

**FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ADJUSTING TO UNIVERSITY:
A SELF-COMPASSION APPROACH**

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**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE**

MASTERS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

in the

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

at the

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

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January 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank and express my deepest gratitude to the following people who played a valuable role in this research journey:

- My husband and partner in life, Nico. Thank you for your support, unconditional understanding and the sacrifices you have made to help me achieve this degree. I cannot express enough how much I love and appreciate you and how much you mean to me.
- Thank you, Dr Naidoo, for your patience, perseverance and guidance throughout the duration of this project. More importantly, I am thankful for your support which entailed believing in me and this work, as well as encouraging me when it was needed the most. I am so grateful to you and was honoured to work with you on this study.
- To my parents, Alit and Leon, you have supported me in so many different ways throughout this study. I am so grateful for your unconditional love, support and the sacrifices you have made to help me make a success of this research. Thank you for being there with me every step of the way.
- To my other family members and friends, thank you for your love, support, encouragement, and for being there when I needed you. I love and appreciate each one of you.
- To the students who contributed to the success of this project, thank you for participating in this study. I appreciate your willingness to open up in the interviews and sharing your life experiences with me.
- I also have to express how grateful I am to my furry family members, Lexi and Koda. You were my constant companions who were always there for love and support to ensure that this journey was not a lonely one.

Abstract

Despite the high access rate at universities, the number of South African first-year students who discontinue their studies is a cause of concern. Thus, it is important to explore the possible reasons behind the high discontinuation rate among first-year university students and investigate ways to support their adjustment to university. Accordingly, this study aimed to explore first-year students' experiences of adjusting to university with specific reference to the challenges they faced during their first year. Their experiences of self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university were also investigated.

An exploratory and descriptive design was utilised to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. Qualitative data were collected from 12 students, who registered for the first time at a local university during 2019. They were recruited through purposive sampling and invited to participate in two rounds of semi-structured interviews. Twelve students participated in the first round in the first semester, and nine in the second round in the second semester. As part of the interview process, participants were provided with a vignette that served as a prompt. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Three main themes with two subthemes each emerged from the data analysis: (1) exercising agency as part of the adjustment process; (2) tensions in students' experiences of self-compassion; and (3) the processes of self-compassion within student experiences. The subthemes that were identified related to the effects of agency on experiences of hope and helplessness, the role of self-compassion in exercising personal responsibility, students' contradictory experiences of self-compassion, the role of self-compassion when engaging in upward social comparison, the twin process of the yin and yang of self-compassion in adjusting to university, and the reciprocal relationship between social support and self-compassion.

As most studies to date have been quantitative in nature, the findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge of self-compassion by describing how students practised and experienced self-compassion while adjusting to university. Insights gained from this research might have important implications for university intervention programmes focused on first-year students as self-compassion was found to contribute to successful adjustment to university.

Keywords: First-year students, self-compassion, adjusting to university, eudaimonic and hedonic well-being, positive psychology, South Africa

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Rationale for the study

The pursuit of higher education serves as a valuable extrinsic and intrinsic source of meaning to students, due to its promise of a fulfilling career (Nell, 2014). However, in South Africa, despite the high access rate, many students discontinue their studies during their first year at university (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013; Langtree et al., 2018).

Adjusting to university could be considered stressful as students might experience certain challenges during their first year which can lead to psychological distress, poor academic performance and a decline in well-being (Conley et al., 2013; McGhie, 2017). Moreover, students who experience difficulty adjusting to university are more at risk of dropping out in their first and second year (CHE, 2013; Daniels et al., 2019; Shay, 2017).

Some of the challenges that students face as part of the process of adjusting to university include a lack of social support, demanding academic workloads, financial difficulties, loneliness, and homesickness if they are non-residential (Conley et al., 2013; Young & Campbell, 2014). Students might also experience a diminished sense of competence (Hailikari et al., 2016) and difficulty finding their place and role in the new social and academic setting (Mudhovozi, 2012; Nel et al., 2016).

In South Africa specifically, students might have additional challenges such as entering university from positions of inequality regarding race, schooling, class, and socio-economic resources (Chetty & Pather, 2015; Pather et al., 2017). Further, they might have limited internet access (Shay, 2017), unfulfilled expectations that can negatively influence their performance (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018), financial and language difficulties (Maudeni et al., 2010; Nel et al., 2016), as well as poor time management and personal motivation (McGhie, 2017). Students might also find it difficult to adjust to a multiracial and cultural

society (Chetty & Pather, 2015), find a sense of belonging, settle into university, and make friends (Arends & Petersen, 2018). Because these challenges could influence students' experience of adjusting to university, it is vital to consider the potential protective factors that could aid them during this process.

Self-compassion is one of the many constructs considered as a protective factor against stress (Homan & Sirois, 2017; Neff, 2018; Trindade & Sirois, 2021). It enhances not only a sense of community and belonging, but also greater perceived social support, optimism and perceived competence (Akin & Akin, 2015; Brodar et al., 2015; Neff & Germer, 2017). Therefore, it can be argued that self-compassion assists students in their process of adjusting to university and has the potential to protect them when they are confronted with challenges.

In South Africa, obtaining a degree increases students' chances of being employed and could potentially reduce poverty (World Bank, 2018). For this reason, it is important to investigate ways to assist students within a potentially stressful environment. The proposed study thus explored self-compassion as a protective factor among South African students by applying a qualitative approach. The study explored South African students' experiences of adjusting to university¹ and investigated how they experience self-compassion when faced with challenges during their first year.

1.2 Research aim and questions

The study aimed to explore first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university. The contextual aim

¹ It is important to note that the analyses and interpretations included in this study were based on data collected in 2019, before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the conclusions that were drawn regarding students' experiences of self-compassion while adjusting to university do not apply to adjusting to online learning or the additional challenges students faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been included as a limitation in chapter 6.

was to explore and describe first-year students' experiences of adjusting to university. Thus, the following research questions were explored:

(1) How do first-year students experience the challenges posed by adjustment to university?

(2) How do first-year students experience self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university?

1.3 Overview of research design and methodology

A qualitative approach, embedded in an exploratory and descriptive design, was followed to assist in understanding the experiences of the first-year students and to capture rich, contextual data of their everyday lives (Yin, 2016, 2018). An interpretive paradigm was employed to understand the participants' interpretation of adjusting to university and their experiences of self-compassion by means of interviews. This paradigm aims to gain an understanding of how individuals socially construct their realities (Bhattacharya, 2008).

Purposive non-probability sampling was applied for this exploratory study. This sampling technique is suitable for accessing in-depth data from individuals with specific experiences or knowledge (Neuman, 2014). Twelve first-year students who were willing to share their experiences and who were registered at university for the first time during 2019 were recruited.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. Conversations were guided by a set of open-ended questions about the research topic while exploring the participants' responses in greater depth (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Two interviews were conducted per participant to obtain rich, thick descriptions and insights into their experiences of adjusting to university and self-compassion. A vignette, which is a non-threatening story about a hypothetical person that participants can identify with (Gourlay et al., 2014), was provided to serve as a basis from which they could share their experiences.

The first round of interviews was conducted in the first semester in March while the second round was conducted in the second semester in August of the same year, before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The recorded data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis and following an abductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Reichertz, 2014).

Ethical clearance was obtained from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State. The principles of beneficence and non-maleficence were adhered to (Allan, 2015, 2020) and the participants' personal identification information and research data were treated as confidential. To adhere to the principle of autonomy (Allan, 2015), the participants received informed consent forms and were informed that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study without penalty. Student Counselling and Development was available to consult with participants in need of psychological assistance or services. Trustworthiness and rigour were achieved through respondent verification, by keeping a research journal, providing a clear description of the methodology, and lastly, by providing rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences.

Clear descriptions of how the concepts used in the current study are understood, conceptualised and applied are included in the following section.

1.4 Clarification of key concepts

Key concepts used in this study are clarified below. Although a variety of definitions can be posed for these concepts, they are defined and described in ways they are understood, conceptualised and applied in this study.

Self-compassion

In its simplest terms, self-compassion entails being as caring, kind and compassionate towards oneself as one would towards another individual who is having a difficult time (Allen & Leary, 2010). Neff's (2003a) model of self-compassion consists of three

components: self-kindness versus self-judgement, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification.

For the purpose of this study, self-compassion refers to self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness, whereas a lack of self-compassion refers to self-judgement, isolation and over-identification. Self-compassion involves being open to one's suffering and willingness to use self-kindness as a means to heal oneself and to relieve suffering (Neff, 2003b; Neff & Davidson, 2016). A lack of self-compassion, however, could entail an individual's harsh judgement of themselves, perceiving their experiences as abnormal and avoiding or over-identifying with their emotions (Germer & Neff, 2019).

Well-being

The conceptualisation of well-being in the current study drew from various existing definitions of well-being to propose a holistic understanding of this construct. Hedonic well-being entails the pursuit of enjoyment, comfort, physical and emotional pleasure, while eudaimonic well-being entails seeking to achieve personal potential by living in line with one's values (Giuntoli et al., 2021). Well-being in the student context refers to happiness, enjoyment, academic attainment, experiences of social interactions within and outside the university compound, and the ability to adapt to campus life (Awang, Ahmad, et al., 2014; Awang, Kutty, et al., 2014). In this study well-being thus refers to the functioning and flourishing of first-year students during their adjustment to university.

First-year students

First-year students in the context of the current study can be regarded as emerging adults because, according to Arnett et al. (2014), individuals who fall within the range of 18 to 29 years of age can be referred to as emerging adults. Specifically, first-year students refer to individuals who had registered to study at the undergraduate level of study at the selected university for the first time in 2019.

Adjusting to university

Adjustment to university is a multidimensional and multifaceted process (Haktanir et al., 2018; Sevinc & Gizir, 2014; Tarasova et al., 2017) where students pass from initial experiences of emotional tension and stress to achieving a state of well-being and adequate functioning within the university environment (Clinciu, 2013). Adjusting to university in this study thus refers to the process all first-year students go through while transitioning from a secondary to tertiary institution.

Challenges

In the context of this study, challenges refer to the wide range of experiences and obstacles that could be stressful for an individual during their first year at university. These challenges could either be internal or external, for example, lack of internet access or lack of motivation.

Protective factors

Protective factors refer to existing constructs mentioned in this study, with the potential to benefit individuals. These factors include but are not limited to self-compassion, social support, mindfulness, motivation and goalsetting. In this study specifically, protective factors function as a mechanism to aid student adjustment and to buffer the adverse effects that their challenges might have on their well-being.

1.5 Outline of chapters

This section provides an outline of the six chapters included in the study:

Chapter 1 contextualises the study and provides the rationale for the study, the research aims, an overview of the research design and methodology, key concepts and outline of the chapters.

Chapter 2 focuses on the relevant literature regarding the key concepts of the study. This includes an overview of the positive psychology paradigm and well-being, followed by

a discussion of self-compassion and the process of adjusting to university globally and in a South African context. The chapter concludes with a brief look at the potential influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on student adjustment.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research design and methodology used to collect and analyse the data, a description of how trustworthiness was achieved, and the ethical principles that were adhered to during the course of conducting the research.

Chapter 4 presents the participants' experiences through an interpretation of the findings. Three main themes with two subthemes each were identified. The first main theme, i.e., exercising agency as part of the adjustment process, comprises two subthemes: 'the effects of agency on experiences of hope and helplessness' and 'the role of self-compassion in exercising personal responsibility'. The second main theme, i.e., tensions in students' experiences of self-compassion, gave rise to the two subthemes named 'students' contradictory experiences of self-compassion' and 'the role of self-compassion when engaging in upward social comparison'. The last two subthemes, 'the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion when adjusting to university' and 'the reciprocal relationship between social support and self-compassion' emerged from the third theme, i.e., the processes of self-compassion within student experiences.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings outlined in chapter 4, linking the findings to relevant literature.

Chapter 6 summarises the findings of the study in addition to highlighting the implications for practice, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a brief personal reflection.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the current study. This included a description of the background, research aims and objectives, methodology, clarification of the key concepts

of the study and a chapter outline. Chapter 2 explores the literature relevant to first-year university students and self-compassion.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a broad understanding of positive psychology and well-being in a student context and contextualise the background of the current study. To achieve this, the chapter provides a review of literature on the conceptualisation and function of self-compassion, common challenges students face during their first year at university, and adjustment to university globally as well as in the South African context. Although it was not the focus of the current study, literature highlighting the possible impact of Covid-19 on university students have also been included. The structure of the chapter aims to guide the reader from a global understanding of positive psychology and well-being to an in-depth exploration of first-year students' experiences in the South African context.

2.2 Positive Psychology as theoretical (or explanatory) framework

Positive psychology studies the conditions and processes underlying the flourishing and optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). More importantly, positive psychology developed as a critique against mainstream psychology with its emphasis on pathology and dysfunction (Nafstad, 2015; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One of the main assumptions in the field of positive psychology is that there are certain traits and processes that inherently benefit an individual's well-being (McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Diener (2003) viewed positive psychology as the study of happiness, strengths, and virtues and of helping individuals achieve a better quality of life (as cited in Frisch, 2006). The three pillars of positive psychology, which are usually the focus of study, are positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is interested in how these three pillars manifest at three points in time: the past, which focuses on well-being, contentment

and satisfaction; the present, which focuses on happiness and flow; and the future, which includes optimism and hope (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Positive psychology thus represents a more growth-oriented understanding of human functioning instead of the deficit-oriented approach associated with traditional psychology (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005).

After the development of a positive psychology approach, however, some points of criticism have been raised. For example, Yakushko and Blodgett (2018) argue that this approach is too individualistic, overly focuses on happiness and personal achievement, and does not consider an individual's social and environmental context. Jans-Beken and Wong (2021) concur by stating that positive psychology might place a burden on individuals to be happy during challenging times. McNulty and Fincham (2012) concluded that psychological characteristics that were assumed to enhance well-being unconditionally cannot be considered either positive or negative. They explain that the contribution of psychological characteristics towards either enhancing or diminishing well-being depends on the individual's circumstances. According to Tweed et al. (2020), the current field of positive psychology experiences problems with coherence, despite numerous studies indicating how its constructs can be beneficial to well-being.

In response to these critiques, second-wave positive psychology came into existence, challenging the positive–negative dialectics of well-being (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Shifting away from the strong focus on positive emotions and traits, second-wave positive psychology suggests that optimal functioning depends on four principles: accepting and confronting with courage that life is full of suffering; realising that sustainable well-being can be achieved only by overcoming suffering; recognising the polarities in life; and striving to live in balance and finding joy in undesirable circumstances (Wong, 2019). Second-wave positive psychology is concerned with encouraging optimal functioning in human beings and society through the dialectical principles of yin and yang of human existence (Wong & Roy, 2018).

For this reason, second-wave positive psychology encourages a more holistic approach to individuals when conducting research or implementing interventions. This study is thus relevant within the positive psychology framework as first-year students' experiences are explored to gain a holistic understanding of the factors that could contribute to their optimal functioning, including how they might cope with suffering as part of the adjustment process.

2.2.1 Well-being

Well-being is one of the most researched constructs in positive psychology. Although it is a broad and multifaceted construct, well-being can be conceptualised through two major perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (McMahan & Estes, 2011; Rahmani et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020). Hedonic well-being entails pursuing enjoyment, comfort, physical and emotional pleasure, while eudaimonic well-being entails seeking to achieve personal potential by living in line with one's values (Giuntoli et al., 2021), thereby striving towards self-actualisation (Disabato et al., 2016). Literature on the hedonic approach refers to subjective well-being, which includes the presence of more positive affect than negative affect and an increase in life satisfaction, (Diener et al., 1999; Disabato et al., 2016).

In contrast to hedonia, which some researchers have referred to as a subjective emotion of happiness with an overemphasis on feeling (Rahmani et al., 2018; Sheldon et al., 2019), eudaimonia regards psycho-social functioning to be a measure of well-being (Joshnloo, 2016). Psychological well-being, in this sense, includes six key components necessary for positive psychological functioning, namely self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy (Matud et al., 2019; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Other important aspects to consider for positive functioning include purposeful engagement with life, realisation of personal talents and capacities, and enlightened self-knowledge (Ryff, 2014).

Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are two separate but related components of well-being (Joshano, 2016; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Although some researchers have argued that one component, mainly eudaimonia, has a more substantial influence on sustainable well-being (Gentzler et al., 2021; Joshano et al., 2020; Sheldon et al., 2019; Swami et al., 2017), others have claimed that both elements are required for a holistic understanding of well-being (Delle Fave et al., 2011; Paleari et al., 2021; Ryff et al., 2021). Therefore, the conceptualisation of well-being should be multi-levelled with equal emphasis placed on individual, social and organisational wellness (Di Martino et al., 2018; Ng & Fisher, 2013; Prilleltensky et al., 2015). Although subjective well-being in itself is not the most reliable predictor of sustainable well-being, in combination with the eudaimonic perspective it provides a more holistic understanding of an individual's experiences of well-being.

Research indicates that successful adjustment is imperative to well-being (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017) and highlights the importance of well-being in the process of adjusting to university (Mey et al., 2014; Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2020). For this reason, it was vital to consider the well-being of first-year university students. Well-being in a student context refers to happiness, enjoyment, academic attainment, experiencing social interactions within and outside the university compound, and the ability to adapt to campus life (Awang, Ahmed, et al., 2014; Awang, Kutty, et al., 2014). First-year students might be vulnerable to stress and burnout while adjusting to a tertiary institution, which can be detrimental to their well-being and hinder them from achieving academic success (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Kroshus et al., 2020; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Langtree et al., 2018). In support of this statement, Eloff and Graham (2020) conducted a study on 281 students from a large urban South African university who completed the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form, the Flourishing Scale and the Fragility of Happiness Scale. They confirmed a statistically significant decrease in mental health and well-being in students over the academic year and indicated the need for

interventions that would support students' mental health and well-being (Eloff & Graham, 2020). In the context of the current study and informed by second-wave positive psychology, self-compassion was explored as a possible factor that enhances students well-being during the adjustment process.

The consideration of self-compassion as an internal resource and protective factor during the adjustment process aligns with the current principles of second-wave positive psychology. Research has indicated a strong positive correlation between self-compassion, well-being and mental health (Chio et al., 2021; Kotera & Ting, 2021; Neff, 2011; Neff, Long, et al., 2018; Pandey et al., 2019; Phillips, 2018; Zessin et al., 2015). Self-compassion is an essential source of eudaimonic happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001), as the components of self-compassion include the acceptance that all human beings experience suffering, the validation of one's experiences, and the balancing of both positive and negative emotions and judgements (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021; Neff, 2003b; Neff & Costigan, 2014). Self-compassion can also have a significant impact on hedonic well-being as it has been associated with increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, and greater life satisfaction (Booker & Dunsmore, 2019; Jeon et al., 2016; Stoeber et al., 2020; Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2018). Self-compassion is thus an appropriate protective factor to explore when investigating student well-being and adjustment to university.

2.2.2 Self-compassion

The three pioneers currently driving the field of self-compassion are Kristen Neff, Christopher Germer and Karen Bluth. Neff (2003b) describes self-compassion as the awareness of one's suffering in an accepting and non-judgemental manner. Simply put, self-compassion is compassion turned inward (Germer & Neff, 2013), accompanied by encouraging and benevolent internal dialogues (Neff & Germer, 2017). Being self-compassionate involves being open to suffering and willing to use self-kindness as a means

to heal oneself and relieve suffering (Martin et al., 2022; Neff, 2003b; Neff & Davidson, 2016). In order to be open to suffering, negative emotions are embraced, instead of replaced, by generating positive emotions of care and connectedness (Neff & Germer, 2013).

More recently, Neff has elaborated on the conceptualisation of self-compassion by defining it as a “balance between increased positive and decreased negative self-responding to personal struggle” (Neff, Long, et al., 2018, p. 627). Further self-compassion is referred to as a loving, connected presence which increases positive affect and decreases negative affect when an individual is faced with challenges (Neff & Germer, 2017). For this reason, self-compassion is associated with positive mental health (Bluth & Neff, 2018).

Neff’s (2003a) model of self-compassion consists of three components: self-kindness versus self-judgement, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. Self-kindness refers to being kind and understanding towards oneself rather than applying harsh judgement or self-criticism (Neff, 2003b) when noticing personal shortcomings or imperfections (Neff & Germer, 2017). Further, self-judgement refers to harsh treatment towards the self, self-depreciation, and intolerance towards negative traits of the self (Pandey et al., 2019). When individuals are kind towards themselves, the internal dialogue takes on a soft and supportive tone and personal flaws and inadequacies are responded to in a gentle and understanding manner (Neff, 2011). By responding to perceived failure or suffering with understanding, patience and acceptance, negative emotions will be defused, enabling an individual to view the situation through a self-supportive lens (Homan & Sirois, 2017). Treating oneself with kindness implies adopting an attitude of benevolence and understanding when faced with challenges, which can enable students to be more resilient when experiencing perceived failures (Stallman et al., 2017).

The second component of self-compassion, which is common humanity, refers to realising that negative experiences are shared with all of humanity and that neither personal

failures, suffering, or negative experiences occur in isolation (Neff, 2003b). Appreciation of common humanity can also be described as an acknowledgment of the universal emotions that all individuals experience during challenging times and the ability of these emotions to connect people (Bluth et al., 2017). A lack of awareness of common humanity leads to an experience of isolation. Isolation in this context refers to an experience of disconnection when an individual views their challenges and imperfections as abnormal (Neff, 2011). In contrast, when an individual perceives their challenges as commonly experienced by most people, they might appraise the situation as less threatening and therefore as less stressful (Homan & Sirois, 2017). Moreover, they might be less critical of themselves if they realise that others have similar experiences.

The third component, mindfulness, is a well-known construct in positive psychology and refers to the awareness of what is happening inside and outside of an individual in the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Specifically in the context of self-compassion, mindfulness refers to a balanced sense of awareness of the painful emotions, thoughts, and beliefs that stem from experiences instead of disconnecting or over-identifying with the negative experience (Neff, 2003b). Mindfulness is thus an independent construct that fulfils a specific role in the context of self-compassion. Mindfulness provides greater clarity to develop self-compassion, while self-compassion encourages mindfulness by reducing rumination (Keng et al., 2012; Raab, 2014).

In the context of self-compassion, in particular the lack thereof, over-identification refers to the tendency to personalise experiences, being overwhelmed by a dramatic narrative of negative aspects of oneself and one's experiences, and becoming lost in the emotional experiences (Germer & Neff, 2019). Over-identification implies that individuals concretise their fluctuating, moment-to-moment experiences and perceive it as pervasive and definitive (Braehler & Neff, 2020). Avoiding or over-identifying with suffering might cause the

individual to become consumed by negative emotions and, consequently, view the event or occurrence in an unbalanced perspective. However, when an individual can validate their emotional experiences in an open and accepting manner, they might learn to see more clearly, accept the things that cannot be changed, and respond wisely to challenges instead of reacting without thinking (Cassisa & Neff, 2019).

Although the three facets of self-compassion are distinct, they do enhance one another (Neff, 2003b). Being more mindful would, for instance, mean greater awareness and an opportunity to apply self-kindness to oneself consciously and diminish self-judgment (Neff, 2016b). Furthermore, fewer negative emotions are experienced when one stops judging oneself, and there is a better chance to have a balanced awareness of one's own emotions. In addition, when one realises that a particular experience is shared with others, it lessens the intensity of self-judgement (Neff, 2003b). A self-compassionate frame of mind is thus created through the interaction and combination of the three facets of self-compassion (Germer & Neff, 2019).

In support of Neff's conceptualisation of self-compassion, Brené Brown introduced the theory of shame resilience, which defines shame as "an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Brown, 2006, p. 45). Shame resilience entails becoming aware of and accepting shame when it is experienced to allow growth and authenticity (Brown, 2006; Dayal et al., 2014). Shame resilience would thus aid individuals in separating their sense of self-worth from their perceived experiences.

Shame resilience theory is related to self-compassion because shame about unmet expectations, followed by feelings of guilt, could lead to self-criticism and self-judgement (Mendes et al., 2022). In turn, a lack of awareness of negative emotions and experiences can lead to isolation, while awareness and acceptance can lead to connection with others and the

realisation of shared experiences. Self-compassion is thus a crucial component in building shame resilience. It would encourage being gentle with oneself in the midst of shame, reaching out, connecting, and experiencing empathy (Brown, 2012; Rogers & Ebbeck, 2015). As many individuals encounter negative experiences in their lives, it is essential to investigate how self-compassion as a protective factor can diminish adverse effects such as stress and anxiety and enhance well-being in an individual's life.

According to the literature, self-compassion protects individuals against stress across different domains of psychological functioning. Quantitative studies have shown self-compassion to be associated with increased levels of well-being in adults older than 60 (Homan, 2016) and caregivers of people with physical and psychological disabilities (Azad et al., 2018). Self-compassion has been further associated with increased levels of life satisfaction and positive affect, as well as decreased levels of perceived stress, anxiety, and negative affect in samples of 90 and 29 adolescents, respectively (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Bluth et al., 2016). In addition, self-compassion has also been found to be associated with increased engagement in health-promoting behaviours in a sample of 147 adults who completed the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale and the 10-item Wellness Behaviours Inventory (Dunne et al., 2018). A Swiss study by Krieger et al. (2013) found that self-compassion was lower in a sample of 142 individuals diagnosed with depression than in a sample of 196 never-depressed individuals, which they measured with the Self-Compassion Scale and the Beck Depression Inventory. The never-depressed individuals who displayed higher levels of self-compassion seemed better able to keep negative emotions and experiences in perspective (Krieger et al., 2013). In contrast, individuals who are critical towards themselves might experience feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, failure, or guilt, according to Warren et al. (2016).

Based on the preceding evidence, being self-compassionate has a noticeable impact on the emotions and thought processes experienced by individuals during difficult times. Being kind to oneself in times of adversity might therefore lessen the intensity of negative emotions and generate more positive emotions.

Recently, it has been found that self-compassion, mindfulness and savouring mediate the positive association between perceived social support and better psychological well-being (Wilson et al., 2020) and that mindfulness and self-kindness partially mediate the relationship between social support and distress (Stallman et al., 2017). Self-compassion thus accounts for the benefits experienced from social support and entails a specific, internalised thought process that has an impact on how individuals view and experience certain situations.

Self-compassion is associated not only with affect and thought processes, but also with behaviour. For example, Sirois (2015) conducted a study on a sample of 403 Canadian undergraduates and confirmed that self-compassionate students were more prone to engage in health-promoting behaviours. Another Canadian study showed that, in a sample of 768 students, those with lower levels of self-compassion were more likely to procrastinate in their studies, which caused them to experience higher levels of stress (Sirois, 2014). Thus, self-compassion cannot be considered only as a protective factor against negative self-evaluations (Klinge & Van Vliet, 2017; Mosewich et al., 2019; Neff, Long, et al., 2018; Solomon-Krakus et al., 2022), but also as a vital factor that drives certain emotions and behaviours following an unpleasant event. Being self-compassionate can be described as a process in which affective, cognitive and behavioural domains are taken into account.

Ultimately, self-compassion is an inner resource that can potentially provide individuals with hope and strength when faced with challenges (Neff & Knox, 2017). Specifically, self-soothing is a protective function when experiencing stress (Bluth et al., 2016). Enhancing self-compassion in first-year students may thus be a possible factor to

promote student well-being and success, especially when their emotions and reactions are influenced by what they think and believe about themselves when faced with challenges.

2.2.3 Critiques against and misconceptions of self-compassion

Despite the growing body of knowledge indicating the beneficial nature of self-compassion, there are still misconceptions about this construct. These misconceptions are mainly due to individuals' assuming that self-compassion is a narcissistic notion and similar to self-pity, selfishness and passivity because it is turned inward (Neff, 2003a, 2015). Self-kindness in particular has been critiqued as that it risks the acceptance of assumptions about oneself and one's experiences, which could impede one's ability to challenge or change these assumptions (Robinson, 2021). Neff (2021) introduced the concept of fierce self-compassion to address this misconception, stating that self-compassion is not only about validating and soothing oneself, but to act in the world in an empowered manner.

There is a discrepancy in the current body of knowledge with regard to the relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others. Sinclair et al. (2017), for instance, challenge the construct validity of self-compassion based on the premise that it was adapted from the concept of compassion. According to these researchers, self-compassion lacks the necessary elements such as the selfless nature of compassion. Similarly, López et al. (2018) found no significant relation between self-compassion and compassion for others.

In contrast, a study by Mills et al. (2018) shows that a negative correlation between compassion and self-compassion exists. Neff (2015) also asserts that individuals who are more self-compassionate might find it easier to show compassion to others and that some who are compassionate to others are not necessarily self-compassionate. The discrepancies in these findings support the view of Sinclair et al. (2017) and indicate that more research is needed to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others.

The critiques raised in the last five years against self-compassion have been aimed largely at the appropriate use of the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a), and not at the conceptualisation and theory of self-compassion per se. The Self-Compassion Scale has been used in various contexts, and some researchers have found it to be a reliable and valid measure to assess self-compassion. However, some inconsistencies emerge when the factor model is applied to quantitative data analysis (Cleare et al., 2018). In particular, Muris et al. (2016) postulate that the total score of the Self-Compassion Scale does not accurately represent levels of self-compassion due to the fact that the negative indicators of self-compassion exist independently. Muris and Otgaar (2020) also argue that the current way in which self-compassion is measured is inappropriate and that researchers should consider a paradigm shift, adjust the theory, or modify the measuring instrument. Neff (2016a) contends that the items of the scale should be rewritten to fit the theory and be more consistent in different cultural contexts before assuming that the theory is incorrect. Neff (2020) further disconfirms Muris and Otgaar's (2020) argument by insisting that self-compassionate individuals simultaneously engage in compassionate self-responding and disengage in uncompassionate self-responding and that empirical evidence has shown the total score from the Self-Compassion Scale to be valid.

Nevertheless, the discrepancies regarding the validity of the Self-Compassion Scale indicate a limitation in research on self-compassion that needs to be addressed, especially regarding the measurement of self-compassion. Thus, the qualitative investigation into self-compassion among a student population, undertaken by this study, is not only valuable, but can also provide in-depth understanding of the nature of self-compassion and the dynamic processes within and between its components.

2.3 First-year university students

First-year students go through a transitioning process when they move from high school to a tertiary institution, where it can be challenging for some to adjust to the new academic and social demands of the university environment (Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2020). Moreover, they have to adjust to the new and complex operating systems of a university (Nkomo et al., 2021), new approaches to learning, specifically independent learning (Hassel & Ridout, 2018), a new communication environment (Tarasova et al., 2017), independent living (Kift, 2015), and a new social environment that is rich in diversity with regard to language, religion and culture (Mudhovozi, 2012). Ultimately, most first-year students might experience the transition into university as challenging because of the changes they encounter on multiple levels.

In addition to the adjustment to a new environment, first-year students also experience adjustment to a new life stage. According to Arnett et al. (2014), individuals in the range of 18-29 years of age can be referred to as emerging adults. Those who have moved past the adolescent stage, but are not ready to call themselves adults as yet, might identify as emerging adults (Arnett, 2000, 2014). The five features that define emerging adulthood are identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities/optimism (Arnett, 2014). During this identity-forming process, students might experience a sense of instability and feeling in-between and are more prone to make frequent changes such as discontinuing their studies when they feel burned out (Arnett, 2014). Further, the results of an American study indicate that, in a sample of 487 undergraduates, those who flourished were able to avoid factors that are sometimes caused by a sense of instability such as risky behaviours, anxiety and depression (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). In contrast, students who experienced identity exploration and formation as challenging might be vulnerable to certain maladaptive behaviours and coping mechanisms. It is thus critical for the

development of emerging adults, which include students, to explore different areas of their lives while simultaneously experiencing a sense of stability.

Students staying in residence are provided with a safe environment to explore different possibilities in the areas of love, work and worldviews (Arnett, 2016), and roles, values and identity images (Lairio et al., 2013). However, university life can be stressful (Denovan et al., 2017; Shamsuddin et al., 2013), despite providing students with an environment where they can freely explore their identities in multiple areas. This is exemplified in a study among a sample of 374 American college students, where academic performance, pressure to succeed, financial concerns, relationships with loved ones, and self-esteem were associated with depression, anxiety and stress (Beiter et al., 2015).

In South Africa, classrooms in which students are recognised and acknowledged across diversity are considered a place of comfort, belonging and safety (Shefer et al., 2018). However, first-year students are faced with various unique challenges that can contribute to the experience of university life as stressful. Some of these challenges include gaining access to university (Walker, 2019), coping with the unexpectedly large volume of academic workload (Swanepoel & Van Heerden, 2018), financial insecurity (Rousseau et al., 2020), moving away from home to study at university (Bernstein & Chemaly, 2017), and a lack of familiar social support structures (Mall et al., 2018).

Entering the university environment in this life stage clearly has the potential to be either stressful for students or provide them with an opportunity to explore their identities. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the process of adjustment to university, explore how first-year students experience this stage of change in their lives, and identify and consider protective factors that could aid them in this adjustment process.

For many students, pursuing higher education is a source of meaning and hope (Govender, 2020; Wissing et al., 2014). The excitement of being accepted to a university,

however, can be short-lived due to the overwhelming challenges of the adjustment process (Moodley & Singh, 2015; Wope & Van Belle, 2018). Although the number of students gaining access to university increases each year, the outcome is unsatisfactory as there is still a high failure and dropout rate, which occurs mainly among first-year students and is a cause for concern (Daniels et al., 2019; Langtree et al., 2018; Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Mokgele & Rothmann, 2014; Mouton et al., 2013; Ramrathan & Pillay, 2015; Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020). The figures indicate that about a third of first- and second-year students discontinue their studies and half do not graduate (CHE, 2013; Shay, 2017).

Some of the factors that may contribute to low student graduation and high dropout rates are level of motivation, level of academic integration, type of living conditions at the university (Murray, 2014) and educational background (Maboape & Meyer, 2014). In the South African context, many students enter university from positions of inequality with regard to race, schooling, class, and socio-economic resources (Chetty & Pather, 2015; Pather et al., 2017). Some additional challenges for South African students are limited internet access (Shay, 2017), unfulfilled expectations, which can have a detrimental effect on their performance (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018), financial and language difficulties (Maundeni et al., 2010; Nel et al., 2016), adjusting to a multiracial and cultural society (Chetty & Pather, 2015), poor time management and low personal motivation (McGhie, 2017), and struggling to find a sense of belonging, settle into university, and make friends (Arends & Petersen, 2018). In addition, Kotzé and Kleynhans (2013) have highlighted that the responsibilities and roles which first-year students adopt can also be stressful experiences. More specifically, first-generation students might experience additional pressure to succeed academically (Hébert, 2017; Liversage et al., 2017; Sangma et al., 2018) and perceive a lack of socio-emotional support as their families have neither the knowledge nor the experience of the challenges they face (Mhlongo & O'Neill, 2013).

Up until this point, various challenges have been highlighted on an individual level; however, it is essential to consider the challenges students face on an institutional level in the South African context. There is a significant educational gap between secondary and tertiary schooling systems in South Africa. Although the National Senior Certificate school curriculum aims to prepare students for tertiary study, many students still struggle to succeed academically at university level (Read & Du Plessis, 2021). Furthermore, there is inequality between most rural and urban secondary schools. Students who previously attended rural schools are considered to be disadvantaged due to many factors such as teachers' below-basic levels of content knowledge (Spaull, 2013), receiving instruction in a second or third language (Manik, 2015), a lack of career guidance before applying to university (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012) and a lack of resources to aid academic performance (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014). These factors can influence students' academic experiences at university, which is evident in a study conducted on first-generation students by Van Zyl-Schalekamp and Mtombeni (2015). These researchers found that students had higher chances of overcoming academic challenges when they had attended a high school with resources that could prepare them for tertiary education.

Despite the support systems available at universities, many students still lack the drive and initiative to utilise these resources (Van Breda, 2017). Most concerningly, the students who could benefit from assistance the most are often less inclined to engage in help-seeking behaviour and often drop out early (Van Zyl et al., 2012). Gore (2021) argues that, although universities are aware of disadvantaged students' challenges, some still fail to meet the needs of their students due to a lack of clarity on what "disadvantage" means.

Contrary to the line of argument in most of the literature regarding student adjustment in South Africa, Kapp et al. (2014) argue that viewing students from rural communities as disadvantaged can risk defining them in deficit terms and within a pathologising paradigm. In

actual fact, equal focus should be placed on how students succeed despite their challenges (Kapp et al., 2014). Informed by their argument, the current study proposes that it is vital to consider the protective factors that can aid students faced with challenges while adjusting to university. According to the literature, several factors aid students in their navigation of the adjustment process, for example, goal setting, commitment, taking responsibility for one's learning (McGhie, 2017), family pride as motivation, intellectual engagement at the university, mentors (Hébert, 2017), feeling connected to one's families (Liversage et al., 2017), and religion and spirituality (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013).

Research has indicated self-compassion to be related to, predict and enhance protective factors such as pursuing healthy goals (Terry & Leary, 2011), being more motivated to learn, more confident, and less afraid of academic failure (Smeets et al., 2014), and feeling more connected to others (Neff & Pommier, 2013). It is thus essential to investigate self-compassion in a student population, as it does not only serve as a protective factor against stress, but also enhances other factors that positively influence university adjustment and student well-being.

2.3.1 The dynamic and ongoing process of adjusting to university

Adjustment to university is a multidimensional and multifaceted process (Haktanir et al., 2018; Sevinc & Gizir, 2014; Tarasova et al., 2017), where students initially pass from a stage where emotional tension and stress are generated to a stage where a state of well-being and functioning adequate to the demands is achieved (Clinciu, 2013). Extensive research has been conducted on student adjustment (Chavoshi et al., 2017; Chien, 2015; Clinciu, 2013; Haktanir et al., 2018; Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Sevinc & Gizir, 2014; Tarasova et al., 2017). However, there are discrepancies with regard to how best to conceptualise student adjustment. Two of the most researched models in the literature are the U-curve of adjustment (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) and Tinto's (1993) influential model.

According to Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), a U- or W-curve can be used to apply a pattern of adjustment to individuals entering foreign settings or geographically different environments. Although this acculturation process seems to follow stages, it is not a linear process (Rabia, 2016). Four processes can explain the U-curve. The first stage is initial excitement, possibly accompanied by a sense of homesickness (honeymoon phase), followed by a crisis point where the new adjustment becomes more stressful (culture shock), and thirdly adjustment and gaining confidence in the new academic and social environment (Chavoshi et al., 2017; Lysgaard, 1955; Owusu et al., 2014; Rabia, 2016). The W-curve adds an additional stage of mental isolation where students might, after vacation, compare their new or current culture with their home culture and might feel that they do not belong in either place (Brein & David, 1971; Owusu et al., 2014). The last stage for the U- and W-curve entails the regained adjustment phase and mastery phase (U-curve), where students become more involved in campus opportunities and begin to feel a genuine connection to the campus community (Lysgaard, 1955; Owusu et al., 2014).

Although some literature supports the U-curve model in university adjustment (Pekerti et al., 2021; Rabia, 2016; Wang et al., 2012), other studies indicate the U-curve to be inappropriate as it disregards various internal and external factors that influences the adjustment process (Chien, 2015; Dailey-Strand et al., 2021; Hirai et al., 2015; López, 2021). Due to the discrepancies in the literature regarding the validity of the U-curve model, it is important to consider other adjustment theories to guard against adopting an overly simplistic understanding of the experiences encompassed in the process of adjusting to university.

Another stage adjustment theory used in more recent studies, which indirectly addresses the limitations of the U-curve model, is Tinto's (1993) influential model (as cited in Moosa & Langsford, 2021). Tinto's (1993) model frames students' goal commitment, their institutional (Van Rooij et al., 2018), academic and social integration, and their sense of

belonging to university (Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2020). Moosa and Langsford (2021) explain that Tinto's (1993) model involves three stages, namely the separation, transition and incorporation phases. The separation stage involves disassociation from past school experiences and integration with the new university context. The transition stage involves being torn between past and present where students must acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills to adjust to their new social, academic and institutional environment. The incorporation stage entails establishing new interaction patterns that result in a sense of being more socially and academically involved (Tinto, 1993, as cited in Moosa & Langsford, 2021).

Tinto's theory suggests that a mixture of students' characteristics and the extent of their academic, social and environmental integration influence their decision to drop out (Raza et al., 2020). In support of his influential model, Tinto developed a theory of academic persistence (2010) which postulates that student persistence is influenced by social, academic and institutional experiences at university as well as pre-entry attributes and antecedents (Larose et al., 2019). Tinto's theory thus emphasises internal and external factors that influence first-year students' adjustment experiences.

As first-year students enter a foreign environment, they might experience the adjustment process as stressful due to a lack of social support, demanding academic workloads, financial difficulties, loneliness, homesickness if they are non-residential and a diminished sense of competency (Conley et al., 2013; Hailikari et al., 2016; Young & Campbell, 2014). Terry et al. (2013) found that American students who moved away from home might experience feelings of homesickness, resulting in problems with concentration and motivation, thereby negatively influencing their academic performance (Terry et al., 2013). Further, Sevinc and Gizir (2014) conducted interviews with 25 Turkish participants and indicated that factors such as shyness, fear of failure/disapproval, loneliness, and

homesickness negatively affect first-year students' adjustment and sense of identity and belonging to a university (Sevinc & Gizir, 2014).

There might also be a possible mismatch between students' expectations and experiences at university (Matshotyana et al., 2015; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018) which could contribute to difficulty in adjusting to university. In South Africa, adjustment to university involves entering a new environment with a richly diverse population. For this reason, being exposed to a different culture on campus and finding their new place and role in the new social and academic setting can be challenging for first-year students (Mudhovozi, 2012; Nel et al., 2016).

Despite the adjustment process being stressful, certain factors can aid students during their adjustment process. Students are more able to manage stress and anxiety when they are motivated and confident in their abilities (Besharat & Pourbohloul, 2011; Langtree et al., 2018), and for this reason, they are more prone to succeed academically (Al-Hebaish, 2012; Chesser-Smyth & Long, 2012; Khalaila, 2015). Considering the potential experiences students can have according to the U-curve model and the importance of social and academic adjustment as stated by Tinto's model, protective factors are important to aid them in their adjustment to university.

2.3.2 The role of self-compassion in the student context

Empirical studies indicated that social support, optimism, mindfulness, and self-efficacy are protective factors against stress and enhance student well-being in adjustment to university (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017; He et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018). Students might thus adjust more easily to the university environment when they perceive their social support systems to be available to them, are able to adopt a mindful perspective and believe themselves to be capable to succeed academically. Notably, self-compassion has the potential to enhance a number of known protective factors that can aid students during the adjustment

process, including a sense of community and belonging, greater perceived social support, optimism, perceived competence, and the use of cognitive reappraisal when faced with unpleasant experiences (Akin & Akin, 2015; Brodar et al., 2015; Doorley et al., 2022; Neff & Germer, 2017; Wang & Lou, 2022). It is plausible that students might experience an enhanced sense of belonging due to being aware of their common humanity. Further, self-compassion might also affect students' perceptions of their environment and themselves if they are more inclined to engage with their social support systems as well as experience higher levels of optimism and perceived competence. For this reason, the practice and experience of self-compassion can serve as a protective mechanism to students faced with challenges at university and aid adjustment to university in order to achieve greater student well-being.

Self-compassion has the potential to act as a buffer against challenges experienced while adjusting to university as it has been found to increase levels of well-being and decrease levels of anxiety, stress, and depression (Neff, Long, et al., 2018; Smeets et al., 2014; Sünbül & Güneri, 2019). Therefore, self-compassion can be considered a resource that could provide individuals with hope and strength in challenging times in order to recover more easily from perceived failure (Ceccarelli et al., 2019; Miyagawa et al., 2020; Neff & Knox, 2017; Petersen, 2014). Specifically, self-compassion seems to assist students in adjusting to university life (Neff & Davidson, 2016; Scott & Donovan, 2021). In a study by Hope et al. (2014), a sample of 159 students entering a Canadian university completed the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale, Diener and Emmon's Mood Report and the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the findings showed self-compassion to be a protective factor against negative affect (Hope et al., 2014).

Supporting studies have indicated self-compassion to be a protective factor in university adjustment where students are faced with challenges. For example, students who

move away from home to study might experience a sense of homesickness, which negatively impacts their well-being and adjustment process. Terry et al.'s (2013) study, as indicated earlier, showed that students who displayed higher levels of self-compassion were less depressed, experienced less homesickness and were less dissatisfied with attending university. Long and Neff (2018) found in a sample of 691 American students that self-compassionate students exhibited lower classroom participation avoidance and were more inclined to engage in help-seeking behaviours. Students who experience and practise self-compassion might thus find it easier to adjust to a new academic and social environment and be more inclined to have positive experiences.

Further, procrastination is a common phenomenon among student populations (Ziegler & Opdenakker, 2018) and can negatively impact academic life and well-being (Atalayin et al., 2018). Sirois' (2014) study, as indicated earlier, found procrastination to be interrelated with lower levels of self-compassion and that students formed negative evaluations about themselves when they procrastinate. This, in turn, led to an increase in stress levels and have negative consequences for psychological well-being. According to Barutçu Yıldırım and Demir (2019), one of the negative consequences of procrastination might be self-handicapping, which limits academic success as students use excuses for possible failure in order to enhance their self-worth. They did, however, indicate that an increase in self-compassion leads to a decrease in self-handicapping and the need to enhance self-worth through providing reasons or excuses (Barutçu Yıldırım & Demir, 2019). The perceptions that students have about themselves and their current experience might thus influence their emotions and behaviour.

Regarding self-compassion among diverse groups, Tóth-Király and Neff (2020) conducted a study on 10 997 respondents from 18 samples (five student, 10 community, one community mixed with student, two clinical) from different countries. They established that

the conceptualisation of self-compassion seems to be universal across diverse groups but that the levels of self-compassion differed (Tóth-Király & Neff, 2020). Although there was not a South African sample included in the study, the results indicated that student populations experienced the highest level of self-compassion. This finding contradicts that of a previous study where no significant differences in levels of self-compassion were found between the student and community sample (Neff & Pommier, 2013). It is thus unknown whether South African first-year students would have high or low levels of self-compassion.

Some qualitative self-compassion studies have been conducted, on high school students (Klingle & Van Vliet, 2019), women with chronic pain (Barnes et al., 2021), health care professionals and students (Egan et al., 2019), individuals diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Pauley & McPherson, 2010), young adult cancer survivors (Lathren et al., 2018), and young women athletes (Ferguson et al., 2014). However, qualitative research on self-compassion on university students remains limited.

Among the qualitative studies conducted on university students, a variety of themes were identified. For example, Binder et al. (2019) concluded that Norwegian students who had self-compassion experienced being friendlier and more supportive towards themselves, becoming more accepting of uncomfortable feelings, feeling relief in the awareness of common humanity, and being better able to cope when they faced challenges. The findings of Tiwari et al.'s (2020) qualitative study on university students in India support the notion that self-compassion is a protective resource. The findings indicated self-compassion to be a complex process that may reflect cognitive, affective and behavioural resources and facilitate a number of protective factors to decrease levels of stress and increase levels of well-being.

In slight contrast, according to Champion and Glover's (2016) findings from an English university sample, students agreed that self-compassion would benefit themselves and others. However, they were afraid that being self-compassionate would make them

vulnerable to the judgement of others (Campion & Glover, 2016). A finding by Tierney et al. (2018) could explain this contradiction. They indicated that UK medical students collectively thought that cognitive freedom is required to actively be compassionate towards others and themselves (Tierney et al., 2018). Accordingly, it can be argued that the fear of being judged by others indicates a lack of self-compassion or, at least, a lack of cognitive freedom to be self-compassionate. This would thus explain why individuals might think of self-compassion as beneficial while simultaneously find it difficult to practice when they fear they would be judged by others. When they have cognitive freedom, however, they might be more able to respond with self-compassion towards themselves instead of ruminating on possible judgment from others.

Most of the research conducted on self-compassion in student populations has been quantitative in nature and found self-compassion to be a protective factor in university adjustment. However, qualitative studies conducted on university populations have indicated that self-compassion is also a protective resource which facilitates many other protective factors as discussed in this chapter. For this reason, it is vital to further qualitatively explore and understand how first-year students experience and practise self-compassion when faced with particular challenges during their first year at university.

2.3.3 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on first-year students

The current study focused on exploring first-year students' experiences of self-compassion and adjustment to university pre-Covid, considering that the interviews were conducted in 2019. As mentioned previously, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on first-year students' experiences was not the focus of the study. However, it is critical to shed light on the existing research on the topic, as the literature has indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic can negatively impact mental health and well-being (Deniz, 2021; Hasan & Bao, 2020; Kotera et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2021).

For developing countries all over the world, the global pandemic has introduced many additional challenges. One critical challenge is the widening of the digital divide, which includes a lack of network infrastructure, computers and internet access (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). South African students in particular are faced with a lack of resources such as appropriate equipment and data to ensure effective participation in e-learning (Mpungose, 2020; Mpungose & Khoza, 2021). The pandemic has highlighted, and possibly exacerbated, the inequalities, social exclusion, and injustice that many university students are already experiencing (Badat, 2020).

Many universities have resumed contact classes, however, students are still affected by the Covid-19 pandemic as they might have had academic challenges, anxiety about health, and experienced loss and grief. Although not the focus of the current study, the impact of Covid-19 on students' adjustment to university needs to be considered, as well as the role that self-compassion can play in enhancing student well-being in the current context. This is raised as a limitation of the study as well as a suggestion for future research in the concluding chapter.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the literature of the key constructs of the study. First, a broad overview of positive psychology and well-being was provided, highlighting the value of self-compassion. Next, the chapter provided descriptions, critiques, and empirical evidence on self-compassion and adjustment to university. Lastly, the chapter discussed the role of self-compassion in students' adjustment to university in the South African context, and the impact of Covid-19 on university students. Existing literature clearly indicates the concerning high drop-out rate amongst first-year students and stresses the importance of investigating factors that could contribute to student success rates at university. Although quantitative research has indicated self-compassion to be a protective factor in student

adjustment, there is insufficient qualitative research that explores the finer nuances in understanding students' experiences of self-compassion and its effects on their well-being. The following chapter focuses on the methodology applied to explore the aims of this study, namely first-year students' experiences of adjusting to university and first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology applied in the current study. A discussion on the research aims, research paradigm, sampling procedures, data collection process, and data analysis utilised in this study, is included. The chapter concludes by discussing trustworthiness and ethical considerations that were applied to the study.

3.2 Research aim and questions

The study aimed to explore first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university. The contextual aim was to explore and describe first-year students' experiences of adjusting to university. Thus, the following research questions were explored:

(1) How do first-year students experience the challenges posed by adjustment to university?

(2) How do first-year students experience self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university?

3.3 Research design and methodology

This study subscribed to a qualitative approach to help understand the experiences of the individuals and capture rich contextual data regarding their everyday lives (Yin, 2016). To help understand first-year students' experiences of self-compassion and adjustment to university, qualitative data, which focused on meaning-making (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Khaldi, 2017; Willig, 2001, 2008), were collected. Therefore, this study followed a qualitative approach, embedded in an exploratory and descriptive design (Yin, 2016, 2018), to explore and describe students' experiences of self-compassion in the face of challenges posed by adjustment to university.

Many quantitative studies have found self-compassion to be a protective factor against the stressors that first-year students experience (Hope et al., 2014; Neff & Davidson, 2016; Smeets et al., 2014; Sünbül & Güneri, 2019). However, a recent database search (EBSCOhost, December 2021) revealed that, to date, few qualitative studies have explored how self-compassion serves as a protective factor in the adjustment process of first-year university students. Therefore, experiences of a group of university students were explored and described within the existing framework of self-compassion and adjustment to university to add to the existing body of qualitative literature.

An interpretive paradigm was applied in this study as the aim was to understand the participants' socially constructed realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bhattacharya, 2008; Putnam & Banghart, 2017). Further, an interpretive paradigm focuses on understanding the meanings which individuals attribute to their experiences and the cultural and historical contexts they inhabit (Creswell, 2009; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020; Scotland, 2012). This paradigm was utilised to understand, through interviews, first-year students' interpretation of the process of adjusting to university and their experiences of self-compassion. Interpretation is required in qualitative research as the researcher is part of the meaning-making process (Willig, 2017). Thus, utilising an interpretive paradigm further encouraged an understanding of how the meanings that students attach to their experiences related to in-depth insights into the psychological constructs of this study.

3.4 Participants and sampling procedures

In this exploratory study, non-probability purposive sampling was employed because, according to Ponterotto et al. (2017), it is suitable for accessing in-depth data from individuals with specific experiences or knowledge. Purposeful sampling encompasses the selection of cases that could provide rich, in-depth understandings rather than empirical generalisations (Patton, 2002). In other words, purposeful sampling aims to examine the

complexity of different conceptualisations, rather than provide one conclusion (Benoot et al., 2016).

Twelve participants were invited to an interview as this is the minimum requirement to reach data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is important to note, however, that data saturation cannot be dependent on a predetermined number of participants, as this would imply that there is an understanding of meaning as transparent prior to analysing the data (Braun et al., 2019). Braun and Clarke (2015) argue that due to the flexible and reflexive nature of thematic analysis, sample size is often revisited during the data collection stage. They are in agreement with Malterud et al. (2015) who claim that sample size cannot be predicted by perceived redundancy as this could result in limited information collected to generate themes during the analysis stage. For the purpose of this study, it was decided that more participants would be invited for interviews if data saturation was not reached during the initial twelve interviews. However, as data saturation was reached for the first round of interviews, the sample size of this study consisted of 12 participants.

Participants in the study comprised 12 students from all ethnic groups and genders, who had registered for their first year at university for the first time in 2019 and were willing to talk about their experiences. The students were from disciplines that included, but were not limited to, Psychology, Anthropology, Social Science, English and Education. Initially, 13 participants volunteered to participate in the study. However, one individual was excluded after disclosing that he was not in his first year at university. The participants varied in language, ethnicity and gender, which may arguably have facilitated the gathering of rich, thick data from participants whose experiences varied according to the diversity of the South African population.

The participants were recruited from five different first-year psychology classes. I provided them with an explanation of what the study entailed and the requirements regarding

participation. A list, accompanied by a cover page further explaining the study's constructs, was provided for each class where students could write their names if they were interested in participating. The lists were left in the classes so that students had enough time to consider whether they would like to participate in the study. A total of 128 students indicated that they were interested in participating. As the number of students exceeded the number considered for interviews, 12 names were selected randomly from the list from each of the classes. Two to three students were recruited from each class to enhance diversity in the sample. However, the sample can also be viewed as homogenous due to all of the participants being psychology first-year students. This has been highlighted as a limitation in chapter 6.

Factors that account for diversity among individuals, such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status, could influence one's experiences and are therefore essential to consider when conducting qualitative research (Allmark, 2003). As there are various ethnic groups in South Africa (Adams et al., 2013), conducting interviews with a diverse group of students could give the students a voice and dismiss pre-existing stereotypes and assumptions regarding the group the student identifies with (Ponterotto, 2010).

To invite students to participate in the interviews, messages were sent to students on WhatsApp and email. Two mediums of social interaction were used to improve the likelihood of student participation. Some students did not respond to the messages. It was assumed that they were no longer interested and other students were selected randomly from the list and contacted.

The participants indicated that they were comfortable being interviewed in English, although some were not English mother-tongue speakers. All of the participants were interviewed in English, however one participant responded in Afrikaans. One can argue that language is an important factor to consider when conducting research, as Chauke (2020) states that the mother-tongue links to one's individual and group identity. Ngcobo and Barnes

(2021), who conducted interviews in English among South African students whose mother-tongue was another official language, stated that they could not guarantee that the participants fully understood the contents of the interview schedule. In the current study, participants were encouraged to indicate when they did not understand a question and to take as much time as they needed to express themselves clearly. Due to these encouragements, they were able to voice their opinions, thoughts and views regardless of their mother-tongue.

Descriptions and background information of the participants are provided below.

Alex is a white female student majoring in Anthropology and Sociology. Her parents are funding her studies and she moved from a town approximately 400 km away to pursue her studies. Alex indicated that she is able to visit her hometown regularly. She enrolled at university directly after completing matric and feels grateful to be able to study and pursue her dreams. Alex enjoys spending time with her friends and going for walks.

Lebogang, a black female student, is registered for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. After completing her matric, she lived at home for four years with her son before moving almost 450 km away to study at university. She initially wanted to study Education, but because the programme was full, she continued with her current degree but plans to complete her Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). *Lebogang* indicated that she practises self-kindness through positive self-talk.

Karabo is a black female student registered for a Bachelor of Education degree. Her home town is approximately 400 km from the local university and she lives in a residence on campus. She stays in contact with her family when she needs support. *Karabo* indicated that she motivates herself to overcome challenges by reminding herself of her family's support in her life.

Jane is a black female Psychology student. She comes from a town about 400 km from the local university, and lives in a student commune. She motivates herself through

positive self-talk when she is faced with challenges as a way to show kindness to herself.

Jane did not respond to the invitation for the follow-up interview.

David, a coloured male student, is registered for a Bachelor of Education degree. He initially wanted to pursue a BCom Accounting degree, but is now considering continuing with his registered course. David, a first-generation student, is living far from his family. He relocated from a town approximately 550 km away to pursue his studies at university. He indicated that he finds communicating with his peers to be benefiting him when he experiences challenges with regard to the academic content of his modules. David did not respond to the invitation for the follow-up interview.

Sethle is a black female student majoring in Psychology. Initially, she was not accepted at the local university and enrolled for a Financial Management course at a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college. She was informed a week later that she was accepted at the local university. Sethle lives approximately 450 km from her family as she had to relocate to another city to study at university. She finds solace in reaching out to other people such as peers and lecturers when she experiences challenges at university.

Daniel, a black male student, is registered for a Bachelor of Arts degree. He moved approximately 800 km away from his family to study at the University of the Free State. Daniel expressed that he feels privileged to be studying at university and that his parents are funding his studies. He enjoys spending his time by helping others in any way he can and indicated that making other people happy is important to him.

Megan is a black female student registered for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. She lives in a residence on campus, and her home town is nearly 700 km away. Megan mentioned that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funds her studies. She indicated that she experiences self-kindness through positive self-talk.

Xolani is a black male Fine Arts student who eventually wants to study Astrology. He mentioned that he is the oldest child in his family and the first of his siblings to pursue their education at a university. He is staying at home with his family while studying at the local university. *Xolani* uses positive self-talk to validate himself when he feels he made the right decision and to motivate himself when he experiences challenges.

Ben is a white male student studying English and Psychology but wants to study History instead of Psychology. He mentioned that he was awarded an NSFAS bursary and that he lives approximately 400 km away from his family. He is currently staying with his brother in an off-campus residence and enjoys treating himself with ice cream, sweets and cappuccino.

Michelle, a white female student, is registered for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. Her studies are bursary-funded and she lives at home while pursuing her studies. She identifies as an Irish South African, as she was born in Ireland but moved to South Africa when she was four years old. *Michelle* enjoys spending her time helping her peers with academic work.

Lydia is a black female student registered for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. She mentioned that she is a first-generation student and that her home town is approximately 450 km away from the local university. When she is faced with challenges, she finds comfort in validating herself by acknowledging that she did her best. *Lydia* did not respond to the invitation for the follow-up interview.

3.5 Data collection procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on first-year students' experiences. Conducting semi-structured interviews entails following a set of prepared questions to cover a sequence of themes yet remaining flexible to allow changes to the sequence or question formulation in accordance with the participants' responses

(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Kvale, 2007). In this way, the researcher becomes a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, instead of using only the set interview schedule (Brinkmann, 2013). In this study, a set of open-ended questions was used to guide conversations about the research topic while exploring the participants' responses in greater depth (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

Two individual semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015; Brinkmann, 2013; Kvale, 2007) were conducted with the majority of the participants to obtain in-depth descriptions and insights into their adjustment to university and their experiences of self-compassion. The first round of interviews was conducted between 15 March 2019 and 8 April 2019, while the follow-up interviews were conducted between 26 August 2019 and 20 September 2019. The interviews were conducted at the indicated times as, according to Zeller and Mosier's W-Curve (as cited in Owusu et al., 2014), students go through different adjustment phases during the year. The initial and follow-up interview schedules can be found in Appendix A.

As part of the interviewing process, the participants were provided with a vignette, which is a non-threatening story about a hypothetical person with whom participants can identify (Gourlay et al., 2014). Two vignettes (Appendix A) were created that contained the same narrative but different names for the character. Female participants were provided with Amanda's vignette and male participants with John's vignette. The vignette served as a basis for sharing their own experiences after reading the character's story. Vignettes are also valuable for desensitising and depersonalising individuals' responses to sensitive topics (Al Sadi & Basit, 2017).

In this study, the vignette probed the students to share their opinions, beliefs and attitudes in response to a scenario and the follow-up questions in a non-threatening manner. The vignette potentially helped the students feel more comfortable and made it easier for them to open up when they were asked about their opinions on the character before sharing

their own experiences. Upon reflecting on their own opinions and views of the vignette character, many participants either associated with or differentiated from the character in the vignette. This process enriched the data that were obtained, because the participants' comparison with the character provided valuable information that would not have been voiced in response to the interview schedule questions that focused on the participants' personal experiences. The vignettes can be found in the interview schedule in Appendix A.

The interviews were audio-recorded, after written informed consent had been given. The interviews took place in the same room, but at different times during the day. The door was closed during the interview process, thereby making it private and inaccessible to others. For this reason, there was no interruptions while interviewing the participants. The interview room was considered a quiet space. Although there were times when noise from outside was audible, such as students walking past or construction work, it did not interrupt the interview. The duration of the interviews ranged between 25 minutes and 60 minutes.

Twelve participants took part in the first round of interviews, but only nine participated in the second round of interviews. Three participants were contacted multiple times but did not respond to the invitation for the follow-up interview. The data collected from the individuals who only participated in the first round of interviews were still used as their experiences of the first semester were relevant to the study. However, their data were limited in that they did not have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of adjustment and self-compassion in the second semester. For this reason, data saturation, which refers to the point where no new information is discovered during data collection (Gubrium et al., 2012), was reached for the first round of interviews, but not necessarily for the second round of interviews. This has been included as a limitation in chapter 6. Data saturation can also be applied to the data analysis (Saunders et al., 2018). As the initial themes of this study

overlapped and had to be refined and reorganised, it can be argued that steps were taken to ensure data saturation while conducting the thematic analysis.

3.6 Data analysis

For data analysis, Clarke and Braun's (2016) approach to thematic analysis was followed to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning or themes within the data collected from the interviews. Thematic analysis is flexible (Clarke et al., 2015), as it can be used to identify patterns within and across data and research that is focused on understanding participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions. In this sense, thematic analysis was suitable to this study, as participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding self-compassion and adjustment to university were explored.

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) thematic analysis process consists of six steps which entail familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the thesis. These steps were followed to analyse and interpret the in-depth descriptions gained from the transcribed semi-structured interviews.

The first two steps of thematic analysis are familiarisation with the data and coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). In the first step, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The initial interviews were outsourced to a transcriber, whereas I transcribed the follow-up interviews. Listening to the audio-recordings also contributed to familiarising myself with the data. Any thoughts I had were also written down in the reflexive journal in this phase to engage with the data on a deeper level.

The second step, coding, entailed generating labels for essential features of the data related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Initial codes were generated by analysing the transcripts and data in three columns in a Word document. The first column included the written responses from the participants' transcribed interviews. The second

column included the initial codes, whereas the third column was used for closed coding. The structure followed in the process of generating codes for the data can be found in Appendix C. Not all of the codes were used to generate themes from the data.

The next two steps in the data analysis process were searching for themes and reviewing themes. In the third step, searching for themes, patterns were investigated based on the codes identified to generate themes for the data. Codes that indicated patterns in the data were grouped to generate coherent and meaningful themes in line with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). In this process, many codes were consolidated to generate more coherent and relevant themes. In the fourth step, after initial themes had been identified, the themes were reviewed to ensure that rich data were used and that the themes cohered in a meaningful way. As the themes were reviewed, it became clear that some of them were either not convincing enough on their own or that some overlapped. Therefore, the themes were collapsed into one another where necessary, and three main themes and six subthemes remained.

The last two steps included defining and naming themes and writing up. The fifth step involved the formulation of definitions and names that captured each theme's main points (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Initially, the interpretation of the theme was highlighted by the name of the theme. However, some of the names did not accurately capture the essence of the participants' reflections and my interpretation thereof. The names of the themes were thus revised and renamed accordingly.

Lastly, writing up involved an integration of the analysed narrative and data extracts with existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). A report in the form of a minor dissertation that presents the study's findings was thus generated.

An abductive approach, which moves between induction and deduction (Reichert, 2014), was also followed in the data analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2013),

inductive and deductive approaches are often combined in an analysis. By using an abductive approach in the current study, the existing concepts and theories of self-compassion and adjustment to university could be applied as a frame of reference in data analysis. The data yielded new ideas outside of the existing literature on self-compassion and the process of adjusting to university. The utilisation of this approach aligned with Reichertz (2019), who indicated that the researcher's logic influences theory development and that the results are not merely a generalisation of what was found in the data. Thus, the data were analysed using the existing frameworks, theories and models of self-compassion and adjustment to university, while simultaneously being open to interpretations and theories that emerged from the data outside of existing theoretical frameworks.

3.7 Trustworthiness and rigour

Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence a researcher has in his/her study as well as how accurately the analysis and interpretations represents that participants' lived experiences (Kornbluh, 2015; Petty et al., 2012). Establishing trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research, as it is a way to persuade the researcher and readers that the research is worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The four criteria against which a qualitative study should be evaluated to enhance trustworthiness include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). A clear description of how the researcher analysed the data and of the assumptions which informed the analysis is therefore provided as it is useful in evaluating the trustworthiness of the research process (Nowell et al., 2017). Lastly, reflexivity is an essential element in qualitative research (Shaw, 2010). The steps taken and processes involved to achieve trustworthiness and reflexivity in this study are discussed hereafter.

Credibility aims to inspire confidence that the findings and interpretation of the study are truthful and representative of the participants' views (Cope, 2014; Lewis-Beck et al.,

2004; Polit & Beck, 2017). In the current study, credibility was enhanced through respondent verification and keeping a reflexive journal. The participants had the opportunity to verify their responses verbally during both interviews. After the interviews, transcripts were sent to the participants for member-checking (Kornbluh, 2015). Only one of the participants requested sensitive information to be omitted, but verified the responses she provided. Further, by keeping a reflexive journal, awareness was created regarding my subjective positioning and potential biases towards the study. An excerpt from my reflexive journal can be found in Appendix D where I reflected on my thoughts regarding self-compassion while analysing the data and questioning whether I am staying true to the participants' voices. This excerpt highlights my own research process, my doubts, informs the interpretations that were made and created an awareness of steps that I can take to limit researcher bias. The study also subscribed to triangulation which can reduce the effect of investigator bias (Gunawan, 2015). Researcher triangulation was achieved as my supervisor acted as a second coder. In this way, the focus was shifted to the accurate representation of the participants' responses.

Dependability was increased by maintaining a reflexive journal and an audit trail (Ryan et al., 2007). An audit trail refers to documenting all of the researcher's decisions and assumptions made as well as actions taken during the research process (Cope, 2014). Dependability was achieved as the research process was logical, traceable and documented so that another researcher can follow the decision-making process and arrive at a comparable but not contradictory conclusion (Nowell et al., 2017). Documents that form part of this study's audit trail include raw data such as the recorded interviews, entries from the reflexive journal, the transcripts from the interviews with the participants, and the documents containing the analysis of the data.

Transferability refers to the how applicable and valuable the findings are to those not involved in the study (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014). In a qualitative study, this only relates to

case-to-case transfer (Tobin & Begley, 2004), which involves using findings from an inquiry to an entirely different group of people or setting. Transferability was demonstrated in this study by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the methodology, decisions made and participants' experiences (Ryan et al., 2007), should similar research be conducted in other higher education contexts.

Confirmability involves the process of demonstrating that the researcher's results and interpretations were derived from the data obtained (Cope, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). This study ensured confirmability by including a clear description of the data analysis in which an abductive approach was followed. The supervisor also provided support by acting as a second coder, which formed part of researcher triangulation. Researcher triangulation and maintaining a reflexive journal ensured the authentic representation of the participants' experiences.

On the one hand, personal reflexivity entails reflecting on how personal views, characteristics, beliefs, values, aspirations and experiences could influence the research (Palaganas et al., 2017; Willig, 2008). In this regard, maintaining a reflexive journal enabled and encouraged me to consider the influence I might have had on research findings.

On the other hand, epistemological reflexivity entails how the methodology that was used and the researcher's understanding of theory could have influenced the collected data (Palaganas et al., 2017; Willig, 2008). Epistemological reflexivity was enhanced by conversing with my supervisor and peers, as well as by keeping personal notes after reflecting on the day's events. Through these practices, I became aware of the parallel process of my own experiences, including my own experiences of self-compassion and counselling first-year university students, and the data collected from participants. Increased awareness of this parallel not only limited research bias, but also increased the accuracy with which the findings represent the meanings that participants attributed to their statements.

3.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the UFS General/Human Research Ethics Committee (UFS-HSD2018/1118) (see Appendix E). After the initial ethical clearance expired, extensions were obtained. The ethical considerations and limitations in this study are discussed accordingly, with a focus on relevant ethical principles and reciprocity.

The principles of beneficence and non-maleficence were adhered to (Allan, 2015, 2020; Department of Health, 2015) by informing the participants about the nature and possible risks of the study, and offering counselling at Student Counselling and Development at the University of the Free State should they experience distress during the interview process. Access to the services provided by Student Counselling and Development was essential in this study as first-year students who experience challenges such as financial and familial difficulties can be considered vulnerable (Van Breda, 2017, 2018). By the end of all the interviews, however, none of participants indicated that they needed to use the service.

Another ethical consideration was that the participants might have perceived me to be in a position of power, as I was a senior psychology student at the time of conducting the research, which aligned with some of their aspirations. Such a perception could have influenced their responses during the interview process as they might have wanted to come across as socially desirable. In this regard, the vignette served another valuable purpose. Students might have felt more comfortable sharing their own experiences after providing their opinions and views about the character without worrying how they were coming across. Thus, the vignette helped towards building rapport with the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017) to ease them into the research process. The open-ended nature of the interview questions could also have contributed towards a collaborative meaning-making process between myself and the participants in which a power dynamic is less evident.

The principle of autonomy (Allan, 2020) refers to the respect afforded to individuals to make and act on informed, free and voluntary decisions in line with their interests (Allan, 2018). This principle was adhered to by providing the participants with informed consent forms (Appendix B), informing them that participation is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study without penalty. The participants were provided with consent forms in Afrikaans, English, and Sesotho to ensure that language posed no barrier to their understanding of what the study entailed. All of the participants preferred to read and sign the English informed consent form. Throughout the process consent was also sought through respondent verification as participants were asked to read the interview transcripts and indicate any omissions or additions to what they had said. For example, one participant requested the omission of a sentence about a family member, and it was removed from the transcript. An example of an interview transcript can be found in Appendix C. The participants who returned for the follow-up interview participated out of their free will, possibly with a clearer understanding of the research process after participating in the initial interview.

The participants' personal identifying information and research data were treated as confidential. The interview transcripts and the mini-dissertation used pseudonyms to ensure that no identifying information ties the participants to the data collected. There could have been a breach of confidentiality during the recruiting process, as students were required to write their names while sitting in class. However, the list was left in the room so that students could write their names after class should they be concerned about privacy and anonymity.

In the data analysis stage, a transcriber's service was used for the initial round of interviews. The transcriber signed an agreement (Appendix F) indicating that data would be treated with confidentiality. There was also no identifying information on the transcriber's audio-recordings that could be linked to the participants' identities. Further, the audio-

recordings were deleted from the recording device after they were uploaded to my personal computer. The informed consent forms signed by the participants were stored in a locked cabinet, and the interview transcripts and audio-recordings were password-protected and stored electronically on my personal computer.

Throughout the research process, there was a focus on reciprocity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), which refers to the give and take of social interactions (Harrison et al., 2001). According to Dostilio et al. (2012), the three types of reciprocity in research include exchange-oriented, influence-oriented, and generativity-oriented reciprocity. Exchange-oriented reciprocity refers to the interchange of benefits, resources, and actions (Dostilio et al., 2012). After the initial interviews, all participants received a small parcel with refreshments to thank them for their participation. Prior to the interviews, they were not informed that they would receive refreshments to ensure that they would not feel coerced to participate in the study. They were also provided with a bookmark with information on self-compassion and a link to Kristen Neff's self-compassion website by the end of the first interview. In addition, they were informed that they could request a copy of the final draft after it has been completed. It should be kept in mind that the participants might have agreed to the follow-up interview expecting a reward of sorts as was the case after the initial interview. This is further discussed as a limitation of the study.

Secondly, influence-oriented reciprocity refers to iterative and interrelated interactions within a collaboration that have an influence on processes and outcomes (Dostilio et al., 2012). In this study, where there were follow-up interviews, the nature of the research and the reflection required from the participants in the first interview could have influenced their experiences and awareness of self-compassion. Thus, the participants' experiences and awareness of their thoughts, emotions and behaviours could have influenced the data obtained from the follow-up interviews. Further, participants were encouraged to

engage in member-checking, where they were provided with the opportunity to read through the transcripts and omit and add information, which could be regarded as a form of reciprocity during the meaning-making process in research.

Lastly, Dostilio et al. (2012) refer to generativity-oriented reciprocity, which pertains to the transformative power of relationality and the co-construction of emergent systems of collaborations. This reciprocity was achieved using an abductive approach as it allows for the participants' experiences to emerge and influence the results. Thus, the participants had an opportunity to learn from the process, potentially leading to shifts in their worldview. In turn, I also learned from their experiences, both fitting within existing theoretical frameworks and allowing the data to speak for itself outside of existing theoretical frameworks. As this study emphasised reciprocity and adhering to ethical principles and considerations, it can be argued that the study is ethically sound notwithstanding the mentioned limitations.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided a summary of the research methodology utilised in the study, decisions made during the research process, how trustworthiness was achieved, and the ethical considerations that were adhered to. The next chapter focuses on the research results, including the in-depth and detailed data that were collected.

Chapter 4

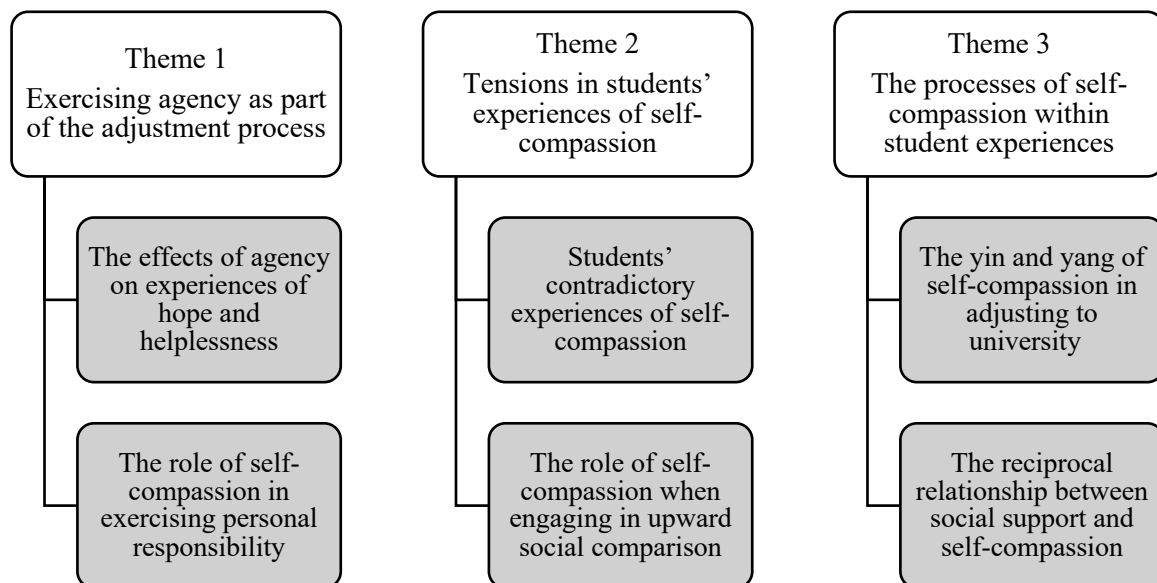
Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

The study provided valuable findings that answered the research questions and achieved the research aim outlined in Chapter 3. The current chapter gives a description of the findings and supporting evidence from the transcribed interviews. Quotes from the transcribed interviews are used to substantiate the inference drawn from the participants' responses. Three main themes further supported by their subthemes were identified while analysing the data. The themes with their accompanied subthemes are highlighted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Visual representation of the findings



The identified themes and subthemes explore and describe students' experiences of adjusting to university, specifically regarding the challenges that they faced and their indirect and direct practices of self-compassion. Nuances in these experiences are explored such as the tensions they experienced within being self-compassionate, especially when they

compared themselves to other students or considered their social support systems. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis are discussed and explored in greater depth accompanied by relevant quotes from the interview transcripts.

4.2 Theme 1: Exercising agency as part of the adjustment process

The first theme presents the agentic role students play during their adjusting to university, specifically highlighting the importance of exercising agency as a protective factor against the challenges they faced during their first year at university. Further, personal responsibility were also a common theme that emerged from the data. Thus, the two subthemes identified were (1) the effects of agency on experiences of hope and helplessness and (2) the role of self-compassion in exercising personal responsibility.

4.2.1 The effects of agency on experiences of hope and helplessness

The participants' experiences of self-compassion were explored in the context of the challenges and processes they faced while adjusting to university. Their accounts reflected the importance of exercising agency as part of the adjustment process especially when confronted with experiences of homesickness and the demands posed by university studies. Moreover, they alluded to the role that agency played in their experiences of hope and helplessness. How they exercised agency and the effects thereof, such as their experiences of self-efficacy at varying stages during the year, were explored. Their experiences and the role of self-compassion within these experiences are discussed below.

As students came from different backgrounds, their adjustment processes varied. Many participants experienced a sense of uncertainty, excitement and homesickness during their initial adjustment to university. Importantly, the challenges they faced seemed to have influenced the intensity of homesickness they experienced. For the participants, "home" seemed to refer to their family homes, where they experience a sense of support and belonging. This is important to consider as feeling homesick could imply that they do not

experience support and belonging at university. To illustrate, Lydia highlighted her experiences of homesickness and a sense of belonging at the beginning of the year. For instance, she shared her experience of not being able to visit her family often: *“Uh, it’s hard sometimes, cause sometimes you just feel like going home, maybe for a weekend or something, but you can’t because it’s far ... so it’s really difficult sometimes.”* However, she simultaneously experienced a sense of belonging at her university residence:

Well, it is great cause it is like living with family ... it is by your choice whether you wanna be in that relationship, that kind of relationship they try to build, so, having that environment around you it feels good ...

It is plausible that Lydia experienced homesickness more intensely, due to the geographical distance between herself and her family. This would suggest that she might have been over-identifying with living far from her family and experiencing a form of isolation. Moreover, when she stated, *“you can’t because it’s far”*, it might indicate a sense of helplessness as she wants to reach out to her support system but perceives the geographical distance to be a barrier. However, despite the challenge of living far from her family, she alluded to experiencing a sense of belonging at her university residence.

It is important to note, however, that Lydia emphasised how the experience of a sense of belonging is a *“choice”*. It is therefore plausible to consider that the exercise of agency could assist students in cultivating a sense of hope and belonging at university. A sense of belonging, however, could also possibly cultivate a sense of agency, as Lydia seemingly felt more helpless when she thought about how far away she lived from her family compared to when she realised she could foster new relationships in her residence.

In contrast, Lebogang shared how her experience of homesickness negatively affected her sense of belonging at university. Lebogang, who came to university four years after she had completed high school, shared:

“I wasn’t studying so having to start again and learn how to study, associate with people, to ask for help, it’s, it’s ... hard ... Whooh, at first I thought it would be nice, but now (giggles)², I’m homesick (giggles).”

Lebogang’s comment suggests that she experienced excitement and uncertainty when she re-entered a new academic and social environment after four years. Although Lebogang demonstrated an optimistic attitude when first entering the university environment, her reports of experiencing homesickness could indicate that she longed for the comfort and familiarity of home when faced with the demands of her new environment. Arguably, experiencing homesickness when faced with challenges could also indicate a sense of helplessness as she longed for additional support. Lebogang also illustrates how it might have been more difficult to exercise agency when she possibly experienced a lack of belonging. Accordingly, it can be argued that cultivating a sense of support, belonging and community at university is not only important to protect students from intense feelings of homesickness but to exercise agency which could potentially aid their adjustment to university.

In addition, exercising agency could potentially also increase students’ levels of self-efficacy and self-compassion. The participants whose narratives emphasised a sense of self-efficacy also indicated that they were more compassionate towards themselves and accepting of the adjustment process. Alex, for example, shared her experiences of self-compassion and self-efficacy during the year:

But to come to university, everything changes ... So I don’t think I’ve thought about that. I was kind of just still in the old mindset. And when I did start to really like think about it and felt like bad and guilty, like why am I not, you know, why don’t I have my life together. And obviously that wasn’t good, but, once I realised I

² The participant giggled often during the interview, which could potentially be interpreted as a mechanism to cope with the feelings she experienced during the interview, similar to using optimism as a coping mechanism when entering a new environment.

was just been way too hard on myself, then I started feeling better again because I realized it's pretty normal to feel a bit lost in the first month.

It could be inferred that Alex judged herself for not meeting her expectations of adjusting to university and was thus not compassionate towards herself. She appeared to have expected adjustment to university to be instantaneous. Moreover, it is plausible she experienced a lack of agency when she stated “*why don't I have my life together*”. Here, it is also plausible that Alex experienced a sense of helplessness when she struggled to “*have her life together*”. In addition, Alex illustrates how a lack of agency could be associated with a lack of self-compassion as she judges herself harshly. However, her realising that adjustment is a process could have been a form of self-compassion. Moreover, Alex could also have experienced a sense of belonging when she stated, “*it's pretty normal to feel a bit lost in the first month*”. This realisation made her aware of her common humanity, made her more mindful of her experiences and helped her to accept the challenges posed by the adjustment process, which could also be considered as exercising agency. Moreover, it could be argued that she had a sense of hope when she normalised her own experiences. Becoming compassionate with herself could have accelerated her adjustment process and enhanced her level of self-efficacy. It can thus be considered that acceptance of initial unpleasant experiences as an exercise of agency is an essential part of adjusting to university.

Similarly, Ben indicated how he experienced higher levels of self-compassion, self-efficacy and agency after learning about the growth mindset at university:

... we talked about the mind, growth mindset and ... if you have a growth mindset you can do anything and when I realized you know what but you do have a growth mindset so be more lenient to yourself be more kind cause when you're not kind to yourself you break yourself down and then you have stress ...

Ben seemed to experience higher levels of self-efficacy when he learned about the growth mindset, as he believed it would enable him to “*do anything*”. In addition, he became aware of how he could exercise agency by being more self-compassionate in order to cope with his university experiences. His statement of “*you can do anything*” could also highlight a sense of hope of reaching academic success as opposed to “*breaking yourself down*”. It is plausible that Ben was able to be more compassionate towards himself after he acknowledged the influence of self-judgement on his level of stress. It could further be argued that he was more inclined to be self-compassionate when he realised being unkind to himself could negatively affect his well-being. Thus, in addition to experiencing a sense of self-efficacy, being aware of the detrimental effects of lower levels of self-compassion on well-being could assist students in being more self-compassionate.

Karabo also alluded to a change in her perspective of university and herself, as well as being more accepting of her experiences at university:

Because uh now I have positive thought like I, I motivate myself and now I always push myself and I accept things now I accept that I'm in the university and its totally different from high school and yeah so my thoughts are uh I have positive thoughts this semester.

From the quote above, it can be inferred that Karabo was more able to be self-compassionate with regard to motivating herself after she adopted an accepting attitude towards her experiences in the new university environment. Adopting an accepting attitude and experiencing positive thoughts could also be indicative of being more mindful and exercising agency. Further, her statement “*now I always push myself*” could indicate that she is motivating herself to work harder as she has greater belief in her own capabilities, and therefore experiences higher levels of self-efficacy. Experiencing a sense of acceptance of the

new environment could thus be considered an indicator of feeling more adjusted to the new environment, being more mindful, and experiencing higher levels of self-efficacy.

In summary, the participants' accounts highlighted how their experiences of homesickness during the first semester were influenced by the challenges they faced. The participants' accounts also showed that they were more inclined to experience a sense of helplessness and expressed the need for additional support in the absence of exercising agency. In contrast, when they exercised agency, they appeared to experience higher levels of hope. As a result, many participants indicated experiencing higher levels of self-compassion and self-efficacy as well as being more accepting of their experiences at university. These findings highlight the importance of exercising a sense of agency as a protective factor in students' adjustment to university.

The next subtheme highlights one of the prominent experiences of this nuanced process, which is that students feel a responsibility to do well academically and foster a sense of well-being.

4.2.2 The role of self-compassion in exercising personal responsibility

As exercising a sense of agency seemed to be a vital part of students' adjustment to university, it is plausible that they also felt responsible for their performance and experiences at university. Interestingly, participants' accounts revealed that some students only experienced a sense of personal responsibility to perform well academically, while others also wanted to take personal responsibility for maintaining their well-being and reaching their potential as university students. It is worth noting that participants who seemingly experienced lower levels of self-compassion were more concerned with their academic performance, whereas more self-compassionate participants focused on reaching their full potential as university students. Self-compassion thus seems to have influenced how

participants responded to meeting the goals and expectations they had set for themselves regarding academic success and well-being.

For Lebogang, Jane, and Sethle, meeting their own expectations included feeling responsible for protecting their family members from unpleasant emotional experiences such as stress and disappointment. For instance, Lebogang shared the following upon reflecting on the vignette (Appendix A): “*And having to report back to your parents that you lost, you failed, and now ... you are now adding a stress to them, you are now stressed, scared ...*”. Her statement, “*you are now adding a stress to them*”, suggests that the vignette character might be over-identifying with the experience of failing a test and is therefore blaming herself for her parents’ emotional experiences. Moreover, it seemed plausible for Lebogang that the vignette character perceived herself not to be a “*good enough*” daughter due to failing to live up to her parents’ expectations of her. From Lebogang’s comment, it is clear that she alluded to the vignette character being worried about her academic future at university when she stated that she is “*now scared*”. Lebogang’s reflection of the vignette character thus indicates how over-identification with perceived failure could be detrimental to student well-being, especially if they feel responsible for their achieving academic success.

Similarly, Jane acknowledged how she did not feel “*good enough*” when she failed to meet her expectations of performing well academically:

Yoh I felt like I, I, I was so disappointed in myself, I know like I can do better, I felt disappointed, like I felt like disappointed my sister and my parents, I just felt like I, I’m not good enough.

Here, Jane appeared to directly link her emotional experiences to her worth as an individual. Her disappointment stemmed from her perceived inadequate academic performance. Similar to Lebogang, she assumed that she would disappoint her family and, for this reason, judged herself as being “*not good enough*” as an individual. Accordingly, it can

be considered that engaging in over-identification and harsh self-judgement could negatively affect students' experiences of a sense of belonging in academic and, in some cases, familial areas of their lives.

Based on the accounts of Lebogang and Jane, it may be concluded that, without self-compassion, taking personal responsibility for meeting the expectations students set for themselves could be detrimental to their well-being. It is also plausible that students might try to exercise a sense of agency in situations out of their control, such as managing the emotional states and perceived expectations of their families. Not only is this one possible way in which they demonstrate a lack of self-compassion, but they might be vulnerable to experience a sense of hopelessness if they believe that they are unable to fulfil their self-assigned agentic roles. For instance, Lebogang and Jane emphasised how failing to meet the expectations they set themselves resulted in over-identifying with failure. In comparison, however, Sethle seemed to have been motivated to perform well academically by feeling responsible for her family's emotional experiences:

Okay I, well, my family like had pressure on me like putted pressure on me and I must I must focus and I must not disappoint them so that pressure also led me to like work harder and to also make them proud.

Similar to Jane and Lebogang' accounts, Sethle might have been experiencing a heightened sense of personal responsibility in the roles of being a daughter and a student. However, it is important to note that she was more motivated to perform well academically by focusing on what she could gain from making her parents proud rather than the fear of disappointing them. It is thus plausible that, by focusing on what they could gain, some students, like Sethle, tend to be self-compassionate instead of judging themselves and over-identifying with their experiences of not meeting their expectations. Sethle, however, alluded to the fact that she finds poor academic performance or disappointing her parents to be

unacceptable. Thus, although she was not highlighting the experience of a lack of self-compassion per se, it is unclear whether she would respond with self-compassion should she fail to meet the expectations she perceived her family members to have of her.

In contrast to Lebogang, Jane and Sethle, it is noteworthy that Daniel and Michelle alluded to experiencing self-compassion and exercising their sense of personal responsibility to perform well academically. In their case, they felt responsible not only for academic success and fulfilling the roles they identified with, but also for reaching their potential and, in this sense, maintaining a sense of well-being. Daniel, for instance, elaborated on the motivational nature of striving to meet one's expectations while simultaneously being more self-compassionate:

... but for some people, uh, they see this like as a, as a stepping stone to achieve greater cause like they recognize who they are and their potential inside and when they see this they like be nah this hurts me, let me just strive to do more ...

Here, Daniel alluded to experiencing a sense of agency to succeed academically and fulfil his potential through academic activities. He highlighted that, by focusing on reaching his potential instead of judging his shortcomings, he would be more able to reach his aspirations, ambitions and expectations without harsh self-judgement. Daniel's comment suggests that students might have greater success at reaching their goals when they recognise their inner potential instead of judging themselves for unsatisfactory academic performance. Students might thus be more prone to strive towards reaching their potential and self-actualisation when they are self-compassionate and realise that they are already able to succeed academically.

Similarly, Michelle described how she is able to set realistic goals for herself, which could be a way of fostering a sense of well-being:

I've seen what I can do and I know. Okay, well, this is how it looks. I can push myself maybe from 70 to 75, but I can't expect myself to go from a 70 to a 90 per cent.

Here, Michelle reflected on protecting herself by setting manageable goals after realising that she had set unattainable goals for herself in the first semester. Setting more manageable goals can thus be considered taking self-compassionate action. Michelle appeared to have set more realistic goals without judging herself for doing so. In addition, she shifted her focus to maintaining a sense of well-being by setting more realistic goals instead of attempting to meet the unrealistic expectations set by herself. This could also imply that self-compassion and striving to maintain well-being help students to set attainable academic goals and encourage academic success. Further, both Daniel and Michelle seemed to have exercised a sense of agency based on their perceived capabilities, which could arguably be a form of self-compassion. It is thus plausible that self-compassion helps students to exercise a sense of agency in a domain that is more realistic and within their control, and therefore enhance their level of self-efficacy.

These findings show that self-compassion not only plays a significant role in how students exercise a sense of agency but also what they take personal responsibility for. It appears as if, in the absence of self-compassion, the students experienced higher levels of stress concerning the responsibility to succeed academically and were motivated by fear of disappointment or failure. However, when the participants were self-compassionate, their focus shifted towards reaching their potential and maintaining a sense of well-being. It is thus plausible that students who are more self-compassionate have the desire not only to reach academic success but also to flourish at university.

4.3 Theme 2: Tensions in students' experiences of self-compassion

The second theme presents the tensions that students experienced when they were self-compassionate. The participants reflected on the simultaneous experience of positive and

negative indicators of self-compassion and on the nuanced experiences of self-compassion when they compared themselves to other students. Accordingly, two subthemes are discussed in the following sections, namely (1) students' contradictory experiences of self-compassion, and (2) the role of self-compassion when engaging in upward social comparison. The role of self-compassion within the experiences of these tensions is therefore discussed below.

4.3.1 Students' contradictory experiences of self-compassion

From the data collected, it became evident that participants had contradictory experiences of self-compassion. At times, when faced with academic disappointment either in their own lives or as expressed in their responses to the vignette (Appendix A), the participants revealed that self-compassion indirectly help them cope more effectively with the challenges they faced. However, their accounts highlighted that they experienced positive and negative indicators of self-compassion simultaneously. For instance, some indicated that they responded mindfully to their challenges or became aware of their common humanity but still experienced isolation and self-judgement. Importantly, some participants' accounts highlighted that whenever they over-identified with harsh judgements, they soothed themselves by viewing their over-identification tendencies through a self-compassionate lens.

A comment by Alex illustrates these contradictory experiences of self-compassion. Alex identified with the character in the vignette who simultaneously experienced self-compassion and a lack thereof after failing a test: "*I think her initial reaction that she feels she isn't good enough is natural. I think we would all feel like that.*" Alex's comment suggests that over-identifying with failure is a common experience for many students. Upon reflecting on the vignette character's experiences, Alex implied that over-identification with unpleasant emotional experiences such as perceived failure and disappointment is an expected response for first-year students.

Although it is not Alex directly who is over-identifying with the experience, it can be inferred that awareness of common humanity might diminish the adverse impact of over-identification on student well-being. Further, awareness of common humanity could also be a way for students to soothe themselves after over-identifying with their adverse experiences. Consequently, self-compassionate students could initially respond with a lack of self-compassion when faced with failure and disappointment; however, in so doing, they might be more able to become aware of their common humanity. Thus, self-compassionate students might have a greater ability to respond to challenges by using their awareness of their common humanity to soothe themselves, even after initially over-identifying with their experiences.

Michelle and Lebogang highlighted their contradictory experiences with regard to self-compassion and engaging in attitudes towards help-seeking behaviour. Michelle, for instance, shared: *“And then you’re unsure, like, should I ask the lecturer for help or is she going to say no, you didn’t study hard enough, so you afraid of that, rejection, in a sense.”*

Based on Michelle’s statement, it seems plausible that she considered engaging in attitudes towards help-seeking behaviours to protect herself against the stress experienced due to unsatisfactory academic performance. However, she over-identified with the possible perceived rejection by the lecturer which may have prevented her from engaging in these attitudes. Arguably, Michelle considered taking self-compassionate action but was reluctant to do so due to a lack of self-compassion. A lack of self-compassion, in her case, refers to anticipating harsh judgement from the lecturer, which could indicate that she too engaged in harsh self-judgement. It is worth highlighting that Michelle was aware of how she can be self-compassionate but found it challenging to request assistance from the lecturer when she over-identified with anticipated harsh judgement from the lecturer.

Similar to Michelle, Lebogang alluded to experiencing tensions between self-compassion and a lack of self-compassion. In contrast to Michelle, however, she was more inclined to engage in help-seeking behaviour, as illustrated by her statement: “*Rather be stupid and ask for help than keep quiet.*” Here, Lebogang adopted a negative judgement about her cognitive abilities while simultaneously wanting to engage in help-seeking behaviours. Her willingness to engage in help-seeking behaviours could imply that she believed she has the cognitive abilities to achieve academic success at university. Notably, she might not have been over-identifying with her judgements about herself and therefore appeared to be more willing to take self-compassionate action by asking for help.

It thus seems plausible that over-identification with harsh self-judgement influences whether or not students follow through on their intention of requesting help. Based on Alex, Michelle and Lebogang’s accounts, it can be asserted that students might at times experience both a presence and absence of self-compassion. More importantly, however, the extent to which they are self-compassionate seems to influence the effect that over-identification, self-judgement and isolation have on their well-being.

Some participants highlighted tensions they experienced between being self-compassionate and striving towards academic success. For instance, David commented on his contradictory experiences of self-compassion and academic success when reflecting on the vignette:

Okay, kom ek sê dis nie die einde nie; hy kan beter doen in die tweede semestertoets, maar dan gaan hy moet sy sokkies optrek. [Okay, let me say it is not the end; he can do better in the second semester test, but then he will have to pull up his socks.]

David highlighted that one failed test does not necessarily mean that the characters in the vignette cannot succeed academically. Arguably, he inferred that the vignette character is capable of enhancing his academic performance. Thus, it can be assumed that by viewing

academic challenges mindfully and not over-identifying with perceived failure, students might have a greater belief in their capabilities and, in turn, an enhanced sense of self-efficacy.

David also alluded to the temporary nature of self-compassion when he declared that *“it is not the end ... but then he will have to pull up his socks”*. Based on David’s statement, it is plausible that some students are self-compassionate in order to soothe themselves when faced with disappointment. However, they might find it more challenging to respond with self-compassion when they fear that they might not reach the academic goals and expectations they set for themselves.

This point is illustrated further by Xolani’s experiences: *“... to tell myself that you can’t fail again, like if it happens you’ll be stronger, you’ll learn from it again, but try your best to not fall into such a situation.”* Here, Xolani referred to the tension he experienced between showing kindness towards himself and judging himself for perceived academic failure. He appeared to be kind to himself through engaging in positive self-talk and by focusing on what he could gain from the experiences of failure and disappointment. However, it can be considered that he was reluctant to experience perceived failure in the future, which may indicate an absence of mindfulness, but not necessarily an over-identification with the unpleasant emotional experience.

It is thus plausible that students might find it easier to be more self-compassionate when they experience higher levels of self-efficacy but more difficult when they experience lower level of self-efficacy in response to perceived failure and disappointment. Notwithstanding, it can be concluded that part of being self-compassionate entails being mindful and experiencing a sense of self-efficacy despite being faced with perceived failure and disappointment.

The participants of this study highlighted their contradictory experiences of self-compassion. In some cases, they used self-compassion to soothe themselves when faced with disappointment after initially responding with a lack of self-compassion to the challenges they experienced. From the findings, it can be concluded that students were more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviours when they did not over-identify with their experiences or self-judgements. Moreover, as students simultaneously experienced self-compassion and a lack thereof, the extent to which they were self-compassionate influenced the effects that a lack of self-compassion had on their well-being.

These findings highlight students' nuanced experiences of self-compassion and how their experiences can influence their adjustment to university, especially when they compare themselves to other students.

4.3.2 The role of self-compassion when engaging in upward social comparison

In their accounts, it became clear that participants often compared their experiences to those of other first-year students. Some participants appeared to be more predisposed to comparing themselves to those who excelled in areas they struggled with, such as academic performance and adjusting to a new environment. Although the participants experienced both pleasant and unpleasant emotions when engaging in social comparison³, those who were more self-compassionate found social comparison to be a constructive resource when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university.

Some participants alluded to experiencing a lack of self-compassion when they engaged in upward social comparison. They compared themselves to others, specifically with regard to adjusting to a new environment, class participation, and academic performance. To

³ Engagement in downward social comparison was also noted, but to a minimal degree and was thus not included in the analysis.

illustrate, Michelle shared her experiences of a lack of self-compassion when she compared her academic performance to that of a peer:

Being for example, if you're in a class with your friend, and she passes, but you fail, then you're, you behind, so you still have that unwanted feeling and you like I'm not good enough, I'm not going to be able to pass.

Here, Michelle referred to possible experiences that students can have when they engage in upward social comparison regarding academic performance. Arguably, she experienced a sense of isolation when comparing herself to a peer she believed to be performing better academically. Michelle also judged herself harshly and believed that she was “*not good enough*” to be a student at university. Michelle’s reflection highlights how detrimental a lack of self-compassion, especially self-judgement and isolation, could be to student well-being when they engage in social comparison.

While Michelle alluded to a lack of self-compassion when faced with challenges, Karabo highlighted how experiences of challenges can differ for each individual:

I have felt alone, and also I've felt that there are other people who are experiencing the things that I was experiencing, but I was comparing myself to them like telling myself uhm maybe uh they are not facing the same thing, maybe for them uh the challenges is much better, mine is hard ...

Karabo’s comment suggests that she was aware that her experiences might be shared with other students. However, she still experienced “*feeling alone*” and a sense of isolation when she engaged in social comparison. Despite the awareness of her shared experiences, Karabo perceived her challenges to be more complex than those of her peers, which could arguably have resulted from experiencing a sense of isolation. It is plausible that Karabo experienced a sense of hopelessness when she believed that the challenges she encountered were “*harder*” than the challenges other students encounter. Karabo thus pointed to an

important factor to consider regarding social comparison, which is that the manner in which participants perceive their challenges and their abilities to overcome their challenges influences their experiences.

In contrast to the participants who experienced the engagement in social comparison to be detrimental to their well-being, others highlighted how it affected them positively. In particular, some participants found comparing themselves to other students they admired as a resource towards reaching their academic goals. Notably, Sethle referred to the potential benefits of engaging in upward social comparison with regard to academic performance when she stated: *“So when I did that, I saw that nah I will be able to pass this uh this test only if I also just put the pressure on myself cause she already knows more than I do.”*

Based on Sethle’s statement, it can be inferred that she compared herself to a peer she perceived to be more knowledgeable of the academic contents of a shared module. Sethle further demonstrated motivation to achieve academic success. Although engaging in social comparison may result in higher levels of stress, as she has to put *“pressure”* on herself, it simultaneously encouraged her to work on improving her academic performance. Sethle’s statement thus indicates how, despite her not being explicitly self-compassionate, engaging in social comparison could be beneficial to academic performance and adjusting to the academic demands of university as it might motivate students to achieve academic success.

It is worth highlighting that some participants engaged in upward social comparison while being aware of common humanity. For instance, some participants perceived other students as having progressed further than they had while simultaneously alluding to their shared experiences. Relating to their fellow students through the awareness of common humanity while engaging in upward social comparison gave some participants a sense of hope and self-efficacy. Megan, for example, stated the following in response to the vignette:

“I think, um, she would feel like it happened in the past but some people over, overcame it so she will at the end of the day overcome it.”

Here, Megan proposed that the vignette character believes she can overcome the challenges she experienced after comparing herself to other students who had overcome similar challenges in the past. Based on Megan’s reflection, the vignette character had gained a sense of hope to overcome the challenges she experienced when she engaged in upward social comparison. It is thus plausible to infer that by engaging in upward social comparison while being aware of her common humanity, the vignette character also experienced higher levels of self-efficacy.

Similarly, David highlighted the benefit of an awareness of common humanity while engaging in social comparison when he commented on the vignette: “... *like if we see that I’m not the only person going through this thing, I mean if you can make it out of it, I also can make it out of it ...*” Daniel inferred that an awareness of common humanity could inspire hope in students to achieve their goals and reach academic success. It is therefore plausible that, when students become aware of shared experiences with other students who have passed their first year, they might feel hopeful and experience higher levels of self-efficacy. Being self-compassionate – specifically by being aware of common humanity – might be a significant protective factor for students who compare themselves with peers and other students who have passed their first year at university.

Participants’ reflections on their own and the vignette character’s experiences suggest that engaging in social comparison could be detrimental to their well-being when they experience a lack of self-compassion. However, when the participants were aware of their common humanity, they were more likely to be kind to themselves; they experienced positive effects such as hope, higher levels of self-efficacy, and motivation to achieve academic success. Therefore, based on the participants’ experiences, self-compassion can be considered

a protective factor to buffer against the potential adverse effects of challenges that students face in their first year at university, especially when they engage in social comparison.

4.4 Theme 3: The processes of self-compassion within student experiences

The third theme presents findings regarding the processes of self-compassion within student experiences. The participants' accounts reflected two processes of self-compassion including (1) the yin and yang of self-compassion in adjusting to university and (2) the reciprocal relationship between social support and self-compassion. The different processes pertaining to self-compassion are discussed in depth and organised according to two subthemes.

4.4.1 The yin and yang of self-compassion in adjusting to university

The students' accounts in the current study suggest that they engage in the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion, either directly or indirectly, to show greater compassion towards themselves. Neff and Germer (2018, p. 38) coined the "yin and yang of self-compassion" to understand the nuanced nature of self-compassion as a construct. The yin of self-compassion involves "being" with oneself, whereas the yang of self-compassion involves acting in the world in an empowered manner (Neff & Germer, 2018). The processes further entail the relevant actions that an individual takes to be self-compassionate, either by soothing themselves and allowing the experience of emotions or actively trying to do something about the situation. It can therefore be argued that self-compassion not only applies to engaging in self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness, but also to being motivated and empowered in the face of challenges.

In the current study, the yin and yang of self-compassion was applied to explore how students responded to the challenges and accompanying emotions experienced in their first year at university. For example, Xolani shared how he is usually nervous about approaching

people and feels disappointed when thoughts about what could go wrong in the interaction prevent him from speaking to his peers:

Then I just think to myself like, no, like not in a state of like (chuckles) I won't call it depression but like I become a bit upset and just think and think, I'm like no, next time do better instead, I'm like you know yourself you'll do better next time, but then I just try and keep a positive outlook and say I'm gonna do better, I'm gonna do better, talk to people, be more open, more approachable.

Xolani appeared to experience a sense of disappointment when feelings of anxiety prevented him from interacting with his peers, as he ruminated on the possible missed opportunities such as gaining new friends or group members for projects. However, being self-compassionate seems to have provided him with the hope that he could manage the negative emotions he experienced in response to social engagement with his peers. Further, he seemed to soothe and validate himself by acknowledging his capabilities and accepting the current disappointment as temporary. After Xolani validated and soothed himself through positive self-talk, he appeared to believe in his capabilities and motivated himself to continuously engage with others despite the possible doubt and fears he still experienced. In this case, “*being*” with himself enhanced his sense of self-efficacy.

Similar to Xolani, who highlighted how he reflected on his abilities to cope with the situations he found challenging, Ben gave the following response to the vignette character’s feelings of not being good enough at university after failing a test: “*I'd say scratch that, you're good enough as long as you believe it. And you can do whatever you want, you can pass the module ...*”

As evidenced by this quote, Ben appeared to view a sense of self-worth as independent of academic performance. How much individuals value themselves is thus not determined by their actions or, in the case of students, academic performance. It is therefore

plausible that students would be more able to believe that they can reach their academic goals if they perceived themselves to have value as individuals. In Ben's case, showing kindness to himself in terms of positive self-talk could have enhanced his sense of self-efficacy and, consequently, his academic performance.

In Ben and Xolani's experiences, engagement with the yin of self-compassion was followed by engagement with the yang of self-compassion. Therefore, it can be concluded that these twin processes not only function as a buffer against the experience of disappointment, but also enhance self-efficacy and motivation.

The preceding quotes indicate that some students experienced considerable vulnerability during their adjustment processes. Vulnerability entails facing uncertainty and emotional exposure in a new environment. Importantly, from the participants' accounts, it can be deduced that self-compassion has the potential to function as a protective mechanism when students experience vulnerability. Moreover, engaging in the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion could potentially empower and protect students when they experience uncertainty and feel emotionally exposed. For instance, Alex shared:

Well it's normally not nice when you have to think about something that isn't nice, but normally I would phone my mom or talk to a friend about it and get it off my chest and actually like get it out there a little bit ... Before I would just like move on. ... Cause now I feel it and allow it to manifest and then let it go.

Based on Alex's statement, engaging in the yin and yang of self-compassion can be regarded as having encouraged her to be more compassionate towards herself while feeling vulnerable. It appears that Alex engaged with her social support system when she experienced disappointment and negative emotions. Thus, it can be inferred that, by speaking to individuals in her support systems such as family members and friends, she took action to protect herself against feeling overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions. Moreover, by providing

herself with what she needed, she was more kind and accepting towards herself and her emotional experiences.

Alex further highlighted that she was able to engage with her emotional experiences mindfully, without self-judgement, when she “*feel(s)*” these experiences and “*allow(s) (them) to manifest and then let (them) go*”. Experiencing her emotions is thus an active process she engaged in, which indicates that she was able to accept herself as opposed to judging herself when experiencing a challenge or disappointment.

When the participants felt uncertain or emotionally exposed, engaging in the twin processes also facilitated experiences of hope and empowerment. For instance, Xolani stated:

Okay, ... after I've spoken to the person ... I just talk to myself like, oh, that went much better than I expected, so and so then I'm like you can do this. Like forget you couldn't do it last time, this time you did it and there's still some other opportunities later in the future.

Here, Xolani was able to be self-compassionate after he had a positive yet stressful experience when engaging with his peers. Xolani experienced social adjustment as challenging as he found it difficult to interact with others. Thus, he might have experienced a sense of vulnerability when he was faced with social challenges. However, he was able to comfort and soothe himself through positive self-talk. Xolani adopted a balanced view of the situation by acknowledging that current experiences do not predict future experiences. In this way, he was able to motivate himself to interact with others while experiencing a sense of vulnerability.

In contrast to Xolani's experience of self-compassion despite his engagement with peers, Daniel shared how engaging with peers could contribute to becoming more self-compassionate. He reflected as follows to the vignette (Appendix A): “*If you can make it out of it, I also can make it out of it*” and “*let me just find out how they did it*”. Based on his

statement, Daniel's view seems to be that the vignette character can find his peers to be a motivational factor and a source of hope to transcend his current circumstances and challenges.

Both of the above quotes highlight that the awareness of common humanity can motivate students to engage in problem-solving behaviour and help them feel empowered in the presence of vulnerability. Based on the participants' experiences, engaging in the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion has a twofold function: It first helps students to be kind towards themselves instead of blaming themselves and, secondly, it empowers them to take action and experience a sense of hope.

In summary, engaging in the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion could assist students in emotionally coping with challenges and asking for help from their support systems. Positive self-talk and self-kindness might provide a buffer against self-judgement in the face of challenges, while a lack of self-judgement could further motivate students to engage in help-seeking behaviour. Therefore, engaging in the yin and yang of self-compassion could function as a protective mechanism when students experience vulnerability amid the challenges of adjusting to the new university environment. The fact that reaching out to support systems can be considered as engaging in the yang of self-compassion alludes to a possible relationship between social support and self-compassion.

4.4.2 The reciprocal relationship between social support and self-compassion

Participants' accounts indicated that social support has a reciprocal relationship with self-compassion. They suggest that students could utilise their support systems as ways in which to show kindness to themselves, become aware of common humanity, and become more mindful when faced with challenges. Notably, participants who were self-compassionate were also more willing to engage with their social support systems when they experienced challenges and disappointment. However, the inverse became evident, namely

that, when students experience a lack of self-compassion, they might be less willing to engage with their social support systems.

The participants' responses indicated that receiving social support could reinforce their practices and experiences of self-compassion. In the context of this study, practices and experiences of self-compassion included being motivated to experience positive emotions more regularly, being mindful, and becoming aware of common humanity. Experiencing self-compassion also served to aid participants in recognising their peers and family as support systems. Xolani and Ben revealed how, at times when they might not have been self-compassionate, experiencing support from loved ones had aided them in being more compassionate towards themselves. For instance, Xolani shared how he sought advice from his mother when he experienced a challenge:

Then maybe like I talk to my, to my mom about things, then she gives me her advice, and tells me, nooo [sic] this could be much worse, it's not as bad as you think, it's better and things will get better and so on.

Xolani lived with his mother and had easy access to her to turn to for support when he struggled to cope with a challenge. He further shared how receiving advice from her encouraged him to adopt a mindful perspective when he ruminated on what he believes to be negative aspects of his experiences. Arguably, Xolani received informational and emotional support from his mother when he confided in her regarding the challenges he faced. Therefore, it appears that engagement with his support system made Xolani aware of his perception of the situation. The support he received from his mother guided him to be more mindful and, in this way, to soothe himself.

Similarly, Ben expressed how his brother with whom he lives gave him advice when he experienced academic challenges: "*Then my brother will just tell me you know what go take a shower, or go outside, walk around, come back and do it again ...*" and "*... if you don't*

get it right this time, ask me I'll see what I can do, ask someone in the same (uhm) study field as you ...".

Ben's brother encouraged him to take a break when he struggled to complete his work and felt demotivated. His brother also encouraged him to communicate with a peer, which could have enhanced his awareness of his common humanity indirectly and motivated him to engage in help-seeking behaviour. For this reason, it can be postulated that Ben received informational and esteem support from his brother as his brother provided him with information he could use to cope with the challenges he faced. Therefore, it can be argued that support systems can assist students in taking self-compassionate action in response to the challenges they experience by providing informational, emotional and esteem support.

Whereas Ben and Xolani's accounts indicated how receiving emotional, informational and esteem support from their friends and family influenced their self-compassion experiences, Alex highlighted how being self-compassionate had resulted in her recognising her family and peers as support systems: *"But then I took a step back and said just relax, it's completely new, it's all an adjustment, if you mess up you'll still have your friends and your family who will support you no matter what."*

Here, Alex appeared to have become more aware of her family system as a source of emotional support when she adopted a mindful perspective of her experiences of adjusting to university. It is plausible that her acknowledgement of her unrealistic expectations resulted in her being more kind to herself and viewing the situation more mindfully. She also became aware that she would still receive emotional support from her friends and family even amid disappointment and perceived failure. Thus, Alex's account highlights the possible reciprocal relationship between self-compassion and social support in student experiences, which are two possible protective factors that can aid students in adjusting to university.

Although the participants' experiences indicate a reciprocal relationship between self-compassion and social support, the role that a lack of self-compassion might play in this relationship is unclear. Not all of the participants had equal access to ways and means of contacting their support systems. For instance, it is plausible that students who either live with their families or who are able to visit their families frequently perceive that they can receive support more easily because they have access to their support systems. However, other participants found it challenging to contact their support systems when they experienced an absence of self-compassion, which could have included self-judgement, isolation, and over-identification. To illustrate, Karabo shared:

... so, (uh) I don't have anyone to talk to, so yeah, I, I always contact my family. But it's not that easy because they are not, they are far away from me ... It was going to be easier if I had someone near me, someone I could talk to and tell them everything.

Here, Karabo indicated that she experienced the support she received from her parents as less effective due to geographical distance. Karabo's comment suggests that students' perceptions and beliefs about their experiences might influence how they perceive and receive informational, social and esteem support from others. For instance, Karabo's perception that her family was inaccessible had resulted in a sense of isolation. It is also plausible that she over-identified with the idea that she did not have anyone to talk to, which intensified her feelings of isolation.

In Karabo's case, a lack of perceived support could have led to an absence of self-compassion, while a lack of self-compassion could have prevented her from taking action to reach out for support either to her family or peers. This is noteworthy because students might find it more difficult to cope with challenges when they lack self-compassion and, in addition, are reluctant to engage with their social support systems.

In summary, engaging in self-compassion and accessing their sources of social support constitute a reciprocal process in which students engage in their own distinct ways. Some students might find it easier to engage with their social support systems when they are self-compassionate, whereas other students become more self-compassionate after having received guidance, advice and emotional support from their friends or family. Based on the participants' accounts in the current study, self-compassion can thus be both a facilitating factor for, and a result of, social support. In turn, it can be argued that a lack of self-compassion serves as a barrier to experiencing social support. Self-compassion, therefore, plays a key role in how students experience social support from family and peers, as well as in their willingness to engage with their social support systems.

4.5 Conclusion

Chapter 4 discussed the findings from the data collected in this study. The findings were organised in themes and subthemes and discussed accordingly. From the analysis, it was clear that participants had nuanced experiences regarding self-compassion during the process of adjusting to university. The first theme presented the protective role that self-compassion can play in the process of adjusting to university and it was indicated that participants were inclined to be more compassionate in the second semester compared to the first semester. Furthermore, self-compassion appears to influence students' experiences regarding the responsibilities they feel they need to take on. Accordingly, self-compassionate students strive towards living up to their potential whereas those who lack self-compassion are more concerned with fear of failure and unsatisfactory academic performance.

In the second theme, tensions within students' self-compassionate experiences were explored, especially the notion that students could experience self-compassion and a lack thereof simultaneously. Although social comparison was found to be detrimental to student

well-being when they lacked self-compassion, it can be considered a motivational factor in the presence of self-compassion.

The third theme pertained to the participants' engagement in the yin and yang of self-compassion and how this engagement aided their adjustment to university. The reciprocal relationship between self-compassion and social support was also explored with emphasis on the finding that self-compassionate students are more inclined to perceive their support systems as accessible and that students' support systems often indirectly encourage them to be more self-compassionate. These findings are elaborated on in the next chapter, which offers an integrated discussion of the findings within the context of existing literature.

Chapter 5

Discussion of findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses and links the findings presented in chapter 4 with the relevant existing literature on self-compassion and adjustment to university among first-year students. Noteworthy findings are presented regarding students' adjustment processes and their nuanced experiences of self-compassion in relation to prominent factors such as social support, social comparison, motivation, and self-efficacy. The findings support existing research indicating the potential protective role of self-compassion in students' adjustment to university. The chapter further addresses the research aims and questions of the current study. In other words, the chapter discusses how students experience the challenges they are faced with during their first year and how self-compassion might function as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university.

5.2 Exercising agency as part of the adjustment process

In the current study, first-year students' experiences of adjusting to university have been highlighted in terms of their experiences of self-compassion in both first and second semesters, as well as their experiences of personal responsibility regarding academic performance and well-being. The findings suggest that participants are more inclined to experience higher levels of self-compassion and self-efficacy in the second semester than in the first semester. In addition, students' experiences of responsibility are possibly influenced by their levels of self-compassion. Those with lower levels of self-compassion were concerned with perceived failure and academic success whereas those with high levels of self-compassion wanted to reach their full academic potential. These findings are discussed in depth in what follows.

The participants appeared to have experienced excitement and homesickness simultaneously at the beginning of their first year at university. Their experiences varied during the year as they responded differently to the challenges posed by the process of adjusting to university. In the second semester, however, most participants alluded to experiencing higher levels of self-compassion and self-efficacy. These findings suggest that students followed a pattern of adjustment to university similar to the U- and W-curve described by Chavoshi et al. (2017), Lysgaard (1955), Owusu et al. (2014), and Rabia (2016). Initially, most of the participants experienced excitement and homesickness simultaneously, followed by higher levels of stress, and eventually higher levels of self-efficacy in the new academic and social environment.

However, as this pattern of adjustment was only evident in the accounts of the nine individuals who participated in a follow-up interview, it is unclear whether this process was typical of all participants' experiences. Further, the U- and W-curve can be considered too broad and global, a view that is aligned with the criticisms raised by Chien (2015) and Hirai et al. (2015). These authors have contended that the U-curve of adjustment does not account for other internal and external factors that can influence students' adjustment experiences and processes. As alluded to earlier, the adjustment process might be more complicated in the South African context as students come from diverse backgrounds and a wide range of factors might influence their experiences at university (Mudhovozi, 2012; Nel et al., 2016; Sibanyoni & Pillay, 2014). Therefore, it would be essential to explore individual experiences more holistically and consider possible factors influencing individual adjustment experiences within a South African context.

It is worth highlighting that the intensity of homesickness that the participants experienced was influenced by the challenges that they faced. For instance, those who found adjusting to university to be challenging, seemed to have experienced homesickness more

intensely. Experiencing a sense of belonging at university, however, appeared to help the students who had moved from home to cope with adjusting to the new university environment.

Students' accounts of adjusting to university reflected the process proposed by Tinto's (1993) model. This model suggests that, initially, students are faced with the new academic and social environment with which they must engage as well as the university's values, norms, beliefs, and academic and social context to which they must adjust. This initial adjustment can be a challenging and stressful time for students (Mudhovozi, 2012; Nel et al., 2016) as it can lead to experiences of social alienation and a lack of belonging, which is common among South African university students (Arends & Petersen, 2018; Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). For this reason, cultivating a sense of belonging and support at university can be considered essential in assisting students during their initial adjustment to university.

Exercising agency also played a role in how students experienced the challenges they were faced with during their process of adjusting to university. This study's findings showed that students who exercised agency cultivated a sense of hope, while a lack of agency was accompanied by experiences of helplessness. This finding echoes that of Fritsche et al. (2017), who concluded that group agency can be used to restore a sense of control in the presence of personal helplessness. Importantly, Jääskelä et al. (2017) stated that agency refers to an individual's capability to engage in intentional, meaningful, and autonomous action, influenced by power relationships and contextual factors. According to Belen et al. (2020), hope refers to an individual's perceived ability to reach their goals and construct routes toward them. Students in the current study were thus more hopeful when they believed that they could personally influence their internal experiences and external environment.

It is worth highlighting that the students also alluded to a sense of helplessness when they experienced homesickness. This finding aligns with Smith's (2015) view that experiencing homesickness and reduced control in a new environment could result in a sense of helplessness. It could thus be argued that experiences of helplessness form part of adjusting to university. Therefore, it is important to cultivate a sense of agency and hope amongst first-year students due to the vital role these protective factors can play in the process of adjusting to university.

In the second semester, most participants alluded to feeling more adjusted to university and experiencing higher levels of self-efficacy. It is worth noting that they were more inclined to be self-compassionate when faced with challenges. According to Tinto's model (1993), students progress to a phase which involves feelings of being more socially and academically integrated within the university environment and, consequently, experience higher levels of self-efficacy. Thus, it could be argued that self-compassion either aided students' adjustment processes or resulted from the experience of better adjustment to the university environment.

The study revealed that participants whose accounts indicated high levels of self-efficacy also showed more frequent positive self-talk and appeared to be more self-compassionate. This finding supports Eraydin and Karagozoglul's (2017), as well as Tiwari et al.'s (2020), view that self-confidence and self-compassion could influence one another. It can, therefore, be argued that self-compassion serves as a valuable resource that facilitates both the adjustment process and the experience of a sense of self-efficacy at university.

The data revealed that the participants tended to feel responsible for succeeding academically at university, a finding which is supported by the existing body of literature (Ayish & Deveci, 2019; Hébert, 2017; Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Liversage et al., 2017; Sangma et al., 2018). Their experiences, however, appeared to differ based on whether or not

they were self-compassionate. Participants who lacked self-compassion, but had high academic expectations, alluded to experiencing a fear of failure and disappointment. In response to perceived failure or disappointment, these participants were also more inclined to judge themselves harshly and over-identify with the academic expectations they set for themselves. Significantly, participants who showed a lack of self-compassion in their narratives appeared to be experiencing fear of disappointing their families as a prominent stressor. Some participants alluded to the experience of “not feeling good enough” to be students at university when they failed to meet their academic expectations and fulfil their familial roles.

Because the three facets of self-compassion, namely, self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness, tend to engender and enhance one another (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003b, 2016b; Germer & Neff, 2019), it can be argued that over-identification with the thought of academic failure can lead to isolation and self-judgement. In turn, isolation and self-judgement could result in students’ believing themselves to be undeserving of being at university. This is a critical point to consider as it could contribute to students’ dropping out in their first year. Therefore, it is plausible that students who experience a personal responsibility to perform well academically, but lack self-compassion, might run the risk of evaluating their self-worth based on how well they fulfil their academic responsibilities, which can be detrimental to their well-being.

On the one hand, experiencing the personal responsibility to perform well academically could be detrimental to student well-being without the presence of self-compassion. On the other hand, self-compassion appeared to have mitigated the sense of personal responsibility that the participants experienced in striving to meet the expectations they had set for themselves. Moreover, self-compassionate participants were focused on reaching their potential, striving towards self-actualisation, and attaining a sense of well-

being. Self-compassion thus played a role in students' motivation during their adjustment to university and potentially enhanced their levels of well-being. Arguably, personal responsibility could negatively influence student well-being when they lack self-compassion, but benefit them when they are more self-compassionate.

Ayish and Deveci (2019) as well as Arslan and Wong (2022), support the view that personal responsibility could contribute to students' well-being, self-esteem, and psychological health. The current study's findings, however, suggest that the role of personal responsibility in well-being is more nuanced. Therefore, although personal responsibility has the potential to enhance well-being, this study revealed self-compassion to be a protective factor against fear of failure and disappointment for students who feel responsible for achieving academic success.

Another finding indicated that participants who were more self-compassionate appeared to be focused on maintaining a sense of well-being. However, they only reached this point after they had learned how to cope with their stressors or their stressors had been addressed. This finding could account for why more students were self-compassionate during the second semester compared to the first semester. The participants' experiences are in accordance with the literature which has shown self-compassion to be a protective factor that can reduce the adverse effects of stress on academic performance and have a positive impact on well-being (Fong & Loi, 2016; Hope et al., 2014; Neff et al., 2005; Pandey et al., 2019; Poots & Cassidy, 2020).

However, Kroshus et al. (2020) recently concluded that self-compassion does not buffer the adverse effects that chronic stressors such as financial difficulties and social inequalities have on well-being due to the repeated nature of the stressor. Based on the current study's findings, it can be argued that self-compassionate students who do not

experience chronic stressors strive to flourish and attain a sense of well-being at university instead of only focusing on performing well academically.

5.3 Tensions in students' experiences of self-compassion

The findings from the current study highlighted tensions in students' experiences of self-compassion, which includes being aware of the presence of both positive and negative indicators of self-compassion. At times, participants simultaneously experienced self-compassion and a lack thereof. They further alluded to experiencing tensions within being self-compassionate while comparing themselves to other students. Importantly, self-compassion seems to have buffered against the possible detrimental effect of engaging in upward social comparison.

The findings showed that the participants simultaneously experienced self-compassion and a lack of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university. An awareness of common humanity seems to play a unique role when students over-identify with their experiences and self-judgements. Based on their study with American undergraduate students, Long and Neff (2018) asserted that, if self-compassionate students understand and are aware of their common humanity, they will be less likely to fear being negatively evaluated by their peers and instructors.

In contrast, the findings from the current study revealed that certain participants who were more self-compassionate still over-identified with their experiences of perceived failure. Through an awareness of common humanity, however, they perceived their over-identification with their unpleasant experiences to be a part of the process of adjusting to university. This finding aligns with Neff's (2003b) view that self-compassion is crucial in times of setback as it might provide an individual with support and understanding of the self. In line with this argument, it is plausible that awareness of common humanity could buffer

the potentially adverse effects of over-identification on students who face perceived failure and academic disappointment.

Many participants alluded to experiencing tensions between being self-compassionate and engaging in help-seeking behaviour. Some participants who considered asking for help expressed negative self-judgements about their cognitive and academic capabilities. However, not all of the participants over-identified with their self-judgements. Those who believed they could reach academic success through their help-seeking behaviour judged themselves harshly, but did not over-identify with their judgements.

Although existing research suggests that self-compassion is related to positive attitudes towards help-seeking for male intercollegiate athletes and students (Dschaak et al., 2019; Long & Neff, 2018; Wasyliw & Clairo, 2018), it is unclear whether all three components as stated by Neff (2003a) are required in order to be self-compassionate (Barnard & Curry, 2011). As mindfulness consists of an accepting attitude of emotional experiences (Seligowski et al., 2015), it is plausible that students who judge themselves harshly can still be self-compassionate when they are mindful and accepting of their emotional experiences. Accordingly, mindfulness can potentially buffer the adverse effects of harsh self-judgements and encourage students who do not over-identify with their judgements to engage in help-seeking behaviour.

Although many of the current study's participants were able to respond with self-compassion, they expressed a tension between being self-compassionate and striving towards academic success. Accordingly, students might be more inclined to be self-compassionate when they believe they can achieve academic success and, therefore, experience higher levels of self-efficacy, despite fearing that they may fail academically. Existing studies indicate self-compassion to be positively associated with self-efficacy in Canadian medical students, Islamic and European students, Brazilian adults, as well as international adults (Babenko &

Oswald, 2019; Liao et al., 2021; Manavipour & Saeedian, 2016; Smeets et al., 2014; Souza & Hutz, 2016).

Because the findings from the current study concur with existing research, it can be argued that self-compassion helps students to believe in their capabilities as they might be less inclined to over-identify with perceived failure. In turn, students can experience higher levels of self-efficacy as they might not link their academic success directly to their worth as individuals.

Participants reflected on rich, contradictory experiences when they compared themselves to other students. Overall, the participants who appeared to find social comparison to be detrimental to their well-being also experienced a lack of self-compassion. Recent studies have highlighted the potential role of social comparison on well-being. For instance, Reer et al. (2019) established that the tendency to engage in social comparison is associated with lower levels of well-being. Similarly, Wirtz et al. (2021), Alfasi (2019), Burnell et al. (2019) and Yue et al. (2022) concluded that social comparison over social media can be linked with lower levels of subjective well-being, self-esteem, more depressive symptoms and poorer self-worth.

In the current study, participants reported experiences of isolation when they compared themselves to students who, according to their perception, were adapting more easily to the university environment. Specifically, participants alluded to experiencing isolation when comparing the severity of the challenges they faced to those of other students, despite being aware of their common humanity. This finding supports that of Shin and Lim (2019), who stated that painful social comparisons can cause feelings of isolation. The participants' accounts thus illustrate how, in the absence of self-compassion, engaging in social comparison could be detrimental to student well-being.

It is worth highlighting that, although engaging in social comparison could have a detrimental effect on student well-being, the current study's findings suggest that this engagement could also positively affect students. Some participants showed that engaging in social comparison motivated them to reach their goals and meet their academic expectations. Moreover, they were motivated to adopt effective strategies to meet their goals and be kinder to themselves when they compared themselves to others whom they perceived to be more able to cope with challenges.

The finding that engaging in social comparison could positively affect students echoes that of Park and Park (2017), who established that task-oriented individuals who were motivated to improve themselves after failure were more willing to work with others who performed better. Furthermore, research has shown that social comparison could have various effects on individuals depending on factors such as regulatory focus, their perceptions of peers' higher performance, and their levels of self-esteem (Downes et al., 2020; Mohamadi et al., 2019; Schokker et al., 2010). Since the participants' experiences of social comparison had contradictory influences on their well-being in this study, it is plausible that self-compassion was a factor that affected how they experienced their engagement in social comparison.

Many participants indicated that they compare themselves to others while being aware of their shared experiences. Although the participants still engaged in upward social comparison, they were aware of their common humanity. Consequently, the participants expressed a sense of hope and greater belief that they too could reach their academic goals like other students whom they aspired to be like. Based on their studies, Booker and Perlin (2020) and Jiang et al. (2020) assert that hope may serve indirectly as a mechanism to promote self-compassion. Similarly, Akin and Akin (2015) observed that self-kindness and mindfulness are stronger predictors of hope than common humanity. It is, therefore, plausible

that participants were aware of their common humanity when they experienced a sense of hope that they could achieve their goals.

It is unclear whether the participants in the current study experienced a sense of hope due to being more self-compassionate or responded with self-compassion due to having a sense of hope. It would thus be valuable to explore the direction of this relationship in future research. Nevertheless, it is important to note that self-compassion protected them against the possible negative effects of comparing themselves to other students.

5.4 The processes of self-compassion within student experiences

Two prominent processes of self-compassion were highlighted in the participants' accounts. Firstly, engaging in both the yin and yang of self-compassion encompassed students' soothing themselves and engaging in help-seeking behaviour. Students engaged in the yin and yang while experiencing vulnerability as part of the process of adjusting to university. Secondly, the reciprocal relationship between social support and self-compassion highlighted how students might be more inclined to be self-compassionate when engaging with their social support systems. They might also perceive their support systems as being more available to them when they are experiencing higher levels of self-compassion. These processes are discussed below.

The findings show that the participants either directly or indirectly engaged in the twin processes of self-compassion, which served as a protective mechanism against the challenges they faced. The yin qualities of self-compassion refer to soothing, comforting and validating oneself in times of suffering, whereas the yang qualities refer to protecting, providing for and motivating oneself to alleviate suffering (Neff & Germer, 2018; Yarnell et al., 2019). The yang of self-compassion is also recognised as fierce self-compassion, which involves acting in the world to protect oneself, provide what is needed and motivate change to reach one's full potential (Neff, 2018, 2021).

In the current study, participants' efforts towards soothing and validating themselves when faced with academic and social difficulties as part of the university adjustment process were interpreted as engaging in the yin of self-compassion. On the other hand, engaging in the yang of self-compassion, included contacting their support systems, actively requesting help, and receiving support from their family and friends regarding their academic and social challenges. Jarecki et al. (2020) assert that, at times, individuals might need the yin of self-compassion more, while at other times, the yang. However, both aspects lead to well-being and are necessary to develop the most balanced self-compassion in an individual (Neff, 2018; Yarnell et al., 2019). Arguably, engagement in these twin processes is necessary for optimal functioning among first-year students.

From the participants' interviews, it was clear that most were able to practise the yang of self-compassion after practising the yin of self-compassion. They first allowed themselves to experience their emotions mindfully and soothed themselves with positive self-talk. Thereafter, they were better able to reach out to their support systems, engage in problem-focused coping and request help from their support systems, which included family, peers, and in some cases lecturers.

These findings align with the works of Neff (2018) and Neff and Narisetti (2021), who asserted that, by taking cognisance of both aspects required for optimal functioning, individuals are more motivated to take self-compassionate action when they are kinder to themselves. Thus, it can be argued that students would be more fully able to experience the yang of self-compassion, which includes taking action such as asking for help and reaching out to their support systems, after first engaging in the yin of self-compassion by comforting, validating and soothing themselves when faced with challenges.

Another prominent finding from the interviews was that students felt vulnerable during their adjustment to university. This is a critical finding as experiences of vulnerability

could account for why first-year students are most at risk of discontinuing their studies (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Kroshus et al., 2020). Previous research has defined vulnerability as a state of susceptibility to harm from environmental and social stressors accompanied by an incapacity to adapt (Adger, 2006; Spini et al., 2017). Brown (2018), however, positions vulnerability as experiencing fear and courage at the same time. It can be argued that Brown's definition also encompasses the experience of stressful events, but that vulnerability is not necessarily defined by one's capacity to adapt. Similarly, Bruk et al. (2018) postulate that vulnerability is the willingness to be open to risk, uncertainty and emotional exposure in situations despite fears, with self-compassion buffering against stress and anxiety in vulnerable situations (Bruk et al., 2021). It is thus plausible that the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion could empower and protect students who are experiencing vulnerability, as they are able to be kinder to themselves, accept their emotional experiences and reach out for support.

It is noteworthy that the participants in the current study shared their experiences of informational, emotional and esteem support when engaging with their family and peers. They alluded to their experiences and practices of self-compassion while either engaging with or considering their social support systems. They seemed to have experienced social support in receiving advice and comfort from family members and, in some cases, peers. However, it is important to note that their perception of the availability of support influenced their willingness to engage with their support systems.

From the participants' accounts, social support may be understood as systems the participants turned to for guidance, advice and emotional support. This understanding of support aligns with the definitions of perceived and received social support highlighted by Awang, Kutty, et al. (2014) and Barrera (1981, as cited in Gleason & Iida, 2015), who refer to the subjective judgements of the quality of assistance provided by family members and

close friends, and the actual occurrence of socially supportive exchange. Early work by Cobb (1975) states that social support, which takes multiple forms such as emotional, companionship, informational, social network and esteem support (Kim et al., 2017; Ko et al., 2013; Li et al., 2021), entails providing information that leads individuals to believe they are loved, esteemed and members of a social network. According to Li et al. (2021), perceived quality of support has a stronger influence on mental health compared to the actual structure of a social support system. Thus, in the context of the current study, it can be argued that it is essential to consider how students perceive their support systems in addition to the type of support they receive.

The participants also referred to how their support systems encouraged them to be more mindful. For example, the advice they received from family members often involved taking a different perspective on the challenges they were facing. Consequently, these students used mindfulness to soothe themselves when experiencing academic challenges and difficulties while adjusting to university. This finding is consistent with a study by Wilson et al. (2020), who concluded that undergraduate students with higher levels of perceived support were more mindful and that mindfulness mediated the relationship between perceived social support and well-being.

Similar research has indicated that self-compassion mediates the relationship between perceived social support and well-being among student populations (Jeon et al., 2016; Kroshus et al., 2020). Poots and Cassidy (2020) postulated that self-compassion and social support mediate the relationship between academic stress and well-being. Although existing research refers to social support from various sources, based on the findings of this study it can be argued that social support from family members specifically was a key factor that helped students experience higher levels of self-compassion when they simultaneously experienced over-identification, isolation and self-judgement in the face of challenges.

The findings further revealed that a lack of self-compassion can also play a role in students' experiences of social support. Geographical distance was a factor that influenced the extent to which participants engaged with their social support systems and experienced the benefits thereof. It seems possible that their perceptions of their support systems' unavailability influenced their actions towards seeking support. According to De la Iglesia et al. (2014) and Li et al. (2021), perception of support could play a greater role than actual support and for this reason has been more prominently researched. Lavin et al. (2020) established that American undergraduate students with higher levels of self-compassion reported greater social support from friends. It is thus plausible that self-compassion could influence the perception students have of their families as support systems.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed themes related to the participants' experiences as first-year students adjusting to university. The themes were linked to relevant literature to provide an understanding and interpretation of their experiences regarding self-compassion and the process of adjusting to university. A significant finding was the role of self-compassion in their experiences of personal responsibility for achieving academic success and attaining a sense of well-being. Another finding indicated that participants experienced homesickness more intensely in the first semester depending on the challenges they faced and appeared to be more inclined to experience higher levels of self-efficacy and self-compassion in the second semester. Students further shared their contradictory experiences of self-compassion, especially when they engaged in social comparison.

Lastly, students' accounts indicated that they were more inclined to engage in help-seeking behaviour after they were able to validate and soothe themselves, which also emphasised the reciprocal relationship between self-compassion and social support. The discussion of the current study's findings thus explored how students experienced the

challenges they were faced with during their first year of studies as well as how self-compassion aided their adjustment to university during the year.

Chapter 6

Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the current study. The chapter also highlights the limitations of the study, and possible implications for practice. Further, a reflexivity section is included, and lastly, the chapter makes recommendations for future research.

6.2 Summary of the findings

This study focused on first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with challenges while adjusting to university. A qualitative, exploratory descriptive design was used to gain insight into the participants' experiences. In so doing, 21 semi-structured interviews (12 initial and 9 follow-up) were conducted with students who were registered at a local university for the first time in 2019. The participants were provided with a vignette during the first interview and invited to comment on the narrative of the vignette character. This yielded rich data as the participants were prompted to share not only their opinions and views of the character, but how the story related to their own lives. Thus, they were not only prompted by the questions asked during the interview, but by reading and reflecting on the story of the vignette character. Follow-up interviews were conducted in the second semester in 2019 with nine of the participants.

The study intended to contribute to the body of literature on first-year students' experiences of self-compassion in South Africa. The study also intended to suggest possible implications for practice and to provide an understanding of first-years' experiences of self-compassion from a qualitative perspective as most research conducted on self-compassion has been quantitative in nature. The specific aim of the study was to explore first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university. The contextual aim was to explore and describe first-year students'

experiences of adjusting to university. Thus, how first-year students experience the challenges posed by adjustment to university and how they experience self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university were explored.

To reach these aims, the study utilised thematic analysis and an abductive approach based on self-compassion theory to analyse the data. The findings were discussed in detail, highlighting the key themes found across the participants' accounts of their experiences.

Three main themes with two subthemes each were identified, based on the data, and discussed in chapters 4 and 5. The first theme was (1) exercising agency as part of the adjustment process, with two subthemes, namely the effects of agency on experiences of hope and helplessness, and the role of self-compassion in exercising personal responsibility. The second theme was (2) tensions in students' experiences of self-compassion, with subthemes exploring students' contradictory experiences of self-compassion, and the role of self-compassion when engaging in upward social comparison. The last theme was (3) the processes of self-compassion within student experiences, with subthemes describing the twin process of the yin and yang of self-compassion when adjusting to university, and the reciprocal relationship between social support and self-compassion.

The findings indicated that self-compassion seems to be a protective factor for students when they faced challenges while adjusting to university. When participants were able to validate their experiences and soothe themselves through positive self-talk, they were also more inclined to engage in help-seeking behaviour and reach out to their social support systems. Participants also highlighted that self-compassion played a role in their experiences of upward social comparison. When they were self-compassionate, comparing themselves to other students motivated them to reach their goals, whereas when they experienced a lack of self-compassion, comparing themselves to other students was detrimental to their well-being.

Overall, the findings showed how self-compassion potentially enhanced student well-being and aided students in their adjustment to university, and how a lack of self-compassion could be detrimental to student well-being.

6.3 Personal reflection

Most of the literature on self-compassion and adjusting to university are internationally based and quantitative in nature. Thus, I aimed to contribute to the body of literature on self-compassion and the adjustment process in South African university students and undertake a more in-depth exploration of their self-compassion experiences. I could identify with the topic of this study, as I have at times experienced a lack of self-compassion as an undergraduate and postgraduate student and have been in my own adjustment process as an M1 psychology student and an intern psychologist.

Although I was not a first-year student at the time of conducting the study, I found myself relating to some of the participants' experiences. For this reason, I attempted to stay unbiased via discussions with my supervisor and keeping a reflective journal to become aware of where I might be projecting my own experiences on the interpretations of the participants' responses. During the data analysis and interpretation for the study, I had to engage in in-depth self-reflection to avoid over-identifying with the participants. By engaging with this research and the participants' responses, I became more aware of my internal experiences such as when I experienced a lack of self-compassion while adjusting to a new environment as well as while conducting research.

This awareness of my self-doubt, my harsh self-judgement when I experienced not making enough progress, and my over-identification with emotions such as guilt and failure enabled me to guard against the risk of projecting my experiences onto the participants' narratives. When I revisited an interpretation of a quote after a few days from another point of view, I was able to see that my interpretation was biased and edited my interpretation

accordingly. Re-examination of my interpretations became part of my research process and functioned as a method to ultimately enhance the accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the participants' narratives.

During my adjustment processes and training as a counselling psychologist, as well as during the research process, I started to experience a change in how I relate to myself. The skills that I developed in listening and empathising in my M1 year assisted me with building rapport with the participants during the interview process. This proved valuable especially in the interviews with students who struggled to express themselves in English initially. I encouraged them to take their time and they seemed to become comfortable with participating in the interview. Further, I became more self-compassionate the longer I was invested in my training and research which, in turn, made it easier for me to look past my own projections and recognise the voices of the participants. I felt deep gratitude for my own experiences and what I could gain and learn from the research experience.

6.4 Limitations of this study

While measures were taken to design and execute this study, especially regarding trustworthiness, rigour and ethical conduct, some limitations have to be taken into account when reading this report. All participants were from five different first-year Psychology classes of one Psychology module. They had different majors and were not all exclusively studying Psychology, which is considered a limitation regarding the representativeness and diversity of the sample. Most of the study findings do align with literature on student populations in general, but future research can be conducted to confirm the findings in different student populations such as at different universities and from different modules.

Further, from the 12 recruited participants, only nine responded to an invitation for a second interview in the second semester. Although these nine participants still provided detailed descriptions valuable to the study, the reason for the participants withdrawing from

the study was unclear. It is thus uncertain whether there was a difference in experiences and levels of self-compassion between the participants who took part in the second interview and the participants who dropped out.

Not all the participants attended interviews in the same month. Thus, some participants were interviewed during test weeks, whereas others were not. The participants' stress levels could have been varied due to academic requirements, which could have impacted their perceptions and experiences at the time of the interviews.

The participants were provided with a vignette, which yielded rich, thick data, but could have influenced their responses. Although the vignette prompted the students to share their opinions or experiences, it could have led the participants to share their narratives in relation to the vignette. In this sense, the vignette could have served a similar function to asking leading questions. However, as the interviews were semi-structured in nature, the participants were provided with the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions, which elicited valuable accounts of their own experiences that were unrelated to the vignette. Arguably, the vignette in the current study did not lead participants to provide specific answers.

Although some participants in this study whose mother-tongue was not English were willing to participate in the interviews, they might still have experienced a language barrier. Some of these students did, at times, seem to struggle to express themselves authentically. Thus, it can be argued that language played a role in how accurately participants could express their views during data collection and that this issue should be addressed in future research.

At the end of the first interview, the participants received a small parcel with refreshments and a link to Neff's self-compassion website to thank them for their participation. The refreshments they received at the end of the first interview could have created an expectation of receiving a reward at the second interview. In a way, it could have

unintentionally coerced them into participation. However, I reminded them that the consent form that they signed stated that their participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, before the second interview.

The participants received the link to Neff's self-compassion website (<https://self-compassion.org/>) after the first interview, which could have unintentionally served as a mini-intervention, and impacted their experiences at the second interview. Thus, it is unclear whether the additional information could have influenced their lived experiences of self-compassion as they were not asked whether or not they had visited the website.

At the time of data analysis, I was studying to become a psychologist and had my own experiences of self-compassion, or rather, a lack thereof. For example, I would feel nervous and uncertain during sessions with clients and would ruminate afterwards on whether or not the session was successful. I would often doubt myself and over-identify with perceived failure. It was thus sometimes difficult not to over-identify with the participants' experiences, even though we are in different age groups and life stages. Also during this time, I was in an adjustment process, which could have influenced the way I interpreted their responses, especially since I could relate to some of the participants' experiences. However, I was aware of my potential bias while analysing and interpreting the data and grappled with this as I wrote in my reflexive journal. My supervisor also acted as a second coder to the data and looked at the themes to establish trustworthiness and rigour of the study as well as to ensure the accurate capture of the participants' voices.

Lastly, interviews for this study were conducted before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic while I was completing the first year of my master's degree as a counselling student psychologist. Thus, the experiences of the first-year students are relevant to adjustment to university before the pandemic and not to a university context where first-year students engage in distance or blended learning. These limitations can, however, inform

future research regarding self-compassion and adjustment to university during the Covid-19 pandemic and in so doing, build on the existing body of literature.

6.5 Implications of the study

The value of this study lies in the rich, thick descriptions of first-year students' experiences of self-compassion while adjusting to university. There is currently limited qualitative research available on this topic. As such, this study contributes to the body of literature by providing an in-depth understanding of how students experience and practise self-compassion when they face challenges as part of the adjustment process. The themes that emerged from the data provided an understanding how first-year students experienced self-compassion or a lack thereof, and how self-compassion influenced their experiences of adjusting to university.

The findings from this study could further aid students in their process of adjusting to university by raising awareness of the challenges that form part of the adjustment process that many first-year students experience and serve as a valuable resource for those who feel overwhelmed in their first year. Furthermore, future research could consider the findings in this study to inform possible interventions to facilitate the adjustment process for first-year students. The in-depth exploration and description of students' experiences in the study could inform future intervention-based research regarding self-compassion and adjusting to university to be tailored to the needs of South African university students.

Lastly, the current study's findings could be valuable for the university as a system to understand students' experiences and position self-compassion as a resource to protect against students dropping out during their first and second year at university. Interventions can also be considered to form part of the first-year experience and included in the curriculum to help students become aware of self-compassion which can function as a protective mechanism when they face challenges during their first year at university.

6.6 Recommendations for future research

The interviews for this study were conducted in 2019, before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, the structure of university, learning and students' experiences have changed considerably. The adjustment process was also affected as students engage in online learning, which yields different experiences compared to attending classes on campus. It would thus be valuable for the current cohort of South African students that research be conducted on their experiences and practices of self-compassion while adjusting to university during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The current study exclusively used interviews to collect data from participants. It might thus be noteworthy to consider using focus groups to gather additional data. The participants in the current study had a variety of experiences regarding their peers and social situations, and it could be beneficial to investigate their experiences when interviewing them in a group compared to individually. Because group participation can create awareness of common humanity as an element of self-compassion, focus groups can be considered as a useful way to collect data for future research.

Utilising a mixed methods approach could also yield valuable information. In the current study, it was clear that participants experienced different levels of self-compassion, but due to the qualitative nature of the study, their levels of self-compassion were based on my interpretation and not on a self-report scale. A mixed methods approach would allow one to explore how participants view themselves, which can be determined by completing self-report measures such as the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a). The utilisation of a mixed methods approach provides the opportunity to use self-report measures as a baseline for understanding students' experiences such as how self-compassionate they are, and to build on this understanding by gathering rich, nuanced data through interviews and focus groups.

Should the Covid-19 context prevail, online platforms could also be considered as a more appropriate means of collecting quantitative and qualitative data.

Future participants can be recruited more rigorously by selecting them from various modules and degrees to enhance the diversity in the sample. It is suggested that participants are interviewed relatively in the same time frame to avoid the influence of external factors on their experiences, such as stress regarding academic performance. In addition, a sufficient number of participants should be recruited to ensure data saturation in both sets of interviews, in the case of participants withdrawing from the study halfway through the interviewing process. Intervention-based research could be valuable for exploring how universities could aid first-year students during their adjustment process.

Lastly, the findings from the current study yielded significant insights with regard to the yin and yang of self-compassion, social support and self-comparison. Thus, it would be valuable to explore the nuances within and between these constructs more deeply as they appear to be prominent in first-year students' experiences of adjusting to university.

6.7 Conclusion

This study focused on first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion while adjusting to university. The findings aimed to answer research questions pertaining to how students experience the challenges posed by adjustment to university as well as self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university. Students further indicated experiencing challenges more intensely when they longed for social support, especially those who had moved away from home to study at university. Moreover, a sense of agency seemed to have directly impacted students' experiences as exercising agency contributed to experiences of hope. In contrast, a lack of agency was accompanied by a sense of helplessness. Further, self-compassion played a role in what students felt personally responsible for as some students were worried about reaching

academic success. Others, however, were less concerned with a fear of failure and were instead motivated to enhance their levels of well-being and reach their full potential. Notably, regarding the second research question, being self-compassionate seemed to have been beneficial for participants' well-being and optimal functioning. From the discussion of the findings, the students had nuanced self-compassion experiences when they engaged in social comparison, considered their support systems, and faced challenges such as academic stress and unsatisfactory academic performance. Self-compassion was also positioned as a process which involved most of the participants findings it easier to engage in help-seeking behaviour after validating their experiences. Self-compassion is thus a valuable mechanism that can assist students in their adjustment to university, and even more so, enhance student well-being.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to speak to me about your experiences at university. I am interested in hearing about the challenges that you have encountered while being at university as well as how you experience and practice being compassionate towards yourself when faced with these challenges.

- To begin with, can you tell me about the degree that you are studying towards? And what does it mean for you to be studying at university?
- How do you experience living far from/close to your family?

Here is a short story about the experiences of a first-year student at UFS in Bloemfontein. Please take some time to read through it. After reading, I will ask you a few questions with reference to your views on Amanda's/John's situation as well as your own personal experiences.

A vignette about the experiences of a first-year student

“Amanda/John is 18 years old and has just moved to Bloemfontein from a small town to study at the UFS. Although she/he enjoys her/his newfound independence, she/he worries about whether she/he will be able to pay for tuition fees, accommodation and daily living expenses. She/he has just failed her/his first semester test.”

- What do you think happens next?
- What challenges are you currently experiencing at university? And when you think about these challenges, what thoughts are going through your mind?
- Can you think of some ways in which you are unkind or kind towards yourself when you experience such challenges? (Probe: How can being kind towards yourself help you in adjusting to university?)

“Amanda/John is one of many students in her/his Psychology class and because she/he feels embarrassed by her/his low mark, she/he is reluctant to speak to her/his lecturer about why she/he failed the test. She/he therefore does not know how to improve upon her/his marks, and is unsure about whether she/he will be able to pass the module. She/he does not feel that she/he is “good enough” to be at university.”

- How, in your opinion, is Amanda/John handling the fact that she/he failed a test?
(Probe: How do you think Amanda/John feels?) (In your view, how is the way that Amanda/John is feeling and handling the situation affecting her/him?)
- When you think about the challenges that you experience such as _____, what feelings do you become aware of? And how does this impact on your university experience?

“Amanda/John enjoys spending time with new friends in her/his city res but misses her/his family when she/he is alone. Apart from forming new friendships, Amanda/John is fixating on everything that is wrong (the test she/he failed, lack of access to the internet, and the fact that she/he is unmotivated to study) and feels as if she/he is the only one who is experiencing these difficulties.”

- What, in your view, would help Amanda/John with the way she/he is feeling at the moment? (Probe: How would _____ help her/him?)
- In what ways can you relate to Amanda/John? And what difference does it make to you if you are aware that others are going through the same experiences?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add before we end?

Once again thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview and for sharing your opinions and experiences. I will e-mail the transcript to you for you to check if what I have recorded is accurate, and in case you want to add anything. I will also share the link of a self-compassion website that you might find helpful and contact you for a follow-up interview.

Follow-up Interview Schedule

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to speak to me about your experiences at university once again. At our first interview, you talked about ... [depending on responses from previous interview session]. This morning/afternoon, I would like us to talk about your experiences since our previous interview session.

- To begin with, would you please tell me a bit about how you are experiencing life as a student since we last talked? (Probes: How would you compare your experiences as a student between the first and second semester?)
- When we spoke about the challenges you experienced in the first semester, you mentioned that _____. When you think about the challenges you are facing at the moment, what thoughts are going through your mind? (In what ways are the thoughts you have now similar to, or different from, the thoughts you had mentioned when we spoke earlier?)
- You mentioned that you are sometimes unkind to yourself by _____. How has this affected your university experience?
- You mentioned that [a way in which the participant shows kindness to him/herself] can help you to adjust to university by _____. How has _____ helped you to adjust to university thus far?
- When you think about the challenges you experience such as _____, what feelings do you become aware of? (How intensely do you experience these feelings? What changed since the last time we talked? What stayed the same?)
- In our first interview, you mentioned that being aware that others are going through similar experiences could make a difference to you because _____. How has this awareness helped you when faced with the challenges you experience at university?

(What can one do to become more aware that others are going through similar experiences and challenges?)

- We have been talking about self-compassion in our interviews. Can you tell me a bit about how, if at all, being self-compassionate could be helpful while you are experiencing the challenges of adjusting to university?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add before we end?

Once again thank you for taking the time to participate in this follow-up interview and for sharing your opinions and experiences. I will e-mail the transcript to you for you to check if what I have recorded is accurate, and in case you want to add anything. I will also e-mail the final document to you if you would like to read about the findings of the study, and I will share a few additional resources that you might find helpful.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), hereby volunteer to participate in a Psychology Masters study conducted by Maroné Oosthuizen from the University of the Free State. I understand that this study is designed to gather information about first-year students' challenges and experiences of self-compassion in adjusting to university and have been informed about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I was informed that two interviews, which will last approximately 30-45 minutes, will be held during the course of the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview, I have the right to decline to answer a question or to withdraw my participation in the study without penalty. I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

Moreover, I understand that should I suffer any emotional distress or personal embarrassment during the process of reflecting on and sharing my experiences as a first-year student at UFS during the course of the study, I may contact Dr Melissa Barnaschone at UFS Student Counselling and Development (051) 4012853 who will provide 2-3 counselling sessions, free of charge. In addition, should I have any concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, I may contact the administrator of the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, Mrs Charne Vercueil on vercuilcc@ufs.ac.za or (051) 4017093.

I agree to the recording of the interview.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Maroné Oosthuizen (marojvr@gmail.com)

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____



Appendix C

Example of an Interview Transcript

Interview 1, Participant B1

Date: 28 August 2019

Place: University of the Free State

Duration: 37:11

Key: -- False start to a sentence
 --. Sentence ends abruptly/is incomplete/is interrupted
 ... Pause
 Word(s) inaudible

1. **Interviewer (I):** “Okay, so good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time once again --.”
2. **Interviewee (R):** “It’s a pleasure”
3. **I:** “Uhm, this one is gonna look the same as the previous one so I am still interested in hearing about your experiences at university, some of the opinions you might have or anything that you would like to share, uhm, but I am interested in your experiences since the first time --.”
4. **R:** “yeah”
5. **I:** “we’ve talked. So, could you please tell me a bit about how you are experiencing life as a student since we last talked.”
6. **R:** “Well since we laft talked, last spoke I think I definitely got my life more together, adjusted a bit more to what varsity is like and what it expects of me. It was a big shock coming from high school where they expect such a little bit of you and then coming to university where they expect so much of you and at the same time you have to be independent and you have to control your finances and you have to keep your relationships good and you have to still have time for yourself so I think I’ve learnt or I have adjusted now to managing it all a bit better.”
7. **I:** “Okay, so uhm, how is it for you now, compared to how it was, can you give me like examples --.”
8. **R:** “Like, for example, I remember the first interview I was very, I was stressing because I didn’t feel healthy and I wasn’t eating healthy and I wasn’t gymming but (participant takes a deep breath) now it has changed. Now I am starting to eat healthy, I am starting to gym more, I don’t have so much financial stress because I have learned how to manage my money and learned kind of... the workload I have kind of adjusted to it now and accepted that it is going to be more difficult but I can handle it.”
9. **I:** “Okay, what would you say helped you to adjust to all of these different areas of your life?”
10. **R:** “I think just time. Just time to practice a bit and have a few months or, I went through a few months where I tried this and I have tried that just to see kay if I spend my money this way will I have left over, if I manage my time this way will I be, will this work for me. It’s just time and practice... I think.”
11. **I:** “Okay, so with practice, I just want to check, it’s like this trial and error --.”
12. **R:** “Yah”
13. **I:** “Type of thing”
14. **R:** “Trial and error for sure”

15. I: "Okay, and is that the way for you in all of the areas or is there some areas that you feel something specific might have played a role?"
16. R: "... Uhm, I think, in, with regards to myself and giving time to myself, that wasn't trial and error, that was talking to friends and ... [Noises of students talking in the background audible] like listening to them and hearing what they say and seeing how they make time for themselves and then kind of using their tips and everything to adjust it to my life."
17. I: "So how does making time for yourself look like?"
18. R: "Well now it's doing things for myself, so instead of spending the whole day studying, taking like a gym break or sitting in the lounge and talking to a friend for a little bit, not just work, stress, all of that. For me, taking time for myself is relaxing a bit."
19. I: "Okay, and uhm how much time did you take for yourself last semester?"
20. R: "... I don't think I took a lot of time for myself last semester. I had a lot of time on my hands, but I wasn't using it productively for myself, whereas this semester I make time to do things that I know are good for me."
21. I: "And how do you think that has impacted your experience at university?"
22. R: "It's definitely made my experience a bit more uhm pressured, to try and fit everything in and get everything I want to do done and academically done and then all of that but it's worth it."
23. I: "Okay. What do you gain from that?"
24. R: "Gain from what?"
25. I: "From making time for yourself even if it feels more pressured. What makes it worth it for you?"
26. R: "I think just mental wellbeing, just knowing that... if I just take a little bit of time for myself and just out of my day and do something that is going to make me happy, it relaxes me and it makes me feel good and it calms me down and helps like [loud noise audible from outside] mental wellbeing.... state."
27. I: "Okay. So, uhm, you spoke a little bit about it now, but if you think now in general, how would you compare your experiences as a student from first semester to this semester?"
28. R: "Well I think first semester was... it was hectic in the sense that you had to adjust to all these new things but at the same time I feel like I had more time on my hands whereas second semester, I don't know, something about it is just... everything is all crammed into one semester so it's a little bit more stressful, uhm, but I think as a person, I had to go through first semester and all those adjustments to be ready for second semester."
29. I: "Okay. So what exactly prepared you and what made you feel more ready now?"
30. R: "I feel more ready because I know what to expect now. I know the workload, I know what my lecturers expect of me and I know how much effort and time I need to put in. I also know things like I need to spend so much this month and I need to spend this much time with myself and I need to spend this much time with friends and I need to manage my time and I didn't really know it but last semester, cause I never had to, I never had to know it before, so knowing all these things now is helping me this semester when it's like very stressful so then I don't have to stress about money for example because I have already learned how to handle it, so now I can just focus on like the stressful parts of this semester."
31. I: "Okay. So when we spoke about the challenges that you experienced in the first semester, uhm, I remember you mentioning uhm the challenges you experiences was around budgeting for money, uhm, your university work and also like managing your time, like taking time to exercise or find time to exercise."
32. R: "Yes."
33. I: "So, how do you feel about those now?"

34. **R:** “I feel much better. I think in first semester concerning money, I was very hard on myself and I was very strict with you can’t spend any amount over this. I don’t know why but I thought I had to save all my money whereas now it’s like okay if you... spend a little bit more than you should this month and then you save a little bit next month and with regard to time management I am more... aware now of like where my time is going. In first semester everything was just a rush but now I am more aware of like this amount of time is going into that, this amount of time is going into studying, maybe you should cut of some time here and give it to studying for example. Yah, and with exercise I have also learned to but in gym somewhere in between of all of the craziness.”
35. **I:** “And the university work?”
36. **R:** “University work, oof, it’s not fun [participant laughs]. It’s difficult, uhm, but I’ve also found the balance for it to make time for it. Obviously this semester is a bit more harder or more difficult... but... yah, it’s nothing I feel I can’t handle.”
37. **I:** “Okay, so let’s look, let’s focus on the budgeting part. What effect did that have on you at university when you start to be less hard on yourself and allow yourself more slack if I can call it that.”
38. **R:** “Yeah. Uhm, it was, it was, it had a good effect on me because I had, I stopped stressing the whole time about oeh you wanna go have lunch with your friends, that’s going to make you go over budget, you know, whereas let’s just say its okay to go like, like a couple of hundred over your budget if its --. Obviously you not every day but if like I can afford to like if I have saved up enough money. So just the, the kind of stress relief of stopped stressing about your money, everything is going to be fine, everything is not about money. You have it there to spend. So that just helped me relieve myself with stress and with it all.”
39. **I:** “Okay, and the uhm, time management where you went from time kind of just passing by to now you trying to use every hour for something, how has that influenced your life?”
40. **R:** “It’s made life a little... complicated, not complicated but almost complicated because now, whereas in first semester I have time to like just chill and like watch a movie or like read a book, now I like you don’t have time for that you need to do this and that. So... it makes life a bit more planned and a bit more structured, which I am not normally, I am not normally like that but it’s helped me a lot to make sure that I have enough time in a day to do everything that I need to get to.”
41. **I:** “Okay. And uhm the university work, how would you, would you regard it as a challenge now?”
42. **R:** “Well, yah, if it wasn’t challenging then I wouldn’t enjoy it. I am glad that as much as it sounds funny, but I am glad that it is challenging me because I mean if it was just, if everything was as easy as first semester, we would never progress. So it is nice to be challenged and to think a little bit more, even though it hurts me during a test, but you know, it's it's something that needs to happen so I don’t mind the challenge. I am willing to put in the work just to strengthen my mind.”
43. **I:** “What do you mean by it hurt you during the tests?”
44. **R:** “Well obviously the tests are a bit more tricky this semester and its more, you have to apply your knowledge a bit more than like when like last semester you had to just like list facts about stuff, now it’s like you have to apply it to a case study so it does challenge you a bit more but its good.”
45. **I:** “Okay. And uhm I was wondering about you the hurt. You used the word hurt.”
46. **R:** “Like hurt my marks. Or what do you mean?” [Participant laughs]
47. **I:** “How does it hurt you in tests?”

48. **R:** “It hurts me in tests just because now for tests I could just study like a list of things and study a few theories and concepts and then I would be fine whereas now it hurts me in that not physically but it just hurts my marks a little because now I am still used to studying lists and stuff like that and not applying it and then when I wrote my first semester test I got a bit of a shock. So it hurt my marks probably, I am not sure yet, but I will see when I get them back, but it has to happen.”
49. **I:** “Okay, and [clears throat] are there any other challenges that you have experiences since the last time we have talked?”
50. **R:** “... Uhm... I think... my only challenge would be to... as much as I’m managing my time now, something it’s still hard to find the balance between... okay you need to study versus... okay go and see you friends. Because sometimes you feel like you need a break from studying and you need to see your friends but then other times you just need a break from your friends and you need to study. So as much as I manage my time much better I am still... the balance is still a bit off I think. I think I spend a little too much time doing friendly stuff instead of working” [participant chuckles].
51. **I:** “Okay. What makes you say that you are spending too much time with friendly stuff” [both researcher and participant chuckles]
52. **R:** “I think it is a personal thing... uhm like I know if I feel ready and prepared for a test and if I am not feeling that feeling it is because maybe I went with a friend to get coffee or something like that. Then I go into the test knowing that... even if I get a seventy I could have gotten an eighty if I spent that hour studying instead of with a friend. So it is definitely a personal thing of knowing that okay... I did spend too much time with my friends this week and I messed up a little bit in this test but it’s okay.”
53. **I:** “Okay. ...Uhm when you think about the challenges that you are facing in this moment like the balance with the time and the university work now, what thoughts are going through your mind?”
54. **R:** “I think... I am thinking right now that... every semester or every month or every day has a new challenge that you have to overcome so I am trying not to be too hard on myself and like beat myself up for like if I get a bad mark or something like that because I am still getting there. I am still going to work on finding a balance, so obviously it’s not nice if you don’t do well in a test or something and you know that you could have if you spent more time studying but at the same time I am like okay well now I know. So overcoming like these challenges, it’s not nice in the process but at the end of the day I understand now what happens.”
55. **I:** “Okay. So in what ways do you think the thoughts that you now have surrounding the challenges are similar to or different from the thoughts that you had about the challenges last semester?”
56. **R:** “... I think last semester I was... a bit naïve in that I thought that it was all about your mindset and... you should just pick yourself up when you had a bad day or something or when you have gotten a bad mark whereas now after maybe experienced it a little bit I realized it is a little bit more difficult than I made it seem. ... So I noticed that it is not as easy as it seems to just say okay you got a bad mark, you have to move on from it because sometimes you dwell on it and then like you can’t help it. So I think my mindset has changed a bit and I am a bit more realistic now.”
57. **I:** “And how does that realistic mindset look like?”
58. **R:** “Well it’s not, it’s more like... not just blaming things on like... or not blaming its rather... like more realistic like with myself like if I failed a test or something you allowed to dwell on it for a little bit and then move on whereas last semester I think it was more of

okay you failed a test, move on. So now like I give myself like a realistic time to think about it and get over it and even for everything. Just to like think about stuff and feel my emotions a bit more instead of just trying to move on from them I actually want to feel them a bit and then let them go.”

59. **I:** “And you did you experience that, giving yourself time to feel it before you go on?”
60. **R:** “Well its normally not nice when you have to think about something that isn’t nice, but normally I would phone my mom or talk to a friend about it and get it off my chest and actually like get it out there a little bit before I would just like move on. So I allow myself to think about it and sad about it or whatever and then I will start to move on instead of just ignoring the feelings that I was feeling and like the disappointment or whatever and pushing it to the side. Cause now I feel it and allow it to manifest and then let it go.”
61. **I:** “Do you experience any difference since you start to pay more attention to it instead of ignoring it or swiping it to the side?”
62. **R:** “I feel like it makes me a bit more sad sometimes when I have to think about it but at the same time I know that... at the end of the day its gonna help me to feel the sadness that I am feeling about something and then get over it instead of just never feeling my emotions.”
63. **I:** “So in what way does it help you personally?”
64. **R:** “Well I think it helps me personally in that I don’t just bottle everything up now and that I don’t just ignore everything that’s bad and that I don’t wana focus on. It helps me to like work through it instead of just okay that’s something that is not nice to think about it so I am not going to think about it. Now I can think about it, talk to a friend about it, work through it and then slowly progress from it.”
65. **I:** “Okay, so what happens if you bottle it up? What happens at the end of that?”
66. **R:** “Oeehh its normally an explosion. So normally if I bottle something up I keep it in me for like a month or two and then if I go home, normally because family is my safe space, then it just explodes. It will start as like something small that I am fighting with my mom about or my sisters and then it will just explode into everything that I haven’t told them for like the past two months that I have been bottling up so it’s something I am also trying to work on as not just exploding everything that’s, I have been feeling and the bottled emotions.”
67. **I:** “Okay and if we look at that other side, trying to allow yourself to feel the emotions whether it is positive or negative, what happens at the end of that process?”
68. **R:** “Well I think at the end of the process of like felt it and everything it’s easier to let it go. Cause once you thought about it and you’ve dwelled on it and you contemplated it and you’ve contested it in your mind, then it makes it easier to just say okay well I have done everything I could have thought about it now, this is what I can do to fix it now, I must let it go.”
69. **I:** “Okay... and in what ways have going through that process affect or influence your experience at university?”
70. **R:** “I think it’s made my experience a bit better because now I know that like for example the past two weeks have been extremely, extremely, extremely stressful with tests and I have been feeling down a lot and I have been feeling stressed and its helped me to realized that it is okay if I feel a little bit down or something like that whereas I used to be like you can’t feel sad about anything, you must always be happy and positive and move on. Whereas now I allow myself especially to express it to my friend And in doing that it helps me to work through it.”

71. **I:** “Okay. ... so the previous time we spoke you mentioned uhm some ways that you are unkind to yourself. And the things that you mentioned was your being negative towards yourself, being unkind to yourself and you put pressure on yourself uhm as well as when you are not eating healthy or well enough and when you drink too much.”
72. **R:** [Participant laughs]
73. **I:** “So how do you feel about this now?”
74. **R:** “Uhm I am definitely more kind to myself uhm... just a lot nicer to the person You know like not so stressed about waking up every morning and I must put make up on and like I must have the perfect thing to wear and I am not really that phased about And I am, I’m eating much healthier too which makes my body feel good but I’m also, I’m not depriving myself from anything. And I really don’t drink that much [participant laughs]. Its... yeah.”
75. **I:** “Okay, so how was you know all of this being kinder to the person and the whole eating more healthier, how has that impacted your adjustment to university or just your general experience here.”
76. **R:** “Well I think it’s easier to adjust to university ad everything if you are already comfortable with yourself, so adjusting to university and like meeting new people and stuff like that it’s so much easier when you are comfortable with yourself and I think if you are comfortable with yourself you are nice to yourself. So it’s helped me in also be more confident to be able to talk to people and not be shy and able to speak up so it’s made my experience better in that sense.” [Door closing loudly audible from outside]
77. **I:** “Are there any other ways that you are unkind to yourself that you might have become aware of after the last time we spoke?”
78. **R:** “... Mmm... I feel like thinking right now I don’t know. Maybe one way that I am unkind to myself is I am still hard on myself but not as hard as I was last semester but I think maybe I can just chill a bit more” [participant chuckles]
79. **I:** “Okay, in what ways do you think you are still hard on yourself?”
80. **R:** “I think I still do put a lot of pressure on myself to have like reached certain goals at certain points and if I don’t reach it then it doesn’t make me feel good but and then I am hard on myself about like why didn’t you reach it but I also get over that.”
81. **I:** “Okay... so you also mentioned that sometimes you are kind to yourself by telling yourself to trust yourself, talking to your friends and doing something for yourself. Do you want to elaborate a bit more on that?”
82. **R:** “... Yah, well I think the same thing sort of applies maybe also talking to my family is being kind to myself, uhm... yah I think I beat myself a lot up I beat myself up a lot... but I also do things that I know are good for myself and good for my metal health so even gym now for me is really really good to, if I am stressed or something I just kind of help me clear my mind for a little bit. And that are the things I do to be kind to myself.”
83. **I:** “And how have you experienced doing these things that you see to be kind to yourself, affecting your experience at university throughout the year?”
84. **R:** “Well it’s made my experience, it’s made me, it’s made the experience easier because instead of having to worry about, I have to worry about school work and I have to worry about finances and I have to worry about time management and I have to worry about assignments and tests and I have to worry about uhm what if I am beating myself up about, it helps it then, it just takes one less stress off, because varsity is already so stressful so to lose that stress of uhm being like super hard on yourself, it helps with the overall universities you can focus more on university stress instead of just stressing about yourself the whole time.”

85. I: "Okay. Uhm and what is overall university stress for you? I just want to clarify."
86. R: "University stress for me is ugh classes, getting to them on time especially I don't know like this semester all my classes seem to be after each other so the ten minutes are just not enough time to get around campus and making sure a big thing that I am always stressing about is making sure that they don't upload something on blackboard for example and I miss it or meeting like deadlines for activities and assignments and studying for tests in between like classes and then having a class and then writing a test straight afterwards and just its very stressful" [both researcher and participant chuckles]
87. I: "And uhm do you feel it's more or less than the previous semester?"
88. R: "Its definitely more. I think cause everyone told me this semesters gonna be difficult but honestly I laughed at them saying no man its fine but because of everything so crammed into like this three months it's just like the the like everyone's, all of your lecturers are putting tests and tests and tests and tests and tests and everything just seems much more crammed together than las semester it seems like we had like a month between tests whereas now it's like two weeks between a test. So it's this semester's --. And obviously the workload is just that little bit more and a little bit more difficult and they expect you, a little bit more of you like they expect you to apply your knowledge and read up more and have like extensive knowledge, extentive? Extensive knowledge. So the workload has definitely increased from last semester but I do not think it is unbearable. I think it's doable."
89. I: "Okay. So uhm... just to get back to the ways that you are kind to yourself, you said last semester that what, the biggest thing that has helped you is also to relax and that it was even therapeutic to do some of these things especially with friends."
90. R: "Yeah"
91. I: "So I am wondering how, how does that tie in for you with the newfound stress at the university in this semester?"
92. R: "Yah it helps a lot to when you stressing about a test if you can talk to a friend who has the same module for example. Even just talking to them about the thing that is stressing you about actually helps me or knowing that I am not the only one who's feeling all this pressure and feeling all this stress just knowing that its normal, my friends are experiencing you are supposed to be a little bit stressed this semester. So talking to friends, even when you talking about the stressful thing, for me it relaxes me. And it also helps me that we can like share knowledge about stuff which helps a lot too."
93. I: "Okay. So in which way does it also help you to talk to someone who you know has had the experiences as you?"
94. R: "I think it just help you relate to them. Like I said not to feel like you going through this massive thing alone. So I think, I think a big problem with first years is that they feel like... they going through this whole stress and this whole adjustment alone and in reality we actually all in this together, we all not in the exact same, we all feel some sort of pressure and stress and worry. And you think it's it's just yourself but just to know that you know its normal you not weird, you not the only one feeling this way. Just to feel a sense of belonging with another first year, it helps."
95. I: "So what do you think is the difference for a first year who feels like they are in this alone and a first year who feels like that sense of belonging with someone?"
96. R: "I think when you feel this sense of belonging you start to calm down a little bit and say okay... I am normal like I I'm I'm not the only person who's going, who feels like they got the world on their shoulders you know. Just helps you to calm down and say well if everyone else can do it and manage I can do it too. Just kind of just that sense of... like a

reasurement like you got this. They wouldn't give you something you can't handle or you are able to do it, your friends can do it, you can do it."

97. **I:** "... Okay so when we think about the challenges that you experience like university work and the what feelings do you become aware of?"
98. **R:** "Uhm I think... feelings of just over, overwhelmed. You feel a bit overwhelmed thinking about all the stuff you have to do like before seven o'clock and then you can take a break for an hour and then you got to start again. And it's just, its overwhelming sometimes and then sometimes you actually have nothing to do. So the feelings are like up and down cause you are like so overwhelmed some days and then some days you almost don't have enough to do. So your feelings kind of bounce around a little bit. But yah, it's not nice to have to worry if you feeling worried about something. But I also think there is a good amount of worry. I should be worries about like the assignments I have due next week for example. So there is a lot of mixed emotions."
99. **I:** "Okay. When you say you should worry about the assignment what do you get from that worry?"
100. **R:** "It makes me stress a little but I think its eustress I don't think its distress. I think it's a little, it's a good stress, to think ahead. Obviously not to like to worry and then to a point where you dwelling about it and its all you can think about and you can't even take a break over the weekend cause you so you must finish this project but we also can't just be so laid back that you like ooohh its next week I got a whole week to do it you know. You need that good stress to drive you a little bit to get it done."
101. **I:** "Okay. And when you say [clears throat] this feeling of sometimes a little bit of worry a little bit of overwhelmed, you know this mixed feelings, [clears throat] where would you put them on a scale if one being not intense at all and ten being like extremely intense?"
102. **R:** "I think it depends on the week. Some weeks are definitely an eight where I am just stressing and I am just I am not going to get anything done and some weeks it's like a two so really just depends on what's going on during that week or those two weeks or even those three days."
103. **I:** "So it depends on what happens also on what happens in the week now and what you have to do in the week."
104. **R:** "Yah I think a lot of my stress depends on how many assignments I have due, how many tests I have to study for, how many I have to do."
105. **I:** "Okay uhm and what do you think changed in terms of how intensely you feel these feelings from last time we spoke and what stayed the same?"
106. **R:** "I think this semester the feelings have been a bit more intense so last semester was about a six, this semester is about an eight just because like I said it's so jammed I feel like it's so jampacked and there's so much work to do and so much so many things that need to get done in such a short period of time so it does intensify the feelings a bit more compared to last semester that just felt a bit longer and a bit more like I had more time for it."
107. **I:** "Okay so in the first interview and also we spoke a bit now about it, uhm that be--. You mentioned that being aware that someone else is going through the same experiences that you are makes a difference because you feel you have support. How has that awareness helped you with adjusting to university and with your experiences this semester?"
108. **R:** "I think... its helped me adjust in that... I've I've been able to kind of in like talking through friends and like talking through other first years I made aware that uhm their also dealing with the same things we all going through the same things and it's also gives me like a different perspective so I can see okay maybe this person handles it like this and this

person handles it this way and I can also say oh okay well I like how this person does it I'm gonna try that. So it's kind of just you not alone and you get different ideas about how to do things whereas you be stressing like I really don't know how to do this assignment I don't know how to manage my time whereas you can look to a friend and say how do you do it and you realise like that's how they do it and obviously cause their in it with you you know it will apply to you."

- 109. I:** "Okay. So what do you think can one then do to become more aware of the fact that there are other people that go through similar experiences than you might be going to?"
- 110. R:** "I think a big thing for me was in tutorial classes cause we a lot smaller I'll say I would talk to more people than I normally would to in class and just kind of not even being best friends or even good friends, just being peers and talking to them and saying joh were you as stressed about this test as I am and they were like yah I haven't studied this chapter or I am struggling with this so you don't necessarily be good friends with someone but even just talking to another first year that you walk to class with or something uhm can help you gain like their perspective."
- 111. I:** "Okay. So we've also been talking about self-compassion in our interviews and I would like to just hear your thoughts about what do you think it means to be self-compassionate towards yourself?"
- 112. R:** "To me self-compassion is--. Cause if you compassionate about someone else you know you can care for them and you can relate to them so it's when you care for yourself and your kind to yourself and your nice to yourself and yah if your compassion your good to yourself, not only thinking about the negative things of why haven't you done this or why are you like that your like you think to yourself like okay well I'm a good person uhm I'm good at this I am good at that its being aware of the, your positive attributes not just your negative ones which we normally focus on the whole time."
- 113. I:** "Okay. So can you tell me a bit about how if that if at all, how being self-compassion could be helpful while you are experiences challenges, while you are experiencing challenges while adjusting to university?"
- 114. R:** "I think if your being self-compassion with yourself while you experiences hard well difficulties then it will help you in that... you won't be so negative about it you would be like why didn't you study last night you'd rather be like well you studies the night before and you got these chapters done lets focus now instead of like just dwelling on why didn't you do this why didn't you do that why didn't you go to this class why didn't you study earlier you'll say okay well I didn't go to that class but I went to this class and maybe I should have studied on a Monday but I am still studying today. So it helps you to just kind of move on from the negative things and to just move into like a plan of action."
- 115. I:** "Why do you think we tend to focus more on the negative side of ourselves?"
- 116. R:** "I think it's just easier. It's some, its so much easier to look at the things you don't like than the things you do like and I think also society if you watch tv or whatever or anything it, they never really depict, they never have a movie with like a person who is happy with themselves cause there's no story there so you kind of get used to seeing the story of you not happy with yourself or you not kind to yourself cause there's a story there. So I think media influences you a lot especially social media when they, like if you are online or something on Instagram and you are scrolling through and you see oeh she's got a nice body I wish I had a body like hers instead of saying oeh she's got a nice body but I've also got a nice body were being oeh I want that so..."
- 117. I:** "So if you can give someone advice on how they can be more self-compassionate towards themselves what would you tell them?"

- 118. R:** “I’d tell that person to just don’t be so hard on yourself. Don’t think that... just because something went wrong it means that everything is going to go wrong. Be kind to yourself don’t don’t don’t hurt yourself. The world’s already going to hurt you enough so you need to you need to be able to be nice to yourself and you need to be able to yah I think really just people beat themselves up about things too much.”
- 119. I:** “So before we end this interview is there anything else that you would like to add?”
- 120. R:** “Uhm... yah I think varsity like university in general is a weird time in a person’s life because you have all this freedom but you still dependent on your parents and you still wana go home some weekends and you want to stay here and party some weekends and you need to work some weekends it’s just kind of this weird but wonderful time in a person’s life so for like all like all my friends they like no I don’t wana come to university or whatever I definitely recommend university if you are willing to put in the work of course cause the social aspect of it is a lot of fun but the workload is difficult but if you doing something you love like I absolutely love my course then it’s actually easy. So that’s all I can say about university” [laughs].
- 121. I:** “Okay thank you”
- 122. R:** “Thank you” [laughs]
- 123. I:** “So thank you for taking the time to participate int his interview and to for sharing your opinions and experiences once again. So this one will work the same way as the previous one. I’m going to send you the transcript and then you can tell me if I should change or add or omit anything and uhm I’ll also send the final document to you like after everything is finished and then if I come across maybe interesting or useful resources I think maybe you would interesting I will also send those to you.”
- 124. R:** “Okay thank you!”
- 125. I:** “Thank you”
- 126. R:** “I appreciate it”

Example of the Coding Process

B1 Coding

Possible Codes:

1. Mindfulness
2. Overidentification
3. Self-kindness
4. Self-judgement
5. Common humanity
6. Isolation
7. Yin of self-compassion
8. Yang of self-compassion (which includes coping and motivation?)
9. Challenge of Striving to meet higher/self-actualization needs [not used, but self-efficacy was used]
10. Process of adjustment
11. Resources used to facilitate adjustment to university [not used]
12. Locus of Control [not used]

[social comparison and social support were also used to identify relevant themes]

Participant Responses	Open Coding	Closed Coding
<p>“Well since we last talked, last spoke I think I definitely got my life more together, adjusted a bit more to what varsity is like and what it expects of me. It was a big shock coming from high school where they expect such a little bit of you and then coming to university where they expect so much of you and at the same time you have to be independent and you have to control your finances and you have to keep your relationships good and you have to still have time for yourself so I think I’ve learnt or I have adjusted now to managing it all a bit better.”</p>	<p>Experienced “improvement” during the past few months</p> <p>Experience of adjustment</p> <p>Sense of what is expected of her</p> <p>Experienced a shock when encountering new environment with higher expectations</p> <p>Mixture between what uni expects of you and what you expect of you?</p> <p>[experience a sense of expectation from university (others) and from self]</p> <p>Own expectations and perceived responsibilities</p> <p>Time improved management of different responsibilities</p>	<p>CSAN, Process of adjustment, Locus of control</p>
<p>“Like, for example, I remember the first interview I was very, I was stressing because I didn’t feel healthy and I wasn’t eating healthy</p>	<p>Stress due to not being physically healthy</p>	<p>Mindfulness, Yang of SC, CSAN,</p>

<p>and I wasn't gymming but (participant takes a deep breath) now it has changed. Now I am starting to eat healthy, I am starting to gym more, I don't have so much financial stress because I have learned how to manage my money and learned kind of... the workload I have kind of adjusted to it now and accepted that it is going to be more difficult but I can handle it."</p>	<p>Same time when felt that she adjusted better also improved physical health Financial management reduced financial stress Adjusted to workload Acceptance to [possibly undesired] increase in difficulty of the workload Believes she will be able to handle the difficulty level [self-efficacy?]</p>	<p>Process of Adjustment,</p>
<p>"I think just time. Just time to practice a bit and have a few months or, I went through a few months where I tried this and I have tried that just to see kay if I spend my money this way will I have left over, if I manage my time this way will I be, will this work for me. It's just time and practice... I think"</p>	<p>Adjustment can possibly be a spontaneous process Can also involve action from the individual to become more adjusted Passive and active process?</p>	<p>Process of Adjustment,</p>
<p>"Trial and error for sure"</p>	<p>Adopted a trial and error method to adjustment</p>	
<p>"... Uhm, I think, in, with regards to myself and giving time to myself, that wasn't trial and error, that was talking to friends and ... [Noises of students talking in the background audible] like listening to them and hearing what they say and seeing how they make time for themselves and then kind of using their tips and everything to adjust it to my life."</p>	<p>Making time for self was also a conscious effort Going to friends for guidance Using other's tips and adjusting it to own life</p>	<p>Yang of SC, CSAN, Resources,</p>
<p>"Well now it's doing things for myself, so instead of spending the whole day studying, taking like a gym break or sitting in the lounge and talking to a friend for a little bit, not just work, stress, all of that. For me, taking time for myself is relaxing a bit."</p>	<p>Doing things for self excludes academic activities Doing physical activity or talking to friends other than work and stress Time for self = relaxing [self-care?]</p>	<p>Yang of SC, CSAN, process of adjustment</p>

Appendix D

Excerpt from the Reflexive Journal

I have finished coding with my first transcript! It feels really good to be engaging with the data. I have to double-check my coding, though, because there were times where I stopped for the day when I could see that I was becoming more and more biased. Hopefully, my supervisor will help me filter out the comments or the codes that are too biased or do not make that much sense from another point of view. I can now really understand the importance of having a second coder.

Although I am experiencing excitement and a sense of accomplishment, I feel a bit overwhelmed by the amount of codes coming out from the transcript. As I am using an abductive approach, I am trying to look for other keywords that pop up beyond only self-compassion. There are times where I feel I might be missing some important information but cannot seem to grasp it. At other times I struggle to see past only the three self-compassion constructs. When I feel stuck, I try to see how they connect with and influence one another in the participant's narrative. I should also note the differences between the times the participants have different self-compassion experiences and when they are projecting on to the vignette. Does it say something about compassion and self-compassion? Is self-compassion and compassion more when the participant can relate to the vignette character? And what happens when they cannot relate to the character? Are we more critical when it comes to ourselves? I also thought that maybe self-compassion is easier to apply when it goes well compared to when it goes badly?

One thing that I keep thinking of is the misunderstanding of self-compassion. Firstly, without taking self-compassion into consideration, working towards a goal like performing academically well might be a good thing. But if you only apply self-kindness when it goes well, what happens if it does not go well? Or with self-compassion in the equation, if you believe it will help you reach a goal, but it does not, what are the possible negative effects? Isn't the point to reach acceptance and not move away from things by using the internal dialogue? For example, saying to yourself: "I am going to fail" or "I have to try better next time". In both cases, there is a risk of the experience and emotions being avoided in a sense.

I obviously have a few ideas and a lot of questions swirling in my mind while engaging with the transcript, and it is difficult not to code them based on my interpretation. I find it difficult to find the balance between what the participant is “trying to say” and my interpretation thereof. There is a fine line, and once that line is crossed, the comment becomes biased. I am currently very aware of my own experiences of self-compassion and how I might be projecting onto the participants. Like with a second-coder, I see the value of keeping a reflexive journal, especially while analysing the data. I hope that with time, continuing with being reflexive and engaging with the thoughts and comments from my supervisor, I can do justice to the participants’ voices.

Appendix E

Letter of Ethical Clearance



Faculty of the Humanities

25-Oct-2018

Dear Mrs Oosthuizen

Ethics Clearance: First-year student's experiences of adjusting to university: A self-compassion approach

Principal Investigator: Mrs Maroné Oosthuizen

Department: Psychology Department (Bloemfontein Campus)

APPLICATION APPROVED

With reference to your application for ethical clearance with the Faculty of the Humanities. I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Research Ethics Committee of the faculty that you have been granted ethical clearance for your research.

Your ethical clearance number, to be used in all correspondence is: UFS-HSD2018/1118

This ethical clearance number is valid for research conducted from 25-Oct-2018 to 25-Oct-2019. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension.

We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure we are kept up to date with your progress and any ethical implications that may arise.

Thank you for submitting this proposal for ethical clearance and we wish you every success with your research.

Yours Sincerely

Dr. Asta Rau

Chair: Research Ethics Committee

Faculty of the Humanities

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Office of the Dean: Faculty of the Humanities

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P.O. Box/Posbus 339 | Bloemfontein 9300 | South Africa/Suid-Afrika | www.ufs.ac.za



Ethical Continuation Report



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

04-Oct-2021

Dear Miss Maroné Janse Van Rensburg

Continuation/Report Approved

Research Project Title:

First-year student's experiences of adjusting to university: A self-compassion approach

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2018/1118/1908/21

We are pleased to inform you that the application to extend your ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

**Dr Adri
du Plessis**

Digitally signed
by Dr Adri du
Plessis
Date: 2021.10.04
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Appendix F

Transcriber Agreement

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

You have been hired to transcribe interviews for Maroné Oosthuizen, on the research project: *First-year students' experiences of adjusting to university: A self-compassion approach*. The ethical guidelines of this study require that you read and sign this form, signifying that you are willing to enter into a confidentiality agreement with respect to the data collected in this study. Please complete the following.


I Elné Martin (transcriber's name) agree to:

1. Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., electronic files, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the researcher and supervisors (research team).
2. Maintain confidentiality by removing all identifiers of participants and third parties mentioned by participants during the interview (e.g., colleagues, family members and/or acquaintances of participants).
3. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession and ensure that all records, transcripts and recordings are kept confidential (i.e., materials are never left unattended and are secured when not being used) if transcription occurs outside the university.
4. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., electronic files, tapes, transcripts) to the researcher when I have completed the research task.
5. After consulting with the research team, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the researcher (e.g., information stored on USBs and computer hard drive).

Transcriber:

Elné Martin (Print Name)  (Signature) 12/03/2019 (Date)

Researcher:

Maroné Oosthuizen (Print Name)  (Signature) 11/03/2019 (Date)

Appendix G

Turnitin Report

Minor-Dissertation

ORIGINALITY REPORT

9%

SIMILARITY INDEX

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