with previous literature on student engagement and mentorship.

The mentor-mentee relationship emerged as a pivotal component in fostering a supportive learning environment. The majority of participants as discussed in the findings frequently mentioned how mentors helped them navigate the academic challenges of their first year, providing guidance on coursework, time management, and study strategies, this support is vital as it aligns with the principles of Social Constructivism, where learning is seen as a collaborative process shaped by social interactions. By engaging with their mentors, students could construct knowledge more effectively, feeling more competent and confident in their academic pursuits.

Furthermore, the social aspect of the mentorship program was highlighted by many participants. They reported that mentors played a significant role in helping them establish social networks, which are critical for emotional and social adjustment. These networks provided a sense of community and belonging, essential for first-year students who often struggle with the transition to university life. The mentors not only facilitated connections with peers but also introduced students to various campus resources and activities, further enhancing their integration into the university environment. This social integration is a key factor in student retention and success, underscoring the importance of programs like the FYE Mentorship in higher education institutions.

5.2.2 Needs of First-Year Students

The study anticipated that first-year students would require both academic and emotional support, with the expectation that the FYE Mentorship Program would address these needs effectively. While academic support was adequately provided, emotional support was found to be lacking. Participants highlighted the necessity for mentors who could offer more empathetic and understanding support for their emotional well-being. This gap indicates a significant area for improvement in the program. Participants also reported specific needs for academic guidance, including assistance with coursework, time management, and study strategies. Additionally, some of the first-year students sought help in finding their way around campus and accessing necessary resources and information. Mentors played a crucial role in addressing these needs, helping students navigate the university environment and connect with relevant campus resources.

An additional concern emerged regarding male students' engagement in the program. Participants noted that male students in their classes were generally less interested in participating in the mentorship program compared to female students. For instance, one participant observed, "*the boys in my class are just not interested in participating in the program, unlike the girls who seem more engaged*". This observation aligns with existing research suggesting that male students may exhibit lower levels of interest and engagement in mentorship programs (Smith & Jones, 2018). Such disengagement can lead to unmet emotional and academic needs and reduced overall support for the students.

Previous studies have shown that when students receive adequate support, they often report improved emotional well-being and academic success (Brown & Park, 2020). However, the lack of emotional support in this study indicates that, despite the program's efforts, some students are still not experiencing support.

The deficiency in emotional support, coupled with lower participation rates among male students, underscores the importance of developing targeted strategies to enhance engagement and support for all students. Comprehensive mentor training should include strategies for addressing emotional and psychological challenges and focus on increasing engagement across different student demographics. Enhancing the emotional support component of the program and addressing the needs of less engaged students will be crucial for improving overall student success and satisfaction.

5.2.3 Support for Social and Emotional Adjustment

Social Constructivism posits that learning and development are inherently social processes. The FYE Mentorship Program succeeded in fostering social connections among students, which is essential for their overall adjustment and success. Many participants reported that their mentors played a key role in helping them establish a sense of community and belonging, which is crucial for social integration and emotional well-being.

However, the emotional support component of the program was found to be insufficient. Participants expressed a need for more empathetic and understanding mentors who could provide emotional guidance. This finding highlights a critical area for enhancement within the program. Effective emotional support is integral to student adjustment and well-being, and mentors need to be equipped to offer this support consistently (Johnson & Williams, 2019).

An additional concern was the neglectful behaviour of some mentors. Participants reported instances where mentors created WhatsApp groups for their mentees but then left them unattended, providing minimal guidance or support one participant reported *"University workload is a lot. I'm often confused, anxious, and frustrated. Thoughts of dropping out have visited my mind many times, our FYE mentor never respond to our queries and never available to assist! She has opened the Whatsapp group but never engage with us."* This behaviour undermines the mentor-mentee relationship and violates the principles of Social Constructivism, which emphasizes the importance of active engagement and scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable others. According to Vygotsky, effective learning occurs through dynamic social interactions where mentors facilitate and support the learning process. Neglectful behaviour disrupts this process, leaving students without the necessary support to navigate their academic and social challenges effectively.

Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach to mentor training that includes strategies for providing emotional support and maintaining consistent engagement. By ensuring that mentors are well-prepared to offer both academic and emotional guidance, the program can better support students' overall adjustment and success.

5.2.4 Factors Influencing the Success or Failure of the Program

The study identified several factors influencing the success of the FYE Mentorship Program. Consistent mentor engagement, structured support sessions, and the quality of mentor training were critical determinants of positive outcomes. The active involvement of mentors in the academic and social lives of their mentees significantly contributed to the students' sense of belonging and academic success. Structured support sessions provided a reliable framework for mentees to seek guidance and support, ensuring that their academic and social needs were systematically addressed.

Conversely, the lack of focus on emotional support and insufficient training on cultural competency were notable shortcomings. Many participants felt that mentors were not adequately prepared to handle the emotional and psychological challenges faced by first-year students. This gap in emotional support is concerning, as emotional well-being is closely linked to academic success and overall student retention.

Instances of mentor neglect, such as creating WhatsApp groups and then leaving mentees unattended, further highlight the need for more rigorous mentor training and oversight. Vygotsky's Social Constructivism emphasizes the importance of scaffolding, where mentors provide continuous and active support to help mentees navigate complex tasks and build their knowledge. Neglectful behaviours undermine this scaffolding process, leaving students without the necessary support to thrive academically and socially.

To address these gaps, the program must adopt a more holistic approach to mentor training that includes both academic guidance and emotional support strategies. Enhancing mentor training to cover emotional support techniques, cultural competency, and consistent engagement can significantly improve the program's effectiveness. By ensuring that mentors are well-equipped to address the diverse needs of their mentees, the FYE Mentorship Program can better support first-year students' overall adjustment and success in the university environment.

5.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations. The qualitative approach and relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. While qualitative methods provide in-depth insights into participants' experiences, they do not allow for broad statistical analysis or generalization to larger populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the study's focus on a single institution means that the results may not be applicable to other contexts. It also explored the experiences of students from one college within the university which limits the scope of the findings and may not capture the varied experiences of students from other faculties. The unique characteristics of the institution and its student population may influence the findings, making it difficult to generalize to other universities or educational settings (Smith et al., 2018).

One significant limitation of this study is the insufficient exploration of cultural competency among mentors. Cultural competency involves understanding and respecting diverse cultural backgrounds, which is crucial for providing effective support in a multicultural educational environment (Johnson & Williams, 2019). The lack of comprehensive data on how mentors address or fail to address cultural differences limits the study's ability to provide detailed recommendations on improving cultural competency within the FYE Mentorship Program.

Another significant limitation is that the study did not attract first-year students, despite the focus on understanding their experiences within the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program. This gap limits the ability to gather direct insights from the key target group. Without the direct perspectives of first-year students, it becomes challenging to fully assess the program's effectiveness from the viewpoint of the students who are the primary beneficiaries. This limitation reduces the study's ability to reflect the direct lived experiences of first-year participants, which could have added richness and depth to the findings.

Future research could address these limitations by employing strategies to attract more first year students for added richness and depth to the findings and a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the FYE Mentorship Program's impact. This would allow for broader generalization while still capturing detailed personal experiences (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Expanding the scope to include multiple institutions would also enhance the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies across different universities could identify common themes and unique challenges, offering more robust recommendations for improving mentorship programs across diverse educational settings (Brown & Park, 2020).

Additionally, future research should explore longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of mentorship programs on student success and retention. Investigating the experiences of both mentors and mentees over an extended period could provide valuable insights into the sustained benefits and potential areas for improvement. This includes a deeper examination of cultural competency training and its effectiveness in supporting students from diverse backgrounds (Lee & Lin, 2021). Addressing these research gaps would contribute to a deeper understanding of effective mentorship practices and support the development of more comprehensive and inclusive mentorship programs in higher education.

5.4 Conclusion

Chapter 5 has provided a comprehensive discussion of the findings from the study on the FYE Mentorship Program, framed within the context of Social Constructivism. The results indicate that while the program effectively fosters a sense of belonging and academic support, significant gaps remain, particularly in the provision of emotional support and cultural competency.

The study found that first-year students benefited from the program in terms of academic support and community integration. However, emotional support was inconsistent across participants, with some students noting insufficient engagement from mentors, especially in communication channels like WhatsApp groups. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interactions in learning and development. The lack of engagement from some mentors further highlights the need for improved mentor training and support structures.

The findings underscore the importance of expanding mentor training to include emotional support techniques and cultural competency. Increasing institutional support and implementing feedback mechanisms are also crucial for the program's improvement. Additionally, providing additional resources and institutional support is essential for the sustainability and effectiveness of the program. Adequate funding, access to counselling services, and resources for mentor-mentee activities are essential components. Institutional support can also include administrative backing, recognition of mentor efforts, and integration of the mentorship program into the broader university support system (Brown & Park, 2020).

The study's limitations, such as its qualitative approach and single-institution focus, suggest that future research should include multiple institutions to enhance generalizability and provide a more comprehensive understanding of mentorship programs.

In conclusion, while the FYE Mentorship Program at UKZN, has demonstrated positive impacts, addressing the identified gaps is essential for its continued success. By integrating a more holistic approach that encompasses both academic and emotional support, and fostering cultural competency, the program can better serve the diverse needs of first-year students. Implementing these recommendations will contribute to higher retention rates, improved student satisfaction, and overall academic success, fulfilling the program's potential to support student development effectively.

5.5 Recommendations and Implications for Practice

This subchapter explores the actionable steps and broader impacts derived from the research findings presented in the previous sections. It provides detailed recommendations for implementing practical changes based on the insights gained, while also discussing the wider implications these findings may have for real-world practices. By integrating both specific suggestions and general applications, this section aims to bridge the gap between theoretical research and practical application, offering guidance on how to effectively apply these insights to enhance outcomes in relevant fields.

Expand Mentor Training

To better address the diverse needs of students, it is essential to include comprehensive training on emotional support techniques and cultural competency. Research indicates that mentors who are well-trained in emotional support are more effective in helping students manage stress and anxiety, leading to better academic performance and overall well-being (Lee & Lin, 2021). Furthermore, cultural competency training will enable mentors to understand and respect different cultural perspectives, which is crucial for providing inclusive support. This can help mitigate feelings of isolation among students from diverse backgrounds, fostering a more supportive and integrated university community (Johnson & Williams, 2019).

Mentors Monitoring

Monitoring mentor engagement is critical, as some participants reported feeling neglected by their mentors. This neglect was observed in cases where mentors failed to actively participate in group activities or left mentees unattended in WhatsApp groups. Regular oversight and evaluation of mentor performance can ensure that mentors remain committed and responsive to their mentees' needs. This monitoring aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the active role of social interaction in learning, highlighting the importance of mentor involvement in the mentorship process.

Foster Cultural Competency

Incorporate cultural competency training to ensure that mentors are sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of their mentees. This training should cover topics such as cultural awareness, bias recognition, and inclusive communication strategies. Enhancing cultural competency will help mentors better support students from varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Lee & Lin, 2021). Additionally, integrating practical components, such as role-playing scenarios and case studies, can enhance the training experience by providing mentors with real-world examples of how to address cultural differences. Regular refresher courses and feedback sessions can also help maintain and improve mentors' cultural competence over time. Establishing a mentorship network that fosters ongoing dialogue about cultural issues can further support mentors in navigating complex cultural dynamics and promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

Increase Engagement

Encourage consistent and meaningful engagement between mentors and mentees through structured activities and regular check-ins. Scheduled meetings and group activities can foster stronger mentor-mentee relationships, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the mentorship program (Smith et al., 2018). To build on this, implementing a feedback loop where mentees can voice their experiences and suggestions for improvement can help tailor activities to better meet their needs. Offering incentives for active participation, such as recognition awards or certificates, can also motivate both mentors and mentees to engage more deeply with the program.

Establishing clear goals and milestones for mentor-mentee interactions can provide a framework for measuring progress and ensuring that both parties are benefiting from the relationship. This structured approach, combined with flexibility to accommodate individual preferences, can lead to more sustained and impactful engagement.

Expand Resources

Provide additional resources and institutional support to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the program. Adequate funding, access to counseling services, and resources for mentor-mentee activities are essential for a successful mentorship program (Brown & Park, 2020). Beyond financial support, creating a resource hub with tools and materials for mentors and mentees can facilitate more effective interactions and activities. This hub could include access to professional development opportunities for mentors, educational materials for mentees, and technology platforms for virtual meetings and collaborations. Additionally, fostering partnerships with

external organizations or alumni can provide supplementary resources and networking opportunities. Ensuring that the mentorship program is integrated into the broader university support system can also enhance its visibility and impact, aligning it with other student success initiatives and creating a more cohesive support network.

Implement Feedback Mechanisms

Establish regular feedback channels for mentees to express their needs and experiences, allowing for continuous program improvement. This feedback can be used to adjust training modules, support structures, and engagement strategies to better align with the evolving needs of students (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

By implementing these recommendations, the FYE Mentorship Program can better support first-year students in their transition to university life, ensuring they receive the academic, social, and emotional support necessary for their success.

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APPENDICES



Appendix 1- Gatekeeper's Permission

Appendix 2- Advertising Poster

Appendix 3-Information Sheet and Informed Consent

Appendix 4- Interview Schedule.

Appendix 5- Ethical Clearance

11 April 2022

Sanah Katlego Masemola (SN
219055483) School of Applied
Human Sciences College of
Humanities
Pietermaritzburg Campus UKZN
Email: 219055483@stu.ukzn.ac.za Lekekam@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Sanah

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

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

"Does the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program for First-Year Students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal yield positive results? An Exploratory Study."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with first- year students who have participated in the mentorship program for at least one semester (Zoom, Skype or telephone interviews recommended) at UKZN.

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

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

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express

consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely

Appendix 2

Participants Recruitment Poster

Does the first-year experience (FYE) mentorship programs for first-year students at UKZN yield positive results? An exploratory study

Description of the Study

I am conducting a study to investigate the effectiveness of the FYE mentorship programs in the college of Humanities for first-year students at UKZN. If you are a first-year student who has participated in the mentorship program for at least semester during their first year, I invite you to participate in my study.

Benefits of Participation

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to contribute to the research on the effectiveness of the FYE mentorship program in the college of Humanities at UKZN. Your participation will help to improve the mentorship program for future first-year students.

How to Participate?

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at 219055483@stu.ukzn.ac.za or [REDACTED]. I will provide you with more information about the study and answer any questions you may have. Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

Thank you for your interest in this study!

Appendix 3**Information sheet and consent to participate in research.**

Information Sheet

Title of Study: Does the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program for first-year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal yield positive results? An Exploratory Study.

Researcher: Sanah Katlego
Masemola

Supervisor: Dr Motlalepule
Lekeka

Dear potential participant,

My name is Sanah Katlego Masemola, and I am an educational psychology student currently studying towards my master's degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I have chosen to conduct an exploratory study titled, "Does the First-Year Experience (FYE) mentorship program for first-year students at UKZN yield positive results? This research study is being supervised by Dr Motlalepule Lekeka, who is currently employed as a senior lecturer in the Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus).

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done, what it will involve, and what will happen to the data collected. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the First-Year Experience (FYE) mentorship program on first-year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The study aims to explore the effectiveness of the mentorship program and to determine whether it has a positive impact on academic performance, social integration, and overall student experience.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interview will be conducted via Zoom and will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission, and the recording will be transcribed for analysis. The questions will be open-ended, and you will be encouraged to speak freely about your experiences in the mentorship program.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no anticipated risks associated with participating in this study. However, some participants may find it uncomfortable or stressful to discuss their experiences in the mentorship program. If you feel uncomfortable at any point during the interview, you may choose to end the interview or skip any questions. I would also encourage you to seek psychological and/or career assistance from the UKZN student support services. All information pertaining to these services can be accessed from <https://aessupport.ukzn.ac.za/student-support/>

The benefits of this study include contributing to the knowledge base on mentorship programs and potentially improving the quality of the mentorship program at UKZN.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and all information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not be used in any publications or reports arising from this study. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your anonymity.

Storage and Disposal of Data:

A password-protected external hard drive will be used to store and secure the research data that has been produced electronically. This external hard drive will be locked in a storage facility in the project supervisor's (Dr Motlalepule Lekeka) office and may only be accessed by the researcher and the supervisor. Hard copies of the data collected during the research will be kept securely in the same storage facility as mentioned above. Five years after the study has been completed, electronic data on the external hard drive will be deleted and all hard copies of the data will be incinerated.

Voluntary participation and discontinuation of participation:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you consent to participate in this research, you may withdraw your participation at any point. Your refusal to participate or your withdrawal of participation from the study at any time will not incur any negative consequences, penalty, or loss to you.

If you would like to receive feedback of the research, an email will be sent out with the final results on completion of the study.

Ethical review

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number **HSSREC/00006278/2023**)

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher, Sanah Katlego Masemola, at [219055483@stu.ac.za/](mailto:219055483@stu.ac.za) [REDACTED]. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact the supervisor, Dr Motlalepule Lekeka, at [lekekam@ukzn.ac.za/](mailto:lekekam@ukzn.ac.za) 0312605348. 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 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

CONSENT

I _____(insert name) have been informed about the study entitled

“Does the First-Year Experience (FYE) Mentorship Program for First-Year Students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal yield positive results? An Exploratory Study.

.” by Sanah Katlego Masemola

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

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 that I usually am entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact Sanah Katlego Masemola (the principle investigator) at [REDACTED] 219055483@stu.ukzn.ac.za or Dr Motlalepule Lekeka(the project supervisor) at 0332605348lekekam@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:

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 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
 Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional Consent

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO (please circle)

Signature of Participant

Date

- -

Appendix 4: Interview schedule

Interview questions linked to main research questions:

Research questions	Related interview questions
1) What are the experiences of first-year students who participated in the FYE program at UKZN?	a) How did you find out about the FYE mentorship program at UKZN? b) What were your experiences participating in the FYE mentorship program?
2) What are the first-year students' needs? Is the FYE mentorship program at UKZN able to meet these needs?	a) As a first-year student, what are your needs. b) Are your needs met by the FYE mentorship program?
3) To what extent do first-year students at UKZN feel supported by the FYE program in terms of their social and emotional adjustment to university life?	a) How has the FYE mentorship program supported you in terms of your social and emotional adjustment to university life as a first-year student at UKZN
4) What are the factors that influence the success or failure of the FYE program at UKZN?	a) From your perspective, what are the successes or failures of the FYE mentorship program for first year students at UKZN? Any recommendations in terms of failures? b) Would you recommend the FYE mentorship program for the incoming UKZN first year student? Why or why not?

Thank you for your engagement and participating in my study. I will send you an email that includes the key points you discussed during the interview. Please may you engage with these statements and accept, reject, or modify what has been transcribed and please inform me if it is an accurate representation of what you have said.

Sanah Katlego Malekgala Masemola
(219055483) School of Applied Human Sc
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear SKM Masemola,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006278/2023

Project title: Does the first-year experience mentorship program for first-year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal yield positive results? An exploratory study

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 09 October 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 07 March 2025.

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

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-

040414-040). Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/ms

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

SKM MASEMOLA-TURNITIN REPORT (Thesis)

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