

Article

## First-Year Students' Experiences of 'Transition as Induction' at a South African University

Raymond Fru<sup>1\*</sup>, Wiets Botes<sup>1</sup>, Alan Felix<sup>2</sup>, Felix Awung<sup>3</sup>, Tiani Wepener<sup>1</sup> & Richard Moloele<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Sol Plaatje University, Private Bag X5008, Kimberley 8301, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Private Bag X8, Wellington 7654, South Africa

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Humanities, Sol Plaatje University, Private Bag X5008, Kimberley 8301, South Africa

\*Corresponding Author: [raymond.fru@spu.ac.za](mailto:raymond.fru@spu.ac.za)

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**Abstract:** The emergence of the global pandemic has had devastating effects on institutions of higher learning. In South Africa, many universities had to swiftly switch to online teaching and learning in a bid to mitigate the effects of the pandemic without considerable repercussion on the academic project. The paper investigates first-year undergraduate students' experiences of induction as a critical phase of university transition at a South African university. The focus was to investigate how first-year undergraduate students transition into the unknown university environment as they come from various backgrounds. A case study research design was employed in the study. The population included first-year students across all schools in various areas of specialisation at the South African University. Given this population, a purposive sampling technique was employed in the study from which selected students to the tune of forty were interviewed. The findings revealed that the students had varying experiences of transition. Nuanced with the theory of resilience, these experiences were then interpreted following the constructions of deterioration, adaptation, and recovery. The study serves as valuable feedback on how South African universities can go about transforming their cultures, systems, and policies to better support first-year students during a phase of induction.

**Keywords:** Adaptation phase; COVID-19; deterioration phase; recovering phase; students' experiences; transitioning

### Introduction

The South African higher education landscape has experienced significant 'repurposing,' in recent times to align with global developments (Scott 1995; Hockings, Cooke, and Bowl 2007). These developments which are characterised by an increased emphasis on market forces have created students as consumers and university faculties more as service providers. Such global neoliberal affinity to capitalism, profiteering, and the corporatization of higher education (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017) implies that massification of provision is always prioritised at the expense of attention to the needs of the students (Pritchard 2006). Notwithstanding the above, many institutions of higher learning continue to formally ascribe to ethos and policies that highlight the interests of the students at the centre of their mandate. This is the case of the South African university in this study whose vision statement highlights "A university critically engaged in learning, research and development – while enhancing democratic practice and social justice in society." Additionally,

the strategic plan of the university refers to “... working towards imbuing the spirit and traditions of critically-engaged humanist University – constituted in fundamentally inclusive ways: the kind of inclusion that reaches beyond the numbers that account for diversity, but one that is sensitive to discrimination and marginalisation in its multiple forms.”

This plan and vision are very noble and laudable, especially in the context of South Africa which is a country considered to be amongst the most unequal in the world (Statistics South Africa, 2020). In fact, despite the very liberal and progressive post-apartheid legislations it is known that elevated levels of inequality have continued to manifest unabated in every stratum of society including in education. In this regard, Vally (2019) paints a picture of how South African suburbs like Sandton boast world-class institutions with top-of-art facilities, whilst the adjacent Alexandra township schools are often victims of violence, poor infrastructure, and a lack of resources. Under these realities, a major legitimate concern would be on how these students experience learning and the learning environment as well as the dynamics that inform their different experiences, especially because the school is considered a microcosm of society

Premised on the idea that issues of transition especially at the phase of induction have great ramifications for student learning and potential success or lack thereof (Awung et al, 2024; Ramsay, Raven & Hall, 2005), there is a need to reflect on such experiences critically and constantly. All these with the hope that such reflections promote social justice by leading to interventions to improve the individual and collective experiences of students irrespective of their socio-economic conditions. It is against this backdrop that this article is couched around the objective of determining the experiences of first-year students as they navigate the induction phase of transition at a South African university.

## Literature Review

### 1. Overview of the South African Socio-economic Landscape with Implications for Education

The background of this study relates to the unique socio-economic realities of South Africa that make it possible for students to start university from different vantage points with critical implications on student academic success. Vally (2019) surmises that the socioeconomic status of children is one of the most crucial factors that influence learner outcomes. It would not be out of place therefore to posit that in South Africa, factors such as parental wealth, place of birth and race are critical determining factors of a student's educational opportunities and experiences. A study conducted by Amnesty International (2020) determined that the situation is compounded by the multiple languages that exist in the country. In comparing with countries from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Amnesty International determined that 60% of teachers from South Africa work in schools with more than 10% of students whose first language is not the language of instruction compared to an OECD average of 21%. All these schooling factors play a role in the kind of student that is entering Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and could affect their academic performance as Fru (2015) and Makumane & Fru (2021) exemplify in their scenarios of History education in crises in South Africa and the complexities of multilingual education in Lesotho respectively.

### 2. The Adverse Effect of COVID-19

The emergence of COVID-19 and its devastating effects around the globe has exacerbated the challenges for students at HEI's with these Institutions undergoing unprecedented changes. In South Africa, many universities have had to switch to online teaching and learning as a way of mitigating the effects of the pandemic without considerable repercussion on the academic project. Whilst the South African education terrain always pointed to the direction of online or blended learning for the future, the sudden implementation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic took the sector unprepared, hence the move has been termed “emergency remote teaching and learning” (Ojo, Burger, Onwuegbuzie, Bergstedt, Adams and Crowley, 2021). COVID-19 ushered in a new complex e-learning system where students are taught remotely and only hear a voice without a face. As Mishra, Gupta, and Shree (2020) posit that online teaching is perceived as a massive challenge to deal with and stakeholders also are not potentially fit to adjust with sudden emotional change as they are not technologically competent to embrace the current situation. The pandemic therefore

exposed the vulnerabilities of students in the face of challenges imposed by the pandemic. This is a particular dilemma for the university in question in this paper since issues of social justice, humanist university, inclusivity and sensitivity to diversity, discrimination and marginalisation are critical ideas in its vision statement as well as in its strategic plan.

### 3. A Conceptual Clarification of University Transitions with Emphasis on Induction

Javed (2016) asserts that research is needed on the concept of transition to explore how this phenomenon takes place and impacts students as well as the challenges transition poses for students when they enter university. The majority of students leave the comfort of their homes and warm environments only to be exposed to the harsh realities of transition into HEI. As Latham and Green (1997) put it, these students go through the process of transition independently. The concept of transition is referred to as an individual's movement from the known to the unknown or familiar to the unfamiliar environments and the challenges encountered in making this move (Javed, 2016:14). The transition of first-year students to the university is a perplexing time for some students as they are expected to adapt to the unfamiliar environment as well as new learning styles (Southall, Wason, and Avery, 2016). As students transition to the pristine environment, they bring with them diverse learning experiences and new sets of beliefs and expectations. Life transitions are marked by novel changes and experiences, which require individuals to go through an adjustment process (Buote, 2007). Most students struggle with the transition into university, but those from privileged and more marginal backgrounds face challenges when entering an unwelcoming and even hostile environment (Greer, 2014).

University transitions are conceptualised into three phases as follows: transition as induction which refers to experiences of students at the point of entry into the university from application to formal orientations and the initial student engagements in the new community; the second being transition as being and this refers to the student experiences of the developmental years of the university. This is the phase where a student gets immersed into the insertional culture and starts elements of the student identity on campus are beginning to emerge and take shape; lastly, there is the phase of transition as becoming which refers to the student's experiences at the exit level. This phase speaks directly to what the student is taking back to the community, or the world of work as informed by the university experiences. In other words, the last phase depicts how has the university shaped the individual. Notwithstanding this broad conceptual understanding of transition, the focus of this paper is on transition as induction because the aim is to investigate students' experiences at the phase of entry into university. These experiences are critical for evidence-based and tailor-made interventions to be initiated by relevant stakeholders to address specific student experiences. The figure below is an example of an ideal student journey.



Figure 1. Adapted from BluenotesGlobal (2022)

Figure 1 depicts the ideal student journey that lecturers, management, and students have when they think about student success in Higher Education. The expectations of what students bring and what the institution can offer. This is also known as the one-size-fits-all approach which is not comprehensive as it does

not take into consideration the fact that university and student expectations are not always mutually compatible.

Contrary to the ideal student journey depicted in Figure 1 above, figure 2 below summarises the realities that institutions know, and students experience when they enroll. Different students come in with diverse needs, dreams and ‘abilities,’ at even different times – where the green student has a head start, and the blue one is being disadvantaged from the onset already, making no journey straightforward, where each student has his trajectory. The colourful circles depict some of the support services and units typically available at the university, which often do not speak to one another, and not to the needs of each student, creating misalignment between the support structures available and students’ needs.

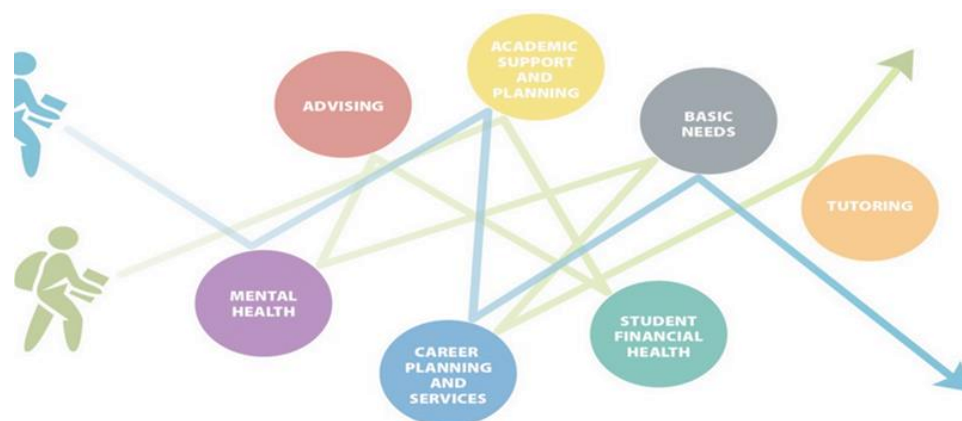


Figure 2. Achieving the Dream (2018).

#### 4. Social Responsibility

Social responsibility can be defined as the fair and equitable distribution of power, resources, and obligations in society to all people regardless of race or ethnicity, age, gender, ability status, sexual orientation and religious or spiritual background (Ayala, Wilcox & Hage, 2011). The injustices that characterise society in general are frequently found in various social institutions such as educational institutions (Sullivan, 2006). Fundamentally, socially just principles underlying the above definition include concepts like inclusion, cooperation, fair treatment, equal access, and equal opportunity. Social justice is interpreted in distributive terms as meaning that all people should be treated equitably by receiving whatever social benefits are available in life. People from other backgrounds find the issue of social justice as an impediment. For instance, the psychological effects of poverty have shown to be equally problematic during adolescence (Ayala *et al.*, 2011). The study envisages investigating whether these principles are encapsulated by the university from which the sample is drawn. The premise we are moving from is that all children would be treated equally, and that education is available to all within the education system (Sullivan, 2006). In the context of this study, social justice would be defined as equitable access to services, accommodation, and education in a university setting that would enhance learning.

#### 5. Inclusivity and Diversity

The term inclusivity has been touted for quite long and the interpretation given to it was also varied. In the classroom context, inclusivity may mean the incorporation and acceptance of diverse cultures. Foreman (2008) defines inclusivity as a concept that extends well beyond students with a disability and encompasses the idea that all schools should strive to provide optimal learning environments for all students, regardless of their social, cultural, or ethnic background or their ability or disability. The term may mean non-dominant participation in activities in an institution. According to Berlach and Chambers (2011:531), the concept of inclusivity can be traced back to its origin in Scandinavia and refers to the services that were seen as being necessary for those with intellectual disabilities. The argument here is that students with special needs disabilities

should be made to mingle with the normal ones. For this study, the term would mean allowing spaces for students to play a part and not be discriminated against. In HEIs, inclusivity may be two-fold. Firstly, it is about students belonging to the classroom and secondly, in the broader campus culture.

## 6. Resilience Theory as a Theoretical Framework

Resilience Theory has shown increased popularity in higher education research, particularly in giving expression towards students' experiences of university life (Zarotti, Povah, & Simpson 2020). For this paper, Resilience theory will be particularly helpful in unravelling the subjective and individualized experiences of students as they navigate through the different phases of transition such as the induction into university, to ultimately achieve student success (Storms, Simundza, Morgan, & Miller, 2019). Against the backdrop of student success, Resilience theory provides a framework to identify phenomena that hinder student success, while also exploring the types of coping and supportive mechanisms that inevitably result in student success.

Given this understanding of Resilience theory, scholars such as Nandy, Lodh and Tang (2021) recently claimed that the Resilience theory is underpinned by three core phases. These phases are identified as the "deteriorating phase", the "adapting phase" and the "recovering phase". The deteriorating phase is regarded as a temporary phase that depicts an individual's state of despair and lack of hope due to individual issues encountered within a specific environment (Zarotti *et al.*, 2020).

The adapting phase, on the other hand, is characterised by the ability of an individual to overcome aspects of adversity using personal intervention, action, and the individual's reliance on supportive mechanisms. Finally, the recovering phase deals with the way an individual encounters a level of personal growth due to the aspect of adversity (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Agteren, Woodyatt, Iasiello, Rayner & Kyrios (2019) added, that the interconnectedness of these phases is key towards ensuring that an individual's resilience is strengthened.

To contextualise, the use of Resilience theory underpinned by its three core phases will be key to exploring and reporting on first-year students' experiences of the induction phase at a selected South African university. Firstly, with the "deteriorating phase" in mind, the researchers will be able to explore the students' initial transition into the institutional context and to give voice to the student's experience of adversity as they enter this "alien environment" that brings with it a set of challenges (Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Secondly, the "adapting phase", will be helpful to determine how the students were able to cope with the academic and social demands put forth by the institution which enabled them to cope with the initial feelings of adversity (Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Finally, the "recovering phase" will allow the researchers to report on the student's level of personal growth as they transition from developing towards becoming (Steele, 2018). These phases will shed light on the types of issues that they have encountered, as well as the considered supportive coping mechanisms that enabled them to be successful in their academic endeavour at the institution.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

The study employed a case study research design. The case included that of first-year undergraduate students and their experiences of the induction phase at a South African University. As co-researchers in the study, we were tasked to ensure that the first-year students as the participants of the study were consulted in advance (Hancock, Algozzine & Lim, 2021). The study followed a purposeful qualitative research approach. Bouncken, Qiu, Sinkovics, and Kürsten (2021) remind us that a qualitative research approach involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data that include text, drawings, video, and audio recordings. In this study, the verbal responses in the form of audio recordings of first-year undergraduate students at a South African University were collected and transcribed to gain an understanding of how the first-year students experienced the induction phase of transition.

The population of the study included first-year undergraduate students from several areas of specialisation at the South African University. Given this population, a purposive sampling technique was employed for the study. A purposive sampling technique, also referred to as subjective, judgemental, and

selective sampling (Staller, 2021) is considered a type of non-probability sampling that allows researchers to choose individuals from a social setting to participate in the data-capturing process that is based on the judgement of the researchers (Renjith, Yesodharan, Noronha, Ladd, and George, 2021). In other words, a purposive sampling technique serves as the researcher's deliberate choice and selection of participants due to the qualities and experiences of the participants (Mthuli, Ruffin, and Singh, 2021). For this study, the researchers were intentional in selecting a sample of first-year students to report on their rich and authentic experiences of the induction phase as they enrolled at a South African university.

## 2. Data Collection

The use of a semi-structured interviewing process with the forty participants allowed for the generation and capturing of rich empirical data. The rich empirical data was captured through an audio device, thematically analysed, and transcribed. The subjective student experiences were interpreted and reported by the researchers in line with the principles of Resilience theory as a theoretical lens. To report on the student experiences of the induction phase at a South African University, the study considered four research questions. These questions were "How did secondary school assist in preparing you for university?" "How did you feel when you arrived at university?", "What was your experience of being a first-year student?" "Describe how you felt when you engaged in e-learning during your first year?" and "How would you describe the way the University supports students?"

## 3. Data Analysis

The study made use of thematic content analysis to make meaning of the verbal responses shared by the participants. The use of thematic content analysis enabled the researchers to make sense of how first-year students experienced the induction phase as a first step towards becoming part of a university space. Although thematic content analysis is considered flexible to analysing data (Gezer, 2022.), Neuendorf (2018) cautions, that the approach could result in a lack of consistency in the structuring of themes. To address this limitation, the researchers kept a record of the audio recordings that would allow us to systemize, relate and cross-reference data (Roberson & Perry, 2022). In addition, the verbal data was also made available to the participants to ensure that the findings represent a credible and trustworthy representation of the students' voices. In doing so, the researchers responded to the aspects of credibility, reliability, and validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

## Findings

The verbal responses from the semi-structured interview process yielded rich qualitative data that were associated with the first-year student experience of the induction phase at a selected South African university. The experiences were aligned to a series of events and activities that were held before and after the commencement of the academic year, thus capturing the true essence of the induction phase at the selected university. These experiences in the form of themes are briefly expressed next.

### 1. Experiences related to high school preparedness for university

Participants in the study expressed varied views about the extent to which high school prepared them for life at university. Generally, participants expressed sentiments for either preparedness or non-preparedness for university readiness. About participants who expressed their preparedness, the following constructs emerged:

*"Long hours" P1*

*"School prepared me to learn by myself" P5*

Participant 2 shared a similar sentiment by stating that:

*"Language of instruction / individual learning ..." P2*

In contrast to the above, some participants felt that their high schools did not prepare them at all for the reality of university life. Examples of statements advanced in this regard include:

*“High school and university are two different worlds” P9*

In support of this assertion, it also emerged that at the high school level, the emphasis of teaching is mainly on passive learning with examination preparation being the ultimate product. This is what is also referred to as surface learning.

*“Sir, you know at school the focus is predominantly on learning at the moment and cramming of information for exams” P13*

*“Learning from the textbook is the order of the day” P21*

Our view is that the extent to which high school prepares students for university life is limited. Such limitation is reflected in the challenges that students encounter in integrated university life in the first year. There is also the notion of surface learning, which was the emphasis of university teaching, as opposed to the deep and more critical learning that is expected of the university environment.

## 2. Experience of first contact with the university

The second theme we explored relates to the experiences of students on their first contact with the university. Through this theme, we wanted to know from the participants exactly what were their expectations on the day of arrival at university, how they experienced that moment of arrival and the early days at university and if those initial expectations were met or not. Going by the responses, many of the students experienced feelings of anxiety, uncertainty as well as fear of not knowing what to expect when they arrived at the university for the first time. For instance, the following remarks were made:

*“I was excited, not knowing what is to come and this put a lot of pressure on me.” P18*

*“Overwhelmed and excited and scared, unsure” P5*

*“I was scared and nervous” P6*

*“It was entering an alien environment.” P 12*

*“Surely it was tricky and challenging not comfortable because I felt lost, didn't know the classes.” P7*

This sentiment was echoed by several other participants. Some went further to state that what exacerbated their anxiety was the poor communication processes of the institution which created a feeling that they were not welcome to the university. In this regard, P10 had the following to say:

*“I didn't feel welcomed because I was accepted late and there was not even communication, and no e-mail was even sent...I was far away from university. Things were not organised waiting in line... I did not even know how to register. I was not orientated well. I did not know where to go for residence... There was no orientation because I was late, there was no follow-up... No provision made for people coming after orientation.” P10*

Despite these initial fears and uncertainty, some of the students were happy to acknowledge the assistance that they received from some university personnel. Many of the students singled out the security personnel and the cleaning staff in this regard. The statements below attest to this:

*“When I just arrived, I was extremely nervous and stressed. But thanks to the great support received from the security guards I became a little comfortable. This support changed my preconceived idea about the university.”*  
P13

One student remarked that:

*“Security guards are great; they are super they are welcoming.”* P39

Another student corroborated as follows:

*“I was scared and nervous. The ground staff helped a lot. It was a great surprise the support they provided.”*

*“I relied on people in uniform to assist and thanks that they were able to assist me. I had hoped that the security guards would provide me with much-needed information. Excellent introduction and great impression. Excellent support system”* P16

Another group of students simply felt that the reception was particularly good, and they were very happy from day one.

*“I was happy to come here. I wanted to go where it is very far from home. SPU gave me the opportunity. The people were so good to me they assisted me they loved me I came here at 2 am and I was able to register for all the modules and my stay was sorted out. We still receive the same love, it’s a great institution. Lecturers are supporting us.”* P4

What we realised from this theme is that there was a general sense of anxiety and uncertainty. This is justified for students about to experience university for the first time. However, the evidence also suggests that these fears did not help certain critical institutional processes such as timely communication of admissions outcomes and issues of late registrations and lack of orientations. Some students therefore found themselves lost on campus and had to navigate their way through challenging circumstances. One striking thing is that some students relied on people who wore uniforms. This points to the security personnel who were able to assist some of the students. It also emerged that certain support personnel such as the security guards were immensely helpful even though the students felt that this support was out of personal concern and good heart rather than a formal arrangement of the university.

### 3. University Experiences Regarding University Orientation

The third theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviewing process dealt with student experiences regarding university orientation as part of the induction phase at the start of the academic year. Student views of university orientation were perceived to be either positively or negatively inclined. Concerning positive experiences related to the orientation offered by the university, the following statements were made:

*“The orientation provided by the university really made it easier for me to cope with the demands of my first-year study”* P19

Unfortunately, negative experiences associated with the university orientation were also voiced by some of the participants, as witnessed below:

*“I did not have any foundation; no guidelines and orientation were provided to me since I registered late... there was no follow-up”* P23

*“Because I registered late, I did not have the opportunity to form part of the orientation process, this was a challenge”* P13



An analysis of the responses provided makes it evident that not all first-year students experienced the benefits of the first-year orientation process. As a result, first-year students shared contrasting views on the effectiveness of the orientation process during the induction phase. Although a consensus was reached on the supportive nature of the orientation process in positioning first-year students for a first-year experience, students who registered late, unfortunately, forfeited the opportunity to be orientated. The latter resulted in students not being thoroughly prepared and conversant with operations in this unique environment. Surprisingly, no follow-up orientation process was initiated for first-year students who registered late.

#### 4. University Experiences Related to Student Accommodation

Theme four explored the students' experiences with their accommodation. Going by the data, the accommodation theme can be viewed in two dimensions: that is, the on-campus accommodation and the off-campus accommodation students. While the first-year students felt grateful that they were able to secure accommodation at some point, some of them deplored the conditions that the accommodation exposed them to. Importantly, these remarks mostly came from the off-campus-based students. The following statement reflects the general feelings of the students about residences:

*“In terms of residence, they do not support it, nobody told me about residence or what. The application was complicated” P8*

*“They don’t prioritise us, we even came with our parents, but they didn’t support us.” P28*

More specifically, the students' concerns ranged from issues of Wi-Fi to matters of security, catering, noise and distraction, and issues of lack of privacy. These aspects are mostly integrated in the sense that one often caused the other and was also likely the cause of another. For instance, the concern about safety and security resulted from the fact that off-campus students are forced to travel to campus at odd hours due to the influence of noise around the off-campus residence especially coming from a club called “black diamonds” and due to poor Wi-Fi in the off-campus residence. It is in the process of these movements that they are usually accosted by thieves and robbed. The following excerpt from Participant 8 captures the link succinctly.

*“The first thing that students are complaining about is the Black Diamond because they are making noise on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday and some of the students cannot study out of the influence of noise, so they have to move from Ratanang [name of off-campus residence] to the library” P8*

Another participant indicated that:

*“Some outer rooms don’t have Wi-Fi connections which is very good. Some students must go to the library or come to the cafeteria to study” P9*

One student complained that:

*“The distance between residence and main campus leads to students not being able to get to campus on time for their classes” (P28)*

Another student expressed issues with privacy by saying:

*“We don’t have access to personal space – living off campus. No space or privacy.” P16*

The design of that particular off-campus residence does not allow for privacy and that is of great concern to some of the students. The majority of the students were of the view that first-year students would be accommodated inside the main campus [Moroka Residence] as a matter of priority since they are not familiar with the environment and are more vulnerable.

### 5. Early university experiences related to race relations

Some students had very strong opinions concerning issues of race relations on campus. These feelings were mostly expressed by students who identified themselves as belonging to the coloured racial group and felt that their group was a minority on campus. Based on them being a minority, they felt that they were being oppressed, marginalised, alienated, and not taken seriously by the majority Black population on campus. The following statements support these claims:

*"We as coloureds don't see ourselves in the university system... we don't feel like we belong. We don't feel represented, it is not equal"* P28

In support of the above claim, another coloured student (p18) disclosed that:

*"We are not entitled to a lot of stuff on campus... the way they [Black students] act and speak to you, it makes me feel like I'm not entitled."* when probed more on the allegations, this same student continued that *"most black students will push you away if you don't speak Setswana"*, they will *"turn their backs on you"* and will say *"speak Setswana or don't speak to me"*.

Another student described a scenario where she was discriminated against in a sports team. She explained that:

*"Especially in the volleyball, when we joined the university team, me being coloured I experienced not being helped in the same manner as the other girls"*

The fact that this student was directing the accusation towards the sports instructor even made it more serious. She felt that the coach did not pay attention and provide support to the coloured students in the same way as he/she did with the Black students. She continued that:

*"So, I went to the boys' team, why is the coach not giving attention to me... Other team members made it clear that because I'm coloured, I will not be helped."*

The student went ahead to lament the fact that she then had to leave the team and forget about her ambitions in sports. Comparably, the students explained that they had received remarks from other Black students that stereotyped them. The following statements were cited:

*"Coloured people are not clever"* and *"All coloureds are dangerous"*

*"In class sometimes, I don't ask questions because of the negative stereotypes that coloureds ask stupid questions"* P19

*"They always find a reason to say you can't think smart"* P19

When asked how they cope under such circumstances, student P 19 said

*"Being neglected intentionally it's so obvious... I try and put them in their place. But it makes it difficult, it's nice to stand up each morning and know that today is going to be one of those days again"*

Another student explained that some of the victims of the acts simply develop a withdrawal mentality. She said they *"just go to your room, lock your door and stay away."* Some of these students have brought these concerns to the university management, but clearly, management has not succeeded in robustly confronting the problem. For example, one student explained that:

*“The university is not doing enough, we had a meeting with the warden, and I could pick up that the warden is worried about the racial thing going on. She simply told us to be strong and told us about another coloured guy who had similar concerns and has overcome them and is now happy”*

When asked if they felt this was really a Black person versus coloured issue or if other racial groups were equally affected, one of the students indicated that the white students are not concerned because they don't even want to interact or engage:

*“I don't think whites feel they belong they are basically here to study and finish. They do not belong at all” P19*

A sense of desperation was evoked and a need that this thing should not be happening: the following statements reflect this:

*“Coming here and experiencing this was bad... I can't help I can't talk Setswana” P19*

*“Although I'm a coloured, I'm also a student at this university. They used to say all coloureds are dangerous. You know I don't have friends but that is okay. They don't want to talk to me but that is okay” P19*

*“Because we are the minority, walking past coloured students, how do they cope with all of this, they just go to their rooms, stay away and just go and sleep” P19*

*“There can't be this thing that when blacks are dominant, they can do whatever they want, it's not right” P19*

Another student lamented that academic concerns should be more important on campus than racial and social backgrounds. She said: *“where you are, why you are here is not because of your race or social background but because you are capable”*

## 6. Experiences Associated with University Support Structures

The sixth theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviewing process dealt with student experiences that were associated with university support structures. Notably, university support structures such as “academic support,” “mentor support,” “student health and wellness for psychosocial support” and “extramural opportunities” were pivotal in promoting a feeling of belongingness amongst first-year students at the start of the academic year. The participant responses shared below resemble the types of university support that were rendered to first-year students during the induction phase.

*“For all first-year modules tutor support where initiated that made our work much easier” P8*

*“If I did not understand anything and when I was lost, I had a peer mentor that assisted me with some advice” P17*

*“At the start of the year, we also received a lot of information regarding student health and wellness. I know that we have also have a psychologist that are there for us if times get tough” P4*

*“I must admit, joining the varsity volleyball team was a highlight of my first year. By joining the team, I could meet other first years, make friends, and share experiences” P9*

An analysis of the responses provided seemed to suggest that the selected university was successful in initiating an academic support intervention such as tutor support at the start of the academic year. The tutor support enabled first-year students to cope with the academic demands of a first-year university experience. Apart from the tutor support provided, it was also mentioned that the availability of peer mentor support was beneficial in providing advice and support to first-year students. The availability of peer-mentor support was key in ensuring that first-year students acclimatise to the socio-emotional demands of a first-year university

experience. In addition, the availability of psycho-social support seemed to serve as an intervention that assisted first-year students in coping with the stressors and realities of a first-year university experience. The assumption can, therefore, be made that such forms of support were critical towards shaping the emotional resilience of the first-year student cohort. Finally, the provision of extramural activities such as volleyball allowed first-year students to embrace feelings of belongingness and togetherness with their peers.

#### 7. Experiences Associated with Student Support Rendered Outside of University Structures

Finally, the seventh theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviewing process dealt with student experiences that were associated with support rendered outside of university structures during the induction phase. The support rendered was categorised amongst support structures that were related to “family” and “friends.” These forms of external support are described next:

*“Certain days were more difficult than others. if i had a bad day, then i used to phone my dad in johannesburg for words of encouragement” p4*

*“I must admit that the support offered by my friends in the res helped a lot. they seemed to relate, and we could always chat” p33*

These responses shared by the participants confirm the critical role that family and friends played in ensuring socio-emotional support to first-year students during the induction phase. This form of support rendered by such role-players was beneficial in enabling students to adapt to the demands of the first-year university experience. The responses provided seemed to suggest that family support catered for the element of emotional support. The existence of friendship support, on the other hand, seemed to help allow first-year students to relate, share experiences and be empathic towards their peers. This approach, in turn, has implications for the socio-emotional well-being of first-year students.

### Discussion

This section aims to discuss the findings that emerged from the semi-structured interviews about the aspects of the literature on transitions and induction. This study explored the first-year student experiences of a phase of induction as part of a transitioning journey into a South African University. Conducting this study was important since issues of transition, especially at the phase of induction, have great ramifications for student learning and academic success (Ramsay, Raven & Hall, 2005; Gravett & Winstone, 2021). In the South African context, the issues of student transition are systemic (Stone, 2021). The persistent equity and equality gaps that exist within South African institutions of higher education result in students of colour (Mpisi & Alexander, 2022) students from low-income households and first-generation students being subject to lower graduating rates compared to those students who are traditionally more advantaged (Fataar, 2018). Apart from the socio-economic background of students, university support mechanisms such as the first-year student induction phase further affect student success.

The need for this study arises from the assumption that the induction phase at the selected South African university provided a series of events and activities at the start of an academic year that effectively supported entering first-year students to acclimatise to the university experience. However, given this assumption, empirical data derived from the semi-structured interviewing process with first-year students seemed to suggest that student experiences regarding the induction phase were positively and negatively inclined. More specifically, positive sentiments were shared regarding a) university orientation, b) student accommodation, c) university support structures and d) student support rendered outside of university structures. These experiences seemed to suggest that such forms of support during the induction phase promoted first-year students’ sense of belonging within the university culture.

Unfortunately, the first-year students also expressed less favourable experiences. In this study, student views that centred around a) a lack of preparation for university life, b) student anxiety, fear and uncertainty related to university contact, c) lack of orientation for late registering students, d) poor internet connectivity

in off-campus student accommodation and e) issues of race relations on campus also seemed to downplay the effectiveness of student induction. These findings echo the view of Maloch et al., (2022) who claim that the ability of a higher education institution to deliver an effective induction phase is challenging for any institution, regardless of the resources and status of the institution. The assumption is, therefore, that the first-year student experiences of the induction phase at a selected university encompass the many distinct aspects of student life. These aspects were academic, intellectual, social, and emotional. In addition, student experiences also pointed to the growth and in certain instances disruption of cultural and race relations.

e draw on the principles of resilience theory to appreciate the subjective and individualised experiences of the students as they navigate through the induction phase of university transition. These levels of resilience align with the concept of transition that Javed (2016:14) referred to as an individual 's shift or movement from the known to the unknown, familiar to the unfamiliar, from the old to the new environments and the challenges encountered in making this move. The findings reveal various levels of engagement with resilience as will be explained below.

### 1. Deterioration phase and glimpses of adversity shared by participants

The literature on the resilience theory conceptualises the deteriorating phase as a temporary phase that depicts an individual's state of despair and lack of hope due to individual issues encountered within a specific environment (Zarotti *et al.*, 2020). The findings from the interviews demonstrate that some of the students attained such levels of despair during their induction into the university. This despair was informed by the various adversities that they encountered during induction such as the idea of entering an alien environment, the feeling of not being welcomed, issues of communication, racial tensions, no proper orientation, and the residence-related challenges. The height of deterioration was expressed by the participant who after recounting the frustrations of her early campus days, concluded by saying "I hate this place".

### 2. The Adapting phase

Despite the enormity of the challenges that the students encountered, the interviews show a catalogue of coping strategies employed to keep the academic project alive. Even though some of these strategies might not come across as the ideal situation for student success, they reflect the resilience of the students during strong adversity.

Even the participant who said, "I hate this place," did not give up on her studies. She stayed on and somehow found a way of adapting. This is resilience which in this case is an overly critical aspect of the student journey and success. Other mechanisms of adaptation that the students employed include withdrawing from social spaces and extramural activities. Whilst some of these adaptations seemed to be informed by the student's resilience, others were facilitated by factors such as a support system comprising of a tutor, peer mentor, security guard, and warden; and from an academic perspective, the SCOR module which assisted the students to cope with the demands of first-year academic project.

### 3. The Recovering phase

While it is clear from the findings that all the students encountered adversity, it also emerged that some of the students have developed different strategies for adapting to the university reality. We believe that even though the students are adapting to reality, it is not a matter of accepting the status quo but surviving in the environment. That is why many of them lamented that they expect better. What this means for the recovery phase of resilience is that the students are not yet there. When these same groups of students will be interviewed again after their first year at university as planned.

In trying to link the student experiences to the research literature, we note Latham and Green's (1997) point that, these students go through the process of transition independently and that even though most students struggle to transition into university, students of less privileged and more marginal backgrounds face challenges when entering the unwelcoming and even hostile environment (Greer, 2014) This was supported by Vally (2019) surmises that the socioeconomic status of children is one of the most crucial factors

influencing learner outcomes. Moreover, university lecturers therefore too should assist students in understanding and interpreting the new university experience (Mpisi, Groenewald & Barnett, 2020).

As Mishra, Gupta, and Shree (2020) posit that online teaching is perceived as a massive challenge to deal with and stakeholders also are not potentially fit to adjust with sudden emotional change as they are not technologically competent to embrace the current situation. The pandemic therefore exposed the vulnerabilities of students in the face of challenges imposed by the pandemic

The injustices that characterise society in general are frequently found in various social institutions such as educational institutions (Sullivan, 2006:100).

## Conclusion

The findings from the study serve as valuable feedback on how South African universities can go about transforming their cultures, systems, and policies to better support first-year students during a phase of induction. In addition, feedback from this study serves as a guide on how the student experience during a phase of induction can be improved through inclusive decision-making processes within an already increasingly competitive, student-driven sector. Such transformation of cultures, systems, and policies, particularly during an induction phase will enable entering students to be better geared for the first-year university experience. As researchers, we are of the view that the continued focus on students' academic ability, wellness, and stability, especially during a phase of induction should serve as a priority in ensuring improved student experiences. In turn, improved student experiences are considered a key driver towards students' engagement, equity, and performance. In addition to this, we are also of the view that spaces be created as part of the induction phase that will allow students to experience a sense of social belonging and cohesion that will result in identity safety, feelings of respect, value, and connectedness with others. Future research regarding students' transition through university life is required.

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