PSYCHO-SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY FIRST-ENTERING STUDENTS WITH THEIR ACADEMIC PROGRESS AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: CASE STUDY OF A RURAL-BASED UNIVERSITY

By

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION IN GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

In the

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND EDUCATION

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

At the

UNIVERSITY OF VENDA

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2025

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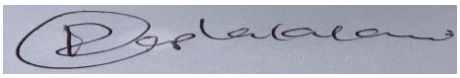
Declaration

I, Raphalalani Avhasei Messie, declare that this research entitled "**Psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-entering students with their academic progress at higher education institutions: case study of a rural-based university",** is my own work and all sources that I have used, have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signature:  Date: 30 May 2025

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Acknowledgements

The unwavering support and encouragement of the extraordinary individuals in my life have enabled me to navigate this path, which has necessitated perseverance, development, and learning.

I am profoundly grateful to my mother, Raphalalani Joyce, for her unwavering sacrifices, resolve, and fortitude, which facilitated my education. I am grateful for your confidence in me and your dedication to ensuring that I had an opportunity to pursue my education, despite the obstacles we encountered. This accomplishment has been founded on your fortitude.

My constant source of motivation is my esteemed son, Tshishonge Gundo Ipfani Obedience, and my cherished siblings - Raphalalani Takalani, Raphalalani Sedzani, Raphalalani Avhafarei, Raphalalani Gumani, Raphalalani Mutshutshudzi and Raphalalani Makhadzi. Every endeavour I make is intended to establish a high standard, which will motivate you also to pursue more ambitious goals and accomplish more.

I am deeply appreciative of my colleague, Mr. Mutshinyalo, and of my spiritual leader at the UPCSA Matangari congregation, Reverend Maselesele K.M (soon to be Dr.). I was consistently challenged by both of you as you presented your academic advancements and reminded me of the imminent nature of my PhD journey. I found the motivation I needed to persevere through difficult times, in your words.

I am deeply appreciative of the unwavering support of my remarkable friends- Nemushungwa Thompho (RIP), Mathebula Vukosi, Magoro Khuthadzo Jane, and Ramaisha Thabelo during both prosperous and challenging periods. Your unwavering motivation, support, and camaraderie were instrumental in the success of this academic endeavour. It is rare and invaluable to have such genuine companions like yourself.

My life was significantly impacted by your faith in me, Mr. Mafumela Phathutshedzo Blessing, my number one supporter. You reminded me of my intrinsic value, potential, and strengths at times when surrender appeared more feasible than perseverance. Your mentoring has been an enlightening influence.

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I am profoundly grateful to my esteemed supervisors, Prof. S.A. Mulovhedzi and Prof. P. Adv. Matshidze. Your unwavering leadership, constructive critique, and unwavering support sustained my focus and motivated me to continue, even in the face of a natural inclination to retreat. I am grateful for your commitment to my academic and personal growth, as well as for holding me accountable.

With the young individuals I encountered at the University of Venda through the Stopthespot Youth Organisation in mind, this study was made possible. I trust that the results will help you overcome the psychosocial obstacles life may present. May you find the fortitude, tenacity, and restoration that you yearn for.

I would like to sincerely acknowledge Katlego, a colleague whom I encountered during my time at UNIVEN. Your fleeting acquaintance ignited a profound enthusiasm within me to further my academic pursuits and explore this subject. Your impact was undeniably profound, significant, and comprehensible.

I extend my gratitude to everyone who contributed, whether significantly or marginally, directly or indirectly. Thank you for your belief in me

I am, most of all, grateful to God Almighty for providing me with the strength, health, and perseverance necessary to complete this journey. None of this would have been possible without your grace.

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List of acronyms

BEDTEF	Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase
DOE	Department of Education
FP	Foundation Phase
HIL	Higher Institution of Learning
SFET	Senior, Further Education and Training
WHO	World Health Organisation
UNIVEN	University of Venda
FYE	First-Year Experience
KNUST	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
LPREC	Limpopo Provincial Review Ethics Committees
UFS	University of Free State

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Abstract

Psycho-social difficulties may significantly influence the day-to-day learning experiences and academic performance of first-year students in higher education institutions. It is widely acknowledged that the transition from secondary to tertiary education presents numerous challenges, particularly for young students entering a university for the first time. The absence of structured guidance and support during this transition often results in students grappling with emotional stress, social isolation, and adaptation difficulties. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study aimed to explore the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students and how these can affect their academic progress. These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural universities, where students often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have limited exposure to diverse academic and social environments. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to gain in-depth insights into students' lived experiences. Data were collected through individual interviews and focus-group discussions, enabling the researcher to capture personal narratives and group dynamics that reflect the shared struggles and coping mechanisms of these students. The study population consisted of ten purposively-selected first-year Bachelor of Education students enrolled in the Foundation Phase, Senior Phase, and Further Education and Training (FET) programmes. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had relevant and rich experiences related to the research focus. The findings reveal that many of these students experience various psycho-social challenges, including anxiety, homesickness, social alienation, and cultural adjustment difficulties. These issues collectively hinder their academic engagement, concentration, and overall performance. Based on the data collected and analysed, the study makes several recommendations aimed at improving institutional support systems, such as the integration of mental health services, the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies, and the promotion of social integration initiatives. Addressing these psycho-social difficulties is critical to enhancing student retention, academic success, and overall well-being, within rural higher education contexts.

Keywords: Psycho-social challenges, first-year students, teaching and learning, academic progress, psychological support, higher education, rural university.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

			
Home sickness	Anxiety	Depression	Isolation

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The transition from secondary to tertiary education marks a significant milestone in the lives of students, often accompanied by a myriad of challenges. Among these, psycho-social difficulties, such as anxiety, depression, homesickness, and social isolation, are prevalent, particularly among first-year students (Jules, Maynard, Lowe, Lipps & Gibson, 2021). These challenges can have a negative impact on students' academic performance and overall well-being. In rural-based higher education institutions, where students may face additional socio-economic and infrastructural barriers, the impact of these psycho-social difficulties can be even more pronounced (Haruna, Mohammed & Braimah, 2025). This study aimed to explore the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students at a rural-based university in South Africa and their implications for their academic progress.

Tertiary students are usually confronted with a wide range of difficulties, including educational responsibilities, financial limitations, a multitude of obstacles and potential risks, and challenges to social advancement within the system. Students face these difficulties with the expectation of succeeding. Most individuals may become lazy and indifferent if they do not experience some type of stress; hence, stress is a necessary and inescapable element of daily life. Stress is inherent because it relates to any incident that could be joyful or unpleasant (Yikealo & Tareke, 2018:2). Globally, 1 in 10 (20%) youth entering a tertiary education institution is likely to experience at least one psychological challenge. Research conducted in Canada and the USA depicts

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that psychosocial difficulties, among first-year students, are increasing (Lipson et al., 2021).

In African countries, such as Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Nigeria, psycho-related issues are worse compared to other countries (Hinojosa, Moreno & Ferree, 2019:17). According to Pretorius and Blaauw (2020, 28), academic performance, adjusting to campus life, being more autonomous, financial issues, time management, and managing interpersonal interactions are among the challenges that first-year students experience. Psycho-social problems are becoming increasingly prevalent among college and university students throughout the world. As many young people begin tertiary studies between the ages of 16 and 25, psycho-social difficulties are more likely to manifest early in life (Van Breda, 2023:123). The transition from high school life can be difficult for many first-year students; therefore, it might take some time for them to settle completely into their new environments and transfer from high school to post-secondary study. First-year experiences have a significant influence on how students approach their academic and social lives at the tertiary level and on their overall tertiary performance (Hinojosa et al., 2019:28).

The first year of tertiary study is known as the year of transition and adjustment; this is because the period presents a variety of obstacles that may benefit or harm the student in the short term and in the future (Hinojosa et al., 2019:18). Among these numerous difficulties they encounter, first-year students also struggle psychologically from a lack of basic coping mechanisms. Evans, Borriello and Field (2018:3) assert that because many students previously focused on both domestic chores and academic work, first-year students also struggle to shift their focus solely to academic responsibilities (studying and taking notes in class) and self-management skills. This results in many students running the risk of leaving school; coupled with financial restraints, this may, unavoidably, affect institutions' retention rates. The absence of familial support is noted by Evans et al (2018:3) as one of the toughest obstacles first-year students must overcome once they begin post-secondary school.

The South African Higher Education, Science, and Technology Minister, Mr Blade Nzimande, highlighted a rise in the number of students enduring psychosocial issues, with 30 percent of students dealing with educational anxiety or strain, 22 percent dealing with drug or alcohol abuse, and 18 percent dealing with hopelessness or

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suicidal thoughts. In response to these problems that first-year students encounter, some South African institutions have tried to create positive and conducive learning environments and psycho-social developmental opportunities, as well as to provide concessions for students with unconventional family situations. According to Harwood and Maniram (2024:12), most residential students in various institutions have access to a variety of programmes, including leadership and development efforts, psychological workshops and campaigns, and volunteer community outreach projects. Through these initiatives, first-year students are offered crucial life skills for a successful transition in their first year. These programmes play vital roles in supporting first-year students in transitioning to life at a tertiary institution. Despite this, a review of the available research found no previous studies that have assessed whether these programmes improve students' psychological well-being and social adjustment. The goal of this study, hence, is to determine the effectiveness of psychosocial programmes on first-year students' mental health and adjustment in post-secondary academic institutions (Niitembu, Shikongo & Bozkurt, 2025).

The psycho-social challenges faced by first-year students have been a subject of concern in higher education research. Studies indicate that a significant proportion of university students experience mental health issues, which can hinder their academic success. A study by Visser and Law-van Wyk (2021), for instance, found that 45.6% of students reported symptoms of anxiety, and 35.0% reported symptoms of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. These mental health challenges were linked to factors such as prolonged quarantine, fear of infection, frustration, boredom, inadequate information, financial loss, and stigma. Similarly, Bantjes et al. (2021) found that common mental disorders, including major depressive disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, were associated with increased fears of academic failure among first-year students in South Africa.

In rural settings, these challenges are often exacerbated by additional factors. Omodan (2021:229) highlighted that rural first-year students faced difficulties with online learning due to unreliable internet connectivity and lack of digital literacy, which were further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. These students also reported feelings of isolation and a lack of preparedness for the demands of university education. Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) note that poor orientation programmes and

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limited knowledge of the higher education system among students from rural backgrounds contributed to their psycho-social difficulties. The cumulative effect of these psycho-social challenges can lead to decreased academic performance, increased dropout rates, and long-term mental health issues. It is imperative, therefore, to understand the specific psycho-social difficulties faced by first-year students in rural-based universities to develop targeted interventions that can support their academic and personal development.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based on the existing literature, psycho-social challenges can remain protracted, thereby creating barriers to first-year students in their academic progress in higher education institutions. Long and Bateman (2020:121) assert that there is a remarkable track record of students finishing their degrees in spite of diverse challenges. However, some had had to drop out of their studies, for instance, to devote themselves to the care of infants and small children, and others had to drop out to work to finance their university studies. These adverse situations cause some students to repeat their levels of study numerous times. These students are impacted academically, physically, cognitively, and psychologically by these circumstances, which also cause tension, anxiety, rage, failure, and ineptitude (Flourishing, Smith, Johnson, Patel, Thompson & Wang,2022:4-5). The lack of research into this phenomenon is an indication that proper attention has not yet been paid to how these challenges affect students. This is concerning, particularly in rural-based institutions, where many students are from disadvantaged communities - from low-income households that are subjected to socio-economic pressure daily. It is, thus, pertinent and imperative to explore how these psycho-social challenges affect first-year students and the rural-based higher institutions of learning, in an attempt to find possible solutions to assist students in overcoming the challenges and excelling at their studies. This background motivates the need for a researcher to explore the psychosocial difficulties encountered by first-year students in their academic progress in a rural-based university, using a case study.

1.3 MAIN AIM OR PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

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The main aim of this study was to explore the psycho-social difficulties that first-year students face in higher education institutions.

1.3.1 Research Objectives

- To find out the psycho-social difficulties that affect first-year students' academic performance.
- To establish how psycho-social difficulties affect first-year students' academic achievement.
- To appraise the teaching approaches utilised by lecturers with first-year students.
- To determine the methods that can be implemented to assist first-year students in overcoming psycho-social issues that are negatively impacting their academic performance.

1.3.2 Research Questions

- What are the psycho-social difficulties that affect first-year students' academic progress?
- How do these psycho-social difficulties affect first-year students' academic achievement?
- Which teaching approaches are utilised by lecturers to promote first-year students' academic progress?
- Which strategies can be implemented to assist first-year students in overcoming the psycho-social difficulties that are negatively impacting their academic performance?

1.4 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

1.4.1 First-entering Student (FES)

According to Reidy (2019), a first-entering student, also known as a "fresher" or a "first-year student", is one in his/her first year at an educational institution, typically, a secondary school or college or university, as well as other types of post-secondary educational institutions. In the University of Western Cape's definition pamphlet, FES is a student who has registered for the first time for an undergraduate study and has never been registered for the same qualification in any other tertiary institution. A

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student is someone who is learning at a college, university, or school, according to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary. According to the University of Venda's policy document, first-entering students (FTENS) are those who are beginning their tertiary studies for the first time. For this study, a first-entering student is a person who enrols in a tertiary institution for the first time for an undergraduate qualification with the goal of learning things that would improve their personal growth and prepare them for the working world.

1.4.2 Academic Achievement

Academic achievement is defined as progress towards obtaining educational skills, materials, and knowledge, which typically spans a variety of subjects. It relates to academic accomplishment rather than general knowledge gain in non-academic situations. This accomplishment or performance, according to Reidy (2019), is the extent to which a student, lecturer, or institution has attained short- or long-term educational goals. Ali and Khan (2020:16) explain that academic achievement refers to achieving educational milestones, like secondary school diplomas and bachelor's degrees. Examinations and ongoing evaluations are widely used to determine academic progress, but there is disagreement about the best evaluation technique and which elements, whether declarative knowledge like facts or procedural knowledge like skills, are the most essential. Academic achievement refers to a student's success in moving up a level, hence indicating his/her performance and accomplishment. In other words, academic achievement refers to the extent to which students or educational institutions meet their intended learning goals, typically measured through grades, test scores, degree completion, and other formal assessments (Slavin, 2018:35). For this study, academic performance refers to a student's success in moving up a level in the area of study.

1.4.3 Psycho-Social

Tus (2020:98) defines "psycho-social" as having to do with a person's psychological growth and interactions with social contexts; the person need not be entirely aware of this interaction with their surroundings. Erikson (1968), a psychologist, popularised it in his concept of "social evolution", and unlike social psychology, the focus is on how individuals behave socially. Students encounter obstacles and barriers - psycho-social problems - in a variety of areas of their personal and social functioning (Taylor,

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2019:45) Psychosocial is described as a dynamic interaction between psychological (thoughts, emotions, behaviours) and social (cultural, relational, environmental) factors, which influence an individual's well-being and functioning (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). For this study, the term "psycho-social" describes the interplay between individuals' thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and their social environment; in essence, it reflects the dynamics of the social environment on mental and emotional health, social functioning, and general quality of life.

1.4.4 Tertiary Education

Tertiary education refers to any further education that is pursued after high school (Marginson, 2018:4). Tertiary education refers to all forms of post-secondary education, including universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational education and training (VET) institutions. It represents education pursued after the completion of secondary schooling, typically aimed at providing specialised knowledge, skills, and qualifications that prepare individuals for professional careers, research, or further academic study (UNESCO, 2021:10). Tertiary education is also seen as a critical driver of personal development, social mobility, and economic growth, with a focus on advancing intellectual capabilities and enhancing employment prospects (CHE, 2022:5). For this study, tertiary education refers to the knowledge acquired after secondary schooling in higher institutions of learning.

1.4.5 Teaching and Learning

According to Biggs and Tang (2021:8), teaching and learning are processes that engage students in enhancing their understanding and application of knowledge while developing skills through studying and instruction. Ormrod (2019:22) states that teaching and learning are processes of training an individual for the formation of habits and the acquisition of knowledge. Teaching refers to the deliberate process during which a teacher facilitates the transfer of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes by guiding, instructing, and engaging learners using various strategies and methods (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019:15). Learning, on the other hand, is the process through which students acquire, internalise, and apply new knowledge, behaviours, or skills through study, experience, or instruction (Biggs & Tang, 2021:12). Teaching and learning are interdependent activities where effective teaching stimulates active learning, and learning outcomes reflect the effectiveness of teaching practices

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(Bransford et al., 2020:45). For this study, teaching and learning are referred to as a process of imparting knowledge to all first-entering students in a lecture hall situation.

1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This section explicates the terms - research paradigm and design, population, sampling procedure, sampling size, data collection methods, data analysis, significance of the study, and ethical principles.

1.5.1 Research Paradigm

A researcher's thinking and views are influenced by the research paradigm adopted for a study (Bless, 2006). There are three categories of research paradigms: positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism. The researcher employed the interpretivism paradigm, which is founded on the belief that reality is subjective and socially produced. This paradigm was relevant to this topic because it implied that an individual is best understood through their own experience of the real world, which may differ from another person's perspective; hence, this approach assisted the researcher in fully comprehending the participants' experiences. Chowdhury (2014:126) asserts that the interpretivist paradigm underlines the meaningful aspects of human nature and participation in both social and cultural life.

In basic terms, the interpretivist research paradigm assisted the researcher in comprehending the different factors that influence human conduct and engagement in various activities. The research used this paradigm to look into how psycho-social issues may be influencing first-year students' academic achievement. The researcher was interested in studying the participants' social worlds as well as relating their first-time experiences in higher education to the psychological issues that they face in this environment. The reasoning is that, to comprehensively grasp the problem, the researcher must first understand the participants' ideas, feelings, views, and ideals.

According to Thanh and Thanh (2015: 23), the interpretivism paradigm is concerned with comprehending the global context of human experience, and this standpoint enabled the researcher to relate to the obstacles faced by first-year students. This study, like many others under the interpretivism paradigm, used a qualitative approach

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to go deeper into what educational problems there are and to elicit answers from individuals, thereby gaining a clear picture of those difficulties.

1.5.2 Research Design

Creswell and Creswell (2018:134) clarify that a research design is the technique for gathering, analysing, translating, and presenting information in a study. It is thus a collection of strategies and procedures for gathering and analysing data on the variables indicated in the research problem.

In this study, a qualitative exploratory research design was used to explore psycho-social difficulties of first-entering students in higher education institutions. This design assisted the researcher in analysing the collected facts and developing a thorough grasp of the study subject, as well as helping the researcher to explore the problem effectively (Siedlecki & Sandra, 2020:8-12).

1.5.3 Research Methodology

According to Dawson (2019:39-40), a research methodology details the tools and processes that will guide the collection and analysis of the data for the study; there are three types of methodology - qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodology. In this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative methodology, as this study is based on a social phenomenon. The qualitative approach is very pertinent when studying a particular society or how a social phenomenon is created. This is because societies are not homogeneous, comprising various human beings with different perspectives; therefore, it is appropriate to examine the field by deploying qualitative techniques to acquire relevant information. This approach provides insights into social issues and enables a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon (Bless, 2006). This approach was the most suitable for this study because it assisted the researcher to understand participants' experiences concerning psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-entering students in their academic progress at a higher education institution of learning (Bhandari, 2023:1).

1.5.4 Population and Sample Criteria

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1.5.4.1 Population

Research population is made up of persons about whom the study's conclusions could be generalised, according to Willie (2022:521). The study population consisted of all registered first-time students at the University of Venda at the time of the research.

1.5.4.2 Sampling procedure

The sampling procedure refers to the method of selecting a few participants from the target population to represent the whole study population (Setia, 2016). Probability sampling and non-probability sampling are the two main forms of sampling. For this study, the researcher used a probability sampling technique, hence it gave every registered student an equal chance of being selected for the research (Turner & Houle, 2019:59). The main sampling criteria were that the students must be at a tertiary institution, and this was their first year at the institution.

1.5.4.3 Sample size

According to Adam (2020:90-97), the sample size is the number of study participants involved in a study. In this study, the sample size consisted of five Foundation Phase students and five Senior and Further Education and Training students who were first-entering students.

1.6 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Rose, McKinley and Baffoe (2020:112-113) state that the data-collection method is a specific technique for obtaining information on topics, allowing researchers to answer pertinent questions. The study employed two qualitative data-gathering methods - individual interviews and focus-group discussions. The individual interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions which were used to gather first-hand data from the participants. The open-ended questions were intended to seek respondents' own opinions, thereby eliciting the participants' perspectives and opinions.

1.6.1 Semi-structured Individual Interviews

According to Cooper and Schindler (2019), an individual interview is a conversation that requires only two people. The researcher applied semi-structured individual interviews because they facilitate greater understanding and provide individual

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participants with privacy in their responses. For this process, the researcher made appointments with the participants and the interviews were also recorded and later transcribed to serve as backup for data accuracy. Participants had the opportunity to share their ideas during the interviews regarding how psycho-social issues were affecting their academic performance in a rural-based university.

1.6.2 Focus-Group Discussions

Smith and Brown (2020:45) state that focus-group discussions are an extended version of interviews, since in these sessions, participants, together, discuss the topic being studied. During the discussions, the researcher took field notes that contained a description of the events, how people behaved and responded, what was said in the conversations, and responses to the researcher's questions. Field notes were taken, and the discussions were recorded to make sure the researcher did not forget any particulars of the sessions.

For the focus-group discussions, all the selected 10 students, who were enrolled in the School of Education and in their first-year of study, were involved.

Table 1.1 Showing population sampled (own source)

Participants	Target Population
Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase students	5
Bachelor of Education in Senior, Further Education and Training students.	5
Total.	10

1.6.3 Field-notes

Field notes were taken during the face-to-face interviews to ensure the researcher did not forget the details provided in the responses (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). The notes provided - a description of the session, how interviewees conducted themselves, the gist of what was spoken, and specific replies to the researcher's questions

1.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the process of summarising and interpreting the collected data, which also involves transforming and examining the gathered data (Saunders, Lewis &

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Thornhill, 2019). Examining data to find recurring patterns, such as a reliable covariate between two or more variables, is the process of data analysis. The data was subjected to a narrative analysis by the researcher. The goal of narrative analysis, a qualitative research methodology, is based on the idea that life is a story; it is a process to discover how people alter their life stories to include a particular event. The researcher used thematic data analysis to achieve the objectives of this study. This process involved locating, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the collected data (Saunders et al., 2019).

The researcher applied the six phases of data analysis, as outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018:257-258). The information gathered from interviews will be presented in narrative form and organised into themes.

The six phases of analysing qualitative data used were as follows:

1. The first phase called for the organisation and preparation of the data for analysis through the transcription of interviews, efficient material scanning, and categorisation of all visual materials, among other activities.
2. Reading and reviewing all the data was the second phase. Gaining a broad understanding of the material and having the chance to consider its overall significance are the main goals of this stage.
3. Coding the data was the third step in the analysis of qualitative data. In this instance, the researcher classified the data text before giving each category a name to identify the gathered data.
4. The coding process was used to create a description of the individuals, environment, and the categories/themes for analysis in the fourth stage. This action was crucial since it aided in creating comprehensive descriptions of the themes in the data.
5. At the fifth stage, the researcher refined the identified themes and descriptions as portrayed in the previous phase.
6. Interpreting the findings or outcomes and presenting a report was the final phase. This phase also demanded that the researcher reflect on the knowledge acquired.

1.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

Investigating a social or human phenomenon through qualitative research is a process of knowledge that is founded on a unique heritage of inquiry (Creswell, 2018:2). By

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using data to illustrate uncommon or central themes that are woven into contexts, qualitative research aims to preserve the authenticity of narrative data.

1.8.1 Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which research methods can be relied upon, making it possible for someone not directly participating in the study to monitor, evaluate and comment on the research process (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020). It also alludes to the accuracy and dependability of the study results. The researcher maintained a detailed audit trail that recorded all stages of collecting data. After conducting interviews with the participants, the researcher made sure to frequently have sessions with the supervisor to ensure that the research process remained consistent and systematic.

1.8.2 Conformability

Conformability refers to the extent to which research results are influenced by participants' perception, not the researcher's bias (Lincoln & Guba, 2019:266). To achieve conformance, the researcher used a notebook to document personal assumptions throughout the study. Researchers also allowed peer researchers to review data and interpretations to check the bias of the information. Moreover, the supervisor reviews ensured that findings were grounded in the data collected rather than the researcher's views.

1.8.3 Transferability

The extent to which the phenomena or discoveries presented in one study are relevant to theory, practice and future research, or the transferability of the results of research to various settings, is termed "transferability", which is a sort of validity outside this particular study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2018:152). In this study, the researcher provided data collection methods and an outstanding description of the participants. The researcher conferred with the supervisors in the reading of the transcripts and the identification of major themes. This ensured that the theme identified reflected participants' experiences.

1.8.4 Credibility

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The credibility refers to the degree to which the study properly reflects the real experiences of the research participants (Shenton, 2018:63). The researcher applied several strategies to enhance credibility; these include allowing participants to review transcripts and interpretations in order to ensure accuracy (Stenfors et al., 2020). Those strategies ensured that the findings authentically represented the participants' perspectives.

1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is anticipated to assist many stakeholders in the education sector in managing the psychosocial challenges that first-year students face, as well as enhancing the academic performance and involvement of students who face a variety of psychosocial concerns. In order to implement and promote academic accomplishment in the face of challenges in the first year of study, organisations, university administration, and policy makers in the education sector may find these research findings essential. These findings may be used by communities' social services and non-profit organisations (NPOs), including the Stop the Spot Youth Organisation, which aims to identify students with psychosocial difficulties and then refer them to psychologists for further assistance. The University of Venda, for instance, identifies students who are struggling with their psychosocial wellbeing and devises strategies to help them, thereby promoting socially inclusive interventions on campus.

1.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study - in shedding light on the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students in rural-based higher education institutions - is without doubt; however, there are several limitations (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020:48). First, the study employed a qualitative research approach with a small sample size of ten participants drawn from a single institution. This limits the generalisability of the findings to other universities or student populations. The experiences and challenges described may be unique to the specific cultural, academic, and geographic context of the selected rural university. Second, the data collection relied heavily on self-reported information from participants through interviews and focus groups, which may have introduced biases, such as

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exaggeration, selective memory, or social desirability. Additionally, language barriers and the sensitivity of discussing emotional and psychological issues may have restricted some participants from fully expressing their experiences. Lastly, the study did not explore longitudinal outcomes, meaning it could not assess how psycho-social challenges evolve or how they affect academic performance in the long term.

1.11 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was specifically delimited to first-year students enrolled in Bachelor of Education programmes (Foundation Phase, Senior Phase, and Further Education and Training) at a single rural university in South Africa. The reason for focusing on this group was to gain a detailed understanding of the psycho-social challenges faced by this category of students entering higher education for the first time, and who are likely navigating new academic, cultural, and social environments. By narrowing the scope to one academic discipline and one institution, the study aimed to ensure relevance to the context and manageability, given the available time and resources. Additionally, the use of qualitative data collecting methods - interviews and focus-group discussions - was a conscious choice to collect detailed, narrative-rich data instead of broad statistical information. These delimitations helped provide the depth and focus needed to explore the lived experiences of participants, even though they may limit the wider applicability of the findings.

1.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Bartneck, Lutge, Wagner and Welsh (2021:89) state that ethical considerations are a collection of moral principles that are advocated by a group, and then universally acknowledged. In research, they offer behavioural patterns and guidelines for the best conduct toward topics of experimentation and participants. The first step in this process was to ask permission prior to the researcher having conversations with the participants, in other words, authorisation to do the research.

The researcher also requested permission to conduct the study from the relevant department at the University of Venda. Applications for ethical clearance were granted by the Ethical Clearance Committee of the University and the relevant departments.

CONFIDENTIALITY

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The identity of participants shall at all times remain confidential. When a researcher is aware of the identity of a study subject but takes steps to keep that information private, the researcher is said to be providing confidentiality to the participants (Macnish, 2019:233-249). The researcher reassured participants that their personal information would be kept private; hence, no one else would have access to it.

1.12.1 Risk of Harm

Every researcher must begin by considering the possibility of harm to participants. Injuries include those that are physical, emotional, reputational, and resource-related. Before participants gave their consent to participate in this study, the researcher discussed the likelihood of emotional stress and informed them of any possible hazards and available remedial initiatives.

1.12.2 Respect for Individual Autonomy

Bartneck et al. (2021:91) state that the freedom to make decisions is what autonomy is about. Even after giving their agreement, participants were informed that they may leave the research at any given moment, without having to provide any justification. The right to appeal that their data be eliminated from the study was made available to participants in this study.

1.12.3 Informed Consent

In order to get informed consent, a researcher must make sure that study participants have been given a complete explanation of the research project, the methods that will be employed throughout the study, as well as the risks and hazards that might be associated with the study (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019:98). Every aspect of the research project, including its potential effects, the benefits of participation, and their right to refuse, was fully disclosed to study participants.

1.13 CHAPTER OUTLINE

1.13.1 Structure/Organisation of the study

Chapter One: Overview of the study

In this chapter, the background to the study, statement of the problem, research questions, objectives, significance, and rationale of the study were presented. It also

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outlined the scope of the study, including limitations and delimitations, as well as a brief overview of how the study is organised.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, existing scholarly literature related to psycho-social difficulties affecting first-year university students was reviewed. The discussions focused on the theoretical framework, defined key concepts, and examined past studies that investigated similar issues, highlighting the research gaps this study aimed to fill.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This chapter outlined the methodological approach adopted for the study. It described the research design, paradigm, data collection methods, population, sampling techniques, data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and strategies used to ensure trustworthiness and validity.

Chapter Four: Data Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

This chapter presented the research findings obtained from individual interviews, focus-group discussions, and questionnaires. The data were analysed thematically, with supporting quotes from participants and visual aids such as tables and diagrams. The interpretation linked findings to the research questions and literature reviewed.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The final chapter provided a summary of the key findings, discussed the conclusions drawn from the study, and presented practical recommendations for higher education institutions, academic staff, and student support services. Suggestions for future research were also provided.

1.14 CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced the study by outlining the background, purpose, and significance of exploring the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students in a rural-based higher education institution. The transition from high school to university presents a wide range of emotional, social, and academic challenges, particularly for students from historically disadvantaged and rural backgrounds. The chapter presented the research problem, objectives, questions, and the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach to investigate the lived experiences of these students.

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Furthermore, the chapter clarified the scope of the study by discussing its limitations and delimitations and presented the organisation of the entire research. Understanding the psycho-social barriers affecting academic performance is crucial for developing targeted support strategies and interventions that can improve students' well-being and success. The next chapter presented a comprehensive review of related literature to provide a theoretical and contextual foundation for the study. It also explored relevant concepts, previous research findings, and theoretical frameworks that support the investigation of psycho-social challenges in higher education.

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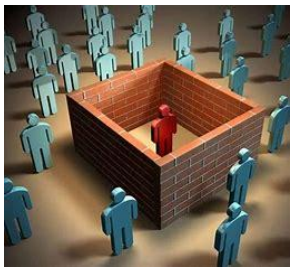
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

			
Home sickness	Anxiety	Depression	Isolation

2.1 INTRODUCTION

A literature review is an essential component of scholarly inquiry because it synthesises and contextualises existing knowledge within a specific field of research (Xiao & Watson, 2019; Ali & Khan, 2023; Snyder, 2019). Beyond mere summary, a robust review allows researchers to identify critical knowledge gaps and establish a framework for understanding complex phenomena in contemporary higher education (Van Breda, 2023). This process ensures that the study is grounded in current evidence and contributes meaningfully to the evolving discourse on student success and retention. Winchester and Salji (2016) maintain that a literature review is a way for researchers to identify what they do not know and to set up their study so that they can better understand the phenomenon they are examining. Recent scholarship by Ali and Khan (2020) emphasises that examining existing literature is the primary method for determining previously investigated variables, thereby preventing academic redundancy. Furthermore, according to Hart (2018), a literature review also guarantees that research is grounded in past research by assisting in the development of a theoretical and conceptual underpinning for the study. In this context, this chapter examined pertinent literature to identify information gaps about the psycho-social challenges that first-year students encounter in their academic progress at higher education institutions, with a particular focus on a rural university. The researcher intended to gain a complete understanding of these difficulties by drawing on prior research.

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There are two main parts to this chapter. The first part details the theoretical framework, with a focus on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory. As outlined in Chapter 1, this theory is crucial for understanding and dealing with the social and psychological problems that first-year students face. Exploring these variables further provided a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges, such as homesickness, acute anxiety, and depressive symptoms, that frequently impede the academic persistence of first-entering students. While foundational theories established the developmental stages of youth, contemporary research by Haruna et al. (2025) demonstrates that these psychosocial stressors are primary predictors of academic withdrawal in rural university settings. Furthermore, Niitembu et al. (2025) argue that the lack of institutional 'psychosocial health' frameworks leaves young people vulnerable to emotional distress, which directly correlates with a decline in their academic performance and overall social integration. The second part reviewed existing knowledge to identify knowledge gaps in this field. This was done by researching important ideas that are relevant to the research questions that guide this study, which include:

- What psycho-social challenges impede the academic advancement of first-year students?
- What is the effect of psycho-social issues on the academic success of first-year students?
- Which pedagogical methods are employed to facilitate first-year students' academic achievement?
- What measures can be employed to assist first-year students in overcoming psycho-social problems that impede their academic performance?

The goal of this review was to build on what we already know about the topic and identify areas that require further research to help the researcher better understand how psychosocial difficulties affect the academic progression of first-year students in higher institutions of learning.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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This study is underpinned by Erikson's psycho-social development theory (1958:63), which posits that our characteristics undergo eight phases of development from infancy to retirement age. This study, hence, employed the psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1968) as its main theoretical framework, as it aims to explain how people grow and change over time. The theory covers both the early and later stages of life, and gets individuals to think about developmental issues that come up again and again as motives for different parts of life. Table 1.2 below shows the eight steps of Erikson's growth.

Table 2.1 Eight steps of Erikson's growth: Adapted from Van Breda (2023) and Erikson (1968)

Approximate Age	Psychosocial Crisis
Infant – 18 months	Trust vs. Mistrust
18 months – 3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt
3 – 5 years	Initiative vs. Guilt
5 – 13 years	Industry vs. Inferiority
13 – 21 years	Identity vs. Role Confusion
21 – 39 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation
40 – 65 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation
65 and older	Ego Integrity vs. Despair

According to Erikson (1968), interacting with others is beneficial throughout life, and each stage is marked by the conflict between our psychological needs and the social environment we are in. At each stage, people therefore have to deal with the tension between their psychological needs and the social situation they are in. The researcher believes that to be confident and productive members of society, people need to be able to effortlessly move through each phase and find a balance between conflicting states, such as autonomy and shame, and trust and mistrust. This theory gives people a useful way to put ideas and facts in order. Modern psychosocial theory emphasises that a robust developmental framework must account for both individual stability and the processes of systemic change. According to Van Breda (2023:124), a

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comprehensive theory of developmental psychology needs to explain the mechanisms by which individuals maintain a consistent sense of identity while simultaneously adapting to significant life transitions, such as entering higher education. This dual focus is essential for understanding how first-entering students navigate the psychosocial tensions between their established home identities and the evolving demands of a university environment. For this study, the researcher focused on Stage 5 of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory - Identity vs. Role Confusion - to find out what psycho-social difficulties first-year students at the University of Venda encounter that were getting in the way of their academic progress.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development helps people understand the changes that occur in people during their teenage years and early adulthood. Stage 5, which usually happens between the ages of 12 and 21, is a very significant time when people are supposed to figure out who they are and what they want (Erikson, 1968:77).

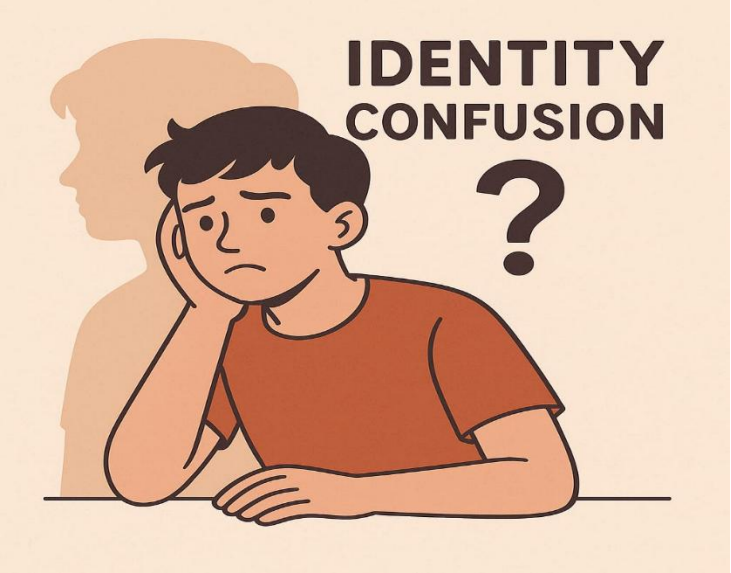

Figure 2.1 Erikson's Stage 5 of development. Source (own source)

This stage of Erikson's theory (1959:77-78) outlines that young people at this point go through a psychosocial crisis in which they have to figure out who they are and deal with role uncertainty. The researcher chose this stage because it is quite similar to the problems that first-year students confront when they move from high school to a higher institution of learning. During this time, students typically have to deal with academic, emotional, and social pressures that test their self-image and ability to cope (Erikson, 1959:78). During this stage, Erikson (in Bastable & Dart, 2007:6) asserted that people

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should be making critical choices regarding their careers, values, relationships, and objectives for the future. If a person fails to complete this developmental task well, they may become confused about their role, have low self-esteem, make poor decisions, and feel they lack a purpose.

This might affect their academic performance and ability to transition to university life (Karcher & Kristine, 2007:77). Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003:77–78) add that the attitudes, values, and habits that young people form during this time are essential for how they see themselves and how they interact with the world around them. The researcher, from personal observations, noticed that first-year students at the University of Venda had emotions of doubt about their academic talents, social identity, and future goals. Erikson (1959:77) contends that young students who get help and encouragement from their teachers, friends, and family are more likely to feel confident and have a sense of purpose. On the other hand, students who did not receive any encouragement often felt alone, unsure of themselves, and as if they were losing their identity. All of these emotions are linked to poor academic performance and emotional discomfort among first-year students.

From the data collected for this study, the psychosocial difficulties that the participants talked about were similar to the ones that Erikson talked about in Stage 5. These students, who were new to university life, reported that they were confused about where they were going in the academic world, had low motivation, and had a hard time adjusting to the increased demands of university life (Erikson, 1959:78). The results of the current study showed how important it is to understand psycho-social aspects associated with identity while dealing with academic problems in college and university settings. By concentrating on Stage 5, the researcher wanted to focus on the psycho-social problems that first-year students confront in a well-known developmental framework by looking at "identity vs. role confusion." This approach helped in isolating the emotional and cognitive barriers that were getting in the way of first-year students' academic success and gave a basis for suggesting the right support and strategies for intervention (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003:77).

The theory stresses that unresolved identity issues affect the academic progress of students in educational institutions and how well they adjust. Erikson (1959:77) perceived that students who did not establish a clear sense of identity often had trouble

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setting goals, managing their time, and making decisions, all of which were crucial in progressing well in their academics. Environmental influences were also very essential in the students' identity development. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003:77–78) explain that the growth of social, cultural, and economic factors all had a role in shaping identity. Many first-year students at the University of Venda faced challenges such as financial difficulties, language barriers, and limited access to job advice, which made it hard for them to find their identity and even harder to acclimate to the tertiary learning environment. Students who took part in this study also showed signs of emotional and mental problems caused by identity uncertainty.

Participants in this study reported feeling alone, anxious, and having low self-esteem. Karcher and Kristine (2007:77) note that these kinds of emotional problems typically come with doubt about who one is, which has a direct detrimental effect on adolescents' motivation and interest in schoolwork. In addition, the study recognised how significant social support systems are for students at this period. Erikson (1959:79) stressed that help from family, friends, and teachers could all assist young people to build a strong and positive sense of self. In this study, academic support programmes, counselling services, and peer-mentorship programmes were found to help students reduce role uncertainty and to improve their academic adjustment. Erikson (1959:78) warned that failing to address the identity crisis at this stage could make it hard to make decisions about life and set goals for a steady work path. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003:78) supported this conclusion by explaining that identity conflicts that are not resolved during late adolescence and early adulthood can hinder both personal growth and academic success.

Erikson's (1959:77–78) fifth psycho-social stage of development explains that first-year students' academic problems are closely linked to unresolved identity development concerns - confusion over identity and role. During this vital period of growth, adolescents are supposed to have a distinct and consistent sense of identity by making crucial choices about their job goals, academic paths, personal values, and social positions. Not being able to get through this stage can lead to identity confusion, which typically shows up as low motivation to do well in school, bad choices, mental pain, and a lack of direction.

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The theory also outlined that the move from high school to college made this identity issue worse as students faced additional academic, social, and environmental challenges, like language limitations and money problems, especially in rural-based settings, like the University of Venda. Using Erikson's theory, academic problems cannot be properly understood without considering the psychological developmental processes students are going through; hence, addressing these mental and social problems is necessary to improve academic performance and students' overall health.

2.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is an organised and critical evaluation of scholarly works directly related to a specific research problem (Xiao & Watson, 2019). This process allows for the identification of knowledge gaps, the refinement of the research focus, and the positioning of the current study within contemporary evidence. Consequently, a robust review functions as the structural foundation for academic research, ensuring that new findings are grounded in established and emerging discourse (Snyder, 2019; Ali & Khan, 2023). Furthermore, Van Breda (2023) emphasises that in the South African context, a literature review must also account for the socio-cultural and "epistemic" shifts that influence how researchers interpret previous methodologies and theoretical frameworks. In this case, the review also assisted the researcher in gaining an appreciation for the emotional, cultural, and contextual complexity of human experiences. The purpose of this study was to examine the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-entering students in their academic progress at higher education institutions using a case study of a rural-based university. The literature review is organised into three sections to ensure a thorough comprehension of the subject matter: the first section examines studies from three international countries; the second section reviews research from three African countries, and the third section analyses studies from South African higher education institutions. By providing a global perspective and regional relevance, this structure guarantees that the review grounds the current study in a wide range of scholarly works.

2.3.1 An Overview of the Term "Psycho-social Difficulties"

The term "psycho-social difficulties" refers to the complex challenges originating from the reciprocal interaction between an individual’s internal psychological state

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(emotions, cognitions, and mental health) and their external social environment (relationships, cultural norms, and socio-economic status). According to Van Breda (2023:124), these difficulties are particularly acute during the "first-year transition," where students must navigate the gap between their established home identities and the systemic stressors of the higher education environment. Furthermore, Haruna et al. (2025) emphasise that these interactions significantly dictate a student's overall well-being and their subsequent ability to maintain academic progress in a rural-based institution. People who have these problems typically feel emotionally distressed, have trouble adjusting to social situations, feel anxious, depressed, have low self-esteem, and have trouble balancing their social roles with academic responsibilities (Eisenberg, Hunt & Speer, 2019:28). Psycho-social problems are multi-faceted issues that arise from the reciprocal interaction between an individual's internal psychological state and their external social environment, directly impacting a student's emotional resilience, social integration, and academic persistence (Van Breda, 2023). In the context of South African higher education, these challenges are compounded by systemic factors such as financial instability and the "epistemic transition" from rural backgrounds to the university setting (Harwood & Maniram, 2024).

Furthermore, recent evidence from Haruna et al. (2025) indicates that these issues are primary drivers of the "burden of depression" and anxiety, which significantly hinder a student's ability to maintain satisfactory academic progress. These problems are especially common for first-year students who are moving from the more structured environment of high school to the more independent and demanding one of college (Conley et al., 2014:196). Students may feel anxious, depressed, hopeless, and like they are inadequate. These problems are generally caused by stress from the academic demands, fear of failure, homesickness, and not knowing how to deal with situations (Beiter et al., 2015:91). Psycho-social problems might occur when one cannot make friends, has trouble adjusting to a new culture, feels alone, or does not know how to communicate well.

Building social capital within a new institutional environment remains a primary obstacle for first-entering students, particularly those transitioning from deep rural regions or diverse cultural backgrounds. Recent evidence from Van Breda (2023:129) indicates that students from under-resourced communities often face a 'relational gap,' where their existing social

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networks from home do not translate into the 'navigational capital' required for university success. Furthermore, Harwood and Maniram (2024:7) argue that this lack of social connectivity leads to heightened 'culture shock' and emotional isolation, as these students struggle to integrate into campus cultures that often reflect urban, middle-class norms. In the South African context, Mkhize and Zondi (2024:118) suggest that establishing new peer-support networks is essential not just for social belonging, but as a critical buffer against the academic withdrawal often seen in the first semester.

The synergistic impact of psychological and social stressors often manifests as a significant decline in academic engagement, evidenced by irregular class attendance, diminished concentration, and lower cumulative achievement (Van Zyl, 2024:82). If these psychosocial difficulties remain unaddressed, they can escalate into severe psychiatric conditions, including clinical depression and suicidal ideation, particularly among first-entering students who lack a robust on-campus support network (Haruna et al., 2025:635). Furthermore, Van Breda (2023:132) emphasises that for students in rural-based institutions, the "burden of silence" regarding mental health often exacerbates these symptoms, leading to higher rates of academic withdrawal. Researchers have shown that educational institutions often do not take psychosocial problems seriously, even notice them, even though they have a big impact on students' ability to do well and prevent them from dropping out. These problems are not just one-time events; they are part of the broader picture of being a student and affect motivation, engagement, and overall health. When students have to deal with anxiety, sadness, being alone, or adjusting to a new culture without enough help, it becomes extremely difficult for them to focus on their studies and achieve academic requirements (Beiter et al., 2015:91). Also, a lot of educational institutions do not have full, proactive mental health treatments and social support programmes made just for first-year students, who are going through a very significant time in their lives.

Students experiencing psychosocial distress are at significant risk if interventions are not implemented early; they are statistically more likely to face academic exclusion or voluntary withdrawal, resulting in long-term negative impacts on their professional trajectories and personal development (Van Zyl, 2024:84). Current literature consistently identifies psychological morbidity as a primary determinant of poor academic performance. Haruna et al. (2025:638) observe that students with high

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levels of mental distress exhibit reduced class attendance and impaired cognitive functioning, which severely compromises their ability to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. Furthermore, Harwood and Maniram (2024:9) emphasise that socio-cultural isolation and a lack of 'institutional belonging' are particularly detrimental to first-entering students from rural backgrounds, often serving as the primary catalyst for academic disengagement and early dropout. It is, hence, imperative to initiate the whole-person support approaches that combine academic help with mental health and social services. This integration ensures that all of a student's needs are met, not just some.

Peer mentoring, counselling services, and programmes that encourage social connectivity are some of the interventions that have shown promise in helping students stay in school and succeed (Conley et al., 2014:196). In conclusion, psychological problems are major issues that need to be addressed in higher education. Not only can dealing with these problems help students' health, but it also improves the reputation of the institution by lowering the number of students who drop out and encouraging a healthier, more involved student body. Institutions, therefore, have an obligation to establish policies and practices based on evidence that actively promote students' mental and social health from the time they start college.

2.3.2 International Context

The term "psychosocial difficulties" denotes the interaction of the environmental, social, and affective factors that influence an individual's mental health and behaviour, within a specific context (World Health Organisation, 2014:5). These difficulties commonly arise for first-year college students around the world as they make the leap from secondary to higher education. This time can shake up their social lives, academic routines, and personal stability. According to literature from a variety of countries, first-year students are particularly susceptible to a variety of challenges, including anxiety, depression, homesickness, loneliness, social exclusion, and financial stress. These challenges can significantly impede their academic performance and overall adjustment to university life. A study conducted by Beiter et al. (2015:90) in the United States revealed that a significant number of first-year students experience elevated levels of emotional distress during their first semester. Findings from the same study indicate that psychological difficulties, like stress and

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anxiety, can be attributed to factors such as - feeling pressured to succeed, being afraid of failing, having few social supports, and transitioning to living away from home. Sleep disturbances, a lack of motivation, and poor time management were frequently the result of these factors; they have a direct effect on students' performance and engagement in academic activities.

According to Conley, Kirsch, Dickson and Bryant (2014:510), emotional instability in the first year can impair cognitive engagement in academic tasks, resulting in poor comprehension and worsening of academic self-efficacy. Within the United Kingdom's higher education sector, recent longitudinal evidence by Slight et al. (2024:5) investigated the multifaceted ways in which first-entering students navigate the intense pressures of academic transitions and the shift toward personal independence. This contemporary United Kingdom study highlights that the 'transition gap' has been exacerbated by a post-pandemic reliance on blended learning, which requires higher levels of self-regulation and emotional resilience. Based on the findings, it was discovered that a significant number of students lacked the emotional resilience and self-regulation abilities necessary to successfully handle numerous academic requirements and roles. Psycho-social problems, like feeling inadequate, being cut off from others, and getting tired of adjusting, were the most common ones. These problems were especially noticeable among shy or lonely students who did not have many friends. It was discovered that these factors cause students to have low academic confidence and make it very difficult for them to seek academic assistance in a proactive manner. Additionally, universities in Australia have also identified a substantial psycho-social burden on first-year students.

Van Breda (2023:128) posits that students who are new to university environments experience significantly increased psychological distress, which is primarily attributable to the competitive academic climate, limited institutional orientation, and reduced parental involvement. This anguish frequently demonstrates itself as withdrawal from social and academic activities, further isolating students and resulting in academic deterioration. Van Breda (2023:128) concludes that numerous students commencing higher education are emotionally unprepared, with their coping mechanisms frequently inadequate. In several worldwide contexts, a common element identified is that psychosocial challenges during the initial year of study are diverse,

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frequently arising from a confluence of academic, emotional, and social pressures. The disruption of support structures, increased academic independence, and the need for social integration make it hard for students to adjust and succeed. Significantly, these studies stress that early intervention and all-around student support systems are needed to help students who are psychologically and socially vulnerable in their first year of college (Van Breda 2023:128; Harwood & Maniram 2024:14)

The Effect of Psycho-social Issues on Academic Success

According to research, having psychosocial problems in the first year of college has a big impact on how well students do, how engaged they are, and how long they persevere in the institution. Increased independence, academic pressure, and social isolation are common during first year of college - all of these can put students at risk for emotional and psychological breakdowns (Conley et al., 2014:199). According to international studies, untreated psychological issues can impair pupils' academic performance, leading to absenteeism, underachievement, and dropout. Beiter et al. (2015:91) discovered a robust correlation between symptoms of anxiety and depression and subpar academic performance in their examination of emotional distress among college students in the United States. Students who reported experiencing elevated levels of psychological tension also reported experiencing difficulties with concentration, memory retention, and the avoidance of academic responsibilities, for instance, non-attendance of lectures and submitting assignments late. These problems hindered learning and made students less confident in their academic abilities.

In addition to affecting academic performance, the study found that emotional instability lowers students' desire and interest in studying. In a similar vein, Denovan and Macaskill (2013:645) noted that first-year students in the UK with low resilience and ongoing stress frequently showed signs of social disengagement and were less likely to seek academic help. The lack of help-seeking behaviour, which was usually motivated by humiliation or fear of judgement, resulted in isolation and further academic decline. Researchers also found that students with psycho-social stress were more likely to engage in avoidant coping mechanisms like disengagement and procrastination, which made their academic problems worse.

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Within the Australian higher education sector, recent longitudinal research by Edwards et al. (2024:112) posits that first-entering students experience significantly elevated levels of psychological distress, which is primarily attributable to the modern 'triple-burden' of competitive academic climates, the rising cost of living, and a decline in traditional on-campus social support. This contemporary Australian study highlights that distress is no longer just an orientation issue but a systemic challenge requiring ongoing institutional monitoring. Her research showed that students with mental health issues were more likely to be placed on academic probation or even exit from the institution altogether if they did not receive treatment, and that many of these problems lasted well into the second year. The factors that were most significantly connected with a deterioration in academic performance were difficulties with financial matters, confusion regarding one's identity, and a lack of emotional support. These problems hindered students' capacity to concentrate, adhere to deadlines, and engage effectively in academic pursuits. Additionally, Edwards et al. (2024:115) contend that social support networks, academic self-efficacy, and emotional stability are critical predictors of academic performance and persistence among first-year students. The authors concluded that regardless of their academic abilities, students with high levels of social anxiety and low emotional stability had a far lower chance of finishing their first year successfully.

According to the worldwide literature, psycho-social challenges and academic achievement in higher education are linked. When first-year students are faced with unresolved psychosocial challenges, their capacity to adjust to the demands of university life is impaired, resulting in decreased academic engagement, lower grades, and a higher probability of early exit or failure. Research by Harwood and Maniram (2024:15) and Beiter et al. (2015:95) has shown that early intervention, peer support, and mental health services can significantly improve students' academic outcomes and retention rates.

Pedagogical Methods Employed to Facilitate Students' Academic Achievement

In response to the psycho-social challenges faced by first-year university students, numerous higher education institutions worldwide have implemented pedagogical methods and academic support mechanisms that are designed to enhance students' academic assimilation, emotional well-being, and learning outcomes. To provide

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welcoming, student-centred classrooms that pay attention to and address students' emotional and social needs, some educational approaches frequently combine instructional design with non-academic support services. Internationally, the incorporation of first-year experience (FYE) programmes is one of the most frequently implemented pedagogical responses. These programmes are intended to help students navigate the academic, social, and psychological responsibilities of university life.

In accordance with the contemporary Australian First-Year Experience (FYE) framework, Edwards et al. (2024:119) observe that universities in Australia have shifted toward 'Third Generation' FYE strategies. These modern programmes prioritise deep curriculum alignment, early digital engagement, and collaborative support systems that function across all institutional layers. The primary goal of these initiatives is to mitigate the 'transition shock' by providing students with academic literacy training, structured peer-mentorship, and post-pandemic orientation models (Slight et al., 2024:11). Similarly, regarding student retention in the United States, recent evidence by Gehrke et al. (2024:16) reinforces the foundational theories of academic participation. They place a strong emphasis on 'inclusive teaching' and digital integration as the modern pillars of student persistence, arguing that a student's sense of institutional belonging is the strongest predictor of their long-term academic progress (Haruna et al., 2025:644).

He maintains that pedagogical practices should focus on the development of emotionally-supportive teaching environments that are academically challenging, encouraging, and acknowledge students, rather than solely delivering content. This involves using active learning approaches, regular formative evaluations, and culturally-relevant teaching to increase engagement and diminish feelings of academic inferiority, which are frequently related to psychological ills in first-year students.

Universities in the United Kingdom have been implementing academic-advising models and blended-learning approaches to accommodate a wide range of learners. Thomas (2018:20) asserts that tutor-led discussion groups and individualised academic advising have been successful in assisting students in gaining self-assurance and achieving academic standards, particularly for those with less emotional resilience. When lecturers are empathic and sensitive to their students'

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emotional situations, their pedagogical interventions, including small-group tutorials, scaffolded tasks, and structured feedback, can increase students' academic achievement and well-being.

While Chickering and Gamson (1999) originally delineated seven principles for effective undergraduate education, contemporary research by Edwards et al. (2024:122) has redefined these for the modern era. These principles have been implemented globally to promote first-year success, with Slight et al. (2024:15) observing that in the United Kingdom, 'belonging-focused' pedagogies are now the primary mechanism for student retention. In the South African context, these principles are further adapted to include 'psychosocial vulnerability' frameworks to support students from under-resourced rural backgrounds (Van Breda, 2023:140). These include fostering faculty-student interaction, promoting active learning, and offering timely feedback - all of which contribute to students' increased emotional and academic support. Particularly during the first several months of university, these ideas have been demonstrated to lower anxiety and increase academic enthusiasm.

According to research from throughout the world, a comprehensive strategy that fosters students' emotional and intellectual growth is necessary for effective pedagogical solutions to psycho-social challenges; this means that these approaches should go beyond academic education. Edwards et al. (2024:125) and Gehrke et al. (2024:20) maintain that universities can help first-year students cope with psycho-social difficulties by designing learning environments that are interactive, well-structured, and sensitive to students' emotional needs.

Support Mechanisms to Help First-Year Students Overcome Psycho-social Problems

Institutions of higher learning around the globe have implemented various institutional support mechanisms to help first-year students deal with the psychological and social challenges they may face, thereby better integrating into campus life. Support programmes like these aim to be proactive and comprehensive, helping students overcome not just academic obstacles but also the social and emotional stresses that amplify their troubles. In nations such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the provision of university-based counselling services has

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become a routine component of student support, and, has become a common institutional response.

According to Gallagher (2014:5), psychological counselling is available on campus at more than 90% of U.S. universities. Numerous institutions have reported that student engagement with mental health services has increased, particularly during their first year of study. These services offer students the opportunity to participate in stress management workshops, crisis intervention, group therapy, and professional counselling. These services are essential for assisting students in overcoming challenges such as social isolation, anxiety, and depression, which are known to impede academic performance and focus. Peer mentoring programmes and interacting with academic tutors are common support systems in the UK that are designed to help students build their confidence and social networks as they make the move to higher education. Organised peer mentorship can greatly lessen feelings of isolation, create a sense of community, and encourage academic motivation, especially during the first semester, according to Gehrke et al. (2024:20). These programmes give academic advice and emotional support from experienced students, fostering a sense of understanding and reassurance for first-year students. Having this kind of social support is crucial for creating coping mechanisms and lessening the psychological strain of tertiary life.

Australian institutions have improved support through student wellness programmes and early-alert systems. As Van Breda (2023:138) has emphasised, numerous institutions have incorporated psychological well-being into the university culture by implementing campaigns that increase mental health awareness, diminish stigma, and promote the act of seeking early assistance. Furthermore, to identify students who may be at risk before their problems worsen, early-alert systems (such as keeping attendance registers, grades surveillance, and online logins) monitor students' academic involvement. As a result, any at-risk students are referred to academic advisors or counsellors for prompt assistance. By addressing psycho-social concerns at an early stage, this data-driven strategy has proven successful in fostering academic retention. Furthermore, the significance of whole-institution accountability for student well-being is being emphasised more and more in international models. An embedded approach, hence, is recommended, in which academic personnel,

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support services, and administrative departments all contribute to the establishment of a psychologically supportive environment (Van Breda, 2023:139). Part of this process is making sure students have easy access to and are aware of support resources, as well as developing an inclusive curriculum and providing staff with mental-health awareness training.

When it comes to assisting first-year students in overcoming psychosocial difficulties, the available research from throughout the world points to the urgency of support systems that are multifaceted, easily accessible, and empathic. Students are far more capable of adapting to academic demands, cultivating resilience, and persevering through the obstacles of university life when institutions prioritise early intervention, peer connection, and emotional support (Gallagher, 2014:6).

2.3.3 African Context

Psychosocial Challenges Impeding the Academic Progress of First-Year Students

It is well-known that first-year students in African universities face psycho-social obstacles that hinder their academic performance. This is especially true in environments where there is poverty, institutional instability, and cultural displacement. Students who are new to university frequently experience emotional and social stressors that impede their academic performance and assimilation, similar to those who are first entering international settings; however, structural disparities, inadequate resources, and socio-political restraints, which are common in many African countries, may aggravate these issues.

University life can be a daunting and confusing time for first-year students in Nigeria, according to research by Adekeye et al. (2015:13). Poor student-to-lecturer ratios resulting in big class numbers, and a general lack of emotional and academic support were all associated with these psycho-social problems. Many students, particularly those relocating from rural to metropolitan universities, also reported feeling homesick and alienated. These emotional stressors combine to cause decreased academic motivation, difficulty in focusing, and a reluctance to participate in class discussions.

According to studies done in Kenya, first-year students are also emotionally unstable because they are adjusting to the tertiary environment and culture. In Kenya, over

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40% of first-year university students demonstrated symptoms of emotional distress, such as anxiety, loneliness, and feelings of worthlessness, according to a study conducted by Ochieng and Otieno (2024:52). These symptoms were significantly associated with inadequate academic performance, absenteeism, and restricted social interaction. The study also found that socio-economic status and gender affected how severe these difficulties were, with female and underprivileged students being particularly at risk.

Asante and Andoh-Arthur (2015:3) investigated the impact of social and emotional factors on adaptation by first-year university students in Ghana. According to their results, students experienced transition shock, which is characterised by a state of emotional confusion brought on by abrupt changes in social roles and academic expectations. Peer pressure, new ways of teaching, and limited access to counselling all made it harder for the students to transition, leading to emotional burnout. Numerous students in their study expressed feeling overburdened, unprepared, and unsupported, which eventually affected their ability to concentrate and persevere in their studies (Asante & Andoh-Arthur, 2015:3).

These results from various regions of the continent serve as confirmation that the African higher education experience is profoundly entrenched in psycho-social challenges, particularly during students' initial year. Even though these experiences are similar to those of other students around the world, African students' socio-economic hardship, a lack of institutional ability, and inadequate student support systems frequently make the situation worse. First-year students in Africa face not just academic and emotional transitions, but also larger structural obstacles, emphasising the urgency of tailored interventions (Ochieng & Otieno, 2024:52; Adekeye et al., 2015:14; Asante & Andoh-Arthur, 2015:5).

The Effect of Psychosocial Issues on Academic Success

In African universities, the academic performance, progression, and retention of first-year students have been demonstrated to be directly and detrimentally affected by psycho-social challenges. These difficulties frequently come up because students have a hard time balancing their personal goals with their academic responsibilities, while also getting used to the new places with little help from the institution. In several parts of Africa, psycho-social anxiety has always been connected to bad school

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performance, such as low marks, failing, and dropping out. The academic performance of students and their emotional well-being were statistically significantly correlated in Nigeria, as determined by Adekeye et al. (2015:16). First-year students with anxiety, sadness, and self-doubt had low academic persistence, skipped lectures, and poor exam outcomes. These researchers stressed that not doing well in school was not always due to a lack of intelligence; it might also be because of mental fatigue, fear of failure, or feeling emotionally disconnected from campus life. Their study also showed that youngsters who did not have ways to deal with problems or friends to help them were more likely to fail to perform well in school (Adekeye et al., 2015).

Kenyan studies exhibited the same traits. Ochieng and Otieno (2024:52) discovered that students who had psychological problems, such as loneliness, unresolved trauma, and academic pressure, had a lower grade-point average and missed more classes. Stress and emotional exhaustion were discovered to make it hard to focus, which made school less interesting. Furthermore, students who were having psychological issues often did not want to seek care because of shame or the non-availability of support initiatives from the institution, which made their academic performance worse. The study by Ochieng and Otieno (2024:52) revealed that psychological well-being is essential for long-term academic success and that failing to address mental health needs increases the likelihood of students dropping out of school. Asante and Andoh-Arthur (2015:4) showed that Ghanaian students with psycho-social distress were less likely to participate in academic activities and more likely to postpone their academic assignments and to drop out. These authors revealed that first-year students who were emotionally unstable took longer to pick up essential academic habits, including managing their time, participating in class, and studying on their own. These problems got worse as the academic year progressed because there were not enough counselling services, academic rules were too strict, and there was insufficient personalised help, especially for students from poor backgrounds.

The African literature makes a strong case for seeing academic failure as more than just academic; it also has emotional and social aspects. In African universities, psycho-social problems are sometimes made worse by factors like income disparity, a lack of institutional infrastructure, and student services that are overused. These elements work together to create a situation where emotional strain increases and

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often leads to poor academic performance (Adekeye et al., 2015:18; Ochieng & Otieno, 2024:52; Asante & Andoh-Arthur, 2015:5).

Pedagogical Methods Employed to Facilitate Students' Academic Achievement

It is becoming increasingly apparent in African higher education institutions that using only traditional lecture-based instruction is inadequate for meeting the academic and psycho-social requirements of first-year students. Numerous universities, therefore, have implemented student-centred and psychosocially-responsive educational practices to promote engagement, emotional well-being, and academic performance. The purpose of these techniques is to bridge the gap between teaching content and providing the broader psychological support that first-year students require, particularly those students who are experiencing transition stress, academic pressure, and social alienation. Ofor-Douglas (2024:44) asserts that first-year students' high failure rate in Nigeria is due to both inadequate academic preparation and an absence of inclusive and adaptable teaching methods. Some higher institutions of learning in Nigeria have responded by launching new programmes to help incoming freshmen with academic foundations and abilities. The main goals of these programmes are to improve students' study habits, time management, and critical thinking. At the same time, they offer emotional support through group talks and ongoing tests. Lecturers endeavour to mitigate apprehension and cultivate a more robust academic identity among students by implementing interactive teaching strategies, including reflective journals and peer learning.

Mwangi and Okatcha (2018:111) also emphasise the implementation of First-Year Experience (FYE) models in Kenyan universities, including the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University. Orientations, workshops on life skills, and academic support that are related to the curriculum are all components of these programmes, which are aimed at assisting students in making the move academically, as well as socially. Lecturers are orientated on how to be aware of psycho-social difficulties and use formative assessment and feedback to get students to participate and ease the pressure to do well. These teaching strategies have worked well to get students more involved and lower the number of dropouts.

Universities in Ghana are working to include pastoral care and mentorship in their academic support. Oppong (2017:93) reveals that certain faculty members at KNUST

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and the University of Ghana have instituted a system of academic advisers and mentoring teams to provide emotional and academic assistance to first-year students. In addition to academic guidance, these advisors offer personal support, serving as a primary line of defence against psycho-social strain. Blended learning methodologies have been implemented to provide students with greater autonomy over their learning pace, thereby alleviating stress and performance anxiety. These methodologies usually involve the integration of digital platforms with traditional teaching methods; however, even while these initiatives are promising, there are still problems.

A lot of African higher education institutions do not have enough resources, have too many students in each class, and do not have enough staff for academic support services. This makes it hard for these institutions to scale up these new teaching methods; however, there is a growing consensus on the continent that students would make better progress in higher education if their instructors used psychosocially informed approaches. Universities are embracing a more holistic approach to academic performance by adding mentorship, personalised feedback, and life skills to the curriculum (Ofor-Douglas, 2024:44; Mwangi & Okatcha, 2018:113; Oppong, 2017:95).

Support Mechanisms to Help First-Year Students Overcome Psycho-social Problems

To mitigate the psychosocial obstacles that impede the academic success of first-year students, African universities are increasingly acknowledging the essential nature of support mechanisms. These consist of student development centres, campus orientation programmes, peer mentorship programmes, and counselling services. Numerous colleges on the continent, hence, have instituted programmes to help students emotionally acclimate to college life and stay enrolled, despite financial constraints prevalent on the continent.

In Ghana, numerous colleges have embraced a more proactive strategy for student well-being. Student counselling centres at universities, such as the University of Ghana and KNUST, have emerged as vital sources of emotional support for first-year students, as per Asante and Andoh-Arthur (2015:4). Services such as stress management classes, group therapy, and individual treatment are available at these centres. These services, which are not always well-funded or staffed, have been

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recognised for assisting students in overcoming pressure from school, loneliness, and anxiety. Nevertheless, stigma and inadequate mental health awareness among students frequently restrict the comprehensive utilisation of these treatments.

Kenya has seen improvements in student support systems. According to Ofor Douglas (2024:44), Kenyan universities have implemented wellness campaigns, crisis hotlines, and faculty-based counselling personnel to address the emotional distress of students. Through orientation programmes that include peer-group creation, resilience training, and psycho-social education, universities such as Kenyatta University provide individualised first-year support. Social cohesion and the stigmatisation of getting help have both been improved by these kinds of interventions.

In Nigeria, initiatives have been undertaken to integrate support systems into academic institutions. According to a study by Olawale and Abiodun (2018:37), academic advisers at certain Nigerian universities are educated to recognise the early warning symptoms of psycho-social stress and send students for professional assistance as part of integrated support models. In addition, peer-counselling initiatives that are student-led and faith-based have become increasingly prevalent on campuses. These informal networks offer emotionally-safe locations for students to express their problems and get peer support, especially in institutional settings with weak formal support structures. Notwithstanding these advancements, obstacles persist; for instance, lack of visibility, inadequate budget, and personnel are common problems plaguing support mechanisms in African institutions.

A significant number of students are either oblivious of the services that are available to them or are hesitant to utilise them as a result of cultural attitudes that equate emotional challenges with weakness. Ofor-Douglas (2024:44), Olawale and Abiodun (2018:44) and Asante and Andoh-Arthur (2015) highlight the significance of multi-layered and culturally- responsive support systems that combine institutional responsibility with student agency. Despite this, the literature emphasises the urgent need for more of such support systems. Institutional approaches to providing support vary across Africa; however, those that integrate psychosocial support into the academic ecosystem seem to work best. These encompass a wide range of activities, including counselling, academic mentoring, peer participation, and campaigns to raise awareness about the urgency of obtaining help. Comprehensive support systems like

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these are necessary to help first-year students stay in school and improve their mental health.

2.3.4 South African Context

Psychosocial Challenges Impeding the Academic Progress of First-Year Students

The emotional and social challenges that many first-year university students in South Africa encounter when transitioning from high school to a higher institution of learning are the major reasons for some students' academic struggles. Many students' real-life situations when they enrol in university are shaped by the country's unique socio-economic and historical landscape, which is characterised by poverty, inequality in basic education, and the enduring effects of apartheid. These psycho-social difficulties, which are, usually the results of - anxiety, social isolation, cultural displacement, depression, and identity uncertainty - are most common among students from rural and underprivileged backgrounds, according to numerous studies. According to research by Nzimande and Gagiano (2020:6), based at the University of the Free State, first-year students had high levels of stress due to a combination of language barriers, feelings of unpreparedness for tertiary studies, and being separated from their families for the first time. Students from rural regions were the most impacted by these factors. For these students, making friends was difficult, and they felt they did not belong in the institutional culture. According to the participating students, these emotional strains made it difficult to concentrate, engage in class, and complete assignments on time (Nzimande & Gagiano, 2020:6).

Mokoena (2018:55) conducted a qualitative study at the University of Pretoria that indicated that many first-year students, particularly those who are the first in their family to attend a higher institution of learning, experience acute psycho-social distress due to academic pressure, financial insecurity, and cultural transition. The researcher found that many students came to the university with unrealistic expectations and a lack of knowledge about what it takes to succeed there, leading to low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. This emotional upheaval often led to academic disengagement and the inability to participate in class. Ramulumo and Sedibe (2017:18) discovered that homesickness, low self-esteem, and a lack of social support were prevalent among first-year University of Venda students, particularly those from

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remote areas. The University's insufficient facilities, along with overcrowded dorms and overburdened student support services, intensified emotions of hopelessness and isolation. The researchers concluded that the students' lack of motivation, decreased likelihood of attending class, and overall inability to perform well in school were all a result of the psychological issues that they were experiencing (Ramulumo & Sedibe, 2017:18).

Additionally, Van Zyl (2024:85) argues that the South African higher education system still struggles to satisfy the psychological and emotional needs of the diverse student body, especially in historically impoverished institutions. The author maintained that universities continue to fail to pay adequate attention to the provision of emotional support and psychological preparedness; hence, many students are left vulnerable during this time of change. According to these studies, first-year students in South Africa have intersectional and systemic psycho-social issues that are influenced by their resources, school culture, and background. These mental health disorders make it very difficult for college students to pay attention in class and do well.

The Effect of Psycho-social Issues on Academic Success

In South African universities, psychosocial issues significantly impede the academic performance and perseverance of first-year students. These issues, which are frequently brought on by financial hardship, emotional distress, and an absence of necessary school preparation, are intricately linked to low academic performance, disengagement, and high rates of student loss. The effects of these mental and social problems are made worse by limited resources at the institutional and student levels, as well as structural inequality. In the research by Van Zyl (2024:85) at the University of Johannesburg on what makes students' progress, it was established that students' emotional strength and ability to fit in with their peers were important indicators of their ability to handle the responsibilities of school. Chronic anxiety, tension, and low self-confidence were prevalent among students, as were poor performance, disengagement from academic responsibilities, and tardiness. First-year performance was impaired by psychological instability, rather than academic competence, according to the investigation.

Similarly, Ramulumo and Sedibe (2017:20) pointed out that University of Venda students from low-income rural areas often suffered from academic stress and had no

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one to turn to for emotional assistance. Low academic accomplishment was determined as a consequence of withdrawal behaviours, such as missing class, not turning in assignments, and remaining silent during class. Many students were hesitant to seek help due to cultural conventions or a fear of shame, which intensified their feelings of isolation and academic difficulties. Mental health issues at the University of Pretoria affected students' motivation, focus, and time management, according to Mokoena (2018:59) - these are all indispensable elements for academic success. Specifically, emotional distress leads to feelings of inadequacy and failure in first-generation students, which further diminishes their enthusiasm for academic assignments. Students frequently expressed feelings of alienation and disorientation, which had a direct effect on their academic proficiency.

Research has demonstrated that even students with exceptional academic capabilities experience hardships in the absence of emotional support and mentoring. According to Ngcobo and Pillay (2020;88), students in educational institutions with inadequate resources experienced academic anxiety regarding failure. These students frequently internalised their challenges and held themselves responsible for their inadequate performance. This caused tension and self-sabotaging behaviours, like procrastination and course withdrawal. Without psycho-social support, students who could not handle these stresses often went on academic probation or dropped out. All of these studies demonstrate that psychosocial support initiatives are not incidental for first-year South African students, but rather essential for academic success. Academic performance is significantly affected by emotional distress, which affects cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and problem-solving. A detrimental academic status, which jeopardises students' ability to continue and graduate, is the consequence of these issues remaining unresolved (Van Zyl, 2024:85; Mokoena, 2018:60; Ramulumo & Sedibe, 2017:22; Ngcobo & Pillay, 2020:90).

Pedagogical Methods Employed to Facilitate Students' Academic Achievement

In South Africa, higher education institutions have progressively used pedagogical measures to meet the learning and emotional requirements of first-year students, particularly those encountering psychological difficulties. These methods are influenced by the overarching objective of promoting equity and expanding access, particularly in light of the nation's historical disparities; therefore, universities are

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seeking to improve new entrants' academic performance and ensure inclusive, responsive, and developmentally-helpful teaching.

A notable response is the implementation of First-Year Experience (FYE) programmes, especially at the University of Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela University. In accordance with Van Zyl (2024:88), the University of Johannesburg implemented an integrated FYE strategy that amalgamated academic orientation, curriculum-linked tutorials, and academic advising. This consolidated approach aimed to provide students with emotional support and a sense of community while acquainting them with the academic demands of college life. Students, as a result, were better able to overcome fear and uncertainty and dive confidently into their studies thanks to the method's organised approach.

Kloot (2017:9) writes about how the University of the Free State's UFS101 programme was put into action. This is a required first-year course that encourages students to think critically, be civically responsible, and learn how to better read and write. To help students discover who they are, deal with the pressures of school, and become more resilient, this course incorporates values-based learning and introspective tasks. It has been demonstrated that incorporating interactive pedagogy and collaborative learning into these classes greatly enhances first-year students' academic performance and emotional adjustment.

Additionally, higher institutions of learning like the University of Pretoria have made investments in blended learning that allows students to study at their own pace, review lectures that have been recorded, and access course materials online. This flexibility has proved especially helpful for students who struggle with anxiety and poor self-esteem, according to Mokoena (2018:62), as it eases the strain of keeping up with fast-paced lectures and permits private study. It has also been demonstrated that peer-based learning and online discussion boards promote a feeling of academic belonging and community.

Peer learning and mentorship programmes are extensively utilised. Academically more accomplished students, at the University of Venda, are taught to mentor their peers through organised tutorial sessions, as noted by Ramulumo and Sedibe (2017:21). In addition to academic content, these programmes offer emotional

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support, which is particularly beneficial for first-generation and rural students who frequently encounter difficulties in adapting to the academic and cultural requirements of university life. The peer-led structure of these programmes mitigates feelings of alienation and fosters a support network within courses.

There are obvious beneficial outcomes of these initiatives; despite these, the programmes are accompanied by problems. Big class sizes, insufficient lecturer training in inclusive pedagogy, and underfunded support networks hinder the comprehensive execution and effectiveness of these initiatives. However, there is increasing agreement that the success of first-year students in South Africa depends on responsive and student-centred pedagogy, which incorporates both academic content and psycho-social assistance (Van Zyl, 2024:88; Mokoena, 2018:64; Kloot, 2017:11).

Support Mechanisms to Help First-Year Students Overcome Psychosocial Problems

As a result of the increasing recognition of the psychosocial challenges that impact student success, numerous South African higher institutions of learning have instituted targeted support mechanisms to help first-year students manage emotional distress, adjust socially, and maintain academic performance. These solutions include official counselling services, peer mentoring, wellness programmes for students, and early warning systems. Even though there are still problems with these initiatives, because of a lack of resources and stigma, these efforts show that tertiary institutions are moving towards creating a more inclusive environment, in alignment with a complete view of what makes students successful.

Mokoena (2018:65) emphasises the function of campus counselling centres at the University of Pretoria, where students can receive individual treatment, group sessions, and resilience courses to assist them in managing stress, anxiety, and emotional tiredness. These services are very helpful during test times and the first few months of college, when many students feel stressed. Psycho-social services are essential, but the report highlights that some students, particularly rural Black South African pupils, are afraid to seek help owing to fear of stigma (Mokoena, 2018:65).

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The University of the Free State has also made significant progress in the development of early intervention systems by utilising academic advising and risk profiling. According to Van Zyl (2024:85), students who are identified as academically or emotionally at-risk through academic monitoring or self-reported distress are referred to customised support systems, including academic advisors and wellness officers. Particularly for students coming from underprivileged backgrounds, this preventative strategy has lessened the impact of student crises and increased academic retention rates.

Nelson Mandela University provides a comprehensive First-Year Success Programme (FSP) that includes academic orientation, peer mentoring, and mental-health education. Peer mentors provide emotional support in addition to assisting students with study strategies and course content; because most have been through the same challenges these first-year students are facing, the peer mentors can understand how hard it is for their fellow students, hence, they assist appropriately, the struggling students in finding the relevant university resources (Kloot, 2017:13). This makes struggling students less socially isolated and more likely to ask for support.

The importance of campus health centres, student leadership organisations, and faith-based support groups in promoting emotional well-being is highlighted by Ramulumo and Sedibe (2017:23) at the University of Venda. In addition to formal counselling services, the University has offered support for initiatives that encourage students to establish informal peer communities in order to provide emotional support and discuss concerns. These grassroots activities are especially vital at remote campuses where there are not enough resources, but students' mental and emotional demands are significant.

Even with these changes, the literature also points to persistent gaps. A lot of higher institutions in South Africa have problems with their counselling units not having enough staff, hence too many students for counsellors, and not making enough effort to educate students and staff about mental health. More and more institutions, however, are recognising how important it is to make learning spaces that are safe and welcoming for everyone. Not only must these treatments be available, but they must also be easy to access, people must be aware of them, and they must be

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portrayed in such a manner that there is no stigma in seeking psychiatric help (Mokoena, 2018:66; Kloot, 2017:14; Van Zyl, 2034:85).

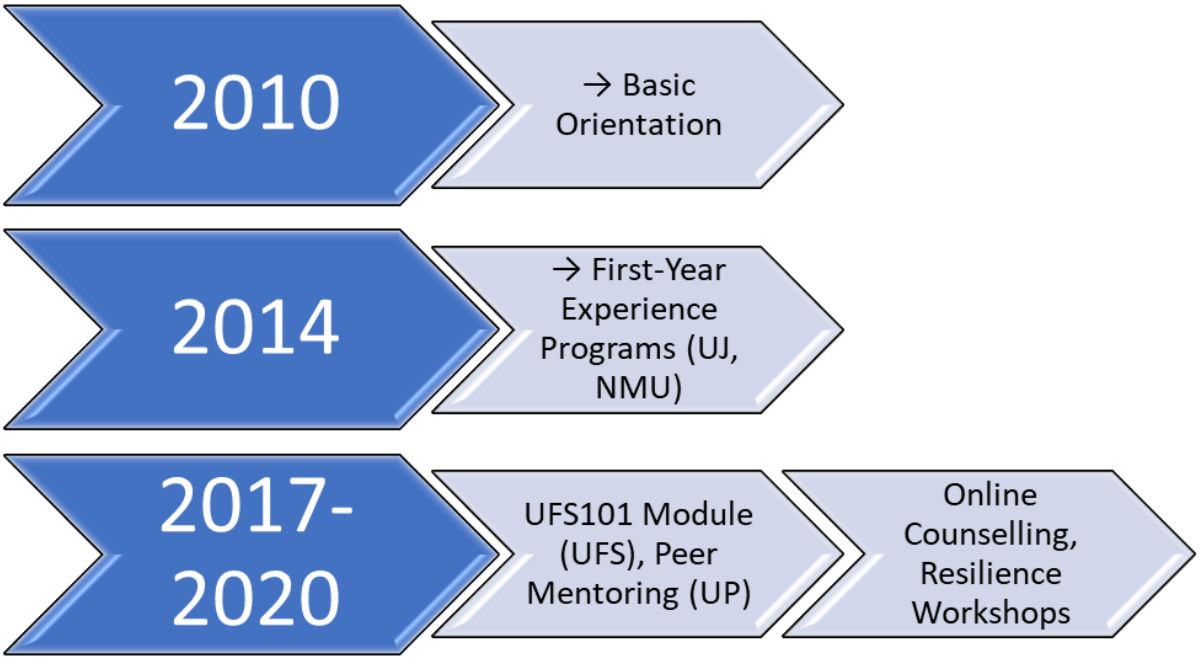

Figure 2.2 Orientation support intervention strategies in some South African higher institutions of learning (own source)

In general, South African higher institutions are slowly putting together support structures that can help students in many ways, both emotionally and academically. These mechanisms show that higher learning institutions know that doing well academically, in the first year, is closely linked to mental health, hence, they have an obligation to provide fully towards inclusive services.

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3.4 CONCLUSION

Table 2.2. below shows a comparison of key findings across the three contexts (International, Africa, South Africa) by theme.

Table 2.2 Comparison of key findings across the three contexts (International, Africa, South Africa) by theme (own source)

Theme	International	African	South African
Emotional Challenges	Depression, homesickness	Anxiety, loneliness	Fear, identity confusion
Academic Consequences	Dropout, disengagement	Low GPA, absenteeism	Class silence, withdrawal
Pedagogical Strategies	FYE seminars, reflective tasks	Mentorship, skills workshops	UFS101, blended learning
Support Mechanisms	Counselling, resilience groups	Faith-based, peer circles	Academic advising, FSP

According to the table above, in the international, African, and South African contexts, the academic progress, affective well-being, and retention of first-year students in higher education institutions are significantly impacted by psycho-social difficulties. Students in different regions have comparable struggles as they adjust to university life, despite contextual differences; the main differences include anxiety, sadness, identity uncertainty, loneliness, and poor coping skills.

Universities in developed nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, have implemented comprehensive support systems to mitigate psycho-social obstacles, according to research. Some of these initiatives are - professional counselling, organised mentoring programmes, early-warning systems, and wellness programmes that look at the whole person (Haruna et al., 2025:642; Slight et al., 2024:18; Edwards et al., 2024:125). These institutions of higher learning understand that in order to help their students succeed, they need to incorporate psycho-social support into their academic programmes.

The literature from Africa underscores the fact that students' psycho-social distress is exacerbated by socio-economic adversity, inadequate institutional resources, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health. Some of these African higher learning

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institutions have put into place significant initiatives to create an inclusive support environment; nevertheless, these endeavours are frequently hindered by widespread inaccessibility and insufficient institutional capacity (Adekeye et al., 2015; Asante & Andoh-Arthur, 2015). Several universities in Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana have implemented academic skills programmes, peer mentoring, and counselling initiatives, since African institutions are increasingly recognising the necessity of student-centred pedagogical approaches and focused psycho-social support in fostering academic persistence.

These themes are of equal significance in South Africa. First-year students' experiences are persistently impacted by historical and structural inequalities in the country, as a significant number of them enter university with inadequate preparation and low emotional preparedness. Mokoena (2018), Ramulumo and Sedibe (2017) and Van Zyl (2024) found that emotional anguish, cultural displacement, academic anxiety, and social isolation hinder students' academic progress. South African universities are progressively employing novel approaches, such as First-Year Experience (FYE) programmes, academic mentorship, blended learning environments, and resilience training; nevertheless, obstacles regarding stigma, lack of institutional resources, and accessibility to programmes continue to exist.

In all three contexts, it is clear that the academic progress of first-year students is inextricably linked to their emotional and social state. The review of the literature makes it clear that students need support systems that are responsive, integrated, and tailored to their specific needs; hence, these systems should cover both the academic and social parts of their lives. This has substantial implications for higher education institutions, as their success is contingent upon the comprehension and resolution of students' psycho-social requirements, in addition to those of the teaching and learning curriculum design.

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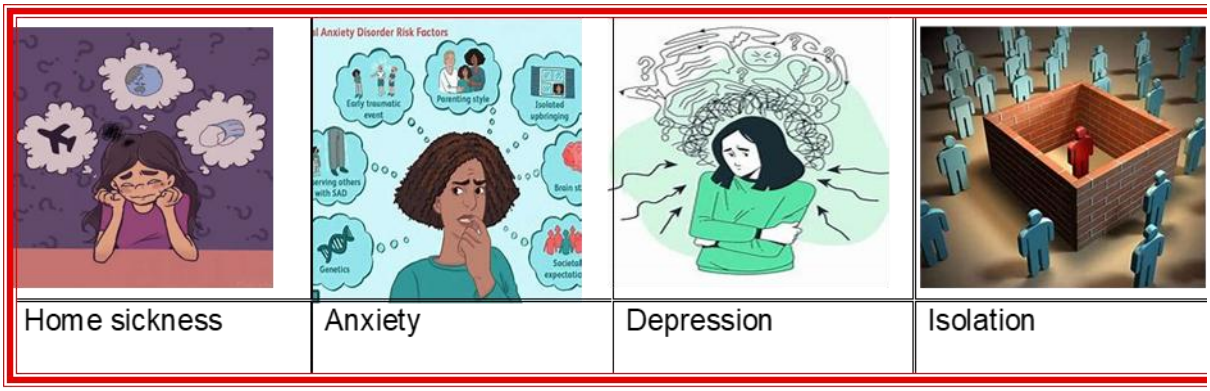
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the methodology exploited to investigate the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students in their academic progress at a higher education institution using a case study of a rural-based university. This chapter focuses on aspects such as research design, methods, population, and sampling procedures, thereby providing a succinct explanation of how each aspect contributed to the research and the study's ultimate objective.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

3.2.1 Paradigmatic Perspective

According to Guba, as cited in Patel (2015:3), a research paradigm is structured around three fundamental philosophical components - ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon), and methodology (the process and tools used to investigate the phenomenon). It is imperative to comprehend the interrelationship between these elements as they directly impact how this study on psycho-social difficulties among first-year students was conceptualised, conducted, and findings interpreted.

The figure below indicates the relationship between these concepts.

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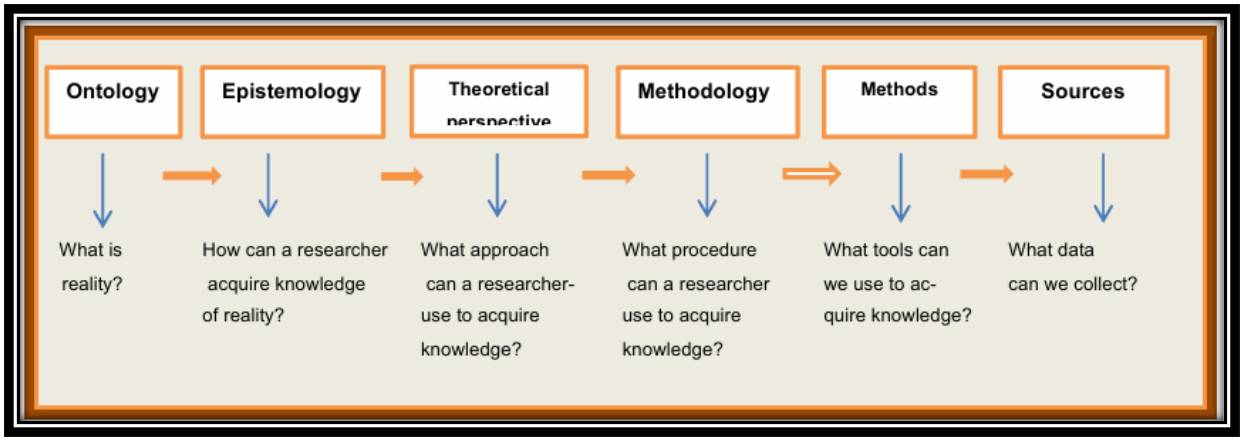

Figure 3.1 The relationship between ontology, epistemology, and methodology

The study was dependent on the relationship between ontology, epistemology, and methodology because together they ensure philosophical coherence and alignment throughout the research process. By understanding that reality (ontology) is subjective and socially constructed, the study acknowledges that psycho-social difficulties, such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation, are experienced differently by each student within his/her unique academic and social environments (Patel, 2015:3).

The epistemological stance emphasises that knowledge about these experiences can only be gained through close interaction and engagement with the students, making their narratives central to the inquiry. This understanding informs the choice of a qualitative methodology, which is best suited to exploring lived experiences in depth. The alignment of these elements guided the research design, data collection, and analysis processes, ensuring that the findings are credible, trustworthy, and contextually relevant. Ultimately, this philosophical alignment enhances the study's ability to capture the complex and nuanced ways in which psycho-social difficulties affect first-year students' academic progress in higher education (Patel, 2015:3; Lincoln & Guba, 1985:38).

3.2.2 Interpretative Paradigm

For this study, the researcher chose the interpretivist paradigm as the most suitable philosophical approach. Interpretivism emphasises understanding the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals within their specific social and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2014:8). This paradigm aligns with the study's focus on exploring the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students in higher education

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and how these challenges affect their academic progress. It is based on the understanding that knowing is contingent, inspired by people's experiences and interactions within their surroundings, and that reality is socially-created (Bryman, 2016:27).

The study was able to acquire a comprehensive understanding of how students perceived, experienced, and responded to challenges, such as anxiety, depression, homesickness, and social isolation. The interpretivist paradigm acknowledges that these experiences are socially constructed and context-dependent, varying from one student to another based on personal, cultural, and institutional factors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:39). Seeking to capture the complexity and lived reality of participants rather than distilling them to numerical statistics, the interpretivist method conforms with qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:56). This study accumulated an extensive and detailed understanding of psycho-social difficulties by using individual interviews and focus-group discussions. The interpretivist approach, hence, enabled the participants to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and coping strategies in their own words to reveal detailed meanings of their transition challenges.

By adopting an interpretivist stance, the researcher recognised that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the participants through dialogue and interaction (Patel, 2015:3). This approach enabled the researcher to collect rich qualitative data reflecting participants' feelings, thoughts, and coping strategies in their own words. Additionally, the paradigm of interpretivism supports contextual knowledge since it acknowledges that social and cultural elements shape human behaviour (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:37). This paradigm was very instrumental in the research understanding the psycho-social difficulties of first-entering students, in particular, how students from a rural-based university shaped their transition experiences, through their educational background, economic situation, and institutional support systems. The interpretivist paradigm's adaptability allows the researcher to modify interview questions depending on participant answers, therefore enabling a more dynamic and responsive data-collecting process. Using the interpretivist paradigm, the study guaranteed that results were firmly anchored in the subjective reality of participants, therefore, offering a complex and thorough

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awareness of the psycho-social challenges first-year students in higher education faced.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is a systematic plan that outlines how a study will be conducted to answer specific research questions or test hypotheses (Creswell, 2014:31). It includes details on how data will be collected, analysed, and interpreted. According to Kumar (2014:122), a research design acts as a detailed framework that connects research questions with the appropriate data collection and analysis methods, ensuring that the study's findings are credible and reliable.

The research design is crucial in any research project because it guides the entire research process, ensuring logical flow, methodological coherence, and alignment with the research paradigm and objectives (Babbie & Mouton, 2015:72). It is beneficial for the researcher to structure the investigation to ensure valid, reliable, and meaningful results. Without a well-chosen research design, a study may produce biased, incomplete, or irrelevant findings.

In this study, which focuses on exploring the psychosocial difficulties experienced by first-year students and their effect on academic progress in higher education institutions, selecting an appropriate research design was critical. Given the sensitive and subjective nature of psycho-social challenges like anxiety, depression, homesickness, and social isolation, the researcher needed a design that allows for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perceptions. The chosen research design also needed to be consistent with the interpretivist research paradigm, which emphasises understanding human behaviour from the viewpoint of those experiencing it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:39). This alignment ensures that the study remains focused on capturing the rich, contextual realities of first-year students' academic and psycho-social experiences.

For this study, the researcher implemented an exploratory research design. Exploratory research is defined as a type of research that seeks to investigate a phenomenon that has not been studied in depth, thereby gaining new insights, identifying key variables, and uncovering patterns (Kumar, 2014:123). Exploratory research is most suitable when there is limited existing literature or when the

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researcher aims to explore participants' experiences in a natural and unstructured setting. The primary reason for choosing an exploratory design is that psycho-social difficulties affecting first-year students in the South African higher education contexts remain under-researched, particularly in terms of how these difficulties influence academic progress. Additionally, since psycho-social challenges are complex, subjective, and socially embedded, an exploratory design allows the researcher to capture detailed, nuanced data directly from students through qualitative methods like interviews and focus-group discussions.

Additionally, an exploratory research design provides the flexibility needed for the researcher to adjust data collection tools and strategies as new themes and issues emerge during the fieldwork (Creswell, 2014:32). This flexibility is crucial when working with human participants who may reveal unexpected but relevant information about their psychosocial struggles and coping mechanisms. In conclusion, employing an exploratory research design has enabled the researcher to generate rich, meaningful, and context-specific insights into the psychosocial difficulties faced by first-year students and how these challenges affect their academic progress.

3.4 RESEARCH METHOD

For this spectacular study, the researcher chose to explore this intricate social phenomenon of first-year students' psycho-social challenges using the qualitative research approach. Dawson (2019:39–40) claims that qualitative research is extremely helpful for acquiring knowledge of human behaviour, emotions, and social interactions, making it an apt method for studies focusing on personal experience. This approach allowed the researcher to get information by direct interaction with the participants, therefore enabling a better knowledge of their viewpoints and difficulties.

The qualitative method was selected since psycho-social challenges vary from person to person and are essentially subjective, whereas quantitative research emphasises numerical analysis, qualitative research gives priority to depth and meaning (Bless, 2006). Capturing the complex experiences of students who were first entering higher education was dependent on this. Emphasising that it gives a researcher both breadth and depth of the knowledge of participants' lived experiences, Bhandari (2023:1), hence, advocates the use of qualitative approaches in investigating social events.

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3.5 STUDY SETTING

This study was conducted at the University of Venda, found in Limpopo Province, Vhembe District, Thulamela Municipality in South Africa. This Institution has been in existence since 1981. The University of Venda (UNIVEN) is situated in the developing town/city of Thohoyandou. Even though this Institution is a rural-based institution, it attracts students from different geographical areas who are mainly from historically disadvantaged rural backgrounds. According to the Times Higher Education (2024), UNIVEN is ranked number 17 among South African universities and 4394 in the world. The institution consists of four big faculties, which include a foundation level that aims to assist students with low matric results to better their grades. Currently, the University offers different programmes, such as diplomas, bachelor's degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas, master's, and doctoral degrees. Below is the map of Thohoyandou, where the University of Venda is situated:

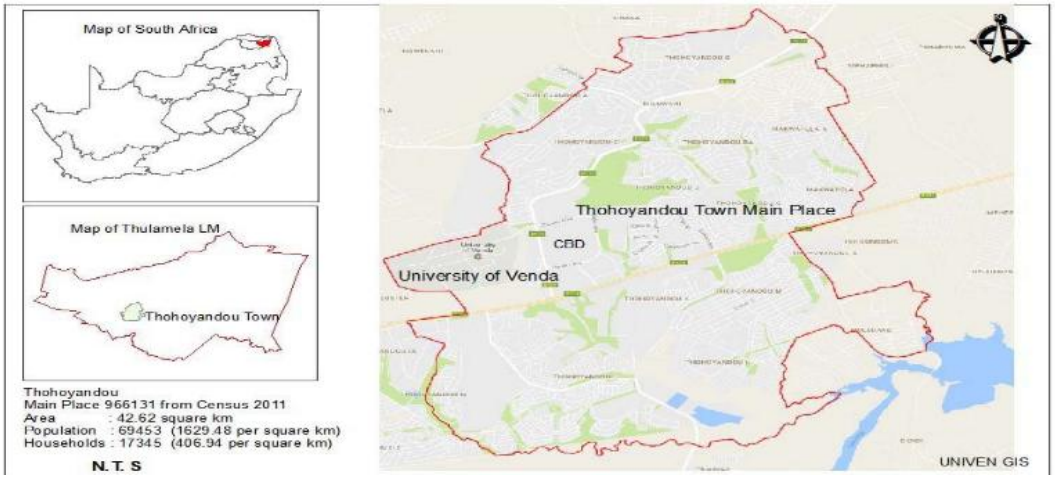

Figure 3.2 Thohoyandou Town map, where the research took place: Adapted from Google Maps (2025)

3.6 POPULATION AND SAMPLING METHOD

3.6.1 Population

It is impossible to study the complete relevant population, such as all University of Venda first-year students; for that reason, a sample was drawn. A well-defined population helps researchers to concentrate on a particular group most pertinent to the study objectives, claims Creswell and Poth (2018:148).

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This study covered first-year students registered at a Venda rural-based University. These students were selected as the target demographic as they were coming straight from high school to higher education, a process that is usually accompanied by different psycho-social difficulties. It was intentional to choose first-year students from a rural university, since they are more prone than their peers in metropolitan universities, to encounter particular academic, social, and emotional challenges.



Figure 3.3 The University – the setting for the research. Source: University of Venda Records (2025)

Sampling in research refers to the process of selecting individuals, groups, or cases from a larger population to participate in a study (Kumar, 2014:229). In qualitative research, sampling is typically purposeful and non-probabilistic, focusing on selecting participants who are most likely to provide rich, pertinent, and diverse information about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2014:189).

The study's participants were recruited through a non-probability purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is frequently implemented in qualitative research to ensure that participants have notable knowledge about the study problem (Braun & Clarke, 2021:89); hence, the researcher utilised purposive sampling to enable the choosing of desired people who are relevant to the study (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016:3). According to Patton (2015:264), purposive sampling is ideal for studies focusing on understanding a specific group of people deeply, especially when

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investigating sensitive, context-bound experiences, like mental health challenges and academic stressors.

This method was very appropriate since it allowed the researcher to focus on students who had faced psycho-social difficulties during their transition to university life. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, the researcher aimed for a small but information-rich sample. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985:202), qualitative sample sizes are typically determined by data saturation, which occurs when no new themes or insights emerge from additional interactions with the participants. For this study, the researcher targeted between 08 to 10 first-year students, with the final number dependent on reaching saturation during the data collection process. 10 participants - 5 were from the foundation phase department and another 5 were from the FET phase department - were selected. The table below shows the details of participants who were involved in the study (Source: Adapted from Kumar, 2019).

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Table 3.1 Participants in the study

PARTICIPANTS	GENDER	AGE	SCHOOL	PROGRAM/ COURSE	RESIDENCE	HOME ENVIRONMENT	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS
Participant A	F	18	Education	BEDTEF	On-campus	Rural	Low-Income (NSFAS)
Participant B	F	19	Education	BEDTEF	On-campus	Rural	Low-Income (NSFAS)
Participant C	M	18	Education	BEDTEF	Off-campus	Semi-rural	Low-Income (NSFAS)
Participant D	M	20	Education	BEDTEF	On-campus	Rural	Low-Income (NSFAS)
Participant E	F	19	Education	BEDTEF	On-campus	Rural	Low-Income (NSFAS)

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PARTICIPANTS	GENDER	AGE	SCHOOL	PROGRAM/ COURSE	RESIDENCE	HOME ENVIRONMENT	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS
Participant F	F	19	Education	BEDFET	Off-campus	Deep rural	Middle-Income
Participant G	F	18	Education	BEDFET	On-campus	Semi-rural	Low-Income (NSFAS)
Participant H	F	21	Education	BEDFET	On-campus	Rural	Middle-Income
Participant I	M	20	Education	BEDFET	Off-campus	Urban	Middle-Income
Participant J	F	17	Education	BEDFET	Off-campus	Rural	Low-Income (NSFAS)

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This sampling strategy was in line with the interpretivist paradigm and exploratory research design of this study, which prioritised understanding individuals' perspectives within their unique social contexts (Patel, 2015:5). The researcher was able to acquire comprehensive, detailed data that directly addressed the research questions of the study by interacting with students who had personally encountered psycho-social challenges. Additionally, purposive sampling enabled the researcher to capture a variety of viewpoints, from students from different socio-economic backgrounds, genders, and academic programmes, thus enhancing the depth of the findings (Bless et al., 2013:172).

In order to guarantee that the participants comprehended their rights in this study, ethical considerations such as confidentiality, informed consent, and the completion of a consent form were rigorously enforced. This method of sampling ensured an in-depth understanding of the problem under study and enabled the researcher to compile a comprehensive document because the use of a small sample guaranteed that every participant's experience was fully investigated.

3.6.1.1 Inclusion Criteria

In selecting the participants, the researcher used the following criteria - Students who were:

- Registered for their first year at the University of Venda for the academic year 2025;
- Willing to engage in the study; and
- Registered in the School of Education under the Faculty of Human Sciences & Education.

3.6.1.2 Exclusion Criteria:

- All post-graduates;
- All students enrolled in other faculties; and
- Second year going upwards.

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3.7 DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

3.7.1 Data Collection

Burn and Grove (2025) explicate data collection as a methodical process of compiling data on specified variables, using a systematic approach. The data collection phase is a critical component of any research study, as it entails gathering pertinent information to address the research questions and accomplish the study's objectives. Data collection, as defined by Kumar (2014:192), refers to the systematic gathering of information from selected participants using appropriate tools and techniques that align with the research design and paradigm.

Data collection process in qualitative research, particularly within an interpretivist paradigm, is interactive, flexible, and participant-centred, allowing the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2014:190). The objective of this investigation was to comprehend the psycho-social challenges encountered by first-year students and the manner in which these obstacles influence their academic advancement. Consequently, the data collection procedure was developed to establish an environment in which participants could freely share their perspectives, emotions, and experiences. The researcher obtained ethical authorisation from the University Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of data collection. The researcher also sought authorisation from the Provincial Department of Education to gain access to the Higher Education Institutions. Potential participants were subsequently contacted through referrals from the Stopthespot Youth Organisation, a student support organisation.

The researcher provided participants with a comprehensive information document that outlined the study's purpose, their rights as participants, and the methods by which confidentiality would be maintained, as soon as they expressed an interest in participating. Before any data was collected, a signed written informed consent form was obtained from each participant following ethical research practices (Babbie & Mouton, 2015:522).

The primary data collection methods were individual interviews and focus-group discussions, which were conducted over four weeks. In qualitative research, individual interviews are appropriate when the researcher aims to strike a balance between the

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ability to investigate emerging topics in depth and the focus of the inquiry, according to Patton (2015:439). Interviews enable the researcher to understand the academic world from the participants' perspective and uncover their lived experiences (Greeff, 2015:342).

In order to guarantee participant confidentiality and comfort, each interview was conducted in a private, peaceful environment at the New Students Centre, office no. F017, on campus, and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes; this is in a neutral and easily accessible location for off-campus students, also. The researcher employed a pre-prepared interview guide that included open-ended questions that were consistent with the research objective in order to maintain focus and consistency. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capturing of data.

The researcher also made field notes during and after each interview to record non-verbal cues, participant emotions, and other observations that could enrich the data during analysis (Creswell, 2014:195). After each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. Transcripts were checked against the recordings to ensure accuracy. The researcher also engaged in initial memo-writing to reflect on emerging themes, participant emotions, and possible patterns (Patton, 2015:440). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, each participant was offered the option to review his/her transcript for accuracy before analysis began, ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:303).

3.7.2 Data Collection Methods

3.7.2.1 Semi-structured Individual Interviews

In order to acquire firsthand accounts from first-year students regarding their academic experiences at the University of Venda, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. This approach was selected due to its ability to maintain confidentiality, which enabled participants to articulate their opinions without external interference. Individual interviews are appropriate for qualitative case studies because they enable a more thorough examination of the motivations, experiences, and perspectives of participants, in line with the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018:165).

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In order to guarantee the privacy of the participants, the researcher verified that the Stopthespot Youth Organisation office, at the students' centre, was unoccupied prior to conducting the interview. Additionally, the interview was conducted at a time that was convenient with regards to the students' academic schedules. These interviews enabled the researcher to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the psycho-social challenges from the participants' perspective, thereby uncovering their lived experiences. The researcher used pre-prepared interview questions to ensure consistency; interviews were all conducted in English since all participants are literate. The interview questions focused on:

- Exploring the psycho-social difficulties that influence first-year students' academic performance.
- Establishing how psycho-social difficulties affect first-year students' academic achievement.
- Appraising teaching approaches utilised by lecturers with first-year students.
- Determining the methods that can be applied to assist first-year students in overcoming psycho-social issues negatively impacting their academic performance.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis. After transcribing, all participants were requested to check if their views had been accurately transcribed. The participants reviewed the transcripts, thereby ensuring accuracy in capturing their responses. This approach enhanced the credibility and reliability of the data (Shenton, 2018:69). Data collection, using interviews, was done within 5 days.

3.7.3 Focus-Group Discussions

Morgan (2019:45) posits that focus-group discussions are beneficial in qualitative research because they facilitate participants' interactions and may yield insights that differ from or enrich those obtained through individual interviews. Additionally, they enhance the capacity of individuals to think critically. According to Gundumogula (2020:299-302), focus-group discussions are an extended form of interviews, for during the sessions, participants additionally engage in collective reactions about the issue under investigation. Field notes were taken during this interview; these notes

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focused on the behaviour and responses of the participants, in particular, the content of the conversations, and responses to the researcher's questions. Field notes, therefore, were taken to ensure that the researcher did not omit any aspect of the interaction.

For this study, focus-group discussions were held to get group views on psycho-social difficulties and how they affect academic progress among first-year students. This approach was selected because the sessions promoted interaction, allowed participants to build on one another's ideas, and therefore produced richer comprehensive data. The focus-group discussions involved 10 participants. Key themes, like those in the interviews, guided the conversations covering academic support systems, personal challenges, and ideas for ensuring students' academic progress. The researcher ensured that all participants had a chance to voice their ideas by facilitating the order of speaking. The focus-group discussions were videotaped; additionally, field notes were taken to record non-verbal signals and group dynamics that gave the answers context. Comparing the data from the focus-group discussions with the individual interviews' answers allowed the researcher to achieve data triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity of the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

3.8 DATA ANALYSIS

The study primarily employed theme analysis as the method of data analysis, as per Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017), a six-phase strategy. Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate because it enabled the researcher to organise data into logical categories that were informed by the study objectives, utilising both the semi-structured individual interviews and the focus-group discussions. By providing a more comprehensive picture of the psycho-social challenges that first-year students encounter in their academic pursuits at the University of Venda, these data-collection approaches ensured a methodical examination of the responses of the participants.

The table below shows a summary of thematic data analysis stages.

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Table 3.2 Summary of data analysis stages

Stage	Activity	Purpose
1. Data Familiarisation	Reading transcripts and listening to recordings	To develop a profound comprehension of participants' experiences
2. Initial Coding	Labelling significant data segments.	To organise data into manageable units
3. Theme Generation	Grouping related codes into themes	To identify patterns and primary concepts
4. Reviewing Themes	Confirming themes against the entire data set	To ensure consistency and accuracy
5. Defining Themes	Naming and refining themes	To elucidate the significance of each theme
6. Interpreting Findings	Linking themes to research questions and theory	To answer research questions and report findings

3.8.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

During the initial phase, the researcher reviewed all of the notes that were taken during the interviews and viewed the videos to gain a comprehensive picture of the entire data that was collected. This phase was essential in helping the researcher comprehend the perspectives of the participants and to develop a detailed account of their experiences; also to identify the initial themes for coding (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

3.8.2 Phase 2: Formulate Initial Codes

During this phase, pertinent sections were assigned codes; then systematic coding was conducted by emphasising critical data points in accordance with the study objectives. Initially, manual coding was implemented; subsequent to this, NVivo software verification was utilised to enhance precision (Nowell et al., 2017:5); for instance, "I felt overwhelmed by the workload" was evaluated under academic pressure, while "I struggled to make friends because I felt like I did not belong" was evaluated under social isolation. This phase facilitated the organisation of data into logical groupings.

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3.8.3 Phase 3: Theme Searching

The researcher then recorded the themes and compiled a list of all similar themes, which were then categorised. This was done after the codes were assigned. Theme maps were generated to illustrate the interconnections between various codes; for example, the theme “emotional problems” was characterised by anxiety, loneliness, and cultural adaptation (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). The larger theme of economic barriers comprised of financial difficulties, a lack of study materials, and poor housing.

3.8.4 Phase 4: Theme Analysis

In this phase, the themes that were identified were refined and verified to guarantee that they accurately represented the data. The themes were investigated by the researcher, who consulted the coded data to confirm their relevance (Nowell et al., 2017:7). A theme was either combined, segregated, or deleted, if it lacked sufficient supporting information; for example, "homesickness" was initially an independent phenomenon; however, it ultimately became a component of emotional distress.

3.8.5 Phase 5: Theme Definition and Naming

The researcher provided comprehensive explanations of how each theme facilitated the comprehension of the psycho-social difficulties that first-year students encountered (Nowell et al., 2017:8). All motives were enhanced to ensure their interdependence and uniqueness; for instance, "academic stress" and "mental health struggles" were inextricably linked, despite their distinct foci (one on psychological well-being and the other on educational challenges).

3.8.6 Phase 6: Report Generation

The final phase involved the coherent and logical drafting of the analysis’s results, which included direct quotations from participants, to substantiate significant conclusions (Nowell et al., 2017:9). To provide a comprehensive understanding of this study, the researcher correlated the themes with those of previous studies in order to achieve the research objectives. The study, hence, was able to produce a report guided by well-founded conclusions on the challenges faced by students in a rural

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university environment by complying with these six phases of thematic analysis; this process ensured rigour, openness, and depth in data interpretation.

3.9 RESEARCH MEASUREMENT

Maintaining credibility, dependability, and validity in qualitative research ensures the trustworthiness of the results produced. As fundamental standards for assessing qualitative research, DeVellis (2017) recommends that researchers maintain dependability, confirmability, transferability, and credibility of the findings. Validity and dependability are usually connected with quantitative research. However, they have been adapted to qualitative studies so that conclusions fairly reflect participants' life experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018:251).

3.9.1 Dependability

The consistency and stability of study outcomes over time are the definition of dependability in research. This ensures that, in the presence of similar circumstances, similar approaches would yield similar results (Nowell et al., 2017:3). This study ensured dependability by employing an auditable trail to describe research findings. The themes were evaluated by an independent researcher, and the interview transcripts were also reviewed by the participants to ensure their accuracy. Morse (2018:112) suggests that external audits or peer evaluations may contribute to the development of dependability by assessing the consistency of the study.

3.9.2 Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the researcher is not biased and that research results are generated from the experiences of participants (Shenton, 2016:72). For this study, the researcher used a notebook and recorder to record participants' views during interviews (Birt et al., 2016:180). To foster openness in the research process, the researcher did a substantial review of other related literature to identify any similarities and differences with the current findings (Krostjens & Moser, 2018:121). This process guaranteed that the results of this study were not influenced by the personal feelings of the researcher.

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3.9.3 Transferability

The degree to which research results can be applied in other related contexts is referred to as transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:256). The researcher requested that a researcher with experience examine the transcripts and identify the themes in order to guarantee the transferability of this study. Creswell and Poth (2018:252) assert that the use of direct quotations from participants enhances transferability by preserving contextual richness and authenticity.

3.9.4 Credibility

Credibility guarantees that the research results fairly capture participants' experiences and impressions (Cohen et al., 2018:254). This study applied several strategies that ensured the credibility of the findings - continuous involvement in the field, continuous monitoring, and triangulation. The researcher spent 4 weeks collecting the data from participants. In this way, the researcher grasped a deeper understanding of participants' views. The researcher allowed the participants to examine the initial transcribed findings to guarantee that their points of view had not been altered (Birt et al., 2016). In addition, for this study, the researcher used several data sources, individual interviews and focus-group discussions to expand the profundity and reliability of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017:4).

3.9.5 Validity

In qualitative research, validity is the assurance of accuracy and authenticity of results, thereby fairly depicting the studied phenomenon (Tracy, 2020:842). The results had validity through the researcher's continuous involvement with the participants, and triangulation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:121). In addition, the provision of rich descriptions allows readers to interact thoroughly with participants' stories, thereby strengthening validity and facilitating readers' immersion in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018:254). These techniques ensured that the research results reflected participants' reality, were accurate, and were well-supported by the data collected.

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3.9.6 Reliability

In qualitative research, reliability guarantees consistency in methods of data collection and analysis (Silverman, 2020:278). Thematic coding was done methodically; an independent researcher cross-checked themes to guarantee consistency (Cohen et al., 2018:254). Morse (2018:810) claims that intercoder reliability checks improve dependability by ensuring that various researchers, examining the same data, will arrive at the same thematic findings. These techniques helped ensure that the research integrity and data consistency were maintained.

3.9.7 Ethical Considerations

Conducting this study with ethical considerations as a priority guaranteed the welfare and protection of every participant. The study followed the ethical standards stated in Creswell and Creswell (2018:55) as determined by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Venda and the Provincial Department of Education. The study process maintained the following ethical standards throughout the research process:

3.9.8 Ethical Clearance

Before data collection, this study's proposal met the requirements of the Department of Education; then it was submitted to the University of Venda Ethical Clearance Committee, where ethical clearance was acquired. Furthermore, the researcher applied to the Limpopo Provincial Review Ethics Committee (LPREC), and approval was granted (see the attached Appendices). All participants were then advised of the goals, methods, and intentions of the study.

3.9.9 Confidentiality

The principle of confidentiality in research ethics requires researchers to maintain the dignity and autonomy of participants by ensuring that any information obtained from or shared by human subjects is used in such a manner to avoid compromising the interests of individuals or communities (Bryman, 2016:131). The information that was collected, such as audio recordings and interview notes, was securely stored in a location that was accessible only to a restricted number of researchers in this study. Additionally, the identities of all participants were protected by referring to them by letter, such as "Participant B".

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3.9.10 Risk of Harm

The study acknowledged the possible emotional discomfort that talking about psycho-social issues can bring about for subjects. Interviews were conducted in a safe setting, in a non-judgmental manner, and each participant was informed that he/she could withdraw from the study without any repercussions, should he/she wish to do so (Babbie, 2020:68). No participant was harmed when conducting this study; however, the researcher advised the participants to visit the campus psychologist's offices for emotional and academic support, should they desire to do so.

3.9.11 Respect for Personal Autonomy

Participants' rights to make autonomous decisions about their involvement were respected during the process. Before data collection, informed permission was obtained to ensure that participants freely engaged after fully knowing the research objectives and methods (Flick, 2018:47). They were also informed that they were free to withdraw from this study if they felt the need to do so.

3.9.12 Informed Consent

Participants were furnished with a comprehensive consent form that delineated the objectives of the investigation and their rights prior to data collection. Additionally, the participants were sent a consent form 24 hours prior to the interview appointment to ensure that they were fully informed of the responsibilities they were accepting (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018:84). The researcher emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary and that individuals were free to withdraw at any time, without incurring any penalties.

3.9.13 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it aimed to highlight and address the psycho-social difficulties faced by first-year students in a rural-based university. By ensuring ethical rigour, the research upheld academic integrity and the well-being of participants (Tracy, 2020:23). The findings provided valuable insights into the challenges students encounter, thereby helping higher education institutions develop better support systems and interventions.

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3.10 CONCLUSION

The methodological framework employed to investigate the psycho-social challenges encountered by first-year students in their academic advancement at a rural-based higher education institution was delineated in this chapter. In order to comprehensively document the lived experiences of participants, the investigation implemented an exploratory qualitative design within the interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus-group discussions from first-year students selected through purposive sampling. This approach enabled the acquisition of detailed insights into their personal and academic challenges. The survey was conducted at the University of Venda - a context in which educational experiences are influenced by rural dynamics.

In accordance with Braun and Clarke's six-phase methodology, thematic analysis was implemented to conduct an exhaustive examination of the collected data. The integrity of the research and the protection of participants were guaranteed by the strict adherence to ethical considerations - confidentiality, informed consent, and respect for personal autonomy. Additionally, the investigation underscored the importance of trustworthiness by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the results. In general, the researcher was able to produce contextually grounded, valid, and in-depth findings as a result of the methodological approach explained in this chapter. This laid the groundwork for the analysis and discussion of the results in the subsequent chapters.

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CHAPTER FOUR
DATA PRESENTATIONS, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative research on the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students at a rural-based higher education institution. The data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus-group discussions. This chapter outlines the data collection process, presents the key themes using graphs, diagrams, and tables, and offers an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the results. This study aims to explore the psycho-social difficulties that first-year students face in their academic responsibilities. The research objectives are: identifying the key psycho-social challenges influencing first-year students' academic performance; understanding their effects on first-year students' academic achievement, evaluating the teaching approaches employed by lecturers, and suggesting methods to help first-year students overcome these issues. This chapter systematically presents the data collected and interprets the findings in relation to these objectives.

Recent studies underscore that psycho-social stressors, such as anxiety, self-doubt, and a lack of social connectedness, are significant predictors of poor academic outcomes, particularly for students from marginalised or underserved communities (Ngcobo, 2021). These challenges are often compounded by a lack of institutional support, culturally unresponsive pedagogy, and limited peer interaction. These are factors which collectively hinder students' ability to thrive in the university environment (Dube & Hlalele, 2020; Mlambo, Maphosa & Nyoni, 2021). For a fuller understanding of these factors, a qualitative study was undertaken; this approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how these difficulties are experienced, subjectively, by students. This chapter, therefore, not only captures the patterns and prevalence of these challenges but also delves into their depth and meaning, offering a rich, contextualised narrative that supports a more informed and empathetic institutional response. In line with this, the analysis contributes to ongoing debates in higher education research regarding student support, inclusivity, and pedagogy in rural contexts, and aligns with broader calls for the decolonisation and transformation of

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student experiences in post-secondary institutions across the Global South (Jansen & Walters, 2021; Letseka, 2022).

4.2 OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION

Data were gathered using two primary instruments:

- Semi-structured Individual Interviews: One-on-one sessions allowed students to share their personal experiences and elaborate on their emotional and social challenges.
- Focus-Group Discussions: Group interactions provided insights into common themes and shared experiences among first-year students.

Each instrument contributed unique perspectives, and triangulating the data helped ensure a comprehensive understanding of the psycho-social difficulties encountered by the students.

4.3 DATA PRESENTATION

4.3.1 Key Themes from Individual Interviews

From the interviews, several recurring themes emerged.

Theme 1: Emotional Stress and Anxiety

Many first-year students are dealing with heightened levels of emotional stress and anxiety, primarily stemming from the pressures of academic requirements. These pressures often come from internal expectations, such as striving for high grades, and external expectations, like parental pressure or societal norms. Anxiety about academic success is a pervasive concern, often leading students to feel inadequate or overwhelmed by the weight of their responsibilities.

- Participant A (Interview):

“There’s this constant pressure to perform well. I always feel like I’m not doing enough even when I’m trying my best.” [PA-INT]

This quote highlights the emotional toll of academic pressure. The students’ perception that their efforts are insufficient despite trying hard reveals how academic standards

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and self-imposed perfectionism contribute to stress. This feeling of inadequacy may lead to burnout, where the student feels demotivated, unable to complete tasks, or even engage with the course materials.

- Participant C (Focus-Group):

"My heart races when I think of exams. I can't sleep the night before tests; it's just overwhelming." [FG-PC]

Here, the physical manifestations of anxiety (racing heart and sleeplessness) show how stress extends beyond the cognitive domain to impact the body. Sleep deprivation and physical symptoms like these have a profound negative effect on memory and retention of facts as well as cognitive performance, leading to a vicious cycle where students find it even harder to prepare for exams, exacerbating their academic difficulties.

- Participant F (Interview):

"Sometimes I get so anxious, I skip lectures just to avoid facing the reality of how far behind I am." [PF-INT]

This response underscores a common coping strategy among students facing high levels of anxiety: avoidance. The students' inability to meet their academic responsibilities stems from the overwhelming stress they feel. Avoidance can lead to disengagement with the learning process, making it even more difficult for the student to catch up and potentially contributing to a deterioration in academic performance.

Theme 2: Homesickness and Isolation

For many first-year students, particularly those from rural areas or smaller communities, the transition to university life means significant emotional and social adjustments. The physical distance from family, friends, and familiar support systems can trigger intense feelings of homesickness. This emotional strain can make it difficult for students to focus on their studies, as they are preoccupied with missing their previous support networks.

- Participant B (Interview):

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"I come from a very close-knit family. Here, I'm just alone. It's hard to concentrate when your heart is still at home." [PB-INT]

The sense of loss is profound when a student moves from a tightly-knit family environment to a more independent, isolating university life. This emotional separation can leave students feeling disconnected from their academic responsibilities, as their mental and emotional energy is consumed by longing for home. The lack of emotional support can lead to difficulty focusing on academic tasks, further exacerbating feelings of isolation.

- Participant D (Focus-Group):

"I try to make friends, but most people already have their own groups. I feel invisible most of the time." [FG-PD]

Social integration is a significant challenge in the first year of university. The feeling of invisibility and the difficulty in breaking into pre-established social circles can lead to feelings of rejection and isolation. This sense of not belonging can take a toll on the student's emotional well-being, making them less likely to participate in academic activities or seek help from peers and instructors.

- Participant H (Interview):

"During weekends, the campus feels empty, and it makes me miss home even more. That loneliness eats into my focus." [PH-INT]

The emptiness during weekends, when many students return home or engage in social activities, can amplify feelings of loneliness. This heightened sense of isolation further undermines students' ability to concentrate on their studies. The lack of social interaction during these times leaves them with ample time to dwell on their emotional discomfort, which then interferes with academic engagement.

Theme 3: Cultural and Social Adjustment

Cultural adjustment is a major hurdle for students from diverse backgrounds or small communities. University settings are often diverse, and students must navigate new social norms, languages, and ways of interacting. For some, these differences can

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cause stress, as they feel alienated or out of place. This cultural mismatch can make students feel uncomfortable in class discussions, group projects, and even casual interactions, thereby affecting their academic performance.

- Participant E (Interview):

"In my village, we don't interact the way people do here. I feel like I don't belong. Even in class, I hesitate to speak." [PE-INT]

This participant illustrates a common issue that many students face when they enter a higher education environment that is culturally different from their own. The unfamiliarity with social norms and communication styles can contribute to discomfort, leading to hesitancy in academic settings. This social alienation often prevents students from fully engaging in learning opportunities, further isolating them academically.

- Participant G (Focus-Group):

"It's hard to keep up with the language and the way other students express themselves. Sometimes, I just stay quiet." [FG-PG]

The difficulty in understanding the language or the vernacular used by peers adds another layer of stress. This is not just about communication – it is about fitting in and participating actively in the academic community. When students struggle to understand or keep up with peer discussions, they may withdraw from contributing, which diminishes their learning experiences and could hinder their academic growth.

- Participant I (Interview):

"Most people here don't understand where I come from. They laugh at my accent, and that makes me withdraw." [PI-INT]

Experiences of subtle discrimination or micro-aggressions, such as laughing at someone's accent, further highlight the cultural dissonance students may face. This can significantly damage the student's self-esteem and confidence. Over time, such

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interactions may result in social withdrawal, affecting not only social integration but also the student's sense of belonging in the academic environment.

Theme 4: Impact on Academic Engagement

Psycho-social difficulties, including emotional stress, isolation, and cultural adjustment, directly impact students' engagement in academic activities. These challenges reduce motivation, disrupt attention, and ultimately affect students' ability to perform academically. The struggle to manage personal issues means that academic tasks become secondary to emotional needs.

- Participant J (Interview):

"When I'm emotionally down, I can't concentrate in class. I just zone out." [PJ-INT]

This quote demonstrates the direct link between emotional health and academic focus. When students are emotionally overwhelmed, their cognitive resources are diverted away from learning, making it difficult to retain information or engage in class discussions. This disengagement negatively impacts their academic performance and sets the stage for a cycle of underachievement.

- Participant C (Focus-Group):

"There are days I don't attend classes and not because I don't care but because I feel like I'll just fail anyway." [FG-PC]

With this quotation, we see the destructive effects of low self-esteem and the fear of failure. For students struggling with anxiety and stress, the prospect of failure becomes so overwhelming that it leads to avoidance, such as skipping classes. This disengagement only worsens their academic situation, making them feel even more disconnected from the learning process.

- Participant F (Interview):

"I used to participate in high school, but here, I feel too intimidated to even raise my hand." [PF-INT]

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The transition to a larger and more competitive academic environment can erode a student's confidence, especially if they feel their contributions will not be valued. In the face of overwhelming challenges, such as homesickness or anxiety, students may shut down in class, which decreases their academic involvement and can prevent them from building relationships with peers and instructors.

Theme 5: Views on Teaching Approaches and Institutional Support

The role of instructors and the institutional environment is crucial in either alleviating or exacerbating the psycho-social challenges faced by first-year students. Students who report positive experiences with empathetic and interactive teaching methods are more likely to feel supported and engaged, while those who encounter rigid, impersonal teaching approaches are more likely to feel alienated.

- Participant A (Interview):

“Some lecturers just read slides. It’s like they don’t care if we understand or not.” [PA-INT]

The lack of interactive engagement in lecture-based teaching methods contributes to feelings of disconnection. When students feel that their learning needs are not being addressed, it can reinforce feelings of isolation, anxiety, and frustration. This may lead to disengagement, where students lose interest or feel that they are not valued in the academic environment.

- Participant G (Focus-Group)

“I like it when lecturers ask questions and involve us. It makes me feel like I matter.” [FG-PG]

Interactive teaching methods, such as asking questions and involving students in discussions, create a sense of inclusion. These strategies not only enhance learning but also contribute to emotional well-being by validating students’ voices. Feeling valued in an academic setting, improves self-esteem and motivates students to engage more deeply with course material.

- Participant D (Interview):

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"There's one lecturer who stays after class to explain. That has really helped me." [PD-INT]

Personal attention and mentoring can make a significant difference in a student's experience. This quote highlights the necessity of support structures within the academic environment. When students receive tailored assistance, they are more likely to overcome emotional and academic challenges, resulting in improved engagement and performance.

These interpretations from the participants' interviews and focus groups provide a detailed picture of how the students' experiences relate to their academic challenges. These discussions also illustrate how psycho-social issues are deeply interconnected with their academic success or failure.

4.3.2 Conceptual Framework

The following diagram illustrates the conceptual framework of the psycho-social challenges identified:

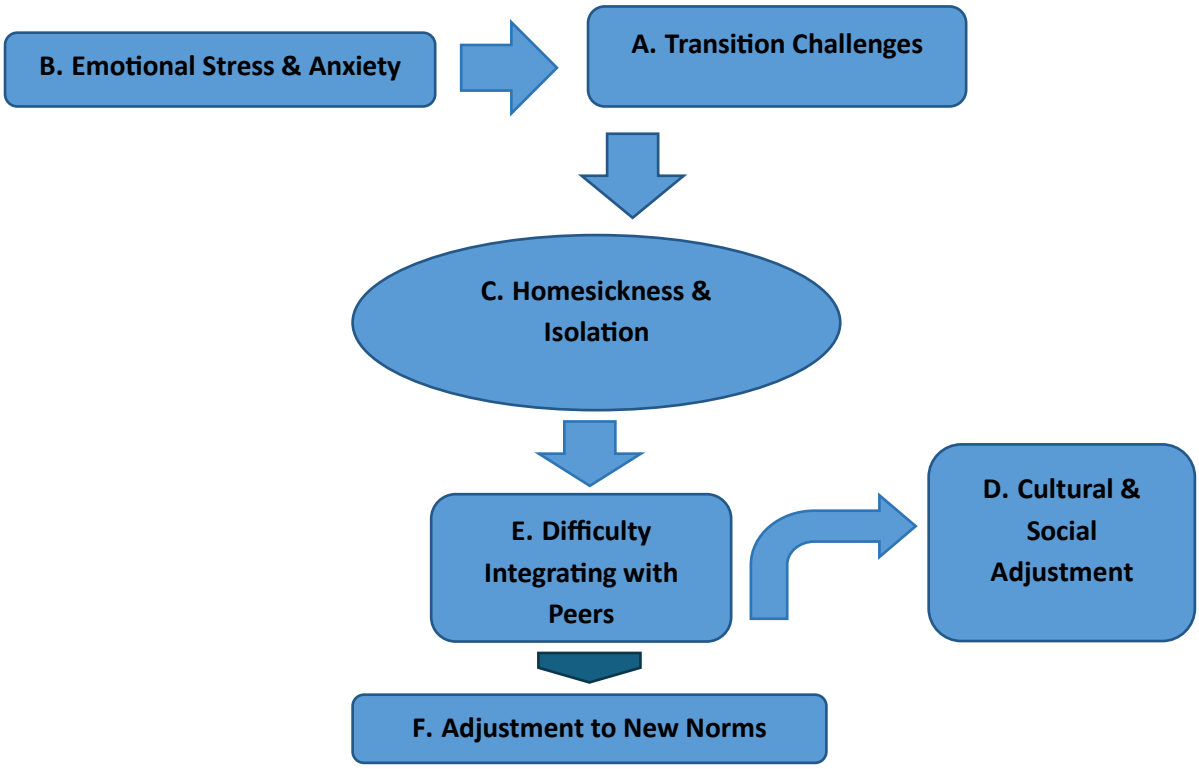

Figure 4.1 Conceptual framework of psycho-social difficulties (own source)

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Participants consistently mentioned feelings of anxiety, isolation, and cultural dissonance as they navigated the new academic environment.

4.3.3. Thematic Analysis from Focus-Group Discussions

A table summarising the themes and representative quotes from the focus groups is presented below:

Table 4.1 Themes and insights from focus-group discussions

Theme	Description	Representation Quote
Emotional Stress & Anxiety	Anxiety stems from academic pressures and fear of failure.	"I constantly worry about meeting expectations, which makes it hard to focus."
Homesickness & Isolation	Feeling disconnected from family and familiar social networks.	"Being away from home is isolating; I miss the support system I had before."
Cultural & Social Adjustment	Difficulty adapting to new social norms and integrating into a diverse student community.	"I find it challenging to relate to peers from different cultural backgrounds."
Impact on Academic Engagement	Reduced participation in classes and extracurricular activities due to emotional strain.	"Sometimes I skip classes because I just feel overwhelmed."

(Own source)

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4.3.3 Interview Insights

The interview responses provided additional data on the prevalence of these issues. The following table shows the frequency of responses for key psycho-social challenges:

Table 4.2 Frequency of reported psycho-social difficulties

Psycho-Social Difficulty	Percentage of Respondents Reporting the Issue
Emotional Stress & Anxiety	68%
Homesickness & Isolation	55%
Cultural & Social Adjustment	47%
Impact on Academic Engagement	60%

(own source)

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section provides an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the data collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus-group discussions. Using thematic analysis, the study identified key psycho-social challenges affecting first-year students at a rural-based higher education institution. Each theme is interpreted in relation to the participants' lived experiences and supported by recent scholarly literature. The psycho-social challenges are presented, not as isolated phenomena, but as interconnected issues that negatively influence students' academic engagement, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging in the university setting.

4.4.1 Emotional Stress and Anxiety

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Analysis of interview and focus group data revealed that emotional stress is the most prominent challenge among first-year students. Students reported experiencing high levels of anxiety due to academic pressures and self-imposed expectations. This stress adversely affects their concentration, study habits, and overall academic engagement.

Students reported symptoms of psychological distress, including sleeplessness, feelings of inadequacy, and emotional exhaustion. These findings are consistent with recent literature showing that academic stress and fear of failure significantly impact students' mental health and learning capacity (Adeyemi, Bamidele & Adedeji, 2023). Emotional stress has been found to impair executive functioning, reduce motivation, and diminish overall academic engagement. In the rural context, such stress is often intensified by the lack of prior exposure to competitive academic environments, leaving students ill-equipped to handle the pressure. Recent South African studies further suggest that rural-origin students face heightened stress due to their perceived educational disadvantage, exacerbating anxiety and self-doubt (Mashige & Mahomed, 2021).

4.4.2 Homesickness and Social Isolation

The data indicate that homesickness and social isolation are significant issues, particularly for students transitioning from rural environments. The absence of familiar support networks leads to feelings of alienation and discouragement, impacting both emotional well-being and academic performance.

This finding aligns with contemporary research, which shows that homesickness is a critical factor affecting student mental health, particularly in the early months of university transition (Maringe, Masinire & Nkambule, 2020; Letseka, 2022). Feelings of isolation reduce students’ ability to focus on academic work and are linked to lower levels of classroom participation and academic confidence.

Cultural and Social Adjustment

Adapting to the diverse cultural landscape of higher education institutions presents considerable challenges. Students noted difficulties in adjusting to new social norms

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and integrating with peers from different backgrounds. This cultural diversity not only affects their social interactions but also their comfort level in academic settings.

This theme reflects broader issues of cultural dissonance, where students struggle to reconcile their personal identities with the dominant academic and peer cultures (Dube & Hlalele, 2020; Letseka, 2022). For many rural-origin students, language barriers, unfamiliar social etiquette, and the fear of being judged contribute to a sense of exclusion and otherness. Recent studies suggest that these cultural differences and mismatches can negatively impact students' academic self-efficacy and inhibit their full participation in the learning process (Ngcobo, 2021; Mlambo, Maphosa & Nyoni, 2021).

4.4.3 Teaching Approaches and Institutional Support

The study also appraised the effectiveness of teaching approaches. Students highlighted the necessity for lecturers to engage in open and empathetic communication. Adaptive teaching methods and proactive institutional support (for example, mentoring programmes and counselling services) are crucial in mitigating the negative effects of psycho-social stressors on academic performance.

These findings resonate with the work of Lekena and Bayaga (2021), who argue that emotionally-responsive teaching is critical in enhancing student motivation and sense of belonging. Proactive institutional support (such as mentorship, tutoring, and counselling services) was seen as essential in helping students cope with psycho-social challenges. Such personal academic interactions can have a profound impact on students' sense of support and academic self-concept (Kwaah & Essilfie, 2020). Several students, however, also indicated that they were unaware of existing support services, suggesting a communication gap between institutional resources and student awareness.

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4.4.4 Exploring the Psycho-Social Difficulties that Influence First-Year Students' Academic Performance

The qualitative data clearly indicate that first-year students encounter a range of psycho-social challenges that adversely influence their academic performance. Many students responded that the abrupt transition to a higher education environment triggers significant emotional stress and anxiety. This stress, often stemming from the pressure to perform and adapt to a new academic setting, disrupts concentration and study routines. Additionally, students from rural areas report feelings of homesickness and isolation, which further impede their ability to focus on academic tasks. The interplay of these emotional and social stressors creates a challenging environment that can detract from learning and academic engagement.

Furthermore, the need for cultural and social adjustments adds another layer of complexity to the academic experience. Students noted that adapting to a diverse and sometimes unfamiliar social environment often leads to difficulties in forming supportive peer relationships and integrating fully into the academic community. This cultural dissonance can result in feelings of alienation and diminished self-confidence, which in turn influence their classroom participation and overall academic performance. Thus, the psycho-social difficulties experienced by these students are multi-dimensional, affecting not only their emotional well-being but also their capacity to meet academic demands effectively.

The interplay of psycho-social factors reflects what Hart (2019) refers to as "academic vulnerability", which is a state in which students' emotional and psychological struggles directly affect their academic persistence and success. Recent empirical findings confirm that students experiencing multiple psycho-social stressors are more likely to drop out or underperform academically, especially in the absence of targeted institutional support.

4.4.5 Establishing how Psycho-Social difficulties affect First-Year Students' Academic Achievement

The study's findings establish a clear link between psycho-social difficulties and diminished academic achievement among first-year students. High levels of stress and anxiety were found to correlate with lower classroom engagement and a reduction in the overall motivation to succeed academically. Students who struggle with these

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psycho-social issues often experience interruptions in their learning processes, as persistent emotional distress hinders their ability to concentrate and absorb course material. This diminished capacity for focus and retention is reflected in poor academic performance, demonstrating that the emotional toll of these challenges extends directly into academic outcomes (Hart, 2018:27).

The data also suggest that the impact of psycho-social difficulties is not uniformly distributed among all first-year students, but is particularly pronounced among those coming from rural backgrounds. These students are often less prepared for the rapid cultural and academic shifts they encounter, which can lead to a cascade of challenges, including lower attendance and participation, and ultimately, academic underachievement (Fong, Patall, Vasquez, Corrigan & Pineault, 2023). The compounded effects of emotional stress, cultural dissonance, and social isolation create an academic environment where even the most diligent students may struggle to maintain high levels of achievement.

4.4.6 Appraising Teaching Approaches Utilised by Lecturers with First-Year Students

The appraisal of teaching approaches, from the data, reveals that lecturers play a pivotal role in either mitigating or exacerbating the psycho-social challenges faced by first-year students. Effective teaching methods that emphasise empathy, open communication, and adaptive learning environments can significantly ease the transition into higher education. Students reported that lecturers who incorporate interactive teaching strategies, such as group projects, open discussions, and mentoring sessions, tend to create a more supportive and engaging learning atmosphere. These approaches help to build a rapport between students and instructors, thereby fostering an environment where students feel understood and supported in their academic journey (Lekena & Bayaga, 2018:77).

Conversely, traditional, lecture-centric methods without supplementary support systems were frequently cited as contributing to feelings of isolation and inadequacy among first-year students. The lack of personal interaction and tailored feedback in such settings often leaves students feeling disconnected from the course material and their peers. This disconnect can amplify existing psycho-social issues, reduce the overall effectiveness of the teaching process and hinder academic success. The study,

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thus, highlights the need for educators to adopt more inclusive and student-centred teaching approaches that not only convey academic content but also actively address the psycho-social needs of first-year students (Fong, Patall, Vasquez, Corrigan & Pineault, 2023).

4.4.7 Determining the Methods that can be Applied to Assist First-Year Students in Overcoming Psycho-social Issues Impacting their Academic Performance

To assist first-year students in overcoming psycho-social challenges, it is essential to implement comprehensive support strategies at both the institutional and lecture-room levels. Institutional support methods, such as enhanced counselling services, structured peer mentoring programmes, and dedicated orientation sessions, are critical in providing a safety net for students facing emotional and social difficulties. These initiatives will not only help students manage stress and anxiety but also foster a sense of belonging and community within the academic environment. By creating formal support networks, institutions can better address the unique needs of students transitioning from rural settings to diverse academic and personal cultures (Lekena & Bayaga, 2021:77).

Additionally, adaptive teaching strategies are key to mitigating the impact of psycho-social issues on academic performance (Kwaah & Essilfie, 2019:5). Incorporating interactive pedagogical methods, regular feedback sessions, and flexible assessment techniques can help accommodate the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of first-year students. Lecturers can further support students by integrating community-building activities into the curriculum, such as group assignments and collaborative projects, which encourage peer interaction and reduce isolation. Together, these methods form a holistic approach that not only addresses the immediate academic challenges but also contributes to the overall well-being and long-term success of first-year students in higher education.

4.4.8 Institutional Support and Resources

The research also highlighted the importance of institutional support in helping students cope with psycho-social difficulties. Students noted that access to counselling services, mentoring programmes, and peer support networks plays a crucial role in mitigating feelings of isolation and stress. For many students, particularly those from

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rural backgrounds, the transition to university life is a daunting experience, and having institutional resources available can significantly ease this burden. Many participants expressed that they would have benefited from more proactive support systems, such as early intervention programmes to identify students facing challenges, early in the academic year. Peer mentoring, in particular, was seen as a valuable resource, as it allowed students to connect with senior students who had navigated similar challenges. Counselling services were also frequently mentioned, although students often cited that they were unaware of these resources, even when available, until later in the semester.

This finding suggests that universities must not only provide such services but also ensure that they are easily accessible and well-publicised. Providing clear information about available support systems at orientation sessions and throughout the academic year could help increase student engagement with these services and ensure that those struggling with psycho-social difficulties can receive timely assistance.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented the findings of the qualitative study on the psycho-social difficulties faced by first-year students at a rural-based higher education institution. The data revealed that emotional stress, homesickness, and cultural dissonance are the primary psycho-social challenges impacting academic performance. Furthermore, the study highlighted the significant role that teaching approaches and institutional support play in either alleviating or exacerbating these difficulties. To improve the academic success and overall well-being of first-year students, it is crucial that institutions implement comprehensive support systems, foster student-centred teaching, and ensure access to support resources that address both the academic and psycho-social needs of students. By doing so, universities can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that facilitates the successful transition of first-year students into higher education. The findings suggest that addressing these issues requires a comprehensive strategy involving tailored teaching approaches and robust institutional support. The subsequent chapter discusses the implications of these findings and propose actionable recommendations for policy and practice.

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CHAPTER FIVE
KEY FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the key findings of the study, followed by recommendations and conclusions based on the collected qualitative data analysis. The chapter synthesises the psycho-social challenges faced by first-year students and their impact on academic performance while suggesting strategic interventions to support student success.

5.2 KEY FINDINGS

The research aimed to understand the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students at a rural-based higher education institution. The findings reveal multiple interrelated challenges that significantly impact students' emotional well-being, academic engagement, and overall performance. Below is an elaboration of the core themes that emerged from the data.

5.2.1 Emotional and Anxiety

The results confirmed that emotional stress and anxiety are the most prominent psycho-social challenges faced by first-year students. These emotional struggles often arise from a combination of academic pressure, fear of failure, financial stress, and the abrupt transition from high school to university. Many students internalise expectations from family and society, especially those who are first-generation university attendees, and feel intense pressure to succeed. Students reported symptoms such as sleeplessness, difficulty concentrating, emotional exhaustion, and physical signs of anxiety, including heart palpitations and panic attacks. These symptoms negatively affect their ability to engage meaningfully with coursework. Emotionally-distressed students are more likely to miss classes, submit poor-quality assignments, or disengage from academic activities altogether.

This finding supports previous literature indicating that unresolved emotional stress can significantly impair executive functioning, memory retention, and motivation (Jega & Aliero, 2024). The evidence clearly underscores the urgent need for proactive

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mental health support, including on-campus counselling, stress management workshops, and early identification of at-risk students.

5.2.2 Homesickness and Social Isolation

The transition from rural home environments to urban-based universities creates a profound sense of homesickness for many students. Being physically separated from their families, friends, and communities leads to emotional withdrawal and loneliness, which in turn dampens motivation and reduces interest in academic work. Students from tight-knit communities often find university life impersonal and isolating, especially when they are unable to build new social networks quickly. Many participants expressed difficulty in finding peers with whom they could relate, and weekends on campus (when it is quiet and sparsely populated) were particularly hard.

This isolation has serious consequences. It reduces participation in lectures, group discussions, and co-curricular activities, and in some cases, it even leads to mental health deterioration. The findings align with Jackson et al. (2020), who argue that a lack of social belonging is one of the most significant predictors of student attrition. Universities, therefore, must implement structured programmes (such as peer mentoring, residence-based social activities, and campus clubs) that could help students form social bonds, thereby feeling part of a supportive community.

5.2.3 Cultural and Social Adjustment

Students also face significant challenges adjusting to new cultural norms and social expectations within the university environment. For those from rural or conservative backgrounds, the sudden exposure to diverse languages, lifestyles, and worldviews can be overwhelming. This cultural dissonance contributes to a sense of alienation and inferiority, particularly when students feel their background or accent is mocked or misunderstood. Students often hesitate to speak up in class or participate in discussions out of fear of judgement; this lack of participation limits their academic engagement and confidence. Additionally, difficulties in understanding the dominant language of instruction or academic jargon exacerbate the feeling of being academically underprepared.

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Brown and Holloway (2021) highlight how such cultural incongruence impairs, not only student integration, but also their learning outcomes. The findings point to the need for culturally-responsive pedagogy and inclusive campus cultures that value diversity and actively counter micro-aggressions and unconscious bias.

5.2.4 Teaching Approaches and Institutional Support

The role of teaching strategies and institutional engagement emerged as a critical factor in how students respond to psycho-social difficulties. Participants noted that lecturers who used interactive, supportive, and student-centred approaches made it easier for them to cope with academic stress. These lecturers fostered a sense of safety, allowing students to ask questions, share ideas, and feel seen. On the other hand, lecture-heavy, impersonal teaching styles contributed to feelings of detachment and further reinforced students' sense of inadequacy. Students reported that they often leave such classes feeling confused and discouraged, especially when lecturers did not provide opportunities for clarification or individual support.

Kwaah and Essilfie (2019) affirm that student engagement improves significantly when teaching is participatory and contextualised, particularly in environments with students from diverse backgrounds. The study thus recommends training for lecturers in inclusive pedagogy, along with institutional policies that promote academic mentoring, tutor-support programmes, and open-door faculty practices.

5.2.5 Psycho-Social Challenges and Academic Performance

The findings establish a clear and direct correlation between psycho-social difficulties and diminished academic performance. Persistent emotional strain, isolation, and cultural alienation lead to reduced focus, absenteeism, and avoidance behaviours. Students struggling with these challenges often find it hard to manage their time, prepare for assessments, or engage with course material, leading to underperformance and sometimes, failure. Those from rural backgrounds are particularly at risk due to lower exposure to digital tools, academic English, and independent learning expectations, prior to university exposure. These students often enter higher education at a disadvantage, and without timely intervention, they may experience long-term academic setbacks or even drop out.

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Jisung Park et al. (2019) explain that the cumulative burden of these challenges constitutes what is known as "cognitive overload", whereby students' mental capacity is consumed by emotional and survival concerns, leaving little energy for academic effort. The study highlights the need for early screening mechanisms and continuous support for vulnerable student populations.

5.2.6 Effective Support Mechanisms

The research highlights the effectiveness of structured, proactive support systems in mitigating psycho-social challenges. Students who accessed services, such as peer mentoring, academic tutoring, counselling, and orientation programmes, reported higher levels of confidence, academic motivation, and emotional resilience. Peer mentoring was particularly praised for creating safe spaces where students could share experiences with others who had faced similar challenges. Counselling services helped students develop coping strategies for stress and anxiety, while tailored orientation programmes helped them navigate the social and academic environment of university life.

Many students, despite these benefits, however, expressed unawareness of available services or uncertainty about how to access them. This indicates that universities must not only offer these programmes but also publicise them effectively through multiple channels, such as orientation events, student portals, social media, and classroom announcements. Goodman et al. (2020) stress that early and consistent engagement with support services, significantly improves academic persistence, emotional well-being, and institutional retention. Institutions, thus, should consider integrating psycho-social support into the core academic experience, rather than relegating it to optional, external services.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are designed to assist higher education institutions in addressing the psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-year students, particularly those transitioning from rural environments. These strategies are informed by recent empirical evidence and best practices in student support and academic development.

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5.3.1 Recommendations for Addressing Psycho-social Difficulties

Developing peer-led support programmes, where senior students mentor first-year students, can provide a more relatable source of guidance. This peer mentorship can help alleviate feelings of isolation and provide practical advice on both academic and social challenges. Institutions could benefit from regular surveys or check-ins with first-year students to assess their psycho-social well-being and identify emerging issues. This proactive approach would allow for timely interventions and adjustments from support structures, ensuring that students receive the help they need before difficulties escalate.

To mitigate the emotional stress and cultural dissonance that many first-year students experience, institutions should implement comprehensive orientation programmes that encompass both academic and social integration. These programmes should include culturally sensitive workshops, stress management sessions, and structured peer mentorship initiatives. According to Gehreke et al. (2024), peer mentorship programmes significantly enhance students' sense of belonging and academic engagement, particularly during their first semester. Such programmes allow new students to form connections with experienced peers who can offer relatable support and guidance.

In addition to orientation activities, academic support should be expanded to incorporate psycho-educational elements, such as managing academic stress, time management, and emotional regulation. This blended approach can help students build resilience, while developing essential study skills. Academic advising should also integrate mental health awareness, enabling lecturers and advisors to identify students who may require additional support. Regular well-being check-ins, through surveys or individual consultations, can facilitate early detection of psychological challenges, allowing timely intervention. These initiatives are particularly critical in rural-based institutions, where students often struggle to adjust to the urban-centric norms of higher education (McConney & Fourie-Malherbe, 2023).

5.3.2 Strengthening Mental Health Support

Higher education institutions must prioritise student mental health by implementing comprehensive and accessible support systems. This includes expanding

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professional counselling services, ensuring students can access trained mental health professionals for one-on-one sessions throughout the academic year. To reduce stigma and normalise help-seeking behaviour, these services should be actively promoted during orientation and throughout the academic journey. Additionally, institutions should offer regular stress management workshops that teach coping strategies, such as mindfulness, time management, and relaxation techniques. Peer counselling programmes and support groups can provide a safe space for students to share their experiences, fostering emotional connection and solidarity. Universities should also consider digital mental health tools, such as 24/7 crisis helplines and online therapy platforms, to offer continuous support. These interventions collectively could help students manage emotional distress, which in turn will support better academic performance and overall well-being.

Nelson Mandela University's peer-helper initiative, during the COVID-19 pandemic, serves as a model, demonstrating the effectiveness of peer-led wellness promotion (Pillay et al., 2023). To reach more students and provide timely support, institutions should incorporate digital mental health tools such as 24/7 crisis helplines, self-check-in apps, and online therapy platforms. Northwood University's partnership with Timely Care, for example, reduced service bottlenecks (OurMidland, 2024). Furthermore, workshops focusing on mindfulness, stress reduction, and emotional coping strategies can empower students to manage distress effectively, ultimately enhancing both their academic performance and overall well-being.

5.3.3 Enhancing Social Integration Initiatives

To address the widespread issues of homesickness, loneliness, and social disconnection, especially among students from rural or isolated backgrounds, institutions should implement structured programmes that promote social integration. Peer-mentorship programmes can pair first-year students with experienced mentors who offer academic guidance and emotional support, easing the transition into university life. Community-building activities, such as student clubs, interest groups, cultural events, and campus festivals, should be encouraged to help students form friendships and build networks. In the classroom, collaborative learning strategies like group assignments and study circles foster academic and social interaction. Residential life can also be enriched through programmes led by residential advisors

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that promote social engagement and wellness. These initiatives help students feel more connected to the university community, significantly improving their sense of belonging and academic engagement.

Classroom-based strategies can also promote social integration. Incorporating group work, collaborative projects, and study circles will encourage interaction and peer learning. These formats allow students to bond over shared academic goals while developing communication and teamwork skills. Residential advisors can further enhance the campus experience by organising social events and well-being initiatives within student housing, promoting a supportive living environment. According to Khan et al. (2022), such community-building initiatives directly correlate with higher levels of student engagement and academic persistence.

5.3.4 Inclusive and Adaptive Teaching Strategies

Lecturers play a pivotal role in helping students adapt to the academic demands of university life. Institutions should encourage the adoption of inclusive, student-centred teaching approaches that go beyond traditional lecture-based models. Active learning strategies such as classroom discussions, problem-solving tasks, group projects, and experiential learning can make content more engaging and accessible. Providing flexible assessment methods, such as project-based evaluations or reflective journals, allows students to demonstrate learning in diverse ways that accommodate different learning styles. Additionally, regular and constructive feedback from lecturers helps students understand expectations and improve performance. To support this, universities should invest in ongoing professional development for faculties, equipping them with tools and knowledge to create inclusive, supportive learning environments. Such pedagogical practices will not only enhance academic outcomes but also provide emotional reassurance and a sense of agency among students.

Frequent, constructive feedback from lecturers helps students track their progress and build academic confidence. Universities should invest in continuous professional development for academic staff, including training on trauma-informed teaching, student mental health, and inclusive pedagogy. Equipping lecturers with these tools ensures they can better support students experiencing emotional or cultural stressors,

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ultimately improving academic outcomes and classroom cohesion (Advance HE Toolkit, 2023).

5.3.5 Cultural Orientation and Diversity Awareness Programmes

Creating an inclusive academic environment also requires intentional efforts to celebrate and accommodate cultural diversity. Cultural orientation sessions at the beginning of the academic year can help new students understand the values, expectations, and social norms of the institution, while also promoting mutual respect and understanding among themselves. For faculties and staff, diversity awareness training is essential to recognise implicit biases and to develop culturally-responsive teaching and support practices.

On-campus events such as cultural weeks, international food festivals, and language exchange programmes will allow students from different backgrounds to showcase their heritage and learn from one another. Supporting student-led cultural clubs and networks provides a sense of identity and belonging for under-represented groups. These initiatives promote intercultural dialogue and mutual respect, reducing alienation and improving students' ability to integrate academically and socially (Brown & Holloway, 2021; BMC Medical Education, 2023).

5.3.6 Institutional Policy Reforms

For sustainable impact, psycho-social support mechanisms must be embedded into institutional policies and frameworks. Universities should develop holistic student support policies that integrate emotional, social, and academic support as core components of student development. Cross-departmental collaboration among academic faculties, student affairs, counselling services, and housing departments is essential to ensure a coordinated response to students' needs. Institutions should also establish early warning systems to identify at-risk students, based on attendance registers, academic performance, and behavioural patterns; these will provide timely interventions through counselling and academic advising. Mandatory training for academic and support staff on mental health awareness, student development, and inclusive practices can enhance their ability to support students effectively. Regular evaluation of these initiatives through student feedback and performance data will help ensure accountability and continuous improvement. By embedding such policies,

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institutions create a culture of care that prioritises student well-being alongside academic excellence.

Regular assessment of these support initiatives through feedback surveys, focus groups, and academic outcomes will help maintain accountability and guide continuous improvement. As demonstrated by Higher Health (2023), in South Africa, when mental health and student wellness are treated as institutional priorities, rather than optional add-ons, student resilience, retention, and achievement improve significantly.

5.3.7 Recommendation for Digital Psycho-Social Support Systems

The university should implement a specialised Digital Student Wellness Portal designed specifically for first-entering students from rural backgrounds. Unlike traditional face-to-face counselling, which students may avoid due to social stigma or geographical distance from campus clinics, a digital platform offers a confidential and accessible "first point of entry" for psycho-social support.

- **24/7 Virtual Counselling**: Provide access to text-based or video counselling services to assist students during after-hours when homesickness and academic stress are often most acute.
- **Cultural Orientation Modules**: Develop digital "micro-learning" modules that address cultural adjustment and "epistemic transition" challenges specific to rural-based university settings.
- **Peer-to-Peer Digital Mentorship**: Integrate a secure chat feature where first-year students can connect with senior student mentors (Peer Helpers) to discuss shared social and academic experiences.
- **Early Warning Systems**: Use the portal to track engagement and provide automated "wellness check-ins" for students who may be showing early signs of academic withdrawal or emotional distress.

5.4 CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed that first-year students at rural-based higher education institutions face a complex interplay of psycho-social difficulties, chief among them

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being - emotional stress, social isolation, homesickness, and cultural non-adjustment. These challenges do not exist in a vacuum, rather, they show an interplay of diverse challenges, which significantly impair students' capacity to engage meaningfully in academic activities and achieve their full potential. Many students arrive at university with high hopes but find themselves unprepared for the emotional and social demands of the new environment. Through the voices of the participants, it became clear that the academic challenges experienced are deeply intertwined with psycho-social stressors. Emotional stress and anxiety lead to avoidance behaviour, reduced concentration, and disengagement from academic activities. Homesickness and social isolation diminish students' motivation and sense of belonging. Cultural differences and the struggle to adjust to new social norms make it harder for students to participate confidently in the learning environment.

The study, however, also identified promising avenues for institutional intervention. Effective teaching practices, structured peer support, inclusive environments, and robust mental health programmes can significantly buffer students from the negative impact of these stressors. Lecturers and administrative staff, when equipped with the right training and resources, can foster an environment where students not only survive, but thrive, academically and emotionally. Ultimately, addressing psycho-social difficulties is not just a matter of student welfare but a critical component of academic success, institutional retention, and equity in higher education. By adopting a holistic, inclusive, and responsive approach to student support, higher education institutions can ensure that all first-year students, regardless of their background, have a fair opportunity to succeed and feel a genuine sense of belonging within the academic community.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

Title: Psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-entering students with their academic progress, at higher education institutions: case study of a rural-based university

Raphalalani Avhasei Messie

Student number: 14011640

Dear Sir/Madam

You are requested to answer all questions honestly. Your responses are vital for answering the study questions and for ensuring the reliability of the research conclusion. Please feel free to participate or opt out of the interview if you are uncomfortable with the information that is requested. Your name will not be mentioned in the report from this research, and the gathered information will not be linked to you, as an individual.

Interview Schedule number: _____ Location/site: _____.

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APPENDIX B: AUDIO RECORDING CONSENT

The interview will be audio recorded. The recorded tape will be disposed of after the interview has been transcribed and the information has been compiled into a report. Statement of consent to be audio-taped.

I understand that audio will be taken during the interview. (Mark yes or no)

I agree to be recorded.

Yes	
No	

…… ……..

Name of participant Date

,……

Signature of participant

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APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever heard of psycho-Social difficulties?
2. What do you think about your transition from high school to higher education?
3. Have you experienced any psycho-social difficulties as a first-year student?
4. Can you describe any psycho-social difficulties that you are facing as a first-year student?
5. How are these psycho-social difficulties affecting you as a first-year student?
6. What do you think are the major causes of these psycho-social difficulties?
7. Please identify any support mechanisms you use to deal with the psycho-social difficulties you face in this higher education institution.
8. What is the higher education institution doing to make sure that you are able to cope with the psycho-social difficulties that you are facing as a first-year student?
9. Which mechanisms do you think can be helpful in dealing with the psycho-social difficulties that you are facing as a first-year student?
10. What measures do you think this higher education institution needs to take to ensure that first-year students are able to deal with any academic learning challenges that they have?

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APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How was your first day at the university?
2. What issues make you feel uncomfortable here?
3. In what way do psycho-social difficulties affect you, as first year students?
4. Does the University have adequate capacity to assist the affected students?
5. What can be done to assist the affected students?
6. What strategies can staff/the University use to identify students with problems?
7. What would you like to change in the way of teaching and learning in this institution?
8. What copying mechanism have you adopted to deal with psycho-social difficulties?
9. Do the lecturing approaches have an impact on your academic performance?
10. What do you think higher learning institutions must do to address students' psycho-social difficulties?

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APPENDIX E: EDITING CERTIFICATE (PROPOSAL)

Umoya Editing

Louise du Plessis
9 Yellow Wood Road,
Chanteclair, 7201
Tel: 0810135651
louise@umoya-editing.co.za
www.umoya-editing.co.za

DECLARATION OF REVIEW AND EDITING

This is to certify that I, the undersigned, performed a language edit on the following proposal:

Psycho-social difficulties experienced by first- time students in their academic progress at a Higher Education institution: Case study of a rural-based university

By

Raphalalani Avhasei Messie

Kind regards,

Louise du Plessis

27 October 2023

Disclaimer

The text was reviewed and edited using 'change tracking'. As such, the document that I submit is fully editable, and the author is entitled to accept, reject or modify my changes and suggestions. The final version of the document, submitted for assessment or publication by the author, may differ from that suggested by me.

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APPENDIX F: INSTITUTIONAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

NAME OF RESEARCHER/INVESTIGATOR:
Ms AM Raphalalani

STUDENT NO:
14011640

PROJECT TITLE: **Psycho-social difficulties experienced by first entering students in their academic progress at Higher Education institution: case study of a rural based university.**

ETHICAL CLEARANCE NO: **FHSSE/24/CSEM/29/0412**

SUPERVISORS/ CO-RESEARCHERS/ CO-INVESTIGATORS

NAME	INSTITUTION & DEPARTMENT	ROLE
Prof Adv P Maishidze	UNIVEN, Educational Studies	Supervisor
Prof SA Mulovhedzi	UNIVEN, Early Childhood Education	Co-Supervisor
Ms AM Raphalalani	UNIVEN, Educational Studies	Investigator-Student

Type: **Masters Research**
Risk: ***Minimal risk to humans, animals, or environment*** **(Category 2)**
Approval Period: **November 2024 – November 2025**

The Research Ethics Social Science Committee (RESSC) hereby approves your project as indicated above.

General Conditions
While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following.

- The project leader (principal investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the REC:
  - Annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project, and upon completion of the project.
  - Within 48hrs in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project.
  - Annually a number of projects may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the REC. Would there be deviated from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date; a new application must be made to the REC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the REC retains the right to:
  - Request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project,
  - To ask further questions; Seek additional information; Require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process.
  - withdraw or postpone approval if:
  - Any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected.
  - It becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the REC or that information has been false or misrepresented.
  - The required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately,
  - New institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.

ISSUED BY:
UNIVERSITY OF VENDA, RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
Date Considered: November 2024

Name of the RESSC Chairperson of the Committee: Prof M. Mwale-Manjoro

Signature: .....

UNIVERSITY OF VENDA
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
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University of Venda
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TELEPHONE (015) 962 8504/8313 FAX (015) 962 9060
"A quality driven financially sustainable, rural-based Comprehensive University"

1/1

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APPENDIX G: LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

CONFIDENTIAL

LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

Office of the Premier

Research and Development Directorate

Private Bag X9483, Polokwane, 0700, South Africa

Tel: (015) 230 9910, Email: mokobij@premier.limpopo.gov.za

LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS

COMMITTEE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

REVIEW DATE: 16 APRIL 2025

PROJECT NUMBER: LPREC/88/2025: PG

SUBJECT: THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY FIRST ENTERING STUDENTS IN THEIR ACADEMIC PROGRESS AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: CASE STUDY OF A RURAL BASED UNIVERSITY.

RESEARCHER: AM RAPHALALANI

Chairperson: Prof I Swarts

Swarts

Chairperson: Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee

The Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC) is registered with National Health Research Council (NHREC) Registration Number **REC-111513-038.**

Note:

i. **This study is categorized as a Low Risk Level in accordance with risk level descriptors as enshrined in LPREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)**

ii. **Should there be any amendment to the approved research proposal; the researcher(s) must re-submit the proposal to the ethics committee for review prior data collection.**

iii. **The researcher(s) must provide annual reporting to the committee as well as the relevant department and also provide the department with the final report/thesis.**

iv. **The researchers will be required to make presentations of the study findings and recommendations at the Provincial Research Conference/Departmental Research Day.**

v. **The ethical clearance certificate is valid for 12 months. Should the need to extend the period for data collection arise then the researcher should renew the certificate through LPREC secretariat. PLEASE QUOTE THE PROJECT NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.**

1/1

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APPENDIX H: EDITOR CERTIFICATE

WSU
Walter Sisulu University

Centre for Learning and Teaching Development
Writing Centre
Mthatha Campus
Cell: 081 345 1955
Email: smatenda@wsu.ac.za

30 March 2026

To whom it may concern,

RE: CONFIRMATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

This serves to confirm that I have copy-edited a research proposal written by Raphalalani Avhasei Messie(Student Number **14011640** titled **Psycho-social difficulties experienced by first-entering students with their academic progress, at higher education institutions: Case study of a rural-based University**

The scope of my editing comprised:

- References
- Spelling
- Tense
- Vocabulary
- Punctuation
- Word usage
- Language and sentence structure

If you need any further details, kindly contact me on the details provided above.

Yours faithfully

Stenford Matenda.

PhD (Communication Science; MA (Media and Communication) PGDip (Media and Communication) and BSc Hons (Psychology)

Walter Sisulu University

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