A FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENT NETWORK FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY

by

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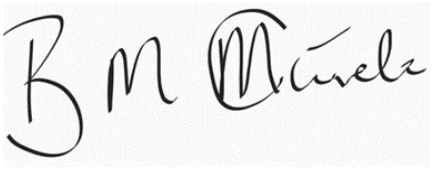
Declaration

I, *Benedict Mathole Macwele (2018287900)*, declare that the thesis, ***A FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENT NETWORK FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY***, submitted for the qualification of *Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Studies* at the University of the Free State, is my independent work.

Complete references have indicated and acknowledged all the references I have used.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work at another university or faculty to obtain a qualification.



25 October 2024

SIGNED DATE

Dedication

I dedicate this study to my wife, Lungile, and my three children, Mandisa, Minenhle and Ntando. I spent many nights away, and I know it was difficult for all of us.

I express my deepest gratitude to my parents, uBaba S.A.M. Macwele and uMama S.J. Macwele. The journey from an undergraduate to a doctoral degree was not easy. I am now a family man, but I started this journey as a teenager who had no idea what my path to success would be like. Baba and Mama, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. I would be nothing without the foundation you provided.

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Abstract

First-year commuter students face various challenges as they transition and adjust to the academic, social, and emotional environments of university life. These challenges highlight the crucial role of peer relationships and networks, as informed by Tinto's student integration theory. Building on these conclusions, this study's primary objective was to develop a framework for a supportive peer network that addresses the academic, emotional, and social needs of first-year commuter students.

To achieve this, I conducted an analysis of key documents, particularly annual reports, from seven South African universities to gain insights into their support systems for first-year commuter students. These analyses revealed that while several programmes catered to the needs of first-year commuter students (see 5.2 and 5.3), the primary focus was on academic support. The integration of social and emotional well-being for these students was notably underemphasised, with limited evidence on how these programmes influenced the adjustment of first-year commuter students.

Chapter 6 of this study serves as the focal point of analysis, exploring the success stories and best practices related to the academic, social and emotional transitions of first-year commuter students. It also examines the role of peer mentor programmes in supporting their adjustment. During the empirical research, eight focus-group discussions were conducted with first-year commuter students at the University of the Free State (UFS). These discussions were organised by gender and campus, following an appreciative inquiry framework that aims to highlight and build on positive experiences and strengths.

The findings underscore the critical role of peer relationships and support in addressing the challenges faced by first-year commuter students during their transition to university life. In the Discovery step of the AI 4D framework, participants highlighted various success stories and best practices that facilitated their adjustment (see 6.2). Conversely, in the Dreaming step, participants identified opportunities for growth to improve the adjustment experience for first-year commuter students (see 6.6). Building on these insights, the Designing (see 7.2)

and Delivery steps (see 7.4) proposed a five-pillar mentoring framework and an implementation plan.

By proposing the five-pillar mentoring framework and the accompanying implementation plan (see 7.4.1), the study offers a practical solution to enhance the effectiveness of peer mentor programmes. This framework aims to create a supportive peer network that ensures first-year commuter students receive the necessary guidance, support, and resources to thrive throughout their university journey.

Keywords:

Appreciative inquiry, case study approach, first-year commuter students, support, peer network framework, student success.

List of Acronyms

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
BA	Bachelor of Arts
CHE	Council of Higher Education
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DACD	Data Analytics Capacity Development
DUT	Durban University of Technology
ECP	Extended Curriculum Programmes
FYE	First-Year Experience
FYN	First-Year Navigator
FYS	First-Year Seminars
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GTER	Gross Tertiary Enrolment Rate
ITP	Integrated Transformation Plan
NBT	National Benchmark Test4
NDP	National Development Plan
NMU	Nelson Mandela University
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NSS	National Student Survey
NWU	North-West University
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PASS	Programme for Academic Student Success
RADAR	Risk Analysis and Detection to Assist and Retain
RID	Reading in the Discipline
RSA DHET	Republic of South Africa, Department of Higher Education and Training

RSA DPME	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
SAIDE	South African Institute for Distance Education
SI	Supplementary instruction
SUN	Stellenbosch University
TUT	Tshwane University of Technology
UFS	University of the Free State
UJ	University of Johannesburg
UK	United Kingdom
UN SDG	United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals
USA	United States of America
USAf	Universities South Africa

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration ii

Dedication iii

Acknowledgements iv

Abstract.. v

List of Acronyms vii

List of Tables xvii

List of Figures xvii

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, AND CONTEXT 1

1.1 SETTING THE SCENE OF THE STUDY 1

1.1.1 Higher education access and success: the global context 2

1.1.2 Higher education access and success: the African context 3

1.1.3 Higher education access and success in South Africa 4

1.1.4 The institutional context of access and success at the case study university 6

1.1.5 Context of first-year commuter students 6

1.1.6 Context of a first-year peer network in the UFS 9

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM 11

1.3 TINTO'S INTEGRATION THEORY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 12

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY 13

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS 14

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS 15

1.6.1 First-year commuter student 15

1.6.2 Peer network 15

1.6.3 Success for first-year commuters 15

1.6.4 First-year student network 15

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY 16

1.7.1 Interpretive paradigm and higher education as a field of study 16

1.7.2 Qualitative research approach 16

1.7.3 Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into the UFS peer mentor programme 17
1.7.4 Qualitative research methods 17
1.7.5 Data collection through qualitative inquiry 17
1.7.5.1 Document analysis 18
1.7.5.2 Focus-group discussions at the case study university 18
1.7.6 Selection of research participants 19
1.8 DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, REPORTING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE 19
1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS 20
1.10 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY 21
1.11 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY 21
1.12 CONCLUSION 21
Chapter 2 UNDERSTANDING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS 23
2.1 INTRODUCTION 23
2.2 HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION 24
2.2.1 Expanding access to higher education 24
2.2.2 Large classes because of massification 26
2.2.3 Increasing students' chances of success 27
2.3 DEFINING A FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENT 28
2.4 BENEFITS OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS 29
2.5 CHALLENGES OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS 30
2.5.1 The living environment of commuter students 30
2.5.2 Underpreparedness of commuter students 32
2.5.3 Commuter student engagement 33
2.5.4 Transportation issues for first-year commuter students 34
2.5.5 Commuter student funding support 36
2.5.6 Adapting to institutional cultures 38
2.5.7 Lack of space on campus for commuter students 39
2.5.8 Influence of COVID-19 on commuter students 40

2.6 SUPPORTING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS VIA PEER NETWORKS FOR HOLISTIC SUCCESS....41
2.6.1 First-year peer mentorship....42
2.6.2 Value and importance of peer mentorship....44
2.6.3 The emotional value of peer mentorship....45
2.6.4 The social value of peer mentorship....45
2.6.5 The academic value of peer mentorship....46
2.6.6 Mentor and mentee relationships....46
2.6.7 An integrated system of peer support....47
2.6.8 Challenges regarding peer mentorship....48
2.7 CONCLUSION....48
Chapter 3 THEORY OF INTEGRATING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTERS INTO THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT VIA A PEER MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME....51
3.1 INTRODUCTION....51
3.2 THEORIES OF STUDENT SUCCESS AND DROPOUT....51
3.2.1 Spady's theory and first-year commuter students....52
3.2.2 Astin's Student Involvement Theory and first-year commuter students....54
3.2.3 Bean and Metzner's conceptual theory and first-year commuter students....55
3.3 TINTO'S STUDENT INTEGRATION THEORY AND FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS....57
3.3.1 The separation stage of first-year commuter students....57
3.3.2 The transition stage of first-year commuter students....59
3.3.3 The integration stage for first-year commuter students....61
3.4 TINTO'S THEORY AND PEER MENTORSHIP....62
3.5 THE CRITIQUE AGAINST TINTO'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK CONCERNING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTERS....63
3.6 CONCLUSION....65
Chapter 4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY....66
4.1 INTRODUCTION....66
4.2 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM AND HIGHER EDUCATION FIELD OF STUDY 67

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH 69
4.4 APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI) OF PEER MENTOR PROGRAMME 70
4.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS 74
4.5.1 Document review and analysis 74
4.5.2 Focus-groups interviews 76
4.6 SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS 77
4.7 DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS 78
4.8 DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, REPORTING, AND QUALITY ASSURANCE 80
4.8.1 Braun and Clarke analysis framework 81
4.9 SIGNIFICANCE/VALUE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH 83
4.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS 84
4.11 CONCLUSION 85
Chapter 5 RESULTS OF DOCUMENT ANALYSIS ON SUPPORT PROGRAMMES FOR FIRST-YEAR COMMUTERS IN SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES 87
5.1 INTRODUCTION 87
5.2 CORE FIRST-YEAR PROGRAMMES ACROSS SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES 88
5.2.1 First-year commuter student orientation 89
5.2.1.1 University-Specific Orientation Programmes 90
5.2.1.2 Common features of University-Specific Orientation Programmes 92
5.2.1.3 Challenges of University-Specific Orientation Programmes 92
5.2.2 Academic advising and commuter students 94
5.2.2.1 Key aspects related to Academic Advising programmes 94
5.2.2.2 A mutual challenge related to Academic Advising programmes 95
5.2.3 Peer learning academic support 96
5.2.3.1 Key aspects of peer learning academic support in selected South African Universities 96

5.2.3.2 Similarities, diversities, and challenges with peer learning academic support at selected South African universities 97
5.2.4 First-year seminars and commuter students 98
5.2.4.1 First-year seminar (FYS) programmes at selected South African universities 99
5.2.4.2 Other transitional programmes at selected South African universities 99
5.2.4.3 Challenges during online transition for FYS 100
5.3 EXCLUSIVE SMALL-SCALE FIRST-YEAR PROGRAMMES AT SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES 100
5.3.1 Peer mentorship programme 101
5.3.1.1 Benefits of peer mentoring 101
5.3.1.2 Challenges with peer mentorship programmes 102
5.3.2 Writing and reading programmes for first-year students 102
5.3.3 Student success webinars for first-year commuter students 102
5.3.4 Student success coaching for first-year commuter students 102
5.4 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC PLANS FOCUSING ON STUDENT SUCCESS 103
5.4.1 Student success initiatives at selected South African universities 104
5.5 REFLECTION ON THE SUPPORT PROGRAMMES 105
5.6 CONCLUSION 106
Chapter 6 PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS THROUGH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI) 108
6.1 INTRODUCTION 108
6.2 AI 4D CYCLE'S FIRST STEP: DISCOVERING 108
6.3 ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS 111
6.3.1 Success stories in the academic adjustment of first-year commuter students 112
6.3.1.1 Success stories regarding family support for first-year commuter students . 112
6.3.1.2 Success stories regarding collaborative Learning Partnerships 115
6.3.1.3 Success stories regarding supportive lecturers and tutors 116
6.3.2 Best practices in the academic adjustment of first-year commuter students 119
6.3.2.1 First-year orientation as best practice for academic support 119

6.3.2.2 Peer mentor programme as best practice for academic support 120
6.4 SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS 123
6.4.1 Success stories in the social adjustment of first-year commuter students 124
6.4.1.1 Interpersonal skills as success stories 124
6.4.1.2 Living close to the university and high school friends as success stories 127
6.4.2 Best practices in the social adjustment of first-year commuter students 129
6.4.2.1 Day residence as best practice for social adjustment..... 129
6.4.2.2 Service-learning modules and faculty events as best practices for social adjustment..... 132
6.4.2.3 First-year orientation as best practice for social adjustment..... 134
6.4.2.4 Peer mentor programme as best practice for social adjustment..... 136
6.5 EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS ... 139
6.5.1 Success stories in the emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students 140
6.5.1.1 Living with Family 140
6.5.1.2 Supportive friends..... 142
6.5.2 Best practices in the emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students 144
6.5.2.1 Peer mentors' emotional support 144
6.6 AI 4D CYCLE'S SECOND STEP: DREAMING 146
6.6.1 Opportunities for growth in academic adjustment 147
6.6.1.1 Managing first-year academic overload 147
6.6.1.2 Enhancing transitional support between high school and university teaching and learning approaches 149
6.6.1.3 Preparing first-year students for large in-person classes 152
6.6.1.4 Changing class times from late to early 153
6.6.1.5 Preparing first years for online classes 156
6.6.1.6 Strengthening academic advising 158
6.6.2 Opportunities for growth in social adjustment 159
6.6.2.1 Language as an opportunity for social adjustment 159
6.6.2.2 Opportunity for growth in diversities on campuses 162

6.6.2.3 Opportunity for social engagement of first-year commuter students 164
6.6.2.4 Personal traits and opportunity for social adjustment 166
6.6.3 Opportunities for growth in emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students 169
6.6.3.1 Opportunities to establish meaningful relationships 169
6.6.3.2 Opportunity for growth in university support for commuting students from disadvantaged backgrounds 174
6.6.3.3 Opportunity to improve stress-coping mechanisms for new students. 175
6.6.3.4 Opportunity to develop an independent identity 176
6.6.3.5 Socio-economic opportunities 180
6.7 CONCLUSION 180
Chapter 7 AI 4D CYCLE'S THIRD AND ADAPTED FOURTH STEP 182
7.1 INTRODUCTION 182
7.2 AI 4D CYCLE'S THIRD STEP: DESIGNING STEP 182
7.2.1 Evaluation of the best practice activities and initiatives that engaged commuter students in the case study university environment 182
7.3 Opportunities for growth in the Peer Mentor Programme 185
7.3.1 Relationship between peer mentors and mentees 185
7.3.2 Peer mentor monitoring and evaluation 187
7.3.3 Sensitive gender, power and ethical dynamic concerns within peer mentor practices 188
7.3.4 Marketing of the peer mentorship programme 188
7.4 AI 4D CYCLE'S FOURTH STEP: ADAPTED DELIVERY STEP 189
7.4.1 A framework for a peer network that supports first-year commuter students 189
7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS 193
7.5.1 Enhancement of mentor-mentee relationships 194
7.5.2 Monitoring and evaluation 194
7.5.3 Gender, power and ethical dynamics 195
7.5.4 Marketing and awareness 195
7.6 CONCLUSION 195

REFERENCES 197
Appendix A: Gatekeeper approvals5F 235
Appendix B: Research study information and consent form 250
Appendix C: Ethical clearance 256
Appendix C1: Ethical clearance renewal 2022 257
Appendix C2: Ethical clearance renewal 2023 258
Appendix C3: Ethical clearance renewal 2024 259
Appendix D: Focus-group discussion guide 260
Appendix E: Language editing 262

List of Tables

Table 4.1: Description of study participants 78
Table 6.1: Themes and subthemes obtained from thematic analysis 110
Table 7.1 Selected evaluation of the peer mentor programme and presenting opportunities for growth 183

List of Figures

Figure 3.1: Spady's theory (Spady, 1971) 53
Figure 3.2: Astin's I.E.O theory (Wah et al., 2022). 54
Figure 5.1: Word cloud of strategic plans regarding student success 104
Figure 7.1: First-year commuter student network framework for student success 190

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, AND CONTEXT

1.1 SETTING THE SCENE OF THE STUDY

Worldwide, including in South Africa, the high demand for higher education has increased dramatically (Valavanidis, 2022; Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Tight, 2019). For example, Valavanidis (2022:1) highlighted this global demand for higher education as "estimated enrolment in 2015 of 214 million versus approximately 600 million in 2040".This expansion has led to more students living off-campus (i.e., escalation of commuter students) due to limited on-campus accommodation and infrastructure (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Thomsen and Eikemo, 2010) and financial constraints (Van Zyl, 2018; Spaull, 2013). Despite this trend, residential universities like the University of the Free State (UFS) have primarily focused on supporting resident students, while neglecting commuter students (Van Zyl, 2018; Lemmens, 2010). This neglect has created a knowledge gap regarding interventions supporting commuter students' success, such as peer mentoring programmes (Thomas and Jones, 2017; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; see 2.6). This knowledge gap emphasises the need for further studies in this area, especially in South Africa, where research on commuter students is limited (McConney, 2019; Van Zyl, 2018). Thus, this study proposed to develop a framework for a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students that addresses their academic, emotional, and social needs (see Chapter 7).

Additionally, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing access and success for commuter students by examining global, African, and South African perspectives. This approach allows for a broader exploration of the access and success phenomenon and provides a contextual framework for the study. The following paragraphs explore the concepts of access and success from global (see 1.1.1), African (see 1.1.2), and South African (see 1.1.3), including UFS perspectives. The study also explores issues associated with the rise in commuting students due to massification (see 1.1.4). Peer networks' potential to address commuter students' success difficulties is also explored (see 1.1.5).

1.1.1 Higher education access and success: the global context

Globalisation and the emergence of the information economy have been among the fundamental forces behind this need for higher education (Motala, 2017). Furthermore, Nascimento, Mutize and Chinchilla (2020) contend that factors such as the expansion of distance education institutions, the growth of the middle class, and the establishment of private institutions have contributed to the rise in demand for access to higher education over the past two decades. Moreover, according to the British Council (2012), the population increase of people aged 18 to 24 in countries like China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Pakistan has further fuelled the need for higher education. In this case, higher education participation globally is measured by the involvement of 18–24-year-olds in any given country (Wright and Horta, 2018).

Higher education offers numerous advantages for individuals and society. Earning a degree is strongly linked to better career prospects, increased productivity, improved health, and overall well-being (Nascimento *et al*., 2020; Atherton, Dumangane and Whitty, 2016). Embedded in the narrative of global access to higher education is the perception that “knowledge and learning are key universal rights of the global community” (Mense *et al.*, 2018:48) that benefit society (Mense *et al*., 2018). Wealthy nations invest significantly in higher education to maintain their competitive edge (Tremblay, Lalancette and Roseveare, 2012).

The global higher education sector has responded to the need for improved access. International higher education has transitioned from elite systems, which catered to a small percentage of 15% or fewer high-school graduates, to mass systems, where a larger proportion of up to 50% of the population has access to higher education (Tight, 2019). This shift from elite to mass systems has been observed in developed countries across Western Europe, North America, Australia, and Asia (Gidley, Hampson and Wheeler, 2010).

The global higher education Gross Tertiary Enrolment Rate (GTER) has grown significantly. UNESCO (2024) reports that there were approximately 254 million students enrolled in higher education worldwide in 2024, more than double the number from 20 years ago. Projections suggest that by 2040, the GTER will reach 594,1 million

(Calderon, 2018). The GTER increased from 19% to 38% between 2000 and 2018 (Nascimento *et al.*, 2020). This increase is indicative that global enrolment is moving towards universal access. For example, higher education enrolment in Japan has reached a universal status, with over 50% of school leavers accessing higher education (Huang, 2012). Also, South Korea's GTER of school leavers was well over 50% in 2013, making it the leader in higher education participation worldwide (Marginson, 2016). Canada has also achieved over 50% GTER (Tremblay *et al*., 2012). To this end, Canada, Japan, and South Korea are meeting the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of universal access for all.

However, the challenge lies in the gap between enrolment and graduation rates. (Nascimento *et al*., 2020). Institutions face the dilemma of ensuring that the students they admit complete their studies and graduate within the expected duration of their programmes (see 2.1). Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that, on average, 40% of new entrants to a bachelor's level programme graduate within the expected duration, while two in ten leave without acquiring their degrees (OECD, 2019). Dropout rates vary across countries, with Spain and Colombia experiencing relatively high dropout rates. In Spain, one out of five students drop out of university (Arce, Crespo and Míguez-Álvarez, 2015). In Colombia, “around 37% of students who begin a Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme drop out of the higher education system altogether” (Sandoval-Palis *et al.*, 2020:2). While access to higher education has improved globally, the situation in Africa presents unique challenges.

1.1.2 Higher education access and success: the African context

Mahomedbhai (2017) argues that Sub-Saharan African higher education has experienced institutional massification. Governments require institutions to increase student intake without funding to improve the infrastructure. For example, “annual expenditure per higher education student in Africa decreased from US$2 900 per year in 1990 to US$2 000 in 2006” (McCowan, 2018:129). Beyond these, institutional massification has increased student-to-staff ratios (e.g. 1 to 100), overcrowded classes, strained libraries and tutorials, and laboratories with inadequate equipment (Mahomedbhai, 2017).

In addition, many factors have led to the neglect of higher education in Africa, such as political instabilities, failures of African economies to improve people's livelihoods, and ineffective governance of higher education (Mngomezulu, 2012). Beyond these, Dei, Osei-Bonsu and Amponsah (2019) argue that African higher education is commercialised. “It is recorded that private universities grew from 35 in 1969 to 972 in 2015. This commercialisation has shifted higher education from being a public good to a privileged right.” Along with these difficulties, student success is still unattainable in many African countries. For example, Kenya saw an increase in enrolments from 10 000 in 1990 to 539 749 in 2017, but 30–40% of students dropped out before completing their studies (Wambua, 2018). Similarly, 30% of Ugandan students in degree programmes dropped out in 2016 (Businge, 2019). In contrast to many other African nations, South Africa's higher education system has a long history and is more developed (Mngomezulu, 2012).

1.1.3 Higher education access and success in South Africa

The massification of South African universities has significantly increased student enrolment, particularly among previously marginalised populations (Strydom, Mentz and Kuh, 2010). The end of apartheid played a crucial role in providing access to higher education for previously excluded populations, leading to transformation in South Africa (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Strydom *et al*., 2010). The Department of Higher Education and Training defines access as the availability of all prospective students' opportunities for Post-School Education and Training (PSET) (DHET, 2021). In 2021, the higher education sector comprised 26 universities and 124 private higher education institutions (DHET, 2023:9). In the same year, 1 300 961 students were enrolled in both public and private higher education institutions, marking a 32% increase compared to the 2010 enrolment figures (DHET, 2023:10). Despite this growth in headcount enrolment (the number of students enrolled in a PSET institution at any given time during an academic year), South Africa is often characterised as a country with low participation and high attrition rates in higher education (Kilfoil, 2021; Essop, 2020; NPC, 2012). Consequently, South African universities continue to struggle with high dropout and low throughput rates.

The Department of Higher Education and Training primarily employs quantitative methods to assess student success, as outlined in the 2021 *Dictionary of Terms and*

Concepts for PSET. These measures include the completion rate (the proportion of students who successfully complete a qualification compared to the total number of eligible students), graduation rate (the number of students who have graduated in a particular year, regardless of the year of study, divided by the total number of students enrolled at universities that year), success rate (the ratio of full-time equivalent (FTE) passes to FTE enrolment), and throughput rate (the number of first-time-entry undergraduate students of a specific year cohort who have graduated within the minimum time, or up to two years beyond the minimum time, compared to the total enrolment of that cohort). However, the throughput rate is generally accepted as the most reliable indicator of quantitative student success because it measures the success within a specific year's cohort. This metric allows us to see how many students registered in the same year eventually complete their studies and how many do not. It provides a clear picture of student progress over time, as demonstrated in the paragraph below.

According to the 2019 government review of the first 25 years of democracy, using the 2010 cohort, only 22% of students completed their three-year degrees in record time (DPME, 2019). This figure increased to 39% by the fourth year and to 56% by the sixth year. These figures indicated low throughput rates despite the annual increases in enrolment in the South African higher education sector. It was estimated that over 40% of students in South Africa did not complete their degrees (Marwala and Mpedi, 2022). Additionally, Henn, Hen-Boisen and Posthumus (2017) suggest that of all the students who eventually dropped out of South African higher education, 60% quit during the first year of study.

However, this study contends that relying solely on quantitative metrics to measure student success is overly simplistic and overlooks the many factors contributing to student achievement. In any case, throughput rates, completion rates and other quantitative metrics measure the outcomes of the actions undertaken by universities to ensure that students succeed. Tinto (2013) best illustrates the aforementioned statement when he says that student success is not accidental but results from deliberate, systematic, and coordinated efforts involving multiple campus stakeholders. Therefore, this study expands the definition of student success beyond

mere quantitative measures, defining it as the ability of students to effectively integrate into the university's social, academic, and emotional environments.

1.1.4 The institutional context of access and success at the case study university

UFS has experienced a trajectory similar to the national enrolment trends, where headcount enrolment increased to 41 205 students in 2022 from 39 516 in 2018 (UFS, 2023). Importantly, the UFS consistently enrols more students than planned (CTL, 2021), which could indicate a constrained system facing challenges regarding infrastructure, funding, and staffing. To this end, the university, in its Vision 130 document, has decided to gradually reduce the total headcount enrolment to 35 000 by 2034 (UFS, 2022). Similarly, the University struggles to meet its throughput rates targets. For example, in 2022 the University planned to achieve a 61% throughput rate but actual achievement was 59% (UFS, 2023). In previous years, the undergraduate throughput rate decreased from 58,6% in 2017 to 57,6%" in 2018 (UFS, 2019a) and worsened in 2019 at 52,6%. Also, 20% of UFS mainstream students dropped out in 2020 (CTL, 2021). While this is lower than the national average, the UFS figure is still very high, considering the number of students per headcount. Although numerous reasons may influence a student's decision to drop out, research at UFS indicates that difficulties in the first year are linked to the transition to university life (Henn *et al*., 2017). Thus, understanding the factors that enable and hinder first-year commuter students' transition is vital to developing appropriate student support mechanisms.

1.1.5 Context of first-year commuter students

The model of young, full-time, on-campus, financially secure students who can dedicate all their time to their studies is outdated in today’s higher education environment (Chappell *et al*., 2020). In a massified higher education environment, many universities cannot support the increasing number of students requiring on-campus housing (Sikhwari *et al.*, 2020). For example, in Canada, a country with universal access, student housing availability and affordability are critical issues (Pillai, Vieta and Sotomayor, 2021). Like South Korea, Japan, and other countries with universal enrolment, Canadian universities increasingly rely on private service providers for student housing. However, private accommodations are costly and often

unaffordable. Therefore, many local students commute while attending university (Pillai *et al*., 2021). Remaining at home while studying has increased the population of first-year commuter students.

The population of first-year commuter students varies in age, gender, responsibilities, accommodation, part-time or full-time status, etc. (Thomas and Jones, 2017). Therefore, they are incredibly diverse (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021). Their residence could be a parental or guardian home or privately rented student housing (Maguire and Morris, 2018). Thus, they are not easy to define. However, a simple definition of first-year commuter students is from Jacoby (2020), who describe them as students who do not stay in institution-owned housing.

Smith (2018:2) defines first-year commuter students as "those who travel into university from their parents or their own family home, which they lived in before entering university" (Smith, 2018:2). Maguire and Morris (2018:9-10) define commuter students as "those for whom the travel between their residence and principal study location materially affects their ability to succeed in higher education". Maguire and Morris (2018) also argue that distance matters and those travelling or walking 30 minutes, or more are affected by distance. Additionally, “travel affects students in different ways: it may be the cost or time of travel, the difficulty or cost of parking, and safety concerns (especially on dark evenings)” (Maguire and Morris, 2018). In this study, commuter students are defined as those students who do not reside in university-owned residences. This definition is inclusive of walking and driving students.

South Africa is awash with stories of student housing challenges (Thebus, 2024; Kigotho, 2023). Stories such as students having to sleep in university corridors, hallways and even classrooms because universities do not have enough student accommodation (Lusengo, 2023). In fact, student housing is one of the long-standing issues in the country. There has been countless student protests since the dawn of democracy about the shortage of quality and appropriate student housing (Lusengo, 2023; Legodi, 2019). The International Finance Corporation (IFC) published a report in 2020 about ‘*The Student Housing Landscape in South Africa’,* which details the dire state of student housing shortages, where an estimated 223 110 purpose- built student beds available for public universities and TVET students. Given the combined

enrolment of 1,19 million post-school education students in 2020, there was an estimated supply-demand gap of approximately 511 600 beds (IFC, 2020:xi). As discussed in 2.2.1, the increase in enrolment in pursuit of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 goals of 1,62 million and the shortages of beds in universities have led to the large number of commuter students. For example, at Stellenbosch University 75% of their student population are commuters (Thebus, 2024). Also, the University of Western Cape annually receives over 20 000 applications for accommodation with only 6 833 university-owned and leased spaces available (Thebus, 2023).

The main argument of this study is that commuting to university influences students' chances of succeeding in their studies (Xulu-Gama, 2019; Maguire and Morris, 2018). This argument is supported by the findings from more recent studies (Chappell *et al*., 2020; Sikhwari *et al*., 2020; Xulu-Gama, 2019; Maguire and Morris, 2018). Sikhwari *et al*. (2020:1) correspondingly found that the "academic performance of resident students is slightly better than that of non-resident students; hence, residing on campus is an advantage". Further, "resident students have more benefits, like access to ancillary buildings, sports facilities, religious activities, and clubs", than commuter students (Sikhwari *et al*., 2020:2). These challenges are more pronounced at the first-year level, where students have not developed sufficient higher education experience to withstand the transition challenges.

First-year commuter students face a multitude of challenges (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Chappell *et al*., 2020; Strydom, 2017; Southall, Wason and Avery, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2014; Kuh, Gonyea and Palmer 2001). Studies by these authors report reasons for such challenges as failure to adapt to new higher education teaching and learning methods and social environments. Also, commuters have less contact with their lecturers and peers. Furthermore, they spend less time doing educationally purposeful activities and have transportation issues, such as a lack of money. They spend a significant amount of time travelling to and from university.

Additionally, first-year commuter students lack a sense of belonging and supportive networks. Thus, Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe (2021:121) argue that these students "often arrive just in time for class and leave immediately after their classes have ended". As such, Maguire and Morris (2018) classify them as high-risk students for

dropping out. Furthermore, only 5.3% of South African new, first-year contact students were accommodated in university residences (DHET, 2013). Thus, Universities South Africa (USAf) argues that commuter students need more significant support to successfully transition from school to university and eventually succeed in their studies (Strydom and Loots, 2018).

The UFS Student Affairs Strategic Plan 2017–2022 posits that there is a lack of participation from first-year commuter students in their interventions aimed at helping them succeed in the UFS. This lack of involvement is a cause for concern, considering that the UFS only accommodates 27% of its first-year contact student population (Strydom and Loots, 2019). These authors posit that 73% of the 2019 first-year students stayed off-campus and not in university-owned residences (Strydom and Loots, 2019). In addition, the UFS Student Affairs Strategic Plan 2017–2022 stresses that interventions to improve student success at the UFS function in silos, primarily because a gap exists between academic and social support. A review of the UFS Strategic Plans since 2009 reveals that this gap was deliberate to focus interventions on social and academic aspects of student life. For example, the UFS 2015–2020 Strategic Plan separated the educational project from the human/social project (UFS, 2015). However, unintended consequences emerged, according to the Student Affairs Strategic Plan 2017–2022, mainly because the distinction created a fragmented approach to student support. Motivated by this challenge, this study proposes that one way to address this fragmentation is through first-year peer networks that integrate academic and social aspects to create a holistic framework for student support (Pilbeam, Lloyd-Jones and Denyer, 2013).

1.1.6 Context of a first-year peer network in the UFS

Peer networks are critical in the first year of higher education. Black and MacKenzie (2008) define a peer network as a supportive group of students who help one another with academic learning, social and emotional well-being, and familiarisation with the institution. “Peer network interventions are also designed to improve peer interaction and relationships by supporting greater integration into social environments” (Biggs *et al.*, 2018:67). Students who lack peer support sometimes suffer from exacerbated psychological problems, such as depression. Their general emotional well-being is compromised (Sun, Lin and Chung, 2020). As a result, some universities have

introduced peer mentoring to encourage peer support in the first year (Van der Westhuizen, 2021; also see 2.6).

Central to peer networks is the understanding that learning is an academic, social, and emotional endeavour. Recent studies reveal that students are connected to other students in a network through modules or courses they take together and extramural activities (Israel, Koester and McKay, 2020; Pilbeam *et al*., 2013). In other words, they are connected through academic and social activities.

The reasons for this peer network choice are multifold (see 2.6). Corwin and Cintrón (2011) describe the importance of peer relationships as a key to reducing the stress and anxieties related to transitioning from high school to university. Peer networks provide a welcoming and supportive university environment that helps commuter students adapt to the new university's social and academic settings (see 2.6.2). Peer networks help to develop positive interpersonal relationships that contribute to the integration of students into a university's academic and social cultures. Beyond these, peer networks support exchanging information and knowledge and help create an affiliation or sense of belonging to the institution (Toma´s-Miquel, Expo´sito-Langa and Nicolau-Julia, 2015). One of the critical contributions of peer networks is that they provide trustworthy friendships where a cohort of first-year commuter students can share their academic and personal challenges. In this case, these networks address challenges related to the transition of first-year students.

In addition, such networks offer a range of opportunities such as "(1) academic discussion and problem-solving; (2) validation and benchmarking; and (3) support as well as personal and professional development" (Pilbeam *et al*., 2013:1479). Additionally, Tinto (2014:13) argues that "students who establish student networks, especially during the first year, are more likely to stay at university than those who are unable to establish those connections" (see 3.3). Thus, this study proposed a socially and academically framework in which peer networks effectively support first-year commuter students to succeed at the UFS (see 7.3).

Using the appreciative inquiry [AI] approach (see 4.4), this study reviews the contribution of the UFS peer mentoring programme to students' social, emotional, and academic well-being (see 6.6). This UFS peer mentoring programme aims to assist

first-time entering students with their transition to higher education (UFS, 2022). Generally, peer-mentoring programmes foster positive academic achievement and social acclimation (Yomtov *et al.*, 2017). Peer mentors are trained senior undergraduates who orient first-year students, including commuters. Thus, peer mentoring programmes emphasise supportive and meaningful personal and professional relationships that inspire first-year commuter students to succeed (see 6.6.1).

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

"Access without support is not opportunity."
- Dr Vincent Tinto, 2008.

My experiences as a commuter student at a South African higher education institution served as the primary impetus for this study. Tinto (2014) argues that students have a great chance to successfully integrate into university social and academic contexts when they live on campus. Thus, the relationship between residence life and student success is well established (Xulu-Gama, 2019). Residence life promotes human interaction and provides a living space conducive to learning, collaboration, and forming interpersonal connections between students and university staff (Xulu-Gama, 2019). Thus, "living on campus can improve student retention, particularly for students who might be identified as at-risk and … improved academic performance" (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014:45).

However, in a massified South African higher education system, universities have not kept up with the new student enrolment rate (see 1.1.3). There are backlogs concerning residential spaces (Tshazi, 2020). As a result, the population of commuter students will continue to increase due to the sluggish provision of student housing and rising enrolment (see 1.1.4). Considering the limited provision of student housing and the increasing number of commuter students, developing interventions that enhance their success is vital. Furthermore, there is a need to develop and adapt strategies that cater to commuter students' unique circumstances and challenges (see 2.5). Therefore, this study aligns with Tinto's statement that providing commuter students with access to university without the necessary support is not enough to ensure their success.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding interventions to support commuter students' success (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). Further, Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe (2021) posit that there is a scarcity of research to identify and understand the specific needs of commuter students in South Africa. Closing the gap in research on commuter students' needs and developing a peer framework contributes to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for these students in South African universities. Therefore, this study aims to close this gap by establishing a framework for South African universities to create a supportive network environment for first-year commuter students. This peer framework seeks to facilitate the success of commuter students and address their social, emotional, and academic needs (see Chapter 7). By focusing on the peer framework, this study recognises the potential of peer support in promoting the success of commuter students.

1.3 TINTO'S INTEGRATION THEORY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applies Vincent Tinto's theoretical frameworks to comprehend the influence of academic and social integration on first-year student success (Tinto, 2014; also see Chapter 3). Since 1975, Tinto has developed a theoretical model that explains why students persist or drop out (French, 2017). Tinto's theory argues that for a student to persist, there needs to be a reasonable level of integration with the social and academic environment of higher education (Xulu-Gama, 2019). He contends that a lack of integration may cause a student's failure to complete higher education. Students may quit if they are not sufficiently assimilated into the institution's academic, emotional, and social environment (Sikhwari *et al*., 2020). Tinto's theory has three stages: separation, transition, and integration. These stages encompass a variety of student experiences that shape the decision to leave or stay in a university. This theory fits well with the objectives of this study (see 1.4), mainly to understand how peer networks can facilitate the academic and social integration of first-year commuter students to succeed. Tinto (French, 2017) argues that the first-year experience is vital because students decide whether to leave an institution or continue. Connolly (2016:1) argues that "the decision to drop out arises from a combination of student characteristics and the extent of their academic, environmental, and social integration in an institution". To this end, this conceptual framework posits that academic and non-academic factors influence student persistence.

According to Tinto, strong affiliation to academic and social environments increases students' commitment to and desire to earn a degree (Arnekrans, 2014). Conversely, "a departure decision was a longitudinal process, and a student who experienced isolation, adjustment issues, difficulty, or incongruence with the institution was more likely to depart than a student who did not" (Zomer, 2007:18). The justification to apply Tinto's theory in this study is because it underlines the value of peer support for student success. It also emphasises the significance of a comprehensive strategy for student success that considers their social, emotional, and academic contexts.

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to ***develop a framework for a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students that could address their academic, emotional, and social needs.***

The following objectives emanating from the problem statement (see 1.2) were proposed to be addressed in different chapters of this study:

- Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 focus on ***conducting a comprehensive literature study on peer networks to support first-year commuter students to succeed.***

- Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the analysis of ***documents from selected South African universities to establish how institutions assist first-year commuter students to succeed.***

- Chapter 6 *discusses* ***first-year commuter students' experiences of the academic, social, and emotional needs in the case study university environment*.**

- Chapter 7 proposes a ***framework for a peer network that supports first-year commuter students' academic, social and emotional needs in the case study university environment.***

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question in this study was designed to articulate the purpose of the study: ***How can South African universities create a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students that could address their social, emotional, and academic needs?***

The following related sub-questions were formulated to respond to this central research question:

- Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 focus on what are different literature perspectives on the role of a peer network in supporting first-year commuter students to succeed?
- Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the document analysis conducted to find out what other South African universities are doing to support first-year commuter students to succeed?
- Chapter 6 focuses on the empirical research findings that looked at first-year commuter students' experiences of the academic, social and emotional needs in the case study university environment? With particular reference to the AI formulation, What *opportunities exist for enhancing academic, social, and emotional engagement needs in the case study university environment among first-year commuter students?*
- Chapter 7 provides conclusions and recommendations as well as a proposed framework for peer network? With particular reference to the AI formulation, *What activities or initiatives have successfully engaged commuter students academically, socially, and emotionally in the case study university environment in the past, and how can we build on these successes?*

I responded to these research questions by conducting a comprehensive literature, theoretical perspective, and empirical research with first-year commuter students.

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

This study makes use of several concepts, and therefore the following definitions are offered for the clarification of these concepts and their interpretation within the higher education context of this study:

1.6.1 First-year commuter student

This refers is a student who does not stay in university-owned residences (Smith, 2018; Jacoby, 2020). They vary concerning their off-campus accommodations. Some stay with parents and siblings, while others are parents raising their children. Others stay in private accommodations closer to campus. Some drive to campus or use public transport, while others walk to university.

1.6.2 Peer network

This refers to a supportive group of students who support one another with academic learning, social and emotional well-being, and familiarisation with the institution (Mntuyedwa, 2023; Vignery and Laurier, 2020; Black and MacKenzie, 2008).

1.6.3 Success for first-year commuters

This study expands the definition of student success beyond mere quantitative measures, defining it as the ability of students to integrate effectively into the university's social, academic and emotional environments. This definition also encompasses student persistence, that students remain registered at the university until they complete their studies.

1.6.4 First-year student network

This refers to the formal or informal grouping of students with similar characteristics intending to achieve specific goals (Pilbeam *et al.*, 2013). For instance, the organisation of a student network for first-year commuter students falls under this category. This study focuses primarily on the UFS peer mentorship programme, which constitutes a student network programme designed to offer academic, social, and emotional support to first-time students as they navigate the transition to university.

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A brief description of the qualitative research approach and methodology was used to accomplish the study. This chapter narrates the rationale for selecting specific courses of action to achieve this study's set objectives (see 1.4). Beyond this, it describes the research design adopted for this study (see 4.3). It also refers to the data collection methods (see 4.5), the research sites where the study was conducted, the selection of the population sample (see 4.6), and ethical considerations (see complete detail in Chapter 4). The study objectives informed the methodology and empirical research design selection (see 1.6) to develop a first-year commuter student network framework for student success.

1.7.1 Interpretive paradigm and higher education as a field of study

This higher education study is located within the research field of student experiences and student support (Tight, 2012). It is premised on the interpretative paradigm, a philosophical approach to studying human affairs based on the idea that individuals' experiences are subjective and determined by the context in which they live (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). "This approach makes an effort to get into the head of the subjects being studied … and to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meaning s/he is making of the context." (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017:33).

Further, this paradigm argues that "knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied, focusing on their meanings and interpretations" (Ormston *et al.*, 2013:12). Thanh and Thanh (2015:24) posit that the interpretative paradigm "allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants". This interpretative paradigm was appropriate for the study, as it aimed to develop a framework for a peer network that is informed by the experiences of first-year UFS commuter students (see full details 4.2).

1.7.2 Qualitative research approach

This study followed a qualitative approach, which refers to "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by employing statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Golafshani, 2003:600). Qualitative methods generally aim to

understand the experiences and attitudes of participants (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015). This qualitative approach was appropriate for the study (see full details 4.3) as it explained, described, or explored events or phenomena (i.e. creating a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students in this study) related to its objectives (Crowe *et al.*, 2011).

1.7.3 Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into the UFS peer mentor programme

This study uses AI to understand the contribution of the UFS peer mentor programme to first-year commuter students' academic, emotional, and social needs (see 4.4). Nel and Govender (2019) define AI as a strength-based interpretive and qualitative approach (see also 1.7.2) to developing positive change. It focuses the research process on what works, rather than fixing what does not. AI "advocates a collective inquiry into the best of what is to imagine what could be, followed by the collective design of a desired future state" (Nel and Govender, 2019:337). AI is based on appreciating what works in an organisation or programme, which is the basis for innovation and improvement. Thus, the AI fits well with the aim of the study, namely to appreciate and understand the contribution of the UFS peer mentor programme to the academic, emotional, and social support of first-year commuter students (see full details 4.4).

1.7.4 Qualitative research methods

Two types of qualitative methods were applied. in the first instance, to broaden the contribution and understanding of practices elsewhere, the study conducted document analyses of reports and documents from student affairs and centres for teaching and learning from seven South African universities (see full details in 4.5.1). Secondly, focus-group discussions were conducted with UFS first-year commuter students who are/were part of the peer mentor programme (see full details in 4.5.2).

1.7.5 Data collection through qualitative inquiry

This doctoral study was based on the following qualitative inquiry:

1.7.5.1 Document analysis

A document analysis refers to documents collected from seven universities (see 4.5.1) to find best practices for supporting first-year commuter students to succeed in South African universities. The two primary documents that formed part of this analysis were strategic plans and annual reports. However, additional documents were incorporated where the need arose.

There are 26 public universities in South Africa. Seven universities were selected. The chosen universities' inclusion criteria are as follows: three were traditional universities: UFS, Stellenbosch University (SU) and North-West University (NWU). Furthermore, two comprehensive universities were selected, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the Nelson Mandela University (NMU), as well as two universities of technology, the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT).

1.7.5.2 Focus-group discussions at the case study university

Eight focus-group discussions (with a minimum of eight and a maximum of twelve student participants) were conducted (see Appendix D) as the most appropriate data collection instrument (see 4.5.2). Kirchberger *et al.*(2009) confirm the rationale for eight focus groups and found that data saturation was reached after conducting eight focus-group discussions on the same topic (see 4.6). The recruited student participants in this study were part of the UFS peer mentor programme. Purposive sampling was applied to select mainstream undergraduate students on the Bloemfontein, Qwaqwa, and South Campuses. Thus, given the sizes of the three campuses, four focus groups were conducted in Bloemfontein, two in Qwaqwa, and two at the South Campus. The criterion for selection was that a student should be part of or have participated in the peer mentor programme as a commuter. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Vice-Rector: Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation (see Appendix A), as well as the Faculty of Education's ethics committee (see also 1.11 and 4.9). The recruitment process included liaising with the peer mentor programme leaders to get the contact details of participating students.

Only students who agreed to sign the informed consent forms were involved (see Appendix B).

1.7.6 Selection of research participants

The researcher liaised with the peer mentor programme leaders to recruit participants on the three UFS campuses. Focus-group discussions (see full details 4.6) were conducted in person.

1.8 DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, REPORTING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

As already explained (see 1.6.5), this study conducted a document analysis of reports from seven South African universities (i.e. UFS, UJ, NWU, SU, DUT, TUT and NMU). Bowen (2009:27) defines document analysis as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents". Data were examined and interpreted to explain how South African universities support first-year commuter students to succeed. This qualitative method is often used with other methods for triangulation (Johnson, 2011; Bowen, 2009). This study conducted document analysis and empirical methods, such as focus-group discussions with participants from the case study university (see 4.5.2). Nvivo was used for this analysis format.

The data generated from the focus-group discussions were thematically analysed (see full details 4.7). "Thematic analysis involves searching for recurring patterns of meaning and common themes across a broad data set" (Cornell, 2015:31). The Braun and Clarke (2006) framework was used for this analysis (see 4.7.1). The framework comprised six phases of thematic analysis, namely familiarising oneself with one's data. Braun and Clarke (2006:16) posit that "it is vital that you immerse yourself in the data to the extent that you are familiar with the depth and breadth of the content". The immersion process involved repeated data reading and actively searching for meanings and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The second phase involved generating initial codes. This coding process helped to identify features of the data that appeared to be interesting (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Phase three was searching for themes. This process involved sorting the different codes into themes to "re-focus the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:19).

The fourth phase reviewed themes, sorting the initial themes into the study's most relevant and appropriate themes. The fifth phase defined and named themes, which consisted of defining and refining themes to be presented in the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The sixth phase was producing this thesis report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Nvivo was also used for this analysis format. Data and research instruments were also stored in a secure space as stipulated by university regulations.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance (see Appendix C) was obtained from the Faculty of Education's Ethics Committee (UFS-HSD2020/1434/0911). Moreover, gatekeeper approvals were obtained from the relevant universities (see Appendix A). The study adhered to all ethical principles, such as respect for participants, the anonymity of participants, the voluntary nature of the study, and informed written consent obtained from each participant (Vanclay, Baines and Taylor, 2013). Furthermore, to protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used when reporting on the research. The characteristics of the three campuses in the study are as follows:

- Campus 1 is in an urban environment, predominantly serving students from well-resourced schools in quintiles 4 and 5. Quintile 4 and 5 schools are fee-paying, affluent schools that cater to families with higher incomes (Van Dyk and White, 2019).
- Campus 2 is in a small rural community. It primarily serves students from lower quintiles 1 to 3. Quintiles 1 to 3 represent no-fee-paying schools catering to lower-income families.
- Campus 3 is in an urban environment. It mainly offers extended curriculum programmes (ECPs) or foundational education. ECPs are also called access or academic development programmes (Engelbrecht, Harding and Potgieter, 2014). These programmes provide access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have qualified for mainstream programmes.
- Table 4.1 displays the number of participants categorised by pseudonym, gender, focus-group number, and campus. There were 67 participants across the three campuses, with an average of eight participants per focus group.

Any references to potentially identifying information (such as their specific lecturers) were removed from the extracts quoted in the analysis and report (Cornell, 2015; see Chapter 6).

1.10 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to contribute to the development of commuter student success and peer networks while also contributing to UFS student success goals as discussed in the UFS Strategic Plan 2018–2022 and Learning and Teaching Strategy 2019–2024 (UFS, 2018a; UFS, 2019b). Therefore, the researcher envisaged that the findings would benefit first-year commuters, faculties (teaching and learning), and student support divisions (e.g. Student Affairs and CTL).

1.11 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on data gathering. Initially, the plan was to conduct focus-group discussions online from April to June 2022 to avoid in-person interactions. However, a tiny fraction of participants could attend Microsoft Teams meetings, which resulted in the cancellation of online focus groups. Consequently, all focus-group discussions took place in person due to the poor participation in online sessions and the relaxation of lockdown regulations in South Africa. It is worth noting that all focus-group discussions occurred after all COVID-19 related restrictions were lifted, specifically in August and September 2022.

1.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the rationale and highlighted the methodology behind the study. The study falls within the interpretative paradigm, aiming to comprehend the experiences of first-year commuter students regarding their academic, emotional, and social transition to university. The selection of a sample of South African institutions was crucial to gaining a broader insight into the strategies implemented to support the success of first-year commuter students (see details in Chapter 5).

As noted in 2.5, there is a lack of research concerning the issues affecting first-year commuter students in South Africa. Thus, the lack of research on the challenges faced by first-year commuter students motivated and emphasised the importance of addressing this gap. By engaging with first-year commuter students at the UFS and

utilising the AI approach, the study aimed to explore their transition experiences (6.6) and evaluate how the peer mentor programme assisted them in adjusting to university life (Chapter 7). Chapter 2 delves into the existing literature on peer networks to support first-year commuter students to succeed. This literature serves as a foundation for understanding the significance of peer relationships and how they can contribute to first-year commuter students' academic, emotional, and social adjustment.

CHAPTER 2
UNDERSTANDING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The massification of higher education globally has led to a substantial increase in students outside university residences. “At the same time, financial constraints prohibit higher education institutions from providing sufficient student accommodation on campus” (Van Zyl, 2018: iii). Staying off-campus presents many issues that are discussed in the chapter. Universities often adopt a residential approach towards commuter students, meaning their issues remain neglected and at the periphery of student concerns in higher education. Simply put, in many cases, residential students are more exposed to student support services when compared to commuter students. Many universities, like the UFS, continue to use a residential model, meaning student support interventions are accommodative to residential students with the luxury of time and space to attend them. Thus, commuter students who are hardly on campus may not receive sufficient student support (Lemmens, 2010). However, as established in 1.2, there is a dearth of literature regarding the experience of commuter students and interventions that support their success (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). Furthermore, Van Zyl (2018) argues that in South African higher education, very little research has been conducted on commuter students, and a limited national database is available regarding these students (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021).

The focus of this chapter is threefold: firstly, to explore the historical factors that have contributed to the growth of student populations in recent years, particularly the increase in commuting students; secondly, to define commuter students and examine the benefits and challenges they face; and thirdly, to investigate the role of peer networks, specifically peer mentorship, in supporting the success of commuter students (see 1.4). This study employs a qualitative literature review approach to explore various perspectives. Denney and Tewksbury (2012:1) define a qualitative literature review as “a comprehensive overview of prior research regarding a specific topic”. A qualitative literature review is beneficial in two ways: it allows researchers to glean ideas from others interested in a particular research question, and it provides insights into the results of other studies (Vanclay, Baines, and Taylor, 2013;

Onwuegbuzie, Leech and Collins, 2012:2). The subsequent paragraphs provide a historical context of some factors that led to the massification of higher education and the growth of commuter students from global and local perspectives.

2.2 HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

As numerous countries worldwide democratise in the 21st century, equitable access and academic success have emerged as critical concerns for governments, institutions, and scholars (Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023; Strydom, 2017). Almost all countries worldwide have witnessed a growth in the number of students accessing higher education. This phenomenon has been termed the massification of higher education (Andrade, 2014). While initially, the focus of many higher education institutions globally was on access to higher education for previously marginalised groups, many universities realised that access without success constituted a waste of talent and resources for these students. In fact, according to Tinto (2012), providing access to historically marginalised groups without offering the opportunity for success was not helping them at all. Therefore, improving access and success are discussed in this chapter as critical factors for commuter student experiences in higher education (Strydom, 2017).

2.2.1 Expanding access to higher education

Calderon (2018) posits that access to higher education has expanded considerably since World War II ended. The rebuilding process that followed the war required skilled labour to modernise mainly European, American, and Asian countries. Mohamedbhai (2008:5) argues that the “latter part of the twentieth century saw the democratisation of higher education and a shift from elitist to mass higher education”. The higher education massification process saw unprecedented enrolment growth and the student body’s diversification. Thus, Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova and Teichier (2007:1) argue that “the massive expansion of higher education across all continents has been one of the defining features of the late 20th and early 21st centuries”. UNESCO (2024) reports that approximately 254 million students were enrolled in higher education worldwide in 2024, more than double the number from 20 years ago. Moreover, it is estimated that by 2040, there will be 600 million students enrolled in higher education

globally (Calderon, 2018). Thus, the global higher education system has reached a mass level where 15% to 50% access higher education (Tight, 2019).

Although traditionally, the growth was spearheaded by Western Europe and the United States, since 2000, Asia has overtaken these regions in terms of total higher education enrolment, particularly China and India (Calderon, 2018). The main drivers of the growth in enrolment worldwide are the expansion of sciences and technology and industrialisation, which have improved the standard of living for many people. Furthermore, the increasing demand for higher education access is primarily driven by globalisation and the rise of the knowledge economy (Motala, 2017). Access to higher education has expanded substantially in South Africa.

The South African higher education transformation policy context has focused on increasing and broadening university access since the early 1990s (Wilson-Strydom, 2011:407). The transition to democracy in South Africa has played a significant role. The post-apartheid era in South Africa brought about substantial changes in higher education, aiming to address historical inequalities and promote inclusivity (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). Many policies and initiatives were implemented to ensure previously marginalised groups, such as black South Africans, have equal opportunities for higher education. These efforts have rapidly increased enrolment rates among these populations (Pandor, 2019).

Over the past two decades, South African higher education has undergone a significant policy transformation, increasing participation in higher education. The changes in the NSFAS funding policies where Government funding expansion has led to increased participation at post-school institutions (Statistics South Africa, 2017:33). However, this growth fails to address the high costs of higher education, which hinder students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Statistics South Africa, 2017).

According to Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh and Susuman (2018), South African student enrolment has grown by an average rate of 4,2% per year since 2000. In 2021, 1 300 961 students were enrolled at public and private higher education institutions, which was a 32% increase compared to the 2010 public and private enrolment figures

(DHET, 2023:10). This growth aligns with the NDP's target of enrolling 1,6 million students by 2030 in universities.

One of the consequences of this massification is the inability of higher education to adequately meet students' demands. Insufficient funding, poor education quality, compromised infrastructure, and overall subpar student experiences are some of the failures (Strydom, 2017; Mohamedbhai, 2008). Mohamedbhai (2008:12) argues that students are the primary victims of massification due to overcrowded classrooms and inadequate academic facilities like laboratories and research equipment. Limited funding and slow construction of new residences mean many students cannot live in university-owned accommodations (Van Zyl, 2018). Student housing stands out as one of the prominent impacts of the massification process. Given the combined South African enrolment of 1,19 million post-school education students in 2020, there was an estimated supply-demand gap of approximately 511 600 beds (IFC, 2020:xi). The shortages of beds in universities have led to the increase of commuting students.

2.2.2 Large classes because of massification

The challenge of large classes is connected to the trend of massification. Among the negative consequences of the massification process is that institutions must increase student intake often without improving the infrastructure to match the student numbers (Mohamedbhai, 2017). Thus, large classes have become the norm, while decreased state funding has become very common. "Large classes at the university create physical distance between lecturers and students and may intimidate students" (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014:58). There is no universally accepted definition of large classes, though generally, a class with 100 students is considered significant (Msiza, Ndhlovu and Raseroka, 2020). Some classes may even contain more than 1000 students at a time.

Simpson (2015) argues that large class sizes restrict the teaching methods that can be implemented effectively. For instance, it is challenging for all students to engage or participate in discussions in large classes, hindering active learning due to the physical constraints of the environment. Additionally, it becomes difficult for lecturers to address individual students' queries, potentially resulting in decreased engagement and increased passivity. This trend may foster a lecturer-centred environment where

knowledge is primarily transmitted from the lecturer to the students, who are expected to absorb it passively. Conversely, a student-centred approach, which promotes "engagement, collaboration, and student autonomy" (Kerimbayev *et al.*, 2023:2), is not feasible in large classes.

Large classes can also exacerbate student success issues. Basaka (2011) found a positive correlation between small classes and improved student achievements. Adimonyemma, Akachukwu and Igboabuchi (2018) argue that large class sizes do not promote quality interaction between lecturers and students and, thus, harm students' academic performance. Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) posit that some of the negative influences of large classes include an extensive workload on academic staff, poor assessment practices, and compromised quality of teaching and learning, just to name a few.

Furthermore, "students who sit far away from the lecturer may not always hear what is being taught, and because of the large student numbers" (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014:61). Large classes are standard in the introductory modules (Tewari and Ilesanmi, 2020). These authors argue that South African universities must increase the intake of new, first-time students without resources backing them. Thus, the student-staff ratios are very high across universities in South Africa at the first-year level, which leads to over-crowding (Tewari and Ilesanmi, 2020).

2.2.3 Increasing students' chances of success

Mentz (2012:2) argues that progress in higher education can no longer be measured by the access or participation rates of diverse groups but by their equitable success. Many universities have struggled to increase students' chances of success (Strydom, 2017). Universities Australia 2019 report that, on average, 16% of Australian bachelor students drop out annually, and 74% complete their four-year degrees within nine years (Universities Australia, 2019).

As established in 1.1.1, according to the OECD, among its 36 member states worldwide, on average, two in ten (24%) bachelor's-level programme students leave without acquiring their bachelor's degrees (OECD, 2019). In developing countries, such as Colombia, "around 37% of students who begin a BA programme drop out of

the higher education system altogether" (Sandoval-Palis *et al.,* 2020:2). In Spain, one out of five students drop out of university (Arce *et al*., 2015).

According to the 2019 government review of the first 25 years of democracy report, using the 2010 cohort, only 22% of students complete their three-year degrees in record time (DPME, 2019). This figure increased to 39% by the fourth year and 56% by the sixth year (DPME, 2019). These figures suggest a low throughput rate despite the annual increases in enrolment in the South African higher education sector. It is estimated that over 40% of students in South Africa do not complete their degrees (Marwala and Mpedi, 2022). Beyond these, Henn *et al.* (2017) posit that of all the students who eventually drop out of South African higher education, 60% quit during the first year of study. Concerning the UFS, the CTL annual 2020 report (CTL, 2021) posits that 20% of mainstream first-year students drop out in 2020 compared to 16% in 2018. Given that, in general, most first-year students stay off-campus at the UFS (see 2.3), dropout rates are expected to be much higher among commuter students. Therefore, the following paragraphs focus on defining first-year commuter students (see 2.3), the benefits of commuting (see 2.4) and the challenges that make them susceptible to dropout compared to residential students (see 2.5).

2.3 DEFINING A FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENT

Worldwide, universities are struggling to meet the demands of student housing. In the United States, 85% of students in higher education were classified as commuters (Jacoby, 2020). In the United Kingdom (UK), around 25% of the student population stays in the family home while studying in higher education (Thomas, 2020). Furthermore, many UK students leave home but remain in student housing outside their campuses. Thus, very few students in the UK stay in university-owned residences. First-year commuter students are highly diverse compared to residential students in age, gender, needs, education level, and university preparedness (Jacoby, 2020). Furthermore some are part-time, full-time, parents, wholly or partly employed, from rural areas and first-generation (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021). Thus, the model of a young, full-time, on-campus, financially secure student who can dedicate all their time to their studies is outdated in today's higher education (Chappell *et al*., 2020). Furthermore, Jacoby (2020) argues that universities view these students as non-traditional and they have been perpetually marginalised in residential institutions.

This assertion stems from the traditional model of higher education, which revolves around an on-campus, residential experience that fosters a distinct campus culture and community.

Like most universities worldwide, UFS accommodates a minority of its undergraduate student population in residences (Strydom and Loots, 2019). These authors state that the UFS only housed 27% of its first-year contact student population in 2019, and the remaining (73%) stayed off-campus (see 1.1.3).

This study defines commuter students as those who do not reside in university-owned residences (see 1.1.5). This definition includes walking and driving students and aligns with the most popular definitions of commuter students (Jacoby, 2020). Smith (2018:2) adds critical components to his definition. The author defines first-year commuter students as “those who travel into university from their parents or their own family home, which they lived in before entering university”. From Smith’s definition, one can begin to see the most salient aspects of commuting: travelling and the location of the accommodation.

2.4 BENEFITS OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS

There are several benefits associated with commuting. Emblen-Perry, Nichol and Ross (2020) report that commuting students can avoid on-campus accommodation costs. Maguire and Morris (2018) say it can be cheaper to live at home (despite commuting). Gormley (2016) found that commuter students who drove to university had higher social standing than those who used public transport. Therefore, Gormley (2016) disputes that students commute because of financial difficulties. Furthermore, this author found that students living with their parents are less likely to receive government financial support. They also had the highest part-time employment rate amongst the various groups (Gormley, 2016).

Students who stay at home report enjoying the privacy of having their own familiar space, e.g. their own rooms (Emblen-Perry *et al*., 2020). Commuting allows close family, religious, and community support networks to be maintained. Emblen-Perry *et al*. (2020) argue that maintaining family, religious, and community support networks offers protection against sudden change, particularly for less confident students. These authors claim that living at home prevents learners from being distracted by the

traditional university social life, thus allowing them to concentrate on their studies (Emblen-Perry *et al*., 2020:4).

Other benefits of living off-campus include "(a) ability to cook meals, (b) length of lease/contract, (c) proximity to campus/town, (d) parking accommodation, (e) ability to live with or near friends, and (f) a private bathroom" (Muhammad, Hafazah and Ishak 2012:603). However, there are numerous disadvantages associated with commuting. Traditionally, among other things, these challenges were related to academic performance, living conditions, adapting to institutional cultures, transportation, and student engagement (see 2.5). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional difficulties.

2.5 CHALLENGES OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS

The literature on first-year commuter students reports many challenges (Xulu-Gama, 2019). According to Thomas (2020:1), in the UK, these students are likely to be first-generation in their families to attend higher education. Also, are more likely come from lower-income families, are mature, and are from an ethnic minority background (Thomas, 2020). This author argues that UK commuters will likely come from a state school and report lower rates of belonging and satisfaction with higher education.

In the context of South Africa, Van Zyl (2018) found that institutions do not do much to support commuters. Furthermore, there is a shortage of research concerning understanding the needs of commuter students. Consequently, many South African universities interviewed by Van Zyl (2018) indicated they did not have student support interventions targeting commuter students. Therefore, the numerous challenges that affect commuter students are not addressed. These challenges are predominantly related to 1) their living environment (see 2.5.1); 2) underpreparedness (see 2.5.2); 3) commuter student engagement (see 2.5.3); 4) transportation (see 2.5.4); 5) commuter student funding (see 2.5.5); 6) adapting to the institutional culture (see 2.5.6); 7) lack of space on campus (see 2.5.7); and 8) the influence of COVID-19 (see 2.5.8).

2.5.1 The living environment of commuter students

Demand for student housing has seen rapid growth driven predominantly by increased student enrolment globally across the past decades (Xulu-Gama, 2019). Residences

provide numerous social and academic benefits to students. Thus, students who reside in university residences are less likely to drop out academically (Sikhwari *et al.*, 2020). Xulu-Gama (2019:16) argues that “as a result of being based in residence, the students benefit from an extra set of people (staff members and senior students or peers) who look out for their academic and social needs”. However, as already stated (see 2.3), only a handful of students get on-campus accommodation.

Sikhwari *et al*. (2020:2) argue that “the provision of accessible, decent, and safe accommodation in South African universities is important for student's academic success, especially those from rural and poor backgrounds”. On average, Sikhwari *et al*. (2020) found that the academic performance of resident students was better than that of non-resident students.

First-year commuter students often fulfil multiple roles at home and university and are reported to lack a sense of belonging and support networks (Strydom, 2017; Southall *et al.*, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2014; Kuh *et al*., 2001). Thus, some are students during the day but parents and workers at night.

Thomas and Jones (2018) report that commuter students often lack faculty acknowledgement. Faculties often assume that “students are living near the institution and free of many of the other responsibilities that many commuter students have” (Thomas and Jones, 2018:33). This leads to additional problems such as where faculties prefer face-to-face instead of online communication, failure to provide timely notification of cancelled sessions so that commuter students do not have to travel to campus, and “not allowing students to re-arrange their timetable to facilitate travel arrangements” (Thomas and Jones, 2018:34).

Gianoutsos (2011) divides commuter students into dependent and independent subgroups. They can be part-time or full-time. To this end, Gianoutsos (2011:22) posits that a “dependent student lives at home with parents or other parental surrogates”. The challenge with this arrangement is that sometimes these students are expected to satisfy their parents’ wishes at home (Muhammad *et al*., 2012). Some do not have designated study spaces, such as for home assignments. Furthermore, a dependent commuter students can be a parents or employees who depend on their

work for their livelihood. Thus, given their arrangements, one can conceive that university may not be the top priority for some of these students.

”An independent student lives away from their parental figures at an apartment, house, or other quarters by themselves or with roommates” (Gianoutsos, 2011:22). However, students who stay off-campus but closer to their universities are commuters, and their living arrangement makes their university experiences vastly different from dependent students. Many aspects of their experiences are practically like those living in university-owned residences. They can dedicate their time and energy to their studies without the intervening challenges from home (Mzileni, 2019). Some students participate equally in the university social environment as residence students. Thus, Muhammad *et al*. (2012) posit that this group of students benefits from university proximity.

In addition, Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) argue that hunger and poor nutrition among commuter students are problems that need addressing (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). Thus, poverty can lead to dropout at the first-year level, where students have not developed strategies to withstand higher education challenges.

2.5.2 Underpreparedness of commuter students

Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020) argue that the success of commuter students in higher education depends on their preparedness. However, commuter students’ underpreparedness is pervasive in higher education and leads to unsatisfactory learning outcomes (Moyo, 2020). Underpreparedness is a challenge at the first-year level (Moyo, 2020). For example, in the United States, the term “freshman myth” was coined in the 1960s to describe the phenomenon of students exaggerating their skills while underestimating the challenges they confront in university (Strydom and Loots, 2018). As a response, the country conducts various standardised tests to determine students' university preparedness (McPherson and McDonnell, 2017). These tests aim to understand what kind of support is needed per student to succeed in higher education. However, since commuter students spend significantly limited time on campus, they rarely participate in supportive programmes (see 2.5.3.)

In South Africa, the freshman myth could be termed “articulation gap”, which is “the misalignment between the learning requirements of higher education programmes and

the actual knowledge and competencies of the first-time entering students" (Tewari and Ilesanmi, 2020:3). The National Benchmark Test (NBT) is conducted, among other things, to check students' preparedness for university (Dunlop, 2018).

Commuter students' underpreparedness can lead to low graduation rates, high dropout rates, and lengthy time to degree completion (Tewari and Ilesanmi, 2020). Maddock and Maroun (2018) argue that South African commuting first-year students often lack essential qualities such as critical thinking, numeracy competence, and reading/writing abilities. McKenna (2009, cited in Frith and Prince, 2016:2) contends that a student's likelihood of success at university is significantly influenced by the literacy skills they acquire from their school and home environments. Consequently, transitioning from high school to higher education represents a critical juncture in a student's academic journey (Strydom and Loots, 2018). Lewin and Mawoyo (2014:51) assert that "most schools do not adequately prepare students for university." As a result, many South African universities end up admitting students who are not fully prepared (Strydom and Loots, 2018).

Frith and Prince (2016:2) argue that "the notion of underpreparedness implies a deficiency in the students only and does not recognise that higher education institutions themselves are underprepared to meet the needs of the students they admit". South African institutions are said to be ill-prepared to deal with students from different and unequal backgrounds. For example, Posthumus and Loots (2018) report that first-time-entering UFS students are generally underprepared, struggle with transition, and are vulnerable to dropping out. Thus, underpreparedness is a systemic rather than an individual student challenge (Moyo, 2020).

2.5.3 Commuter student engagement

According to Delfino (2019), student engagement is essential to understanding commuter students' behaviour that leads to either success or dropout. Behaviours connected to lack of engagement include minimal participation in campus academic and non-academic activities (Delfino, 2019; Kinzie, Strydom and Loots, 2017). Thus, as established, first-year commuter students have less contact with their lecturers and peers and spend less time doing educationally purposeful activities (Wilson-Strydom,

2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2014; Kuh *et al*., 2001). Strydom (2017:3, 4) defines engagement in two ways:

- Firstly, it “is the amount of time and effort students spend on academic activities and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success”,
- Secondly, it “is how institutions allocate resources and organise learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities”.

Because of the need for travelling time, home, and work responsibilities reduce the time first-year commuter students spend doing educationally purposeful activities, and as such, these students can be classified as less engaged (Thomas and Jones, 2018). Furthermore, commuting can influence academic engagement, causing delays resulting in missing taught sessions, having to leave quickly at the end of sessions to travel home instead of participating in groupwork, and influencing the times they access the library (Thomas, 2019)

Furthermore, Thomas (2019) posits that commuter students leave home early to avoid morning peak traffic, and some attend early classes hungry. Consequently, this fuels their lack of concentration and academic engagement (Thomas, 2019). Thomas and Jones (2018) report that commuting is time-consuming, tiring, and expensive.

2.5.4 Transportation issues for first-year commuter students

First-year commuter students also face transportation issues, including lack of transport money and spending significant time travelling to and from university (Strydom, 2017; Southall *et al*., 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Maguire and Morris (2018) argue that the distance travelled to the university influences first-year commuter students' university experience. These authors posit that students who travel long distances are prone to high travel disruptions. Chatterjee *et al.* (2019) established that commuting impacts students' subjective well-being. They argue that students' “mood is lower during the commute than other daily activities and stress can be induced by congestion, crowding, and unpredictability” (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2019:1). Delays were the most critical factor contributing to unpleasant experiences with car

and public transport users (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2019:6). Furthermore, the inability to avoid traffic and other transport disruption were associated with increased stress and other cognitive pressures, e.g. anxieties (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2019:5).

Thomas and Jones (2018) argue that commuting students face significant security concerns. Those who use trains and public buses are prone to robbery and other crimes that can cause bodily harm (Thomas and Jones, 2018). Also, students who walk from campus to home are reported to be prone to the same crimes, although to a lesser extent. Some universities deploy their security to patrol the vicinity, thus providing a safer environment for students.

Moreover, faculties often punish commuter students for late arrival at classes and examinations. Sometimes, penalties may include reduced time to write assessments or being denied entry altogether (Thomas and Jones, 2018). Thus, assessment-related penalties are a significant challenge in modules with many in-class assessments and quizzes. Some lecturers would require students to work in groups, which poses a challenge for commuting students, particularly when the group decides to work late.

Another challenge is that most enhancement events, such as networking opportunities and academic societies, tend to be organised in the evening (Thomas and Jones, 2018:34). This leads to commuter students missing these events, which negatively influences their university experiences. Transportation issues also deprive students of the ability to participate in student leadership activities (Thomas and Jones, 2018:37).

In addition, according to Jacoby and Garland (2004:22), “the timing of classes and co-curricular activities frequently determine the extent to which commuter students can participate”. Swartz *et al.* (2017) state that this may result in students having to forgo study groups, group meetings or having limited access to computer labs or the library, which directly hampers their academic progress. Thus, He (2019) argues that commuter students without satisfactory transportation arrangements cannot fully concentrate on learning or achieve their educational goals.

2.5.5 Commuter student funding support

Providing financial support to commuter students in higher education has long been a critical component in increasing participation (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). However, student funding is perhaps the most referenced non-academic source of higher-education commuter student dropout. Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020:7) argue that “lack of adequate funding for higher education would imply higher fees, thereby shutting out the poor and reducing the ability of universities to contribute to socio-economic, political, and cultural development”. Lack of funding is an international phenomenon. Thus, several countries have reported it as a significant hindrance to student success and access.

For example, in the last 40 years, higher education in the UK has undergone fundamental changes, where public funding has significantly dropped while tuition fees have increased (Marginson, 2017). The British higher education reforms announced in 2004 changed the public finance of higher education (Barr, 2004). In 1993, the state subsidised 37% of the UK's higher education, and 29,6% was from tuition fees, education grants, and contracts (Marginson, 2017). According to this author, the rest of the UK's higher education funding came from research grants and contracts (14,4%), endowments and investments (2,2%), and other income (16,8%). However, this author posits that by 2014, 44,5% came from tuition and grant fees, while just 19,8% was from government subsidies. This drop in government subsidies happened while the number of students in higher education increased to 2,5 million in 2020 (Bolton, 2021). However, UK students from poor backgrounds who mainly commute to university cannot afford higher education and thus exit the system prematurely. Hughes (2020) argues that 60% of UK students have considered dropping out of university because of financial uncertainty.

The United States government has implemented various changes concerning funding higher education. The 2008 great recession led to a shrink in federal and state funding for higher education in the United States (Pew, 2019). The federal government spends just 2% of its budget on higher education. Therefore, states carry the burden of financing their higher education (Pew, 2019). However, some states never fully recovered from the recession; thus, they cannot adequately support their higher education institutions (Yuen, 2020). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in

2020, this situation worsened. To this end, the Center for American Progress estimates that at least $46 billion is needed to fund US higher education adequately in 2020 (Yuen, 2020).

Wangenge-Ouma (2021) claims that South African government funding for higher education is inadequate and cannot keep up with enrolment pressures. Many South African higher education institutions rely on government subsidies, student fees, and third-stream income for financial viability. Wangenge-Ouma (2021) argues that expanding higher education requires extensive state funding. However, the author argues that state funding for higher education in South Africa has been declining in real terms. The country spends just 0,68% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on higher education, which lags behind the international average of 0,82% (De Villiers, 2017). Thus, to keep afloat, universities continue to increase student fees to cover their shortfalls. Beginning in October 2015, South African higher education institutions, including the UFS, witnessed a wave of student protests known as '#FeesMustFall'. This movement was a response to concerns about the rising costs of higher education (Mavunga, 2019). The affordability of higher education remains a significant issue, even with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) aimed at supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds (De Villiers, 2017). As of 2023, students are still protesting the deficiencies and shortcomings within the current NSFAS system (Maneli, 2023). Consequently, the financial burden often leads many students to exit the education system prematurely due to the challenges of fees.

In the South African context, social inequalities persist even after the end of apartheid, affecting various aspects of life, including higher education. Adonis and Silinda (2021) contend that these inequalities are deeply ingrained within the higher education system. The #FeesMustFall movement in 2015–2016 brought to light the racial disparities within higher education, as discussed by Dlamini (2019). According to NSFAS (2019), most of its beneficiaries are black Africans, with 93% of funded students being black in 2019. These statistics align closely with the country's demographics and poverty distribution (De Villiers, 2023). NSFAS only targets students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and being a beneficiary of the scheme often indicates coming from a lower-income family.

2.5.6 Adapting to institutional cultures

Institutional culture “incorporates the university’s values, the names and symbols, its use of space, its research focus, and the interactions between staff new and old, and between staff and students” (UFS, 2018a:5). It is a product of complex institutional histories. In South Africa, where many higher education institutions are linked to colonial and apartheid projects, institutional culture becomes complex. The central tenets of the institutional culture are that: 1) it emphasises an organisation's distinctive character, which provides meaning to members; 2) it is deeply embedded and durable; and (3) it is difficult to change (Peterson and Spencer, 1990). Moreover, it transmits a feeling of self, facilitates commitment to an entity other than oneself, such as a university or peer group, improves the social system's stability, and is a meaning-making mechanism that affects behaviour. Wilson-Strydom (2012:27) posits that “institutional cultures are related to the students developing a sense of belonging instead of alienation, academic and social networks, and the building of social or cultural capital”. This author argues that these factors lead to positive self-esteem, good academic performance, and social acceptance (Wilson-Strydom, 2012).

Institutional culture defines, identifies, and legitimises authority at a university (Kuh and Whitt, 1988). An institution's culture and values significantly influence students' mindsets, academic behaviour and institutionally dominant teaching and learning methods. “Institutional cultures are increasingly mentioned as influential in understanding student success or attrition (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014:48). Culture affects how students from different cultural backgrounds integrate into the social and academic environment. Newsome and Cooper (2016) argue that students usually experience cultural shocks when attending university.

In some cases, “individuals find themselves faced with challenges to their deeply held beliefs and understandings which in turn pose potential threats to their sense of identity and well-being” (Newsome and Cooper, 2016). Thus, failure to adapt to an institutional culture can lead to dropout. Adapting to institutional culture is difficult at the first-year level. However, the situation is worse for first-year commuting students, who typically spend less time on campus and rarely participate in extramural activities. In its 2018 Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP), the UFS posits that, at times,

“students experience the university environment as unsympathetic, hostile, aloof, exclusionary, and discriminatory” (2018b:10).

Institutional culture plays a critical role in commuter students' success. Tinto (2014) established that commuter students who cannot immerse themselves in a university's academic and social cultures are most likely to drop out (see Chapter 3). According to Maguire and Morris (2018:38), one of the contributing factors is that some juggle between home, university, and work. As such, they often do not feel they can get involved in the broader university experience. These authors posit that “students who are more engaged with the university, spending more time on the campus and building up a peer support network, are more likely to succeed and to be more satisfied with their student experience” (Maguire and Morris, 2018:38).

2.5.7 Lack of space on campus for commuter students

The lack of a dedicated space for commuter students on campus is a challenge (Thomas and Jones, 2018; Bloomquist, 2014). “Once on campus (or at their place of study), students experienced practical and emotional issues connected to not having a physical space on or nearby” (Thomas and Jones, 2018:32). Maguire and Morris (2018) argue that commuter students depend on communal spaces on-campus. These spaces include libraries, parking, commuter lounges, etc. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these spaces were unavailable to contain the virus's spread. Thus, implementing the sticky campus model, where students are encouraged to spend more time on campus spaces beyond formal contact hours, was impossible.

The absence of space on campus influences commuter students during gaps between taught lessons; thus, some would decide to go back home (Bloomquist, 2014). Consequently, they would miss some classes or arrive late. However, Githaiga, Gobodo-Madikizela and Wahl (2018) found that day residences have become a valuable resource for commuter students. These authors (2018) provide meaningful insights into the purpose and functioning of day residences. According to their research, day residences support commuter students in gaining a residence-like experience. Commuting students could choose and associate themselves with a specific day residence. Day residences have similar leadership structures as live-in residences, ensuring that commuter students can engage in various co-curricular

activities such as sports, arts and culture, and social events. These day residences primarily cater to undergraduate students.

2.5.8 Influence of COVID-19 on commuter students

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic completely changed how universities conduct their core businesses. The pandemic disrupted everyday life and affected almost all countries worldwide (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020). In response to the pandemic, the subsequent lockdowns interrupted conventional teaching and learning at higher education institutions globally (Schleicher, 2020). Many institutions moved to remote (online) teaching and learning, significantly impacting the student experience (Zalat, Hamed and Bolbol, 2021). Thus, the 2020 student experience was severely affected by the pandemic. Adapting to this environment was a challenge for academic staff and students as internet accessibility and reliability were widespread issues and severely limited the transition to online (Cullinan *et al.*, 2021).

Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe (2020) argue that the pandemic exposed gross inequalities in higher education, where some students could adapt quickly to online teaching and learning, while others could not. These authors argue that poverty and lack of devices such as laptops and smartphones limited student participation in online teaching and learning platforms. Thus, many students had to rely solely on their own devices to continue with remote education. However, inequalities were limited not only to students but also to institutions. Thus, some institutions responded faster to remote learning, while others struggled because of weak information technology infrastructure, among other things (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe, 2020).

All over the world, universities decided to suspend face-to-face teaching for the remainder of 2020, while others chose to resume controlled face-to-face teaching in the second half of 2020. Many South African universities also transitioned to remote learning in response to the pandemic. The transition had both positive and negative impacts on commuter students.

As already established (see 2.3), commuter students are most likely to be poor and rely on the services provided by universities. Lack of accessibility to campus services such as libraries, computer labs, student lounges, and day scholar residences affected

commuter students (Jaramillo and Espinoza, 2020). Even as many universities resumed face-to-face classes in the latter part of 2020, commuter students faced another set of challenges. For example, commuting using public transport was challenging as some public transportation companies did not comply with COVID-19 regulations regarding social distancing. Interpersonal contact at universities creates a significant risk for infection (Mncube, Mutongoza and Olawale, 2021). Critical university services that commuter students use on campus were still limited. Thus, the academic performance of commuter students was affected by the pandemic.

First-year commuter students face many challenges that affect their higher education experiences. Some of these challenges are longstanding, such as issues with transportation, lack of engagement, funding constraints, underpreparedness, and off-campus living conditions. However, some challenges are new, such as those introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, there is a pressing need to address these challenges and improve the higher education experiences of first-year commuter students. Consequently, addressing their challenges requires more than just a peer network, as proposed in this study (see 2.6). Nevertheless, the benefits of being in a peer network (see 2.6.2) provide an environment that can mitigate some of these challenges. To this end, in this study, peer networks are presented as a viable option to support first-year commuter students, as discussed below.

2.6 SUPPORTING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS VIA PEER NETWORKS FOR HOLISTIC SUCCESS

Priest, Saucier and Eiselein (2016) posit that there is growing interest in peer networks to improve the chances of commuter students to succeed. Black and Mackenzie (2008:3) define peer network as the support “other students play in a student's academic learning, social well-being and familiarisation with the institution”. Further, Suresh *et al.* (2021) define peer network as the academic, social, and emotional support an individual offers in equal standing based on respect and shared responsibility. There are two types of peer support, namely horizontal and vertical support. Horizontal support is where students within the same year group support one another, while vertical peer support is where senior students support first-year students (Black and Mackenzie, 2008). This study will focus on first-year peer

networks and vertical support groups (see 1.1.5). As such, the focus is on first-year peer mentorship.

2.6.1 First-year peer mentorship

Peer mentoring has become an essential and influential intervention to ensure first-year students' successful transition and retention (Antoniadou and Holmes, 2016). “Mentoring describes a range of faculty-student, staff-student, or student-student relationships” (Lunsford *et al.*, 2017:316). Thus, it is widely accepted as an effective mechanism to influence students positively. Peer mentorship is a student support network (Yomtov *et al.*, 2017). Thus, “student peer mentorship programmes have been implemented at many higher education institutions to combat high attrition and failure rates among first-year students” (Swart, Coughlan and Joannou, 2019:220).

Collier (2017) defines peer mentorship as when a senior student or mentor provides information, advice, and emotional support to a junior student over some time. In line with vertical support (as discussed in 2.4.), a mentor is typically a senior student with institutional or organisational experience to draw from to guide mentees. Unlike traditional forms of mentorship, where a staff member mentors a younger individual, peer mentors are “generally equal in age, experience, and power to provide guidance and social support” (Reis and Yu, 2018:235). Thus, a peer mentor in an undergraduate programme is “usually a student who has progressed to a more advanced year level, often in the same degree programme” (O'Brien, Llamas and Stevens 2012). Additionally, “a peer mentor can act as a friend, coach, companion, supporter, advisor, role model, and a person to talk to” (Van der Westhuizen, 2021:45).

Peer mentorship can also be in groups or one on one (O'Brien *et al.*, 2012). Group mentoring involves conversing to share ideas, experiences, and tips (Van der Westhuizen, 2021). However, the disadvantage of a group setting is that it is not intimate; thus, mentees can easily see it as tutoring instead of mentoring. In contrast, one-on-one mentoring allows for personal discussions, which benefit mentees. O'Brien *et al.* (2012) also argue that peer mentorship can be part of orientation and transition programmes designed to improve the student experience and facilitate student integration into university. Peer mentors are recruited and trained in areas such as being mentors, setting up and maintaining a group, mentoring sessions,

identifying struggling students, and referring them to other support services (O'Brien *et al.*, 2012). Peer mentors are compensated in various ways, including a certificate of recognition, monthly stipends, course credit, and other forms. Mentoring varies in its lifespan. For example, it can last the registration week only, six weeks, three to six months, and sometimes the entire first year (Christie, 2014). Universities usually decide their mentoring model based on their students' needs.

In addition, peer mentorship programmes are typically based on the Tinto integration theory (Wilton *et al.*, 2021). Tinto (2014) argues that students who are integrated into the campus social and academic environments, both within and outside the classroom, are more likely to persist (see 3.3). Thus, according to Wilton *et al.* (2021), peer mentorship aims to integrate first-year students into the campus environments. To this end, mentors become facilitators of this integration. “Feelings of integration and connection are linked to the sense of community built by peer mentoring and to the supportive social network it creates.” (Seery *et al.*, 2021:665). Characteristics of effective peer mentorship include empathy, trustworthiness, friendship, and supportiveness (Seery *et al.,* 2021). Thus, the value universities typically attribute to mentoring is positive, benefiting mentors and mentees alike (Christie, 2014). To this end, peer mentoring has become the new mantra for higher education support (Christie, 2014).

Many universities, including the UFS, have established peer mentor programmes to support first-year students. The peer mentor programme at the UFS was established to assist students with emotional, academic, and social integration. All new first-year students are allocated to groups of eight to ten to senior students who have been mentors (Malan, 2018). The UFS peer mentor programme aims to encourage students to reach their full potential and to teach them specific skills that facilitate their development (Malan, 2018:42). Thus, the UFS peer mentor programme is also used in this study as a case study to explore how first-year commuting students are and can be peer supported to improve their chances of success. The framework recommended in Chapter 7 draws from the empirical engagement with first-year commuting mentees sampled from the UFS peer mentor programme (see Chapter 6).

The UFS peer mentor programme focuses on four goals. The first goal is psychological and emotional support, where mentors assist students regarding adjustment

challenges and solving personal or social problems (Malan, 2018). The second goal focuses on goal setting and career paths, where mentors help mentees set academic and career goals. The third goal focuses on academic subject knowledge support, where mentors advance mentees' knowledge in their study fields. Lastly, the goal is on role modelling, where mentors demonstrate behaviours that are associated with success, such as academic accomplishments (Malan, 2018).

Conceptually, the UFS peer mentor programme is based on explicit and implicit support. Explicit support refers to formal, organised, and intentional support given to the first-year student (Black and MacKenzie, 2008). Explicit support includes a scheduled interaction between mentors and mentees. In this form of support, the intended outcomes of the interaction between mentors and mentees are outlined and communicated so that both parties know their roles and responsibilities. Mentors and mentees meet regularly to discuss issues and challenges and craft ways to succeed (Black and MacKenzie, 2008).

On the other hand, implicit support refers to when first-year commuter students are paired with other first-years in a group. This grouping aims to offer mentees informal opportunities to engage with other mentees in academically, emotionally, and socially enriching ways. A friendship group of mentees is an example of implicit support (Kuh, 2008).

2.6.2 Value and importance of peer mentorship

The value of peer mentorship is that it creates holistic, collaborative, co-constructed learning experiences and environments in undergraduate education (Priest *et al.*, 2016). Further, peer mentorship encourages self-directed learning and meaningful relationships, promoting emotional, social, and academic support and leadership skills (Andersen, 2018). Mentors encourage balance in work-personal life (social and emotional support), orientate mentees into a new programme, and assist with academic challenges (i.e. academic support) (Geesa, Lowery and McConnell, 2018). Swart *et al.* (2019:221) found that "peer-mentored students were less likely to drop out of university compared to their non-peer-mentored counterparts". In addition, peer mentoring benefits commuter students to better adapt to higher education (Swart *et al.*, 2019). Adapting is very important in South Africa, where many students are from

different cultural backgrounds and relocate from their communities to large cities during their studies (Swart *et al.*, 2019).

Central to peer mentorship is the understanding that learning is an emotional, academic, and social endeavour. Thus, the framework recommended in Chapter 7 relates to the emotional, academic, and social aspects of peer support for first-year commuter students.

2.6.3 The emotional value of peer mentorship

Corwin and Cintrón (2011) describe the importance of peer relationships and participation in first-year peer mentorship as key to reducing the stress and anxieties related to the transition from high school to university. The stresses and anxieties can lead to the breakdown of students' mental well-being and, ultimately, depression (Suresh *et al*., 2021). Peer support from a mentorship is vital to alleviating these stresses and anxieties. To this end, mentors provide emotional support when mentees face challenges and guidance when they experience frustration or anxiety during their studies (Swart *et al.*, 2019).

2.6.4 The social value of peer mentorship

Peer mentorship helps create a welcoming and supportive university environment. It also helps develop positive interpersonal relationships that contribute to the social integration of students into the educational system. Thus, mentorship aids students in attaining both their institutional and personal goals (Corwin and Cintrón, 2011). One of the critical contributions of peer mentorship is that it provides trustworthy friendships where a cohort of first-year commuter students can share their educational and personal challenges. Peer mentoring promotes social support for first-year commuting students by introducing them to one another and helping them to feel at ease in a new and strange environment (Swart *et al.*, 2019).

2.6.5 The academic value of peer mentorship

The academic reasons for this peer mentorship choice are multifold. “Peer mentoring has been shown to positively influence university student achievement and increase student retention at institutions.” (Sharp, 2021:3-4). In addition, such mentorship offers a range of opportunities such as “(1) academic discussion and problem-solving; (2) validation and benchmarking; and (3) support as well as personal and professional development” (Pilbeam *et al*., 2013:1479). Tinto (2014) argues that students who can establish meaningful peer networks beyond the mentorship programme will likely stay at university (see 3.3). Beyond these, peer mentorship supports the exchange of information and knowledge and helps to create an affiliation or sense of belonging to the institution (Toma´s-Miquel *et al*., 2015).

2.6.6 Mentor and mentee relationships

Mentoring is a complex, dynamic interpersonal and developmental undertaking supporting novice students (Garza *et al.*, 2019). Peer mentoring involves a reciprocal relationship of mutual benefits to the mentee and mentor. Peer mentoring involves four phases: relationship building, setting goals and expectations, working, and termination.

Matching mentors and mentees is the first step in building a relevant and meaningful relationship. Matching is usually determined by similarity in a degree programme (O'Brien *et al.*, 2012). Further, these authors indicate that time and availability to meet are vital. Mentors are students themselves. Thus, their academic needs must be accommodated. To this end, the allocation of mentees to a mentor needs to consider the workload of mentors.

The second phase of setting goals and expectations in a peer mentorship programme is formal and informal (Tsang, 2020). Formal interaction is structured and includes a third-party-arranged “matching process between mentors and mentees, and training and orientation sessions based on specific goals” (Tsang, 2020:2). Conversely, informal ones are typically unstructured, spontaneous, and voluntary.

Gurjee (2020) argues that mentees have reported higher satisfaction with mentors who take a formal developmental approach. A developmental approach entails

devoting “effort into building a connection and setting expectations according to their mentees’ preferences and interests” (Gurjee, 2020:50). Mentors share feelings and experiences to enrich the relationship with mentees (Malan, 2018). Any interaction in a peer mentorship relationship aims to empower mentees to make better choices about their lives and careers.

The working phase involves developing and implementing a plan to achieve the goals. It consists of assigning challenging tasks or assignments, counselling, acceptance, confirmation, and providing exposure and visibility, just to name a few (Agholor, Lleo, and Serrano, 2017). These activities provide emotional, psychological, social, and academic support. Dedicating time and space for interaction and follow-ups is critical in this stage. Typically, mentors and mentees communicate weekly. Weekly contact includes phone calls, texts, email exchanges, and virtual and in-person meetings.

The termination phase is the end of the formal mentor-mentee relationship. The termination phase is a challenge to the individuals involved as, in most cases, a bond is created in the process (Christie, 2014). Some mentees depend on mentors for friendship and other emotional, social, and academic support. Thus, ending mentorship may signal the end of a relationship and is a painful experience for mentees. However, ending a mentoring relationship does not mean it has failed; the mentorship goals have been achieved, and it is time to move on.

Moreover, friendship bonds that are created can continue beyond contractual obligations. The positive outcomes of peer mentorship are higher retention, academic success/higher grades, social integration, satisfaction, and adjustment to university (Agholor *et al.*, 2017). Conversely, adverse outcomes mean student departure from the university.

2.6.7 An integrated system of peer support

Peer mentorship is rarely used as an isolated student support initiative. Instead, it is a structured approach designed to work with other student support programmes like academic advising (O'Brien *et al.*, 2012). Mentors can refer mentees to other available support services when a need arises. To this end, peer mentorship programmes work best in an integrated system.

Developing and designing the structure of the operation is critical. In a formal peer mentorship programme, a structure is directed by guidelines and policies set by the university administrators for implementation (Agholor *et al.*, 2017). These guidelines and policies govern the relationship between a mentor and mentee and a peer mentor programme's fit within student support services.

2.6.8 Challenges regarding peer mentorship

Despite the reported benefits of peer mentoring programmes, there are also challenges. Collings, Swanson and Watkins (2016) found that most first-year students accessed the programme during the first week at university, but their numbers diminished by ten weeks. Declining numbers point to a lack of commitment from both mentees and mentors. These findings were supported by Swart *et al.* (2019), who stated that poor attendance at planned events by mentees was a challenge. Discouragement of attendance, attitude, and lack of communication between mentees and mentors were also common challenges (Swart *et al.*, 2019).

Collings *et al.* (2016) found that mentors were overloaded with too many mentees. As such, they ended up stopping their relationships with mentees prematurely. Moreover, mentors are also students, and their academic needs sometimes take over (Collings *et al.*, 2016). Thus, these authors recommend that faculties monitor the work of mentors to ensure accountability. Further, Swart *et al.* (2019) recommend incorporating peer mentorship programmes into each academic programme's curriculum and timetable. In this case, the workload can be managed better to ensure mentors are not overwhelmed.

2.7 CONCLUSION

As stated in 2.1, this chapter aimed to explore the historical factors that led to the growth of student populations, including commuter students. The qualitative literature review revealed that the rebuilding process following the end of World War II led to booming industries, which in turn required skilled labour. The demand for higher education institutions grew, as evidenced by the rise of enrolment figures globally. Higher education was transformed from being for the selected few elites to mass institutions open to many. However, many higher education institutions were ill-prepared for the massive intake of diverse students; hence, many struggled to

complete their qualifications, leading to high dropouts. Large classes, insufficient funding, poor quality of education, limited infrastructure, and other products of the massification process have led to students leaving higher education prematurely.

The second focus of this chapter was defining commuter students and examining the benefits and challenges they face. This study defined commuter students as those students not residing in university residences. This definition aligned with established literature definitions (see more detail in 2.3). While there are benefits to commuting as outlined (see more detail in 2.4), there were also significant challenges discussed that offset these advantages (see more detail in 2.5). In general, by not residing on campus, commuter students-commuter students, by not residing on campus, may not fully engage with the university or benefit from spontaneous interactions and bonds that form in residential settings. This marginalisation can manifest in various ways: reduced access to extracurricular activities, academic support services tailored to the schedules of residential students, and less interaction with faculty and peers, all of which are vital for fostering a sense of belonging and academic success.

Jacoby's (2020; see more detail in 2.3) assertion that commuter students may be marginalised in residential institutions highlights a significant issue in higher education. It warranted a recommendation in this chapter to classify them as at-risk students for dropout. Although the literature did not explicitly label commuter students as at risk, this study, informed by their challenges, differs from the literature and advocates such classification. By recognising commuter students as at-risk, universities can implement targeted support initiatives like peer mentoring to address their academic, social and emotional needs. Care must be exercised when considering classifying commuter students as at-risk to prevent potential stigma or reinforcement of feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Literature provides examples of the negative psychological and educational impacts that can arise from such labels. Thus, it is essential not to apply a blanket approach, as the literature reviewed indicates the diversity among commuter students. In the South African context, students from lower-income families, rural areas, and those with poor secondary education, whether residing on or off campus, are generally considered at risk of academic exclusion. When compounded with commuting challenges, their risk of dropout increases markedly.

The third focus was on examining the role of peer networks, specifically peer mentorship, in supporting the success of commuter students. Peer mentoring and peer networks played a vital role in students' transition and were found to play a vital role in students' transition to university (see more detail in 2.6). Insights from the literature reviewed support the position of this study that peer mentorship of first-year students is a valuable resource that can leverage their success in university. However, research was scarce that connected peer mentoring to first-year commuter students. This scarcity could be explained by the dominance of the residential model in student support research, where the focus is on campus and traditional students. It could also be because universities often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach when supporting students, without considering the need to differentiate based on their residential status. The following chapter discusses theories of student success.

CHAPTER 3
THEORY OF INTEGRATING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTERS INTO THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT VIA A PEER MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter articulates the theoretical framework supporting this study (1.4). This study uses Tinto's student integration theory to ensure that the proposed supportive framework addresses first-year commuter students' academic, emotional, and social aspects (see Chapter 7) that possibly lead to commuter students persisting or dropping out of higher education (Tinto, 2014). The motivation for adapting Tinto's theory was to address the gap in the literature regarding the lack of studies on first-year commuter students' integration into the university environment (Van Zyl and Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; see also 2.1).

For this doctoral study, a theoretical framework can be described "as a framework which offers an explanatory device often in the form of categories and relationships … which both explains and predicts relationships between phenomena" (Ridley, 2008:20-21). It also served as "the guide on which to build and support your study and also provided the structure to define how you will philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically approach the dissertation as a whole" (Grant and Osanloo, 2014:13). Before delving into Tinto's theory (see 3.3), this chapter discusses other theories of student success (see 3.2).

3.2 THEORIES OF STUDENT SUCCESS AND DROPOUT

Since expanding access to higher education post-World War II, there have been concerns about increasing non-completion of degrees and students dropping out of the higher education system. Therefore, while access has improved substantially, numerous challenges exist concerning student persistence and dropout. The evidence shows that though access to higher education has increased significantly, university completion rates have not followed suit. To this end, many scholars have theorised why students drop out or persist in higher education (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975; Astin,1984; Bean and Metzner, 1985). In the pre-1970s, these many theories of student persistence and dropout were at the margin of higher education research. However, they became mainstream in the 1970s, owing to the realisation that universities were admitting many students who did not ever graduate (Aljohani, 2016).

These theories focused on the university-student interaction. Some of the well-known of these theories are Spady's (1971), Tinto's (1975), Astin's student involvement theory (1984), and Bean and Metzner's (1985). These theories have influenced one another. They are discussed below, starting with Spady's theory (see 3.2.1).

3.2.1 Spady's theory and first-year commuter students

Spady's theory is one of the first to acknowledge the sociological influence on student departure or persistence (Nicoletti, 2019). Similar to Tinto (see 3.3), the starting point of Spady's theory is the sociological work of Durkheim (1897) on social integration (Hadjar, Haas and Gewinner, 2023). Durkheim argues that a lack of integration into society can lead to suicide, which he views as a social rather than an individual psychological issue (Nicoletti, 2019). Spady applied Durkheim's explanation to student departure, suggesting that students leave without completing their studies due to a lack of academic and social integration within the university (Dewberry and Jackson, 2018).

Recognising Durkheim's logic that a lack of societal integration, marked by insufficient social ties and a misalignment between personal and collective norms and values, is the primary driver of suicide, Spady suggests that poor integration into the university leads to student dropout (Hadjar *et al.*, 2023). Spady views integration into a university's academic and social environments as a process of assimilation that a student must undergo to avoid departure (Nicoletti, 2019). This process implies that these systems exist in higher education independently of students, who must adapt to or assimilate them.

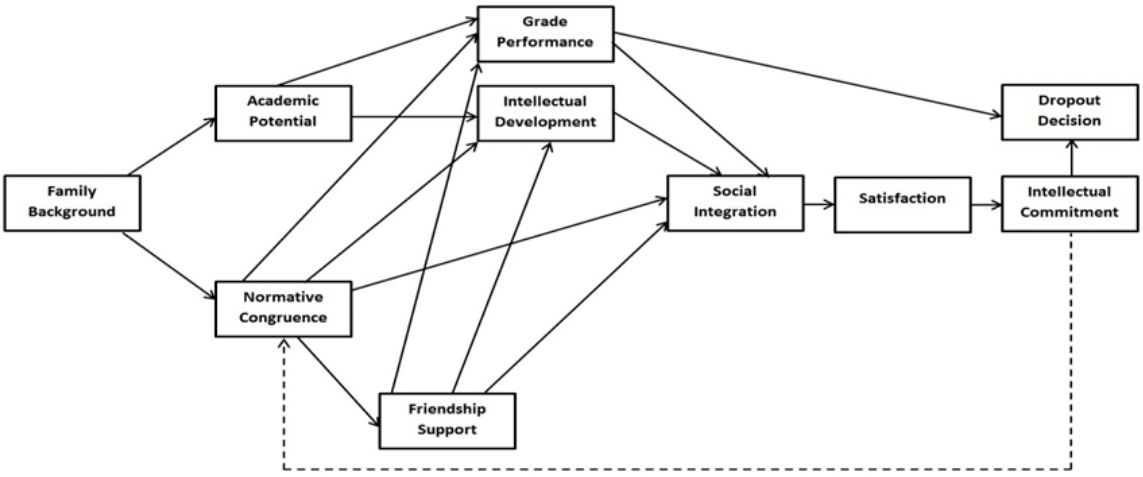

Figure 3.1: Spady's theory (Spady, 1971)

Figure 3.1 depicts Spady's theory of the dropout and persistence processes, considering students' family characteristics, including demographic factors (e.g. age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.). These characteristics influence students' initial expectations and preparedness for university life. Furthermore, family background influences academic potential and normative congruence (Nicoletti, 2019). Spady argues that "the degree to which a person's beliefs, attitudes, and interests match the collective norm of higher education is seen to be vital in success" (Black, 2023:4). In this case, academic integration refers to the student's involvement and performance in the academic sphere of university life. It encompasses academic achievement, intellectual development, and the extent to which students find their academic experiences rewarding or satisfying (Aljohani, 2016). A high level of satisfaction is seen as crucial for student persistence.

Normative congruence relates to social integration and is measured by the student's interactions and relationships within the university community, including friendship support. Students who form meaningful friendships with peers and faculty will likely achieve social integration. According to Spady's theory, students who achieve social and academic integration will likely be satisfied and committed to the institution. Institutional commitment means that a student is invested in their institution and has a sense of satisfaction, which influences a student's persistence (Black, 2023). Conversely, students who fail to integrate into the social and academic environment will likely be dissatisfied and drop out of university.

Students who fail to integrate are likely to experience social alienation. This process of social alienation leads to feelings of meaninglessness, apathy, misery, and depression, which can motivate departure. Spady argues that first-year students' experiences of assimilation or alienation determine their likelihood of staying or leaving.

Spady's theory laid the foundation for subsequent student persistence, success, and dropout theories, such as Astin's student involvement theory (see 3.2.2).

3.2.2 Astin's Student Involvement Theory and first-year commuter students

Astin's Student Involvement Theory, formulated by Alexander Astin in 1984, emphasises the significance of active student engagement in the university's academic and social aspects. According to Astin, student involvement directly relates to their learning and development outcomes (Hallinan, 2016). Astin (Zhou, 2010) lists three types of involvement vital for a student to succeed in higher education: academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. Astin primarily focuses on external involvement such as behaviour; however, he also acknowledges the importance of internal involvement, for example, motivation (Zhou, 2010).

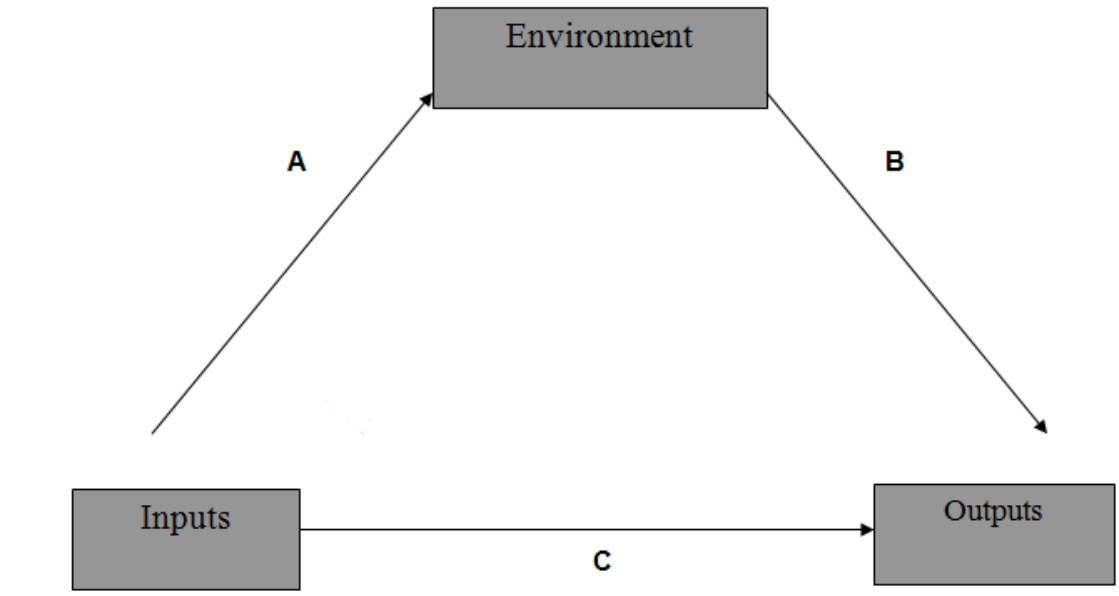

Figure 3.2: Astin's I.E.O theory (Wah et al., 2022).

Figure 3.2 depicts Astin's theory based on inputs, environment, and outputs (Wah *et al.*, 2022). Input refers to the characteristics of students when they arrive at university. Examples of student inputs include family characteristics (as discussed by Spady, see 3.2.1), demographic background, prior schooling, degree aspirations, and more. The environment encompasses the entire educational experience of students during their studies. This holistic experience includes interactions with peers and faculty, classroom experiences, and other educational or curriculum-related activities to which students are exposed (Wah *et al.*, 2022). Output refers to the student's characteristics after exposure to the university environment, reflecting their growth and development due to their educational experiences (Zhou, 2010).

Astin (1984) outlines that students who spend time on campus, participate actively in student clubs and activities, and frequently communicate with lecturers are likely to persist. Conversely, Astin (1984) argues that students who neglect their studies, spend limited time on campus, avoid extracurricular activities, and have little interaction with faculty or peers are likely to drop out (Knight *et al.*, 2014). Astin's theory laid the foundation for the student engagement theory (see 3.2.4).

Astin (1984) posits that the involvement theory advocates for the active participation of commuter students in their learning process. He argues that learning and individual development are proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement. Student motivation is vital to the involvement theory. Therefore, motivated first-year commuter students will likely participate in learning and co-curricular activities. Astin (1984:523) asserts that "students who join social fraternities or sororities or participate in extracurricular activities of almost any type are less likely to drop out." The theory uses psychological and sociological perspectives to describe how students' efforts and the opportunities institutions provide lead to student growth and persistence (Lima, 2014).

3.2.3 Bean and Metzner's conceptual theory and first-year commuter students

Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory focuses on non-traditional students, specifically adults aged 24 years or older who commute to university and are enrolled part-time. As discussed earlier (see 2.2), the massification of higher education has led to the growth of non-traditional student populations. Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that

background variables, such as age, enrolment status, and residence, influence how these students experience university. They contend that for non-traditional students, the commitment to persist is primarily influenced by their interactions with the academic system rather than their social interactions within the institutional environment (Robertson, 2020). Accordingly, these authors view this arrangement as problematic for non-traditional students due to their lack of social integration. The central argument of Bean and Metzner's theory is "that non-traditional students are most likely to be affected by the external environment such as family obligations, work responsibilities, and finances, and are mainly concerned with academics instead of socialisation within the institution" (Chen, Ziskin and Torres, 2020).

Bean and Metzner (1985) found that first-year commuter students spend less time on campus because of off-campus commitments. These students do not have time to participate in campus extra-curricular activities that facilitate social and academic integration. Thus, Bean and Metzner (in Chen *et al.*, 2020) argue that the dropout of first-year commuter students is influenced by the external rather than internal university environment. The "pre-university and external variables interact and impact how students become involved in the academic and social systems of the institutions" (Lima, 2014:20). The influence of the external environment in Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory is a clear departure from Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975), who mainly focus on the influence of the internal environment on student persistence.

To this end, Bean and Metzner (1985:489-490) argue that the environment of first-year commuter students includes "(a) less interaction in the university environment with peers or faculty members and less interaction through extracurricular activities and the use of campus services; (b) class-related activities very similar to traditional students; and (c) much greater interaction with the noncollegiate, external environment". Thus, no-traditional students interact primarily with non-students and non-faculty members.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory offers a critical theoretical understanding of commuter students, but this theory also has limitations. It introduced the concept of the external environment on student persistence; however, the emphasis on the influence of external variables means universities have limited control over informing

educational practices that support student success. In other words, the external environment is outside the sphere of influence of higher education institutions.

3.3 TINTO'S STUDENT INTEGRATION THEORY AND FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS

Vincent Tinto builds on Spady's theory to explain why students depart and persist in higher education. Like Spady (see 3.2.1), Tinto draws a parallel to Durkheim's theory of suicide, arguing that there are similarities between the two processes. Both can be seen as forms of voluntary withdrawal from a particular society. Moreover, Tinto's theory is influenced by Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage.

Durkheim's influence on Tinto mirrors his impact on Spady (see 3.2.1). Therefore, I will not revisit Durkheim's contributions here, but focus on Van Gennep. In his work, *Stages of Student Departure: Reflections on the Longitudinal Character of Student Leaving*, Tinto (1988) established a clear connection between his theoretical model and Van Gennep's (1908) concept of rites of passage. Tinto (1988) utilised Van Gennep's stages of rites of passage to explain the student departure process. Van Gennep's seminal work, translated by Vizedom and Caffee (1960), introduced the concept of rites of passage and life cycle rituals signifying a person's transition from one social status to another. Van Gennep identified three primary stages in these rites: separation, transition and incorporation. Each stage is marked by events that facilitate an individual's transition. Van Gennep's stages have been widely influential beyond their anthropological origins and across various fields of study.

Tinto adapted Van Gennep's framework to explain student departure and persistence in higher education. Tinto's theory has three stages: separation, transition and integration. These stages encompass a variety of student experiences that shape the decision to leave or stay in a university. By employing the concept of rites of passage, Tinto's theory provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student persistence and dropout in higher education.

3.3.1 The separation stage of first-year commuter students

Tinto (1993) argues that all first-year students, including commuters, undergo a separation period where they must leave their familiar environments, such as home,

friends, and school, to join a new university setting. Separation refers to first-year commuter students leaving one group to join another (Jama, Mapesela and Beylefeld, 2008). Similar to van Gennep, Tinto contends that the separation stage involves individuals leaving their past associations and is characterised by a decline in interactions with members of the group from which the person has come (Janusz and Walkiewicz, 2018). "Separation occurs before and at the outset of the institutional experiences in both the academic and social systems." (Elkins, Braxton and James, 2000:252).

The separation stage is not only limited to the physical departure from home to university but also entails psychological and emotional separation. First-year commuter students must mentally and physically detach from their past environments to fully integrate into their new context and adjust to their new role as students (Moosa and Langsford, 2021). "Separation constitutes the first stage of passage into the university career and may require some personal transformation." (Elkins *et al.*, 2000:253). This process leads to adopting new behaviours and cultural norms appropriate to campus life, and shedding old ways of life (Cheng, 2023). According to Moosa and Langsford (2021), the separation phase involves developing new friendships, learning new bodies of knowledge, and employing new ways of thinking in an academic setting. However, there are associated challenges with separation.

Adjusting to a new environment with strange people might induce anxiety, stress, and isolation, leading to an early departure from university (Cheng, 2023). According to Tinto (1993), separation is difficult for students from low-income families or first-generation students.

During the separation stage, Tinto (1993) argues that students often experience incongruence, which refers to the mismatch between a first-year student's social values, preferences, and behavioural styles with those required at the institution (Lemmens, 2010). Moosa and Langsford (2021) suggest that incongruence is common during separation. Overcoming the challenges of separation allows students to transition to the next stage.

3.3.2 The transition stage of first-year commuter students

According to Tinto in his seminal work (1988:444), the transition stage "is a period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped-for associations with communities of the present". Tinto (1988) derived this concept from van Gennep's framework, suggesting that during this stage, new students, having separated from their past, have yet to acquire the norms and behaviours necessary for integration into the university community. Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (cited in Poquet *et al.*, 2021) define transition as an event resulting in relationships, routines, roles and assumptions changing. This stage involves new socialisation, which entails learning about a new culture and its attributes (Matthews, 2021). It is an intermediary phase where students have detached from their past social status, but have not fully integrated into a new university status. Consequently, this is the most challenging stage, filled with confusion, loss, and a lack of belonging.

Victor Turner conceptualises the transition stage as liminality, referring to the middle phase of any ritual where individuals transition from one social status to another (Wels *et al.*, 2011). In this context, students find themselves ‘in between two cultures’, navigating the challenges of leaving behind their old environment while not being entirely accepted into the new university culture.

Transition involves adjusting to a new academic, social, and emotional life. As students enter higher education, Moosa and Langsford (2021) argue that they acquire new knowledge and skills and learn new norms, values, and beliefs. During the transition, students must build a sense of belonging, social networks, friendships, and social and cultural capital (Wilson-Strydom, 2012). Thus, first-year commuter students undergo a dramatic transformation as they transition to fit into the new university setting.

The transition period is highly demanding for all first-year students but even more so for commuter students. Although challenging, the transition phase generally moves faster for first-year students who move to university residences and leave their familiar home environments (Sikhwari et al., 2020). These students often participate in extracurricular activities as part of residence life that help them develop friendships and integrate into campus life. However, as established in Chapter 2, many

universities cannot provide adequate housing for the increasing number of students requiring on-campus accommodation. Consequently, a significant number of students commute to university. For these students, the transition is even more challenging (Chrysikos, Ahmed and Ward, 2017).

Transition induces anxieties related to changes in social and academic cultures (Thuo and Edda, 2017). Cage *et al.* (2021) argue that navigating transitions can be psychologically demanding and may influence students' mental health. The feeling of loss induces the anxieties associated with the transition. Cage *et al.* (2021) argue that during the transition period, students come to terms with the loss of a familiar home environment, including the loss of friends and being distant from family. Additionally, students feel a sense of loss of their former identities and sense of place, experiencing stress related to developing new identities in a new environment (Cage et al., 2021). Elias, Ping, and Abdullah (2011) found that stress correlates with poor academic performance. Thus, as established in Chapter 1, most dropouts in higher education occur in the first year of study.

For many first-year students, transition means being on their own for the first time. They must become independent and responsible for their own lives. Adjusting to adulthood and becoming an independent learner can be daunting (Alipio, 2020). Thus, self-reliance can cause additional stress for students. A successful transition to university means integrating into the academic and social environments (Tinto, 2014).

Successful adjustment to academic life involves students’ ability to achieve good grades (Lombard, 2018). Successful adjustment to the social environment means establishing and accepting meaningful friendships and participating in campus social activities. Emotional adjustment includes the well-being of first-year commuter students (Lombard, 2018). Hence, the first-year transition experience is shaped by social, academic, and emotional adjustments. However, the transition can be characterised as an ambivalent process. At the same time, while students are excited about moving from high school to university, they experience many transition-related challenges discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

3.3.3 The integration stage for first-year commuter students

In Tinto's theory, integration is the final stage. Tinto (1988) argues that after passing through the stages of separation and transition, students must integrate into the new university community. Successful integration hinges on how well students navigate the challenges associated with the transition stage. In this final stage, students adopt new norms appropriate to the university environment and establish membership in the intellectual and social communities of the university. According to Schreiber, Luescher-Mamashela and Moja (2014), the level of integration into the academic and social life of the university and the degree of commitment to their studies and goals predict student persistence.

According to Tinto (cited in Schreiber *et al*., 2014), social interaction is critical for students to establish connections with peers, faculty, and the broader university community. Conversely, lacking an engagement with peers and faculty can lead to student departure. Kuh (2009) further supports this, claiming that the amount of time and effort first-year commuter students invest in academically enriching activities contributes to student success.

Tinto (2014) argues that for students to succeed, they must integrate into both formal and informal academic environments at university. The formal academic environment includes elements such as grades and in-class experiences, which Tinto identifies as critical building blocks for student success. Formal academic integration encompasses activities like researching topics in the library, attending labs and classes, and engaging in various academic success activities (Chrysikos *et al.,* 2017).

Informal academic integration involves interactions with staff and faculty outside of class hours, which help students acclimate to their institution's academic attitudes and values (Chrysikos *et al.,* 2017). Tinto (1997) posits that high levels of involvement and integration in formal and informal academic environments are independent predictors of learning gains. He asserts that academic performance, measured by grades, most accurately reflects how effectively a student has adopted the institution's academic norms and integrated academically (French, 2017).

According to Tinto (2012), the classroom is often the primary, if not the only, place where first-year commuter students engage with academic staff and peers in learning

activities. Lemmens (2010) supports this by stating that for students in commuter institutions, classroom experiences and interactions are often the primary or sole means of engaging with academic staff and peers. Consequently, first-year commuter students are predominantly confined to the formal academic environment and may struggle to form meaningful relationships outside the classroom, impacting their academic progress (Khuong, 2014).

The university social environment also comprises formal and informal settings (Tinto, 1997). The formal social environment includes planned extracurricular activities and residence life, while the informal social environment relates to campus climate and student relationships. Social integration for first-year commuter students involves making friends and participating in university social events (Van Zyl, 2010). However, making friends is often easier in smaller, more intimate residential settings than in larger, impersonal spaces (Tinto, 1997). Residences provide a home-away-from-home environment, facilitating connections and friendships through various social and extracurricular activities (Sikhwari et al., 2020).

Tinto (2014) posits that social integration leads to a sense of belonging, which is crucial for the success of first-year commuter students. However, Tinto (1993) observes that first-year commuter students have limited opportunities for social integration compared to their peers at residential institutions, as they primarily attend university for academic purposes. Consequently, they spend most of their time outside the university, negatively impacting their social integration. Hlalele (2015) supports this view, noting that students who participate in on-campus social activities are less likely to withdraw from university.

3.4 TINTO'S THEORY AND PEER MENTORSHIP

Tinto's theory and the intent of peer mentorship are intricately linked, underpinning the foundations of this study. Peer mentorships are instrumental in facilitating students' transitions to higher education. Arguably, peer mentors are pivotal during all three stages of Tinto's theory: separation, transition, and integration. According to Collings *et al.* (2014), the initial days of the university are critical, as students encounter cultural shocks and significant transformations in their personal, social and academic lives. Academic, social and emotional support from peer mentorship programmes mitigates

the effects of negative life experiences and enhances student well-being and chances of integration into the university community. Peer mentors provide essential support in new environments, thereby alleviating the impact of separation, transition, and integration.

The role of peer mentors in reducing the stress and anxieties associated with separation and transition is well-documented. Mentees' anxiety diminishes, and their sense of connectedness increases when supported by a peer who comprehends the challenges of separation, transition, and integration (Sullins, 2020; see 2.6.2). Consequently, mentoring facilitates first-year students in forming meaningful relationships and developing a range of emotional, social, and academic competencies (Flores and Estudillo, 2018).

3.5 THE CRITIQUE AGAINST TINTO'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK CONCERNING FIRST-YEAR COMMUTERS

Tinto's conceptual framework has been criticised for several reasons concerning first-year commuter students. Tierney (1992, in Khuong, 2014:14) argues that the social integration aspect of Tinto's theory "implies conformity and recognition of the prevailing culture or environment and that an alternative theory where diversity of cultures is celebrated would be preferable". Thus, Hurtado and Carter (1997) argue that student integration, as conceptualised by Tinto (1993), cannot account for the experiences of culturally different subgroups of students, such as Latino students, in the context of the United States. Integration may mean something entirely different for student groups historically marginalised in higher education (Hurtado and Carter, 1997). In this case, the integration of Latino students is understood as assimilation, a problematic term in a world that is trying to accept and value diversity. In any case, Tinto's theory is based on longitudinal research on predominantly white, traditional-age, full-time students at a residential institution (Lima, 2014).

Beyond these, Kommers and Pham (2016) argue that because of the significant differences in language, culture, and communication techniques between most Asian countries and the United States, international Asian students have additional problems assimilating into their new social and academic environments. To this end, Khuong (2014) argues that Tinto's conceptual framework is university-centred because it supports the dominant cultures in higher education and continues accusing students

of not fitting in rather than supporting transformative approaches that accommodate many cultures.

Tinto's theory has also been criticised for being vague about interactions facilitating integration. Quality and positive interactions stimulate learning and eventually lead to persistence (Strydom and Foxcroft, 2017). Conversely, negative interactions can influence students' commitment to their studies and ultimately lead to withdrawal (Lemmens, 2010). Hurtado and Carter (1997 in Tinto, 2014) point out that not all interaction or engagement drives success.

First-year commuter students rely on interaction in class, and, as such, a lecturer becomes a critical facilitator of their academic and social integration. Nora (2001) argues that the most impactful and influential interaction is between a student and lecturers, teaching assistants, and other academic staff. However, Tinto's theory places much responsibility on a student's shoulders to integrate and neglects the potentially harmful role of academic and support staff (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). These authors argue that "students' success is predicated upon the extent to which they feel welcomed by institutional environments and climates" (Johnson *et al.*, 2007:526). Thus, universities should also carry responsibility when first-year commuter students withdraw. Rendón, Jalomo and Nora (2000) argue that Tinto's logic works against commuting students predisposed to drop out because of unwelcoming cultures in higher education (see 2.5.6).

Furthermore, commuter students residing in parental homes cannot escape from their traditions, community, and other affiliations (Lemmens, 2010). In the context of the United States, many commuting students from minority cultural and ethnic groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos cannot assimilate into the university environments. These students rely on "the ease of separation and maintenance of relationships with their families and external communities while making the transition to university" (Khuong, 2014:15). Beyond these, it is not easy to imagine that separation from family can be suitable for student emotional support (Nora, 2001). Thus, this author argues that separation should not entail the rejection of emotional bonds and close relationships with family and community.

Another weakness in Tinto's theory is the meaning of social and academic integration. Lima (2014:18) argues it is "difficult to operationalise outcomes and develop instruments to measure integration accurately". Social integration is difficult to measure because it is more of a state of being than a measurable behaviour. As such, there is a need to develop impactful variables that universities can measure to determine the level of integration of commuter students.

Nevertheless, Tinto's theory provides a crucial framework for understanding student departure in higher education and how universities can enhance persistence. It offers lenses to examine students' challenges at each stage of their higher education journey, including separation, transition, and integration. Furthermore, Tinto's theory views the university community as a cohesive entity built upon shared culture and goals rather than fragmented subcultures that may polarise higher education. This inclusive perspective suggests that any student can become a university community member by embracing its values, norms and practices. Despite its critiques and shortcomings, this study utilises Tinto's theory to illuminate factors influencing student departure and persistence.

3.6 CONCLUSION

The relationship between various theories of student dropout and persistence (as discussed in 3.2), underscores the complexity of understanding student persistence and departure within higher education. Tinto's theory stands out among these theories due to its sociological lens and focus on the interactions between students and their academic and social environments. Additionally, it adapts Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage to explain student departure. In particular, Tinto's theory elucidates how student persistence and dropout are outcomes of these interactions.

Central to Tinto's theory is that student persistence hinges on successful adaptation to university life's academic, social, and emotional aspects (as highlighted in 3.3). Students who effectively integrate into these environments are more likely to persist and thrive. Conversely, departure occurs when students struggle to adapt over time, leading to disengagement and eventual dropout.

In Chapter 4, the methodology of this study is discussed, and the reader is guided through the research paradigm, methodology, and approach adopted for this study.

CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As already stipulated in Chapter 1, this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the methodological choices and the research design process employed in the study. It outlines the sequential steps to achieve the study's objectives (see 1.4). The chapter aims to justify the specific strategies chosen for conducting the research.

Research is a systematic and scientific quest for information within a specific domain or field (Kabir, 2016). Jongbo (2014:87) characterises research “as an organised inquiry to provide information for solving the identified problem”. In addition, Jongbo (2014) and Kabir (2016) emphasise that for an endeavour to qualify as research, it must adhere to systematic and organised procedures, conforming to established norms and standards of validity and reliability. Typically, research denotes a structured pursuit of knowledge. Rajasekar, Philominathan and Chinnathambi (2013) elucidate that research objectives involve discovering, validating, and testing new facts and analysing an event, process, or phenomenon to identify the cause-and-effect relationship. These objectives further include developing new scientific tools, concepts, and frameworks or theories to solve and understand scientific and non-scientific problems; finding solutions to scientific, non-scientific, and social issues; and overcoming or solving the problems occurring in our everyday lives (Rajasekar *et al*., 2013).

Furthermore, Akhtar (2016:68) defines research design as “the plan, structure and strategy and investigation concaved to obtain ensured to search question and control variance”. It lays out the process, structure, and methodology for gathering the requisite data and the framework for their analysis, interpretation, and presentation (Riyami, 2015). Research design presents the logical underpinning for selecting data collection methods and processes, data manipulation, and analysis (Akhtar, 2016). Akhtar’s definition of research design stresses the importance of systematically selecting methods and procedures that allow the researcher to collect the correct information for interpretation. Jongbo (2014) also argues that research design

translates research problems into data for analysis to provide answers to research questions and objectives. A meticulously constructed research design enables the researcher to procure pertinent information for interpretation, while a poorly conceived approach could lead to erroneous conclusions.

Therefore, research as a planned activity aims to establish new facts and information about a particular phenomenon. However, the “purpose of much research at master’s or doctoral level is not so much to prove things, but more to investigate questions, enquire into phenomena and explore issues” (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012:4). Thus, exploratory research is done when not enough is known about a phenomenon. The problem has not been defined adequately. In other words, it aims to fill a knowledge gap by asking questions, exploring problems, and reflecting “on what emerges to make meaning from the data and tell the research story” (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012:4). As established in the statement of the research problem (see 1.2, and Chapter 2), there is a scarcity of research to identify and understand the specific issues of commuter students in South Africa.

This chapter describes the interpretive research paradigm (see 4.2), methodology and qualitative approach adopted for this study (see 4.3). It also describes the appreciative inquiry (see 4.4), data collection methods (see 4.5), research sites where the study was conducted, selection of the population sample (see 4.6), and ethical considerations (see 4.9).

4.2 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM AND HIGHER EDUCATION FIELD OF STUDY

This higher education study is in the research field of student experiences and support, as Tight (2012) suggests. Thus, it is “research that seeks to explain why students persist, and why they sometimes leave higher education without completing their studies” (Tight, 2012:89). However, Tight (2012) notes that higher education research on student experiences focuses mainly on the traditional students, with particular emphasis on young, full-time, residential undergraduate students. Limited studies focus on students' experiences, such as commuters, adults, mature women, and part-time and distance students. Therefore, this study aims to understand the experiences of first-year commuting students who participated in the peer mentor programme to develop a framework that helps them to succeed. Thus, this study seeks to understand

their experiences from their perspectives and worldviews. Hence, this study uses the interpretative paradigm.

The word ‘paradigm’ can be traced to Thomas Kuhn in 1962. A paradigm represents a philosophical way of thinking (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It is a fundamental belief system and theoretical framework with assumptions about reality (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). An interpretative paradigm is a philosophical approach to studying human experiences based on the idea that these experiences are subjective and determined by the context in which the individuals live (Cohen *et al*., 2007). This paradigm assumes a subjectivist epistemology in that researchers make meaning through data obtained and informed by interaction with participants (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

This paradigm believes truth and reality are created, not discovered (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). The paradigm argues that reality is socially constructed and has many realities. It rejects “the notion that a single, verifiable reality exists independent of our senses” (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016:55). The interpretative paradigm focuses on research practices that centralise human meaning-making and knowledge claims (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014, in Dean, 2018). It views every human as unique and their viewpoints as legitimate and worthy. It emphasises the co-constructed nature of reality and the importance of context.

Thanh and Thanh (2015:24) posit that the interpretative paradigm “allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants”. This paradigm is inclusive because it accepts multiple viewpoints of different individuals from different groups (Thanh and Thanh, 2015).

However, critics of this paradigm argue that it lacks generalisability and objectivity (Dean, 2018). Critics say the paradigm is limited by its focus on individual interpretations of complex contexts. Findings from an interpretative paradigm cannot be generalised to other people and contexts (Pham, 2018). Another criticism of interpretivism is that it tends to be subjective rather than objective (Pham, 2018). Thus, research outcomes may be affected by the researcher’s interpretations, belief systems, and ways of thinking or cultural preferences (Pham, 2018). Hence, there remains a concern about bias in interpretative research. However, Yanow and

Schwartz-Shea (2014) argue that these limitations do not render the paradigm useless. The usefulness of this paradigm lies in its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of variables and factors related to a specific context (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). While it could be argued that the interpretative paradigm might be in tension with the purpose of this study – to develop a framework for supporting first-year commuter student success – this potential tension was mitigated by synthesising the rich data collected from literature perspectives and focus-group interviews (see Chapters 2 and 6, respectively).

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

Rehman and Alharthi (2016:52) refer to methodology as "an articulated, theoretically informed approach to producing data". Schwardt (2007) views methodology as a theory on how the research should proceed. It is a "strategy, plan of action, process or design that informs one's choice of research methods" (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016:52). Furthermore, it "guides the researcher in deciding what type of data is required for a study and which data collection tools will be most appropriate for his/her study" (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016:52).

This study followed a qualitative approach, which refers to "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by employing statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Golafshani, 2003:600). Qualitative methods generally aim to understand the experiences and attitudes of participants (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015). This approach is interested in exploring the phenomena as they occur in the natural setting (Riyami, 2015). It embraces the idea that there are multiple realities (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers research to understand these realities (see 4.1). "Evidence of multiple realities includes the use of multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of different individuals and presenting different perspectives." (Creswell, 2013:20). To this end, qualitative research generates knowledge grounded in human perspectives and experiences.

The benefits of qualitative research are that issues can be examined in detail and in-depth. "The data based on human experience that is obtained is powerful and sometimes more compelling than quantitative data." (Anderson, 2010:2). Creswell (2013) argues that qualitative research provides a holistic account of the subject or phenomenon being studied. By presenting many viewpoints and recognising the

numerous aspects at play in a situation, qualitative researchers attempt to create a nuanced picture of the issue or problem being studied (Creswell, 2013).

However, qualitative research is often criticised “as biased, small scale, anecdotal, and lacking rigour” (Anderson, 2010:2). Anderson (2010:2) adds that “rigour is more difficult to maintain, assess, and demonstrate”. Critics also argue that it lacks credibility (Anderson, 2010). Cope (2014:89) refers to credibility as “the truth of the data or the participant views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher”. Anderson (2010:2) argues that in qualitative research, “quality is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and more easily influenced by the researcher’s personal biases and idiosyncrasies”. This methodological approach has been accused of not being transferable. In this case, transferability “refers to findings that can be applied to other settings or groups” (Cope, 2014:89). However, Crick (2020) argues that when qualitative research is carried out correctly, it is unbiased, reliable, rigorous, transferable, and credible.

This study employed a qualitative approach despite the noted challenges. The rationale is that it allows for the triangulation of findings — using multiple data sources and methods to cross-verify results. This multiple-data source approach strengthens the credibility and validity of the research (Carter *et al.*, 2014). Although qualitative research faces accusations of bias, it remains vital due to its ability to provide a deep, contextual, and nuanced understanding of complex phenomena (Daniel, 2016).

4.4 APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI) OF PEER MENTOR PROGRAMME

This study is based on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to understand the contribution of the UFS peer mentor programme to first-year commuter students. Nel and Govender (2019) define AI as a strength-based interpretive and qualitative approach to developing positive change. It was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987). They described appreciative inquiry as action research that attempts to create new theories/ideas/images that help in developmental change. Further developed by Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2008) and refined by Stavros and Torres (2018), Appreciative Inquiry (AI) focuses on identifying and amplifying what an organisation (or institution, as referred to in this study) does well, leveraging these strengths to drive positive change. AI emphasises focusing on strengths and potential

rather than problems and deficits. This strength-based approach, rooted in positive psychology, shifts the traditional problem-solving mindset to one that seeks to identify and enhance what works well in organisations. Thus, a strength-based action research genre for organisational change, development, and research is significantly documented by critical scholars such as Stavros and Torres (2018), Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher and Kearney (2015), Mertens (2015), and Cooperrider *et al.* (2008). AI aims to reconstruct and transform how people perceive reality as posited by Bushe (2007). It leads to new ideas and allows people to choose new actions.

AI contrasts the traditional problem-based or deficit-based approaches that see entities as having problems to be fixed. In other words, AI focuses the research process on what works rather than trying to fix what does not. Thus, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) developed AI for three propositions, namely, a) to move from a problem-solving research approach; b) to understand that organisations are socially constructed realities; and c) to amplify the power of new ideas as forces for change. AI "advocates a collective inquiry into the best of *what is* to imagine *what could be*, followed by the collective design of a desired future state" (Nel and Govender, 2019:337). AI aims to establish positive elements of the social or organisational world to identify what works or makes sense (Kung, Giles and Hagan, 2013). AI is based on appreciating what works in a programme. Moreover, Bushe (2007) posits that individuals who experience positive emotions tend to be more adaptable, innovative, collaborative, receptive to information, and effective in their thought processes.

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) describe the AI model as a process designed to facilitate positive organisational change by focusing on what works well and envisioning a desired future. The original AI framework model, outlined in their foundational works (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Cooperrider *et al.,* 2008), emphasises four key steps: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny/Delivery, collectively known as the 4D Cycle. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) propose four basic principles of AI, namely that the research should begin with appreciation, be applicable, provocative (stimulating fresh thinking), and the process should be collaborative (Kung *et al.*, 2013). These principles are embedded in the four-step or 4D AI framework.

The first step, ***discovery*** (see 6.2), aims to establish and articulate the strengths, successes, and positive experiences commuter participants had in their programme. “Listening to and telling each other uplifting stories about the best of their meaningful experiences leads people to uncover their similarities … and an amazing energy can appear” (Bushe, 2007:34). The second step is ***dreaming,*** which involves thinking creatively about the future and identifying areas of improvement in the programme by focusing on the opportunities for growth (see 6.6). The dreaming phase is about shifting the focus from obstacles to opportunities. It involves acknowledging negative stories but then redirecting the focus from challenges to strengths. The third step is ***designing*** plans for the future, which involves evaluating participants' opinions on crafting the current peer mentorship good practices in comparison to the services currently provided by the case study university's peer mentor programme (see 7.2). This third step involves “producing provocative propositions, which are statements about what the participants want to achieve” in terms of the reality of the current programme (Shuayb *et al.*, 2009:3). The fourth step is ***delivering,*** focusing on action planning and working out what will happen to realise the provocative propositions (Kung *et al*., 2013; see Chapter 7). This step involves implementing the proposals from the third step. However, in this study, the delivering step was adapted to include only the proposed framework and recommended implementation plan (see 7.4). The actual implementation of these recommendations was beyond the scope of this study, primarily because I am neither a leader of the case study university's peer mentor programme, nor still employed by the university.

Bushe (2013) argues that what sets AI apart is that it focuses on generative topics, questions, conversations, and actions. In this context, generativity means the processes and capacities that help people see old things in new ways. Thus, the purpose of AI is to be transformative and generate a new and better future (Bushe, 2007). Generativity should be part of the 4D framework so that the questions in the discovering phase, discussions/conversations in the dreaming phase, plans in the designing phase, and action in the delivering phase stimulate new images and ideas.

The motivation to use AI in this study was based on the premise articulated by Grieten, Lambrechts, Bouwen, Huybrecchts, Fry, and Cooperrider (2018:111), who states that “the questions we ask determine what we find, and what we find escalates in our

language, in our dialogue, in our conceptualisations and very much takes part in the social construction of reality". Certain assumptions informed the choice of AI in this study.

The first assumption was that, had I posed deficit-oriented questions about the UFS peer mentor programme, I would likely have identified numerous challenges. This approach would potentially have led to a framework designed to address deficits instead of elevating the programme's strengths. This assumption was supported by Fynn (2013), who argues that how we think and speak about an organisation, or in the context of this study, a programme, shapes how we act towards it. By framing positive questions, participants were encouraged to look beyond challenges or deficits in the peer mentor programme and focus on the best aspects of the programme. Essentially, the task was to establish what is good about the peer mentor programme that we can build upon and shift away from considering it a problem to be solved.

Another assumption was that when participants focus on the peer mentor programme's positive aspects, they can define its value and contribution to their lives. Grieten *et al. (*2018) support this assumption and caution against concentrating on what is not working or focusing on deficiencies while neglecting what is working well. In this study, AI was selected to discover the peer mentor programme at its best or peak. Using AI was premised on the idea that valuable aspects of the peer mentor programme might be taken for granted and overlooked while challenges are magnified. Elevating and magnifying what works in the programme became the impetus for selecting the AI approach.

This AI approach does not imply that the programme's 'negatives' were ignored. One of the most common criticisms of AI is that individuals do not have an opportunity to express their negative experiences and feelings, which are crucial in understanding an organisation or programme (Couch, 2017). However, Bushe (2007 cited in Couch, 2017) posits that the purpose of AI is not to ignore negative stories or experiences, but rather to find a way to work with the duality of positive and negative stories without compromising the principle of AI. The principle of AI is the elevation of life-giving stories that illuminate high points, peak experiences, and moments of positive potential (Johnson, 2013). This author supported using negative experiences to rise above

challenges and generate positive outcomes for individuals, programmes, or organisations.

During the dreaming phase, participants shared stories about barriers and hurdles they had to overcome in the programme and as first-year commuter students (see Chapter 6). The sharing of negative stories was not in tension with the purpose of AI. Grieten *et al.* (2018) support the view that participants may share their most significant challenges and hurdles during the dreaming phase. However, AI helps to uncover best practices that can be replicated or scaled, allowing for exploring possibilities and future potentials of peer support in general and peer mentor programmes in particular. This approach enabled the proposal of a strengths-based framework in Chapter 7.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Regarding data collection, an "important step in the process is to find people or places to study and to gain access to and establish rapport with participants so that they will provide good data" (Creswell, 2013:147). In this study, multiple data sources were utilised to enhance the robustness of the findings. In addition to the literature perspectives in Chapters 2 and 3, two qualitative data collection methods were used: document analysis (see 4.5.1) and focus-group interviews (see 4.5.2). The rationale for using these methods was triangulation. This research planned to use multiple data sources, including literature perspectives, document analysis and empirical research, to cross-verify the results. However, triangulation was not entirely achievable, given the limitations discussed in 4.5.1 regarding the lack of comprehensive source documents from South African universities. Consequently, while document analysis provided some insights about student support nationally (see Chapter 5), the scarcity of detailed reports limited the ability to cross-verify findings thoroughly through triangulation. Thus, only literature perspectives (see 4.5.1) and the empirical findings of the focus groups (see 4.5.2) were applied in the triangulation.

4.5.1 Document review and analysis

The study reviewed and analysed documents from seven South African universities to broaden the contribution and understanding of practices elsewhere. The aim was to discover how other South African universities support first-year commuter students to succeed. According to Bowen (2009:27), "document analysis is a systematic

procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material". The purpose of document analysis was to "examine and interpret to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen, 2009:27). Each document was analysed to determine the extent to which it was described, addressed or considered how universities support first-year commuter students to succeed (Wach, 2013).

There are five uses of document review and analysis. Firstly, "documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate" (Bowen, 2009:29). Therefore, documents provide background and historical insight (Wach, 2013). Secondly, Bowen (2009:30) posits that "information contained in documents can suggest some questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed as part of the research". In this context, the analysis of documents becomes essential for developing the research instrument. Thirdly, documents provide supplementary research information and insights that can be valuable additions to the knowledge base and development. It is an effective way of gathering data because documents are manageable and practical resources (Triad 3, 2016). Fourthly, "documents provide a means of tracking change and development" (Bowen, 2009:30). Bowen (2009:30) argues that "the researcher may also examine periodic and final reports (where available) to get a clear picture of how an organisation or a programme fared over time". In the fifth instance, Bowen (2009:30) posits that "documents can be analysed to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources".

In this research, the sourced documents gathered comparable best practices for supporting first-year commuter students to succeed at South African universities. However, no empirical research was conducted at these institutions. This analysis primarily used two documents: strategic plans and annual reports (see Chapter 5). Additionally, and where available, other documents were incorporated to support the analysis. Upon engagement with the sampled universities, it became evident that the divisions responsible for many student support programmes did not produce consistent reports suitable for document analysis. Consequently, I was referred to annual reports as a more reliable source of information regarding the student support initiatives within these universities. However, it is essential to acknowledge that annual reports have limitations, particularly in the depth of detail they provide about these

initiatives. To mitigate these limitations, the analysis also incorporated data from other available sources, such as online information about these initiatives; however, even this proved difficult, as online sources were sparse.

There are 26 public universities in South Africa; however, besides the University of the Free State (UFS), six other South African universities were purposefully selected for this document analysis to broaden this study. Still, these universities were not part of the unit of analysis (see also 5.1). These include two traditional universities: Stellenbosch University (SU) and North-West University (NWU). Two comprehensive universities were selected: the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and Nelson Mandela University (NMU). Additionally, two universities of technology were included: Durban University of Technology (DUT) and Tshwane University of Technology (TUT).

4.5.2 Focus-groups interviews

Focus-group discussions were conducted with UFS first-year commuter students. A focus group is a small group of people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator (Doody, Slevin and Taggart, 2013). “Group interactions may highlight members’ similarities and differences and give rich information about their range of perspectives and experiences.” (Doody *et al*., 2013:1). The group discussion should be large enough to generate rich discussion but not so large that some participants are left out. Focus groups provide insights into people's thinking and a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied, including “to capture how meaning is negotiated and co-produced in the group context” (Sim and Waterfield, 2019:3004).

Group interaction and non-verbal communication are the primary benefits of focus groups. Group interaction between members of the target population during focus groups may encourage participants to make connections to various concepts through discussions that may not occur during individual interviews. Group interviews are valuable research tools that allow the researcher to capture deeper information more economically than individual interviews (Guest, Namey and McKenna, 2017). To this end, eight focus-group discussions (with a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 12 student participants) were conducted (see Appendix D) as the most appropriate data collection instrument.

The decision to conduct 8 group discussions was supported by Kirchberger *et al.* (2009), who, in their study, confirmed that data saturation was reached after conducting eight focus-group discussions on the same topic. According to Guest *et al.* (2017:5), data saturation refers to ‘‘the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook”. Guest *et al.* (2017) argue that 90% is reached after six focus groups, while no new codes emerge after eight focus-group analyses. Therefore, Guest *et al.* (2017) imply that eight focus-group discussions cover all the information needed in a study. Guest *et al.* (2017) further posit that there are conditions to these findings. They argue that these findings depend on “(1) degree of instrument structure; (2) sample homogeneity; (3) complexity of the study topic; (4) study purpose; and (5) analyst categorisation style” (Guest *et al.*, 2017:16). Nevertheless, the study could have conducted further interviews if data saturation was not reached after eight focus-group interviews.

The eight focus groups for the study comprised full-time, first-year undergraduate UFS students from the three UFS campuses, namely the Bloemfontein, South Campus, and Qwaqwa Campuses, who participated in the peer mentoring programme. As the most prominent campus, four focus-group interviews were conducted at the Bloemfontein campus. Two focus groups were conducted at the South Campus and the Qwaqwa Campus.

The unit of analysis in this study was first-year commuting students. However, other variables were considered essential, such as gender; hence, groups were separated by gender. It is conceivable that the experience of female commuter students is different compared to male commuter students; therefore, groups were separated by gender. Participants may feel more at ease discussing sensitive or personal topics in a single-gender group. This comfort can lead to more honest and detailed responses. Focus-group discussions followed the 4D framework (as discussed in 4.4).

4.6 SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The researcher liaised with the student affairs divisions and centres for teaching and learning from the six selected universities to obtain their documents for analysis. As explained in 4.5.1, many of these divisions and centres did not produce consistent reports that would support document analysis. Consequently, they referred me to annual reports as a more reliable source of information regarding the student support

initiatives at these universities. Furthermore, the researcher recruited student participants in the UFS peer mentor programme. The leaders of the peer mentor programme assisted with the recruitment of mentees.

Purposive sampling was applied to select mainstream undergraduate students on the three UFS campuses. The criterion for selection was that a student should have participated in the peer mentor programme as a commuter. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Vice-Rector of Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation (see Appendix A). Only students who agreed to sign the informed consent forms were involved (see Appendix B).

4.7 DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The characteristics of the three campuses in the study are already described (see 1.9). In addition, Table 4.1 illustrates the number of participants categorised by pseudonym, gender, focus-group number, and campus. There were 67 participants across the three campuses, with an average of eight participants per focus group.

Table 4.1: Description of study participants

No	Pseudonym**	Gender	Group	Campus
1	Tsamai	Male	Group 1	Campus 1
2	Bless	Male	Group 1	Campus 1
3	Lindo	Male	Group 1	Campus 1
4	Kamo	Male	Group 1	Campus 1
5	Moke	Male	Group 1	Campus 1
6	Ketso	Male	Group 1	Campus 1
7	Matt	Male	Group 1	Campus 1
8	Len	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
9	Irvin	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
10	Botha	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
11	Klerk	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
12	Siya	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
13	Win	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
14	Jack	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
15	Wayne	Male	Group 2	Campus 1
16	Thando	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
17	Sipho	Female	Group 3	Campus 1

18	Jenny	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
19	Tsholo	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
20	Angel	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
21	Hloni	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
22	Audi	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
23	Base	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
24	Landi	Female	Group 3	Campus 1
25	Neli	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
26	Thandi	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
27	Medi	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
28	Pano	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
29	Boity	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
30	Tumelo	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
31	Palesa	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
32	Lerato	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
33	Kyla	Female	Group 4	Campus 1
34	Sabelo	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
35	Inno	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
36	Kat	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
37	Sam	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
38	Sandi	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
39	Xoli	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
40	Lelani	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
41	Thokozani	Male	Group 5	Campus 2
42	Ntobe	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
43	Refi	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
44	Busa	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
45	Luthando	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
46	Semi	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
47	Rele	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
48	Zivo	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
49	Filwe	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
50	Tebogo	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
51	Yanda	Female	Group 6	Campus 2
52	Laide	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
53	Nelly	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
54	Leto	Female	Group 7	Campus 3

55	Bonga	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
56	Bianca	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
57	Naledi	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
58	Tshego	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
59	Pontso	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
60	Nteba	Female	Group 7	Campus 3
61	Sicelo	Male	Group 8	Campus 3
62	Menzi	Male	Group 8	Campus 3
63	Kele	Male	Group 8	Campus 3
64	Tshepo	Male	Group 8	Campus 3
65	Lebo	Male	Group 8	Campus 3
66	Leno	Male	Group 8	Campus 3
67	Khona	Male	Group 8	Campus 3

*These are not the actual names of the participants; pseudonyms were created to ensure the anonymity of participants as per ethical standards (see 4.10).

4.8 DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, REPORTING, AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Data analysis is a process used to transform, remodel, and revise certain information to reach a particular conclusion for a given situation or problem (Johnson, 2011). Johnson (2011) posits that data analysis supports the researcher's conclusion. The data generated from the documents analysed and focus-group discussions were thematically analysed. "Thematic analysis involves searching for recurring patterns of meaning and common themes across a broad data set." (Cornell, 2015:31). Maguire and Delahunt (2017:3352) define thematic analysis as "the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data". These authors (2017:3353) posit that "the goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue". Braun and Clarke (2006:10) argue that "a theme captures something important about the data concerning the research question and represents some patterned response or meaning within the data set". To this end, Braun and Clarke (2006:15) posit that "thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set

– be that several interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning".

A theme can be identified in two ways, namely inductive and deductive. An inductive approach means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:12). This is a bottom-up approach where the focus of the analysis is driven by the data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Conversely, the analysis can be deductive, where the theory drives the focus. In this approach, "analysis would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:12). However, Braun and Clarke (2006:12) caution that this "form of thematic analysis tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data". Therefore, this study opted for an inductive approach where the data obtained from documents and participants informed the development of themes and the overall analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify two themes, semantic and latent. Semantic themes are those "identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:13). Conversely, latent themes "go beyond the semantic content of the data, and start to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:13). Therefore, this study employed the latent thematic approach in the analysis.

4.8.1 Braun and Clarke analysis framework

The Braun and Clarke (2006) framework was used to analyse and interpret data in this study. The framework has six phases of thematic analysis, namely familiarising oneself with one's data. Braun and Clarke (2006:16) posit that "it is vital that you immerse yourself in the data to the extent that you are familiar with the depth and breadth of the content". The immersion process involved repeated data reading and actively searching for meanings and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this inductive process, latent themes emerged (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Although this was a time-consuming exercise, the reading and re-reading process was done to provide a "bedrock for the rest of the analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:17). To this

end, this phase involved transcribing data, making notes, and generating early impressions (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

The second phase was generating initial codes. This coding process helped to identify features of the data that appeared to be interesting (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The codes served as the most essential raw data element to be assessed meaningfully. They assisted in systematically organising data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). In this phase, codes related to the first-year commuter student experiences emerged. This phase followed an open coding approach where no pre-set codes were developed and modified through the coding process. NVivo was used to code the data. “NVivo has features such as character-based coding, rich text capabilities, and multimedia functions crucial for qualitative data management.” (Zamawe, 2015:13).

Phase three involved searching for themes. This process focused on sorting the different codes into themes to “re-focus the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes” (Braun and Clarke, 2006:19). This phase also involved collating codes into overarching themes. “At the end of this step, the codes had been organised into broader themes that seemed to say something specific about this research question” (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006:20) argue that this phase is “when you start thinking about the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes (e.g. main overarching themes and sub-themes within them)”. In this study's subsequent chapters, themes that emerged from this process are discussed in detail (see Chapters 5, 6, 7).

The fourth phase focused on reviewing the themes. This phase involved sorting the initial themes into the study's most relevant and appropriate themes. The preliminary themes and subthemes identified in phase three were reviewed and modified. Further, all the data pertinent to each theme were gathered using Nvivo (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Also, this phase involved checking if the themes formed a coherent pattern and fit within the topic of the study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes considered incoherent and unfit for the topic were revised and refocused. To this end, the researcher was satisfied that the themes captured accurately represented the entire dataset.

The fifth phase was defining and naming themes. This phase involved defining and refining themes presented in the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). “By defining and refine, we mean identifying the essence of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall) and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures.” (Braun and Clarke, 2006:22). Themes were defined and named independently and concerning one another to ensure that there are no overlaps in the presentation and analysis of data. Further, each subtheme was refined and renamed to ensure they aligned with the broader themes.

The sixth phase involved producing this thesis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, this study reports a “concise, coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting account of the story” (Braun and Clarke, 2006:23). To this end, the robust process of identifying themes and subthemes assured the quality of this final thesis.

4.9 SIGNIFICANCE/VALUE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

This study aimed to contribute to the development of commuter student success and peer networks, while also contributing to the achievement of UFS student success goals, as articulated in the UFS Strategic Plan 2018-2022 and Learning and Teaching Strategy 2019-2024 (UFS, 2018a; UFS 2019b). The UFS Strategic Plan outlines the goals of the University regarding student success. In particular, the University posits that student success and well-being remain the core of what it does. “The student experience is a key element of success both at the university and subsequently; the UFS needs to continue to improve student experience both inside and outside the classroom.” (UFS, 2018a:2). Moreover, the Strategy (2018a:2) outlines that “at times, students still experience the University environment as unsympathetic, hostile, aloof, exclusionary, unsafe and discriminatory”. Therefore, this study aimed to ‘move the needle’ for student success and peer networks at UFS, mainly related to first-year commuter students.

The UFS Learning and Teaching Strategy (UFS, 2019b:12) aims to “develop a comprehensive, integrated approach to student success, which requires the identification, and elimination of scattershot, isolated, or boutique programmes for student success, and bringing together stakeholders and efforts to ensure collaboration”. The Strategy (UFS, 2019b:12) further articulates that “all responsible stakeholders should streamline their efforts to enable student success through

curricular and co-curricular activities". In this context, this study aimed to contribute to realising these goals.

As student support divisions, the researcher anticipates that both student affairs and centres for teaching and learning would benefit from this study's findings and recommendations. Furthermore, the researcher envisaged that commuter students and faculties would benefit from learning about first-year commuter students' experiences.

4.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education's Ethics Committee (UFS-HSD2020/1434/0911) (see Appendix C). Informed consent was obtained from each participant of the eight focus-group discussions (see Appendix B for the informed consent forms). Participants were informed that the study was voluntary and confidential. A research study information leaflet was shared with all participants, who were informed to keep it in case they needed to follow up on the research.

Participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research. They were also given the contact details of the principal investigator. Participants were informed at the beginning of the focus groups that the discussions would be digitally recorded and that the recordings would be transcribed. They were further informed about why they were selected and expected to respond to the questions from the researcher. They were informed that this study's findings would be reported anonymously. Therefore, the researcher would ensure that their details and audio recordings would be stored in a secure environment by the UFS ethical regulations.

Participants were informed that the researcher would store any hard copies of their answers in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at the UFS's Main Building storage for future research or academic purposes for five years; electronic information would be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data would be subjected to further Research Ethics Review and approval, if applicable. Once the five years have elapsed, papers and electronic data would be shredded and deleted.

They were also told about the study's potential benefits and anticipated inconveniences. There were no monetary payments for participating in this study.

Participants were informed that in cases of emotional discomfort about any issues being discussed, they could use the appropriate UFS support service for counselling. They were encouraged to participate in the entire study. However, they were informed they could withdraw from the study at any point. Furthermore, they were told that there might be publications in the form of journal articles, conference presentations, or books emanating from the study. However, the researcher would maintain and protect their anonymity by not sharing their identities on these platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on data gathering. Initially, the plan was to conduct focus-group discussions online from April to June 2022 to avoid in-person interactions. However, a tiny fraction of participants could attend Microsoft Teams meetings, which resulted in the cancellation of online focus groups. Consequently, all focus-group discussions took place in person due to the poor participation in online sessions and the relaxation of lockdown regulations in South Africa. It is worth noting that all focus-group discussions occurred after all COVID-19-related restrictions were lifted, specifically in August and September 2022.

4.11 CONCLUSION

Using AI helped to focus the attention on the positives of the peer mentor programme, which demonstrated the programme's value. This AI method helped to get participants to focus on what worked to maximise positive contributions. AI was evaluative; hence, it looked at the contribution of the UFS peer mentor programme to the social, emotional, and academic support of first-year commuter students (see 6.6).

The AI method facilitated open and constructive dialogue among participants, leading to richer insights, as discussed in Chapter 6. The benefit of using AI was that it recommended including an implementation plan in designing the peer network framework that supports commuter students to succeed (see Chapter 7). Thus, it moved beyond theoretical suggestions to practical steps to achieve objectives. However, AI's perceived limitation was its focus on the positives while neglecting the negatives. As discussed in 4.4, and during the dreaming phase, participants shared stories about barriers and hurdles they had to overcome in the programme and as first-year commuter students. The sharing of these stories was not against the principle of AI. AI is not about ignoring negative stories or experiences, but rather finding a way to elevate life-giving stories that demonstrate high points, peak

experiences, and moments of positive potential. By doing so, this study identified best practices in the peer mentor programme, which could serve as a basis for sustaining positive change.

Although this research focused on peer support, many other forms of student support initiatives have been introduced in higher education. Chapter 5 looked at the initiatives that support first-year commuter students to succeed, focusing on South Africa.

CHAPTER 5
RESULTS OF DOCUMENT ANALYSIS ON SUPPORT PROGRAMMES FOR FIRST-YEAR COMMUTERS IN SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses and synthesises the document analysis conducted to determine how South African universities support the success of first-year commuter students (see 1.4). As explored in Chapter 2, first-year commuter students face numerous challenges in higher education, including coming from high school systems that underprepared them and encountering language and cultural barriers that hinder the development of a sense of belonging, particularly for those from underprivileged backgrounds (see 2.5 for additional challenges). Within this doctoral study, the AI methodology is a strengths-based, positive approach to change that focuses on identifying and amplifying what works well, thus shifting the focus from challenges to strengths (see Chapter 6). Chapter 3 further elaborated on challenges related to separation, transition, and integration, as outlined by Tinto's theory. Here also, the AI methodology will shift the focus from obstacles to opportunities. These previous perspectives highlighted that first-year student support is imperative. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the support services provided to first-year commuter students to help them overcome these challenges through a document analysis of selected South African universities' (see 4.5.1) first-year commuter programmes.

The sourced documents gathered comparable best practices for supporting first-year commuter students to succeed at selected South African universities (see 4.5.1), though no empirical research was conducted at these institutions. The primary documents analysed were strategic plans and annual reports supplemented by other sources. Gatekeeper approval was obtained to access these documents (see Appendix A). During an engagement with sampled universities, it became evident that many divisions responsible for student support programmes did not produce consistent reports suitable for the document analysis methodology. Consequently, I was referred to institutional annual reports as more reliable sources[1] of information regarding student support initiatives. However, annual reports have limitations,

[1] A reliable source in this context means that annual reports were available across all sampled universities and could enable document analysis to compare practices.

particularly in the detail they provide about these student support programmes and initiatives. Additional data from other available sources, such as online information about these programmes and initiatives, were incorporated to mitigate these limitations. However, even this method proved difficult, as online sources were sparse.

The document analysis was conducted using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, facilitating the document review and evaluation (see 4.7.1). NVivo enabled extracting meaningful information, identification of relevant programmes and initiatives, and plans for future support. Two prominent themes emerged from the document analysis: core first-year programmes across South African universities (see 5.2) and small-scale exclusive first-year programmes (see 5.3).

The first part of the analysis (see 5.2 and 5.3) examined annual reports and other accessible institutional documents to identify existing support programmes and initiatives targeting first-year commuter students. The goal was to comprehensively understand the universities' support efforts and identify specific programmes catering to the needs of these students. This study's document analysis goal aligns with Bowen's (2009) purpose of document analysis, which is to provide context for the phenomenon being studied. However, given the limitations of analysing institutional annual reports, the chapter could not establish the influence of these support programmes. At best, this chapter establishes only a limited national picture of student support programmes and initiatives.

The second part of the analysis (see 5.4) focused on strategic documents, such as institutional strategic plans and teaching and learning plans, where available. These documents offered insights into the universities' plans and intentions regarding the support for first-year commuter students. Finally, this document analysis is compared with Tinto's theoretical framework (see 5.5).

5.2 CORE FIRST-YEAR PROGRAMMES ACROSS SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

The first part of the document analysis revealed five diverse types of support provided to first-year students across the sampled universities. All the sampled universities had core high-impact programmes for first-year student support. In the context of this study, high-impact student support programmes are initiatives designed to significantly

enhance students' educational experience and success. The five core first-year support programmes identified were first-year orientation (see 5.2.1); academic advising (see 5.2.2); tutorials (see 5.2.3); supplementary instruction (see 5.2.4); and first-year seminars (see 5.2.5). These five first-year support programmes were mainly in teaching and learning support centres and student affairs divisions. The following annual reports were analysed to establish the support programmes from the sampled universities *U1 2020 and 2021 Annual Reports; U2 Integrated Annual Report 2019; U3 Annual Report, 2020; U4 Annual report 2019; and U5 Annual Report 2020; U6 Annual Report 2019 and 2020; U7 Annual Report 2020.*

Many of these support programmes fall under the first-year experience (FYE) concept (see also 1.3, 3.3.2), which refers to academic and non-academic support for the first year of study (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020). Some FYE programmes are based on Tinto's theory (see also 1.3, 3.3, 3.4); they support first-year students' social, emotional, and academic adjustment to the university environment. The five core first-year support programmes were for all students, regardless of their residential status. In other words, universities did not distinguish between on-campus and off-campus first-year students when providing core support programmes.

5.2.1 First-year commuter student orientation

The most common support provided to first-year commuters in this study was orientation. Orientation is "a formal structure or programme of events put in place by higher education institutions to support the positive first-year experiences of students" (Nyar, 2020:123-124). Furthermore, Jacobs (2010, in Nyar, 2020) posits that orientation aims to share information. Orientation informs students about vital success strategies, such as paying attention to essential deadlines, registering correctly, etc. Moreover, orientation builds a supportive community and defines campus academic and social cultures.

The benefits of orientation programmes are that they provide an academic and social introduction to the university experience for new students and contribute positively to their transition (Mack, 2010, in Nyar, 2020). Moreover, these programmes help students adjust to higher education's emotional, social, and academic environments.

5.2.1.1 University-Specific Orientation Programmes

Different universities have demonstrated in this study their unique approaches to orientation.

- *A hybrid model of online platforms and physical sessions at the beginning of the academic year*: For example, University 1 (U1) uses a hybrid model of online platforms and physical sessions that starts at the beginning of the academic year and focuses on integrating topics that include social, emotional, and academic aspects. Trained staff members of U1 manage this orientation programme. Once students are registered, they are given access to online pre-recorded presentations that cover a wide range of topics, usually in January. These topics include safety and security on campus, culture shock, student life and success, student finance, academic advising information, and learning methods. Additionally, U1 requires all students to attend physical sessions on campus in February. The physical sessions aim to integrate first-year students, including commuters, into the university environment through active participation in the orientation programme to ensure optimal integration and a successful start in their studies. All first-year students, including commuters, are given exercises and tasks to complete, and there is a continuous assessment to establish their level of university readiness. The U1 orientation programme is managed collaboratively by student support divisions. Hence, it benefits both on-campus and commuter first-year students.
- *Faculty-based orientation programmes and an extended First-year Navigator (FYN) programme:* University 2 (U2) has faculty-based orientation programmes and an extended First-year Navigator (FYN) programme. Thus, once students are registered at U2, they are introduced to faculty-based orientations that assist with social, emotional, and academic adjustments. Like U1, these orientation programmes aimed to establish the level of university readiness of entering students. These faculty orientation programmes start and end before classes begin and represent short information-sharing programmes. However, U2 also continuously developed an FYN programme, supporting first-year students beyond orientation. FYN is an extended orientation programme linking students to academic skills development workshops, academic advising, peer

mentoring, reading development, supplemental instruction, and other student support programmes that centralise various support services and programmes.

- *A week-long series of voluntary events and compulsory academic-related activities before the academic year starts:* University 3 (U3) conducts a week-long series of events and activities to help first-year registered students adjust to university life before the academic year starts. The programme introduces first-year students to opportunities for personal growth, referring them to available resources and preparing them with university coping skills to deal with new academic, social and emotional challenges. This programme's events are vital links to assist first-year students in joining a support network, accessing campus resources, and understanding the university's academic requirements. Furthermore, these events assist first-year students in communicating with lecturers and professional support staff. The U3 orientation programme comprises educational, wellness, social, cultural and sports events. Academic-related events are compulsory to attend, but other events are voluntary by trained senior students who are responsible for assisting first-year students in small groups.

- *Virtual orientation programmes:* Universities 4 (U4) and 5 (U5) offer virtual orientation programmes (since 2021/2022), including pre-recorded presentations and live online interactions. The gateway orientation, in U4, is an orientation programme designed for new students to the institutional environment and assisting with the university transition. U4 and U5 orientation programmes are compulsory for all first-year students. U4 orientation is a weeklong event, while in U5, it is a two-week programme. Both universities organise orientation on Blackboard, a learning management system. U4 first-year students take a virtual tour to navigate the universities. They join live online interactions with staff and senior students. Furthermore, U4 students watch pre-recorded presentations that cover academic support, health and wellness, psychological well-being, student life, and safety and security. Accordingly, the topics covered include social, emotional, and academic support.

- *Holistic orientation programme at the start of the academic year:* University 6 (U6) and University 7 (U7) have orientation sessions at the beginning of the

academic year, including information sharing and welcoming by university staff members, campus tours, and temporary student mentors. For example, in the first part of the orientation at U6, first-year students attend an information-sharing session where representatives from various departments, such as libraries, student health, student counselling, sports department, campus safety, etc., make presentations. After that, students are taken on campus tours and explore the city. U7 hires temporary student mentors to assist all first-year students with the transition during orientation week. These mentors are responsible for attending to new students' questions during the orientation but do not continue their service beyond that.

5.2.1.2 Common features of University-Specific Orientation Programmes

Overall, all the universities sampled had mainly similar orientation programmes, with the following shared qualities:

- Typically, provide academic and social introductions to the university experience for new students at the start of the academic year.
- Help students adjust to higher education's emotional, social, and academic environments.
- Often involve a combination of online and physical sessions.
- They cover various topics, including safety, student life, academic advising, and learning methods.
- Many universities have both compulsory and voluntary components in their orientation programmes.
- Trained staff members, senior students, or mentors play a role in facilitating these programmes.

Despite the above-mentioned shared qualities, several challenges (see 5.2.1.3 Challenges of University-Specific Orientation Programmes were identified regarding orientation programmes.

5.2.1.3 Challenges of University-Specific Orientation Programmes

The following four challenges of University-Specific Orientation Programmes were found.

Firstly, orientation programmes take place at the beginning of the first semester. Despite being compulsory, many students who registered late could not benefit from these sessions. Furthermore, student protests are widespread at the beginning of an academic year and thus affect the attendance of orientation programmes. U3 reported that attendance at the orientation programme decreased from 4 261 in 2019 to 3 210 in 2020. U3 explained that this decline in attendance could be because orientation was held before registration and many first-year students were still waiting for funding from NSFAS.

Secondly, students in university residences benefited from extended orientation as many sampled universities had residence-based orientation programmes. Residencies developed programmes that promoted social, emotional, and academic engagements as part of their orientation. In U4, first-year residential students participated in several orientation programmes to create a sense of belonging. However, first-year commuter students did not have similar programmes.

Thirdly, some argue that orientation programmes are too brief and occur before the start of university studies, limiting their effectiveness. This notion is confirmed by Tinto (2014:14), who argues some orientation programmes are “often too brief and as they occur before the start of university studies”. Thus, they “do not provide students with an opportunity to get answers to questions that arise after they begin their studies” (Tinto, 2014:14). Therefore, orientation programmes did not support first-year students in a sustained manner.

Fourthly, many orientation programmes discussed above were generic in providing an overview of academic, emotional, and social support services. Nyar (2020) argues that generic orientation programmes do not offer contextualised support related to the courses students pursue. In other words, students learn nothing about the challenges of their specific courses. Furthermore, orientation events were organised at institutional and faculty levels. Information about the academic and social environments of departments and degree programmes was lacking. Additionally, Nyar (2020) argues that international students rarely participate in orientation programmes.

In summary, orientation programmes are common at higher education institutions and are designed to help new students transition successfully into university life. However,

there are challenges related to timing, the specificity of the information provided, and the support for certain groups of students, such as commuters and international students. Universities address these challenges in different ways to improve the overall effectiveness of their orientation programs.

5.2.2 Academic advising and commuter students

The document analysis reveals that many institutions view academic advising (see also 2.6.7) as essential for supporting first-year commuting students. Kuh (2008, in Schoeman, Loots and Bezuidenhout, 2021:87) defines an academic advisor as "an institutional representative who gives insight or direction to a student about an academic, social, or personal matter". Thus, an advisor informs, coaches, mentors, and teaches first-year students. Academic advising also significantly influences the persistence and retention of commuter students. It is also a high-impact practice in student support (Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021).

> Academic advising is a process where students and their academic advisors meet periodically to discuss progress, plans, ideas, and needs as the student pursues academic and career goals (Schoeman *et al.*, 2021:85).

5.2.2.1 Key aspects related to Academic Advising programmes

The academic advising programmes at selected universities focus on the support they offer first-year commuter students. Here are the key points related to academic advising.

- U4 is among the earliest South African universities to establish academic advising, which later developed as a key, high-impact practice. For example, U4 academic advising focuses on student learning and educational experiences and connects first-year commuter students' academic goals with their personal and career desires. Advisors conduct one-on-one discussions with first-year commuter students and group sessions when presenting general topics such as study strategies, time management, exam preparation, and goal setting. Since the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, advising at U4 is more diverse, offering virtual, face-to-face, and telephonic opportunities. Thus, U4 conducts online workshops, residence workshops, telephonic appointments, podcasts, individual online advising appointments, and Facebook interactions.

- Similarly, U2 offers academic advising to first-year commuter students (U2 integrated teaching and learning annual report, 2019) to develop learning strategies, revision techniques, time management skills, note-taking/making techniques, reading techniques, and critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, advisors assist first-year students in preparing for tests and examinations. U2 students can also make appointments or be referred by other support and academic staff. All faculties have their academic advisors. Thus, when students are referred to the programme by the academic staff, advising is compulsory and would be a scheduled appointment. However, students can also voluntarily meet advisors anytime throughout the year.
- In U4, U5, and U6, academic advising is at diverse levels, such as institutional, faculty, and departmental, and some academic programmes have specific advisors. Though advising is at many levels, the responsibilities of all advisors are similar. In these universities, advisors support first-year commuter students, focusing main on developing educational plans, connecting them to valuable resources, helping them navigate the university system, and monitoring their progress. Advisors also help students select appropriate courses, avoiding registering for too many credits. Advising could happen at multiple stages of the student journey, such as recruitment, registration, transition, examination, etc. these advisors are trained staff members.

5.2.2.2 A mutual challenge related to Academic Advising programmes

One common challenge with academic advising (as noted in 5.2.2.1) is that attendance is often voluntary for students, including first-year commuters. Unless a lecturer refers a student to an advisor, they may not consult academic advisors. This challenge suggests that there may be underutilisation of advising services by students, potentially hindering their ability to make informed academic and career decisions.

In summary, academic advising is an essential support service universities provide to help students, particularly first-year commuters, with their academic and personal development. While the universities mentioned offer advising at different levels and through various modes, the challenge of voluntary participation by students remains a concern, as some students may not take full advantage of the available support.

5.2.3 Peer learning academic support

As established in 2.2, massifying higher education has led to large classes. Thus, universities have developed ways to supplement learning by introducing peer learning academic support such as tutorials and supplementary instruction. Davids (2014:338) argues that “the tutorial system is a teaching strategy employed to minimise the negative consequences of large classes”. Tutorials have become integral to teaching and learning, where tutors are usually trained senior students with excellent academic records. These tutors are well-equipped with the subject and theoretical knowledge, skills, and values to assist and guide other students in their academic studies (UJ, 2019).

Additionally, Supplementary Instruction (SI) is a joint student support programme that supports first-year commuting students. Tinto (2012) defines SI as an academic support strategy that provides support through study groups connected to a specific course. According to Dondolo and Nkonki (2016), SI is peer facilitation that aims to help students through personal consultations with peer facilitators, which includes collaborative and active learning as part of a course (Salame, 2021). SI also targets challenging or at-risk courses and provides supplemental solutions to enhance student learning (Dondolo and Nkonki, 2016). SI has been shown to reduce the dropout rate while improving the learning and success of participating students (Salame, 2021).

5.2.3.1 Key aspects of peer learning academic support in selected South African Universities

At U5, tutorials are course-based, and attendance is compulsory for all first-year students, including commuters. Tutors are senior students appointed based on their academic achievement and professional conduct (role modelling). U5 has four different models of tutoring.

- Firstly, there are group tutorial sessions, which take place in a structured format and are compulsory to attend. These sessions further develop discipline-specific skills and improve students’ understanding and application of concepts in larger classes (U5).

- Secondly, there are one-on-one tutorials that first-year students attend voluntarily and are designed to support students outside of group tutorials (e.g. where a student could individually arrange to consult a tutor).
- Thirdly, some e-tutorials refer to technologically mediated tutorials within a virtual environment. During these e-tutorials, tutors use various tools and approaches to help students learn (e.g. increased substantially since 2020 as a response to remote learning). For example, U4 had only three modules with e-tutorials in 2019, but by 2020 there were 141 modules.
- Fourthly, tutorials use an integrated model. In this model, tutors work collaboratively with lecturers in large classes or laboratories to assist struggling individual students or groups of students. For example, tutors could attend to struggling students when they do practical laboratory work.

U3 has SI programmes on all its campuses that apply SI facilitators (i.e. senior students who have completed the same courses they are facilitating). SI is regularly offered outside of class to first-year students on selected courses. The selection of courses is based on their historical performance. Thus, courses that have lower success rates are chosen for SI.

U2 SI is a free service comprising scheduled, voluntary, out-of-class group study sessions driven by students' needs. This SI programme targets high-risk courses rather than high-risk students. The peer-facilitated sessions are collaborative to ensure peer-to-peer interaction in small groups. SI sessions are based on a hybrid model; some are physical, and others are online. Albeit voluntary, all students in high-risk modules are encouraged to participate, including commuter students who could use the online version. In the SI sessions, first-year students compare notes, discuss readings and test questions, and develop study skills. Research from U2 shows that participating students improve their motivation, social cognitive, and metacognitive behaviours. Likewise, U4 also offers SI in high-risk courses; thus, SI complements traditional tutorials.

5.2.3.2 Similarities, diversities, and challenges with peer learning academic support at selected South African universities

U4 tutorials are only in undergraduate courses and are led by postgraduate students. The purpose of the U4 tutorial sessions is to assist first-year commuter students in

expanding, applying, and discussing course content delivered in large classes. Furthermore, students are expected to work on complex concepts and reflect on and revise the material presented in class. First-year commuter students benefit from these tutorials as they are organised within regular teaching and learning hours.

However, U1 has a different strategy concerning tutorials. All first-year students attend tutorials for the first few weeks of the first semester. At the end of the first term, they all write assessment tests to determine which students need to continue with tutorials. Students who do well on the tests are not required to attend tutorials but could do so voluntarily. However, students who fail the tests or receive unsatisfactory marks are placed on compulsory tutorials. The exact process is duplicated in the second semester. Thus, U1 tutorials are designed for academically struggling first-year students.

All sampled universities delivered tutorials in blended, physical, and virtual modes. However, since 2020, there have been challenges with tutorials. U4 reported that the introduction of e-tutorials in response to the national lockdowns was met with challenges related to lack of access to electronic devices, poor network and connectivity, high data costs, and loadshedding. Thus, socio-economic and connectivity issues prevented students from attending e-tutorials. As such, tutorial attendance experienced a decline.

The sudden transition to online learning in 2020 caused many challenges in student support, including SI. For example, U4 reports that in 2020 and 2021, there were low participation rates in their SI programme. Hence, SI would need to be reconceptualised to use digital platforms as effectively as face-to-face.

5.2.4 First-year seminars and commuter students

First-Year Seminars (FYS) are transitional programmes such as courses, modules, and workshops designed to assist first-year students in acclimatising to the university environment and developing effective success strategies (Jaijairam, 2016). FYS aims to integrate students successfully into the university by teaching first-year students academic and social skills (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020). Furthermore, these authors posit that FYS fosters a sense of belonging and promotes institutional

connectedness. FYS, sometimes called University 101, could be non-credit-bearing or credit-bearing.

5.2.4.1 First-year seminar (FYS) programmes at selected South African universities

In 2011, U4 introduced a University 101 module that is credit-bearing for all first-year mainstream students, which is positioned as a high-impact practice and is well-resourced concerning staff and teaching support. This FYS is a year-long module required for degree completion in all disciplines to empower first-year students with the skills to integrate successfully into the social and academic environment. The first semester's focus is academic success skills such as study reading, time management, goal setting, referencing and plagiarism, etc. The second semester focuses on preparing students for employment. Thus, themes covered in the module include academic success, entrepreneurship, and employability. More than 8 000 students were registered in this module in 2020.

The U5 first-year seminar is a comprehensive programme that integrates all first-time entering students. The seminar traditionally takes place face-to-face. However, in 2021, these seminars were presented online. Blackboard Collaborate hosts it and attendance is compulsory for all first-years. However, unlike U4, U5 FYS is offered in a workshop format, not as a module. Thus, it is not credit-bearing.

5.2.4.2 Other transitional programmes at selected South African universities

U4 has other transitional programmes that support entering students. One particular programme is the Programme for Academic Student Success (PASS). PASS aims to help students deal with personal challenges such as finances, relationships, accommodation, or health. The programme also assists with academic problems (e.g. information overload, tests, and examinations) and helps with social challenges (e.g. adjustment issues). PASS is not credit-bearing.

The Academic and Life Management programme at U3 is a module for extended students. The first-year focus is on assisting students in coping with academic demands and challenges that cover time management, goal setting, learning strategies, stress management, problem-solving, and exam preparation. Additionally, both face-to-face and blended learning models are applied. The programme has a strong academic focus, and learning is continually assessed.

U2 offers academic literacy modules as compulsory support programmes for first-year students, including commuters. The modules are in English and Afrikaans; students cannot graduate before passing them. These modules are offered in both semesters. The semester one module is introductory, while in semester two advanced module is presented. These modules are credit-bearing.

5.2.4.3 Challenges during online transition for FYS

Traditionally, FYS were face-to-face, but since 2020, many universities have opted for a blended approach, including U4. However, U4 reports that students had challenges with the online component of their University 101 programme, such as time management, adjusting to the new virtual environment, and difficulties with self-study. In addition, first-year U4 students reported a lack of devices and the internet as challenges that prevented them from accessing study materials and attending online classes.

Overall, these universities offer a variety of support programs to help first-year students succeed in their academic journey. The challenges faced during the transition to online learning highlight the need for innovative solutions to ensure that students continue to receive the necessary support.

5.3 EXCLUSIVE SMALL-SCALE FIRST-YEAR PROGRAMMES AT SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

The document analysis also identified exceptional small-scale programmes supporting first-year commuting students. Thus, these programmes are not commonly implemented across all the sampled universities and the documented success of some of these programmes is limited. In many cases, they are not expanded or scaled up to assist a significant number of first-year students. Below are six distinctive small-scale programmes identified among selected South African universities. The following annual reports were analysed to establish the support programmes from the sampled universities (e.g. *U1 2020 and 2021 Annual Reports; U2 Integrated Annual Report 2019; U3 Annual Report, 2020; U4 Annual report 2019; and U5 Annual Report 2020; U6 Annual Report 2019 and 2020; U7 Annual Report 2020).*

5.3.1 Peer mentorship programme

As already stipulated (see 2.6.1), peer mentorship is when a senior student or mentor provides information, advice, and emotional support to a junior student over time. A peer mentor is usually a student who has progressed to an advanced year level, often in the same degree programme (see 2.6.1). The peer mentoring programmes across the sampled universities have similar purposes, such as helping students adjust to the university environment and develop success strategies.

The U2 academic peer mentorship programme helps first-year students to overcome academic and study-related challenges. It offers discipline-specific academic skills and literacies. Furthermore, the programme helps students with personal, interpersonal, and physical difficulties to transition and adjust to the university environment. Moreover, the programme provides a safe space for first-year students to share their emotional, social, and academic concerns. Peer mentors also help students develop a study routine, set up their schedules, and develop their study goals. They also motivate students to live a balanced academic and social life. Additionally, they assist them in creating a personal financial management plan so they do not run out of money and food. The U2 peer mentorship programme fits well with Tinto's theory concerning academic and social integration (see 3.3).

The U1 peer mentorship programme is faculty-based. It is based on four domains, namely a) psychological and emotional support; b) goal setting and career path; c) academic subject knowledge support; and d) role modelling. Thus, the U1 programme focuses on career, academic, and psychosocial support. U1 mentors are assigned 4 to 6 mentees, with whom they meet once weekly in person and online. U1 mentors are also encouraged to *have one-on-one sessions with their mentees.*

5.3.1.1 Benefits of peer mentoring

Husband and Jacobs (2009) as well as Peregrina-Kretz *et al.* (2018) and Malan (2018) indicate that peer mentoring can orient students to learning at university, helping them adapt to a new study environment and address course-related problems and general study issues and concerns.

5.3.1.2 Challenges with peer mentorship programmes

There are challenges with the peer mentorship programme, as U1 reports, related to the relationship between mentors and mentees. Since both are students, U1 reports that many mentees, especially those performing well academically, do not see the value of having a mentor.

However, it is crucial to recognise that the effectiveness of peer mentoring programmes can vary depending on the university, the student population, and the specific dynamics of the mentor-mentee relationships. Understanding and addressing these challenges is essential for universities to create effective peer mentoring programmes catering to diverse student needs.

5.3.2 Writing and reading programmes for first-year students

U3 has a writing and reading development programme focusing on writing and reading development and multilingualism to enhance in enhancing student learning and academic success. U5 has a reading in the discipline (RID) initiative. However, at U5, only the Faculty of Humanities implements this programme. The programme aims to develop material and interventions using actual academic content to assist first-year commuter students in making sense of their theoretical readings, which could be conducted in face-to-face or blended workshop formats.

5.3.3 Student success webinars for first-year commuter students

U3 hosts success webinars on Fridays that focus on helping first-year commuter students deal with stress, anxiety, depression, and demotivation and share material on resilience. Recorded webinar sessions are posted on the university's social media pages.

5.3.4 Student success coaching for first-year commuter students

U3 offers student success coaching to provide high-impact collaborative learning experiences that contributing to student success. It assists first-year commuter students in becoming independent, self-reliant, managing time effectively, innovative, and with a personal budget. Students are assigned to a student success coach who meets with them online using any convenient mode of communication such as

WhatsApp, Ms Teams, Skype, Zoom, and others. The sessions are strictly confidential and last an hour. During the first appointment, a coach and student establish a relationship and outline roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Coaching may continue beyond the first year. A coach can refer students to other support services if needed.

5.4 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC PLANS FOCUSING ON STUDENT SUCCESS

The document analysis of strategic plans indicated that many selected universities explicitly prioritise student success as a critical strategic goal. However, at some universities, student success is implied within the strategic plans rather than presented as a distinct and standalone strategic goal.

At universities where student success is explicitly positioned as a critical strategic goal (U1, U3, U4, and U5), it demonstrates a clear and intentional focus on supporting students throughout their academic journey (see *U1 Vision 2040 and Strategic Framework 2019-2024; U3 Vision 2030 Strategy; U4 Strategic Plan 2018-2022;* and *U5 Strategic Plan 2025*). These universities have specific initiatives, programmes (see 5.2 and 5.3), and resources dedicated to enhancing student success and fostering a supportive environment for their students.

On the other hand, at the universities where student success is implied (U2, U6, and U7) within the strategic plans, it suggests that while it may not be explicitly stated as a separate goal, it is still considered an essential aspect of their overall strategic direction. In these cases, student success may be integrated into other strategic goals or objectives, indicating recognition of its significance without a separate strategic plan dedicated solely to student success (see U*2 Strategy 2015-2025; U6 ENVISION2030 Strategy; U7 Strategic Plan 2020-2025*). An analysis of the strategic plans reveals the critical themes in the figure below.

Figure 5.1: Word cloud of strategic plans regarding student success

Figure 5.1 illustrates the university plans regarding student success, as identified through a word cloud analysis conducted on NVivo. The key themes that emerged from the strategic goals of the sampled institutions include employability, development, success, learning, and programmes. The inclusion of employability indicates a shift in the definition of student success. For example, U4 sees student success as academic performance, and the university has developed graduate attributes that enhance students' employability. Additionally, concepts such as compulsory, faculties, international initiatives, research, graduate, language support, and others are extensively covered across the universities. Other notable themes include completion, FYE, curricular, assessment, relevant activities, and integration.

5.4.1 Student success initiatives at selected South African universities

U2 has identified several plans and strategies to enhance first-year commuter students' success. These include implementing continuous and interactive formative assessments, which enable them to measure students' progress and take timely remedial measures when needed. The university also aims to implement recognition and incentive systems for high-achieving first-year commuter students to motivate them to succeed.

U3 plans to promote the effective use of techniques such as student tracking and provide an integrated, flexible, and accessible support network for first-year students, encompassing academic and non-academic support. At the same time, U4 intends to develop a comprehensive co-curricular plan to support first-year commuter students.

This university takes a holistic approach to student success, aligning and integrating co-curricular activities with other institutional programmes. U4 also plans to establish clear pathways for student learning and success, guiding first-year commuter students towards completion and utilising real-time data systems to identify when a student is veering off track.

Additionally, U5 aims to improve and expand the tutorial system to cover various modules and courses. The university also plans to introduce a credit-bearing and compulsory English proficiency course as part of the FYE. Additionally, U5 is committed to ensuring that off-campus residences for commuting students are on par with on-campus residences, implementing strict rules for off-campus accommodation accreditation.

However, it is worth noting that commuter students are not explicitly mentioned in Figure 5.1, suggesting they will be accommodated alongside all other first-year students. Other than in U5 regarding the standard of off-campus residences, student success plans did not mention how the sample universities would support commuter students. Therefore, the first-year student success plans of the sampled institutions adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to support residential and commuter students. As discussed in 2.5, first-year commuter students face unique challenges that require tailored and contextualised support that addresses the challenges specific to this student population. These might include flexible class scheduling, access to online resources, additional academic advising, and assistance with transportation and time management. Recognising the unique needs of commuter students and providing them with the appropriate support can help improve their overall success and retention rates at higher education institutions. Therefore, universities should consider these specific needs when developing student success plans and support services.

5.5 REFLECTION ON THE SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the support provided by South African universities to first-year commuter students. The document analysis revealed several programmes that support these students (see 5.2, 5.2.1–5.2.5), demonstrating a significant investment in student success. These programmes cover a broad spectrum of academic and non-academic student experiences. They assist students during the separation, transition and integration stages (see 3.3). However, given the limitations

of relying primarily on annual reports, the influence and effectiveness of these programmes could not be fully established.

Tinto's (2014) conceptual model (see 3.3) emphasises that participation in academic and social activities facilitates student integration into the university environment. However, the involvement of first-year commuter students in these programmes was not established in the analysis. Only three programmes—orientations, tutorials, and first-year seminars—were compulsory, primarily when organised as credit-bearing modules or courses. Most support programmes were voluntary. As found in 2.5.3, first-year commuter students rarely participate in academic and social activities outside the classroom. The empirical findings (see 6.4.2.3) also revealed that participants rarely participated in social events outside of class time because they only came to the campus when necessary, resulting in fewer opportunities to interact with fellow students. After attending lessons, these students usually leave the university to attend to their other home responsibilities (Thomas, 2019).

Furthermore, these support programmes were severely affected by COVID-19. Many had to transition online, which presented significant challenges. In some cases, this transition reduced attendance, resulting in many students not receiving the needed support.

5.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter reveals that South African universities feature a variety of first-year student support programmes, giving us only a national picture concerning student support (see 5.2.1–5.2.5; 5.3.1–5.3.6). However, two notable challenges are observed in the document analysis. Firstly, the programmes were not integrated to provide holistic support for first-year students. Since each programme operated separately, it was challenging to determine with certainty which had the most significant influence on first-year commuter student success. The lack of integration among the various support programmes was a notable concern. A fragmented approach could lead to inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and confusion for students seeking assistance. A more coordinated approach could provide a more seamless experience for first-year commuter students and allow universities to improve the track of the overall influence of their support initiatives.

Secondly, the core programmes primarily focused on assisting students experiencing academic difficulties (see 5.2). According to Tinto's theory (see 3.3), first-year commuter students have a variety of challenges during transition, including those that are social and emotional. While academic assistance is vital, students' social and emotional well-being should not be neglected. The challenges of transitioning to university life extend beyond academics and encompass social and emotional adjustments. Overlooking these aspects could put students at risk of disengagement and attrition. Consequently, it is crucial that in developing a framework to support the success of first-year commuter students, their social and emotional needs are thoroughly considered (see 7.3).

The literature review in Chapter 2 served as a foundation for this document analysis-focused chapter. However, given the limitations of Chapter 5, where annual reports were the main source of evidence, Chapter 6 will serve as the primary unit of analysis for this case study university.

CHAPTER 6
PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS THROUGH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focused on discovering the experiences of first-year commuter students regarding their academic, social, and emotional integration into the case study university environment. Discussions with study participants followed the AI framework (see 4.4). Thus, this study aimed (see 1.4) to develop a framework for a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students at the case study university, addressing their academic, emotional, and social needs (see Chapter 7). The four steps of the AI 4D framework (see 4.4) were applied to structure this qualitative inquiry (see Chapters 6-7), conducted through focus groups (see 4.5.2). The first two steps of the AI 4D cycle will be presented in Chapter 6 (see 6.2 and 6.6), and the last two steps of the AI 4D cycle will be found in Chapter 7 (see 7.2 and 7.4).

6.2 AI 4D CYCLE'S FIRST STEP: DISCOVERING

This first step is ***discovering*** (see 4.4*)*, establishing and articulating the strengths, successes, and positive experiences related to first-year commuter participants in their programme. This chapter presents the empirical findings from the focus-group discussions conducted across three campuses of the UFS: Bloemfontein, South and Qwaqwa Campuses. While the initial plan was to triangulate these findings with those from the document analysis in Chapter 5, the limitations inherent in using annual reports as the primary sources for document analysis necessitate that this study's primary unit of analysis remains solely within Chapter 6.

The focus-group discussion instrument was designed based on the principles of Tinto's theoretical framework and the existing peer mentor programme at the case study university. Consequently, the instrument was structured to address four key areas: academic integration, social integration, emotional support and the peer mentor programme (see Appendix D). Each section included a specific set of questions grounded in the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach (see 4.4).

The data generated from the focus-group discussions were thematically analysed following the Braun and Clarke framework (see 4.8.1). Nvivo was used for this

thematic analysis (see 4.8). The themes presented below align with the structure of the focus-group discussion instrument: academic adjustment (see 6.3), social adjustment (see 6.4), and emotional adjustment (see 6.5) – detailed in Table 6.1. The themes also include the AI framework (see 6.6). Although these three themes followed the layout of the research instrument (see Appendix D) and AI, subthemes emerged through the rigorous analysis of the focus-group data. The subthemes were classified as follows:

1. Success stories (see 6.2.1, 6.3.1, 6.4.1) refer to narratives of individual or collective achievements catalysing positive outcomes among participants. These stories include self-help, self-efficacy, and self-initiatives that led to positive adjustment to university.
2. Best practices (see 6.2.2, 6.3.2, 6.4.2) refer to the university services, programmes, or interventions that help participants adjust to the university environment. These practices represent the best of what the university could offer to first-year commuter students to facilitate their adjustment.

See now the details of Table 6.1 below.

Table 6.1: Themes and subthemes obtained from thematic analysis

Theme	Description	Subtheme	Description
1	6.3 ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT	6.3.1	*Success stories in the academic adjustment of first-year commuter students (6.3.1.1 – 6.3.1.3)*
		6.3.2	*Best practices in the academic adjustment of first-year commuter students (6.3.2.1 - 6.3.2.2)*
2	6.4 SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	6.4.1	*Success stories in the social adjustment of first-year commuter students (6.4.1.1 - 6.4.1.2)*
		6.4.2	*Best practices in the social adjustment of first-year commuter students (6.4.2.1 - 6.4.2.4)*
3	6.5 EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT	6.5.1	*Success stories in the emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students (6.5.1.1 - 6.5.1.2)*
		6.5.2	*Best practices in the emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students (6.5.2.1)*
4	6.6 AI 4D CYCLE'S SECOND STEP: DREAMING	6.6.1	*Opportunities for growth in academic adjustment* (6.6.1.1 - 6.6.1.6)
		6.6.2	*Opportunities for growth in social adjustment* (6.6.2.1 - 6.6.2.4)
		6.6.3	*Opportunities for growth in emotional adjustment 6.6.3.1 – 6.6.3.5*

*Please note: The designing phase (7.2) and delivery phase (7.3) are in Chapter 7.

The intent of applying colours in Table 6.1: was to signify the separation of the different themes. The green section highlights the discovery step of AI with its central theme, “Academic Adjustment” (see section 6.3), with the sub-themes “Success stories in the academic adjustment” (see 6.3.1) and “Best practices in the academic adjustment” (see 6.3.2). The yellow designates the pivotal theme “social adjustment” (see 6.4) with the sub-themes “Success stories in the social adjustment” (see 6.4.1) and “Best practices in the social adjustment” (see 6.4.2). The grey section signifies the predominant theme, “emotional adjustment” (see 6.5), with the sub-themes “Success stories in the emotional adjustment” (see 6.5.1) and “Best practices in the emotional adjustment” (see 6.5.2). The orange section signifies the dreaming step of AI (see 6.6) with three sub-themes, the “Opportunities for growth in academic adjustment” (see 6.6.1), “Opportunities for growth in social adjustment” (6.6.2), and the “Opportunities for growth in emotional adjustment” (see 6.6.3). This colour-coded approach aids in visually separating and emphasising the different aspects of the participants' experiences, helping readers easily navigate through the findings and thematic discussions presented in the study.

6.3 ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS

The researcher categorised participants' responses into several sub-themes under the academic adjustment theme (see details in Table 6.1). In these sub-themes, participants discussed, in keeping with the AI, success stories and best practices regarding what helped them integrate into their campuses’ academic environments.

Although not included as items in the research instrument (see Appendix D), the researcher occasionally applied probes to establish participants' conceptualisation of relevant terminologies, such as academic integration. Participants described academic integration in the following ways:

- “*feeling like you are part of the university*” (Nteba, female, group 7, campus 3)
- “*to me, academic integration means adjustment to the university, like having a sense of belonging to the university, feeling like you are part of the university community*” (Inno, male, group 5, campus 2).

- "*I think academic adjustment or integration means knowing what is happening academically in your campus, like knowing when to submit your assignments*" (Medi, female, group 4, campus 1).

The responses show that participants define academic integration as an adjustment to university. Obi (2012:50) defines an academic adjustment as "the student's positive attitudes towards their academic work and goals and positive valuations of their academic environment".

Furthermore, Li and Zhang (2022) argue that academic adjustment happens when a student demonstrates a sense of purposefulness, enthusiasm to learn, actions that align with academic goals, and fulfilment with the academic environment. Academic adjustment manifests in various ways, including learning skills and strategies to succeed.

Concerning the academic adjustment theme are discussed: success stories (6.3.1) and best practices (6.3.2).

6.3.1 Success stories in the academic adjustment of first-year commuter students

As established in the literature (see 3.3.3), there are two types of academic environments: formal and informal. A formal academic environment includes grades and in-class experience, while an informal environment includes academically enriching interactions outside class. In the empirical study, participants mentioned success stories about what helped them to adjust academically. As discussed in 6.2, success stories are about individual or collective self-help, self-efficacy, and self-initiative. The stories below demonstrate participants' endeavours to adjust to university by seeking help from family, peers, lecturers, and tutors. The success stories regarding family support for first-year commuter students (see 6.3.1.1), collaborative learning partnerships (see 6.3.1.2), and supportive lecturers and tutors (see 6.3.1.3).

6.3.1.1 Success stories regarding family support for first-year commuter students

Literature (see 2.4) highlights the influence of first-generation commuter students in their families, confirmed by this empirical study's participants (e.g. diverse genders

and campuses emphasised the significance of family support as a crucial factor in facilitating academic adjustment). Thando highlighted the invaluable support she received from her family, which played a pivotal role in her academic success and enabled her to develop effective study techniques tailored to her needs within the formal academic environment. Thando reported her success story,

> *Well, my family helped me develop studying methods. Yeah. The Pomodoro study method, whereby I study for a certain amount of time. Because it was suggested that I have a short attention span, I cannot focus on something for a long time. So, my dad suggested the Pomodoro technique, so I just studied for maybe 25 minutes and then rested for five minutes. That way I can complete my work way faster than before. I have struggled in terms of sitting down for long and just focusing for long because I just lose concentration* (Female, group 3, Campus 1).

Thando's story demonstrated that she was aware of her academic challenges and sought help to address them. A non-first-generation student, Jenny reported that her parents helped her during online classes. She said:

> *My parents and siblings are graduates, and they helped me with my work, especially during online classes"* (Female, group 4, Campus 1).

Both Thando and Jenny experienced the benefits of involving parents in their education. Thando implemented a version of the Pomodoro method, studying for 30 minutes with 25 minutes of work and a 5-minute break (Burton, 2016). Burton (2016) posits that the Pomodoro method is a time management strategy designed to enhance productivity by breaking work into intervals. Thando's experience highlights the advantages of having parents with higher education experience. Additionally, Shinoda (2020) emphasised the effectiveness of the Pomodoro study method in improving students' reading abilities, self-motivation, and dealing with study disruptions.

However, the situation was different for other first-generation students. During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, South African institutions were compelled to implement various strategies to maintain academic continuity (Du Plessis *et al.*, 2022; see 2.5.8). These strategies primarily involved online or remote teaching and learning. Many students stayed home during this challenging time, so their parents

became more involved in their education. For example, Xoli shared that his family did not provide academic support but assisted by providing resources for attending online classes. He remarked,

> *For me, I only live with my grandmother, and she helped me with data when my global protect*[2] *dropped during online classes. But other than that, she can't really help me with my academics.* (Male, group 5, Campus 2).

Consequently, online classes facilitated closer engagement between students and their parents or siblings.

Although some universities have resumed in-person classes, many continue offering online modules. The unique circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in students not formally separating from their familiar home environments, as theorised by Tinto (see 3.3). Instead, they maintained existing relationships and only had to adapt to study routines and role changes. As a result, participants benefited from attending online classes while living with families who had experience with higher education and could assist them in their studies. Consequently, informal yet academically enriching interactions between participants and their families enabled the development of successful academic habits, like Thando's experience. Froggé and Woods (2018) confirm this when they suggested that parents and other influential adults play a crucial role in shaping academic attributes such as self-motivation and self-efficacy among university students. Therefore, parental involvement in a student's education consistently correlates with good academic performance (Utami, 2022). Also, "the greater the family participation in the student's entry into university life, the better, as it helps the student cope with the challenges ahead" (Dlamini *et al.*, 2020:3). Furthermore, Naite (2021) argues that when parents are actively involved, they are more likely to promote and stimulate a student's academic growth. Utami (2022) also argues that students' academic, social, and emotional development, together with their sense of pride and accomplishment, benefit from active parental involvement.

[2] GlobalProtect is a university-sponsored VPN portal that links to learning resources for free while off-campus.

6.3.1.2 Success stories regarding collaborative Learning Partnerships

Following the literature perspectives presented in 2.6.2, being in a group environment with peers encourages first-year commuter students to learn and establish meaningful relationships and academic support. Study groups, also called peer academic support, are informal collaborative teaching-learning processes where one student helps another learn a particular subject (Sari, Celiköz and Ünal, 2017). The academic benefits of peer support in study groups include improved academic well-being and self-efficacy (Altermatt, 2019). Furthermore, study groups help students set challenging goals and experience reduced levels of stress, anxiety, and depression when facing academic difficulties (Altermatt, 2019).

Although study groups are temporary, they primarily transfer experience and knowledge from one student to another (Sari *et al*., 2017). These student-led groups can fill knowledge gaps and encourage deeper engagement with the subject matter (Roychowdhury *et al.*, 2020). The authors argue that commuter students who study alone often become discouraged when they struggle with tests and exams, as their individualistic approach prevents them from realising that other students may be facing similar anxieties (Roychowdhury *et al.*, 2020).

Participants from Campuses 1 and 2 highlighted the positive impact of group engagement on their academic adjustment. These participants emphasised the importance of collaborative learning partnerships, particularly through forming study groups with their peers. However, it is worth noting that participants from Campus 3 did not reference any participation in study groups or encouragement to form them, suggesting the absence of study groups in their academic adjustment experience. Participants viewed their participation in study groups as a way to self-help themselves catch up in their courses.

Participants from Campus 1 and Campus 2 provided several reasons why study groups were success stories regarding academic adjustment. They highlighted that study groups held them accountable for assignment submissions, tests, and examinations. Additionally, participants mentioned that study groups allowed them to compare their knowledge and understanding with their peers, providing a benchmark for their progress. Sandi elaborated on this by stating,

we have created a group with the students that I am in the same class with. So, we share information, time, due dates, and we always update each other (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Furthermore, Bless expressed that:

And the other thing is also knowing people. In the university, you cannot make it alone. You need to have a peer group that you can study with. That can remind you that you have this and this because sometimes you tend to forget. Sometimes, you tend to like to be busy. You get caught up and be busy. So having friends and study groups that can help in terms of, you know, studies (Male, group 1, campus 1).

However, participants reported forming study groups during test weeks and examination periods. Thus, study groups were temporary arrangements to achieve specific academic goals. Neli explained,

We usually form study groups during test weeks and exams. But we can't do that during normal weeks because we are all busy with our own lives (Female, group 4, campus 1).

In addition, Sam reported,

peer mentors taught us to communicate with each other as first years to make some study groups and make sure that we communicate whenever we encounter some problems (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Students can initiate a study group or be encouraged by lecturers, tutors, mentors, or individuals with authority. In Sam's case, peer mentors played a role in encouraging him and his fellow mentees to form a study group. A peer mentor supported Sam and his friends in forming a study group to facilitate orientation and adjustment to the academic environment at UFS.

6.3.1.3 Success stories regarding supportive lecturers and tutors

The literature findings in 3.3.3 established that the classroom is the only place first-year commuter students meet with academic staff and other students to engage in learning activities. Thus, lecturers and other lecturing support staff play a crucial role

in participants' academic success, and their influence on how students perceive their first year is significant. Participants identified that some lecturers and tutors were critical catalysts for positive academic adjustment In this context. Tinto (2014:10) argues that classroom experiences are essential, stating that "student success in the classroom is the building block upon which student retention and completion are built". Lecturers significantly influence teaching and learning methods, curriculum, assessment of learning, and student engagement in the classroom (Tinto, 2014). The empirical findings suggest that participants viewed lecturers and lecturing support staff as enablers of academic adjustment.

Participants mentioned that their initial views about university were based on the perception of an uncaring environment where they had to sort out their academic issues independently. However, to their surprise, they found that some lecturers and tutors cared about their academic success. Consequently, participants from all genders and campuses acknowledged that lecturers assisted them in adjusting to the academic environment. Participants expressed that lecturers provided them with adequate reading material that enabled them to study on their own. Recommended references, class presentations, and other additional readings were made available by lecturers on Blackboard[3] or through emails to students. Lelani reported,

> *I had enough reading material to study on my own, so it [academic adjustment] wasn't that hard … and then my lecturers were also supportive; they shared with us all the reading material online* (Male, group 6, campus 2).

For Lelani, the lecturer's support allowed him to adjust seamlessly to the university academic environment. He further revealed that some lecturers encouraged them to ask questions, not be afraid to make mistakes, and stimulated positive engagement. The lecturer’s reassuring nature helped him ease the stress of transitioning from high school to university. Thus, the formal in-class experience of supportive lecturers was a catalyst for positive academic adjustment. Naledi explained,

[3] Blackboard is an online-based learning environment and learning management system.

> *lecturers encouraged us to consult them even after classes through WhatsApp or send emails* (Female, group 7, campus 3).

The mode of communication was cited as necessary by Naledi. She mentioned that sending a WhatsApp text to a lecturer, for example, made the consultation process less formal and intimidating. Participants noted that self-initiated conversations with lecturers were well received.

Tutors were also cited as success stories regarding positive academic adjustment. Participants reported that problem-solving learning was more common in tutorials than in lectures. Tshepo reported,

> *Our tutors encouraged us to work together to deal with challenging parts of our modules* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

Like Lelani's description of the assistance he received from lecturers, Tinto (2012) asserts that lecturers' teaching methods play a crucial role in how commuter students adjust academically. Tinto refers to these teaching methods as "pedagogies of engagement". Pedagogies of engagement require students to actively participate in learning with their peers in the classroom. One example of this approach is problem-based learning, which requires students to work together during class to apply their knowledge and skills to solve a problem (Tinto, 2012). According to Tinto (2012), the significance of engagement pedagogies lies in providing students with a sense of their capabilities, echoing Tshepo's experiences in tutorials. It fosters the idea that students succeed because of their abilities and gives them a sense of ownership over their achievements, inspiring them to perform well in the future.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, there has been an increased awareness of the potential for using smartphones to support learning outside of traditional classroom settings. As Naledi outlined, during COVID-19, communication between students and lecturers increased using social networks like WhatsApp. The pandemic has caused students to develop a positive attitude towards using educational technologies for learning purposes, according to Mafenya (2022).

6.3.2 Best practices in the academic adjustment of first-year commuter students

Participants identified several best practices contributing to their successful integration into the university's academic environment. These best practices facilitated academic adjustment, including first-year orientation academic support (6.3.2.1) and the peer mentor programme (6.3.2.2).

6.3.2.1 First-year orientation as best practice for academic support

Participants mentioned first-year orientation as a best practice offered by the university that facilitated their academic adjustment. This out-of-class student experience is beneficial in disseminating information and correlates with positive outcomes for first-year commuter students. Nyar (2020) also observes that orientation enhances preparedness for the first year by empowering students with relevant knowledge and information, thereby contributing to overall academic adjustment. The empirical findings demonstrate that participants from across genders and campuses reported attending first-year orientation activities. They mentioned several benefits that facilitated academic adjustment emanating from such participation. Inno said,

> *Orientation helped us to know about different buildings and it was easy to attend my classes* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Furthermore, Naledi reported,

> *Attending orientation was key because I did not know anyone here. I did not know the buildings, laboratories, or anything. I did not even know where the shops were. So attending orientation helped me because I was able to get all that information. They also help me select my majors and second majors* (Female, group 7, campus 3).

Orientation typically occurs after registration; however, it is common for students to change their majors as they become familiar with the various academic programmes available at the university. This approach is confirmed by Naledi, who selected her majors after attending the orientation. Therefore, orientation seems to have helped Naledi make a better choice of majors. Moreover, Rele reported that orientation helped

her to know how to search academic materials in libraries online. It connected her to fellow first-year students and classmates. She said,

> *The training we got during orientation helped me a lot. We attended library training and learned how to search for books and stuff like that. I also met many classmates I didn't know during orientation* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Participants who missed orientation reported feeling lost and confused. Luthando stated,

> *At the beginning of the year, there was a strike [student protest], and I went home. When I returned, orientation was over, and I did not even know where my faculty and classes were. Also, I did not know anyone to help me* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

The beginning of an academic year is always chaotic for first-year students. While some try to find their classes, others struggle to sort out their registration. During this time, it is easy for new students to feel overwhelmed and lost. Naledi credited orientation for helping her locate different buildings and thus avoid spending time searching for her classes.

6.3.2.2 Peer mentor programme as best practice for academic support

Evidence from the literature highlights the significance of peer mentors in facilitating academic adjustment (see 2.6.2). Furthermore, participants mentioned peer mentors as a best practice concerning support for academic adjustment. The empirical findings demonstrate that participants from Campus 1 and Campus 2, irrespective of gender, acknowledged the significant role of peer mentors in facilitating academic adjustment. They highlighted several academic benefits that resulted from having a peer mentor. For instance, mentors assisted them in identifying the modules they were registered for and helped them create a personalised timetable. Jack specifically mentioned that:

> *You get a long list of available modules and programmes, and you end up not knowing what to pick. So having a mentor at the beginning helped me with the selection of majors and modules* (Male, group 2, campus 1).

However, Jack likely mistook academic advisors for peer mentors. Academic advisors are generally responsible for assisting students in selecting majors and modules. Nevertheless, peer mentors functioned as academic advisors from Jack's perspective.

Participants mentioned that mentors assisted them with time management strategies. Zivo reported,

> *I did manage but it wasn't easy organising time for myself, changing things, attending classes and all that, but the mentor helped* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Participants reported that peer mentors provided valuable guidance and referred them to appropriate academic support resources, helping them navigate the challenges of university life more effectively. Busa said her peer mentor provided transformative guidance:

> *I remember my first semester was a disaster. I wasn't familiar with anything, I wasn't familiar with the venues, and I didn't know who to speak to. So, meeting my mentor has helped me a lot in a very positive way. Now I know, If I need something, I just ask him, dude, where can I find this? Who do I talk to in terms of academics?* (Female, group 6, campus 2)

Busa demonstrated strong dependence on her peer mentor. This dependency may indicate that their relationship has transitioned beyond mere mentee and mentor to friendship. Busa further affirmed,

> *My mentor is basically the only person I talk to outside class because I just stay in my room all the time, I never get to interact with many people* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

According to participants, during group sessions with peer mentors, they were warned about the risks of poor academic performance and the possibility of academic exclusion. These sessions provided them with crucial insights and guidance on how to avoid such pitfalls. Thokozani said,

> *They taught us that there is academic exclusion in the university. So, if you fail, you can be excluded, unlike in high school, where even when you fail,*

> *you can come back the next year. But here, if you fail some modules, you go straight home* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Kat reported,

> *So, they manage to guide us in a manner that we can adapt to the environment. Yeah, I think mentors have helped in a very good way; that is all I can say. They have helped from day one up until now* (Male, group 5, campus 2)

Participants reported that peer mentors provided them with psychological support. Zivo, a self-reported academically struggling student, expressed,

> *He told me just to have a positive attitude, there is some potential in me* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

According to participants, the composition of their mentorship groups primarily comprises students not doing the same courses. They see this as a strength more than a weakness. Lelani reported,

> *In our mentorship group, we have people doing computer science and other courses we can learn from. For example, I do social science, and they ask me if they need someone to assist them with essays or academic writing. And if I need someone to help me with computer software, I ask them and they are always willing to help* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Participants explained that having a diverse group works in their favour as they can draw strength from others. This peer-to-peer assistance exposed them to different academic programmes available at the university. Lelani further reported,

> *Also, I did not know that computer science is offered on this campus. I always thought it was only available on the main campus* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Mentors played a crucial role in the adjustment of first-year students. Participants highlighted several academic benefits of having a mentor, making the limited presence of peer mentors in Campus 3 concerning. Participants from Campus 3 reported having

little interaction with their peer mentors. Although they were assigned mentors, they had never met them, and there was no further engagement beyond the initial allocation phase. Thus, there was no evidence to suggest that the peer mentor programme was offered to Campus 3 first-year students, which indicates the need to include Campus 3 in the peer mentor programme.

6.4 SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS

Participants were asked to consider what made it possible to integrate into the university's social environment as part of the AI approach (see Appendix D). In this regard, they identified several subthemes contributing to their social adjustment. Some participants from different campuses and genders discussed these subthemes, collectively called social adjustment:

- Botha describes adjustment to the social environment as *"having the sense of belonging and having friends and acquaintances*" (Male, group 2, campus 1)
- Leto referred to social adjustment as "feeling like you are part of the campus environment, like you belong here" (Female, group 7, campus 3).
- Zivo views adjustment to the university as "*making friends with your classmates and participating in extramural activities like sports. For me, it just feeling that the university is now your home and getting comfortable to move around campus*" (Female, group 6, campus 2).

These participants demonstrated a deep understanding of social adjustment, which revolved around significant concepts such as feeling integrated within the university, experiencing a sense of belonging, forming friendships, feeling at home, and participating in social events. In essence, they recognised social adjustment as the process of fitting in and becoming part of the social fabric of the university. Thus, social adjustment encompassed establishing connections, forging relationships, and engaging in social activities that foster a sense of belonging to a community. This sense of belonging encompasses feeling valued, included and accepted by the university community (Pedler, Willis and Nieuwoudt, 2022). The decisions students make regarding whether to remain at or leave the institution are influenced in part by the significance they attribute to their involvement (Tinto, 2012:66). According to Pedler *et al*. (2022:397), social adjustment is facilitated by establishing social

connections with both staff and peers, and is "associated with students' effort, attention, self-esteem, perseverance, and enjoyment in learning tasks". A socially supportive environment promotes a sense of institutional affiliation, where students perceive themselves as integral university community members. As mentioned (see 3.3.2), forming and maintaining meaningful friendships with peers is crucial to social adjustment. Conversely, Tinto (2012) suggests that the absence of social adjustment can result in social isolation and loneliness, increasing the likelihood of a student disengaging from the university.

6.4.1 Success stories in the social adjustment of first-year commuter students

Participants from various genders and campuses described success stories of what facilitated their social adjustment and made them feel they belonged in their campus social environments. Tebogo emphasised:

> *for me, there are many things that made me feel like now I am part of the university in terms of social environment* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

As previously discussed (see 3.3.3), the social environment comprises formal and informal environments. The formal environment includes planned extracurricular activities and residential life, while the informal environment refers to the campus climate and peer relationships.

Participants identified interpersonal skills (see 6.4.1.1) and living close to university and high school friends (see 6.4.1.2) as success stories regarding social adjustment.

6.4.1.1 Interpersonal skills as success stories

The literature findings suggest that it is vital that first-year students establish supportive networks during their transition to university (see 3.3.2). In addition, Rhodes *et al.* (2015) describe interpersonal skills as essential personal and social competence elements that enable commuter students to establish such networks. Interpersonal skills are the life skills used in everyday communication to interact with others, both individually and in groups (Rajesh and Chandrasekaran, 2014). According to Rajesh and Chandrasekaran (2014), these skills facilitate practical expression, understanding, and exchanging ideas, opinions, and emotions. Developing and honing interpersonal skills can enhance a student’s ability to build rapport, resolve

conflicts, collaborate, and establish positive relationships with peers, university staff, and others in various social contexts. However, in most cases, these are taken-for-granted skills that students assume they have until they must engage with other students and staff.

The empirical findings suggest that participants across genders and campuses recognised the importance of interpersonal skills in facilitating social adjustment. These skills acquired before entering university significantly established meaningful relationships with university staff and peers. Developing practical interpersonal skills enabled participants to communicate effectively, build rapport, and connect with others in the university setting. Therefore, these skills facilitated their integration into the social fabric of the university community. Sam believed that

> *adjusting to the social part of university was not hard because, naturally, I am a social person. I can talk to people I don't even know. We were in queues during registration, and I started talking to this guy in front of me. So, I discovered he is also a commuter student living near my place. So, we started walking together, especially when we leave university and it's dark* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Interpersonal skills, such as active listening, effective communication and empathy, were essential for participants to build positive relationships and foster a sense of belonging. Participants like Sam found that their interpersonal skills helped them navigate various social interactions, engage in conversations, and establish connections. These skills made them feel more comfortable and confident in their interactions, contributing to their overall social adjustment and integration into the university's social environment. Thokozani reported that his social skills allowed him to make friends with his peers:

> *with my classmates, I think it was easier for me to connect with them … I don't know if it's my social skills or what, but it was easier to connect with them* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Although interpersonal skills were mentioned as self-taught or innate to participants, some participants mentioned that they gained these skills in class. Leno reported that

lecturers and tutors helped them develop skills to communicate with classmates and thus establish friendships. According to Leno,

> *sometimes in class or tutorials, lecturers or tutors would tell us to engage with other students to respond, let us say, to a question being discussed. … That enabled us to talk to students we never talked to before. But it is difficult to talk to someone new if you don't have the right social skills but, for me, it wasn't a problem. To be honest, I don't think there is a classmate I haven't talked with* (Female, group 8, campus 3).

For commuter students, forming groups to walk together at night, as mentioned by Sam, is a practical application of interpersonal skills that promotes safety and reduces vulnerability. Using interpersonal skills, commuter students can quickly establish support systems that enhance their sense of security and well-being.

In the classroom setting, as Thokozani pointed out, good social skills enable commuter students to initiate friendships with their classmates. These peer relationships contribute to social well-being and provide valuable academic discussion, problem-solving, and personal and professional development opportunities. Tinto (2012) emphasises the importance of social relationships among students who share the same courses, as they can support and enhance the overall academic experience of commuter students.

Moreover, as Leno highlighted, creating a socially enabling environment in the classroom is crucial for the social transition of commuter students. Interactions with peers and teaching staff within the classroom become vital for commuter students, who may have limited social engagement opportunities (see 2.5.3). By fostering a socially supportive atmosphere, lecturers, tutors, and other teaching staff facilitate the integration of commuter students, enabling them to access informal knowledge, navigate the campus environment, and improve their academic performance. As Tinto (2014) explains, the classroom is the only place commuter students interact with peers and staff (see 3.3.3). Thus, creating a socially enabling environment in the classroom could promote a sense of self-worth, improve commuter students' academic performance, and enhance their attachment to the university and willingness to remain enrolled (Tinto, 2012).

Rajesh and Chandrasekaran (2014:1938) found that “students with good interpersonal skills are usually perceived as optimistic, calm, confident and charismatic qualities that are often endearing or appealing to others”. Thus, other students gravitate toward them. As such, these students hardly struggle to develop meaningful friendships and their social adjustment is comparatively easier. Accordingly, Sam, Thokozani and Leno claimed adjusting to the university social environment was not difficult; they credited their social skills.

6.4.1.2 Living close to the university and high school friends as success stories

The literature findings (see 2.5.1) reveal that many universities perceive that students live near the institution and are free of the other responsibilities that commuter students might have. This perception leads to universities not considering commuter students' needs when planning social events for students. However, empirical findings suggest that only first-year commuter students living closer to the university benefited from social support initiatives. This finding is supported by Maguire and Morris (2018), who also argue that distance matters and those travelling or walking 30 minutes or more are affected by it (see 1.1.5).

Campus 1 and 2 participants shared that they have maintained friendships with their high school peers even after entering university. The proximity of their homes to the university played a significant role in this continuity of friendships. Participants mentioned that living close to the university allowed them to maintain regular contact with their high school friends, as they could meet up regularly outside of class hours. Kyla stated,

> *I used to pass this university all the time when going to high school. My school is located just next to this campus. I have that support system because all my friends came here, and as I said, I met new friends through events for off-campus students* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

The geographical convenience of living near the university enabled participants to engage in social activities with their high school friends, such as studying together, attending events, or simply spending time together. This proximity provided a sense of familiarity and continuity in their social relationships, as they could rely on existing friendships when transitioning into the university environment. Inno explained,

> *I did not struggle to make friends because I had people I already knew from high school. Many of my high school peers came to this campus, which greatly helped me. We were doing things together and we shared information. We created a WhatsApp group to share information about what was happening. For example, I did not know the venue where we were supposed to meet for orientation but my other friend was already there, so he gave me directions* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Participants such as Inno found comfort in the presence of familiar faces and their shared history with their high school friends. These long-standing friendships provided stability and continuity in their social lives, especially the separation and transition phases (see 3.3). Sandi said,

> *I am staying at home with my parents and siblings. They drop me off and pick me up every day. So, I did not change my area code [address] when I started varsity. The only challenge is that sometimes I am expected to do some chores, especially on weekends and at that time, I am tired or just thinking about schoolwork [university]* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

In addition to the literature findings in 1.1.5 and 2.5.1, Jorgenson, Farrell, Fudge, Pritchard (2018) found that students who attend the same university as their high school friends benefit from emotional, social and academic support. These friendships can provide a sense of familiarity and support during the initial challenges of the university experience. Participants like Kyla found comfort in navigating the university environment with a high school friend, as they could face the transition together and avoid feelings of loneliness. These friendships can contribute to a sense of university belonging, as Tinto (2014) emphasizes.

However, like any friendship, high school friendships often evolve or fade as students encounter new experiences and opportunities at university. The expansion of social circles, exposure to diverse perspectives, and the availability of alternative friendships within the university context can lead to changes in high school friendships. This decline in satisfaction and commitment is a natural part of the evolving social landscape in university.

Nonetheless, the support provided by high school friendships during the early stages of transition remains valuable. These friendships help students establish a sense of belonging and provide initial peer social support. As friendships evolve or new friendships are formed, there is often a seamless transition without a gap in social support.

The proximity of the university to one's home, as Jacoby (2020) mentions, can also impact the transition experience. Commuter students who live closer to home or continue living in a familiar home environment may not experience the same separation phase as those who live on campus. The home environment contributes to a smoother transition for these students as they maintain their support systems and daily routines.

Although there may be negative experiences associated with staying at home, such as balancing household chores and academic requirements, as Sandi articulated. However, participants overall viewed high school friendships and the university's proximity to one's home as a success story regarding adjusting to the university environment. Participants also actively engaged with new social opportunities formed new friendships and sought support from various sources to fully integrate into the university community and enhance their overall social adjustment.

6.4.2 Best practices in the social adjustment of first-year commuter students

Participants identified best practices concerning their adjustment to the university's social environment. As mentioned in 6.2, best practices were services, programmes, or interventions offered by the university that helped participants adjust to the university environment. These best practices were day residence (see 6.4.2.1), service-learning modules and faculty events (see 6.4.2.2), first-year orientation social support (see 6.4.2.3), and peer mentorship programme social support (see 6.4.2.4).

6.4.2.1 Day residence as best practice for social adjustment

The literature findings (see 2.5.7) established that commuter students lack dedicated spaces on campus. However, the empirical results suggest that participants from Campus 1, irrespective of gender, emphasised the significance of day residences as

best practice regarding social adjustment. They reported that day residences enabled them to forge new friendships and engage with like-minded peers. Tumelo explained,

> *I think if you are a student, especially if you're staying off campus, the day residences help. Specifically in the social aspect of life, you might find that you don't have time or can't make time to socialise or find new people. But if you're in a day residence, you can meet somebody. I mean, every time you go there, there is someone that you can talk to. When we have Inters [inter-residential activities] and other social events on campus, we get to hear about them in day residences. If I weren't in a day residence, I would have missed a lot when it came to social life. I wouldn't have met many people had I not been in that space* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Participants noted that day residences allowed them to attend events that exposed them to the social life on campus. They expressed positive experiences associated with participating in these social events, often leading to develop meaningful friendships. These events allowed participants to engage with their peers and create connections within the campus community. Kyla explained,

> *I know the university had an event at the beginning of the year, a first-year event. I think it was at Rag Farm. Yeah, so we were there and met other people who were also first-year commuters. They had an event specifically for off-campus students. So that was nice; we got to meet other people as well. So, it wasn't difficult to make new friends and stuff. The committees in our residence and the university's effort to get commuter students to experience university life made it a lot easier for us to meet new people* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Participants strongly believed that day residences fostered a sense of belonging and conveyed that the university values their presence. They emphasised that day residences were crucial in establishing peer mentoring relationships, contributing to a feeling of togetherness and reassurance. Ketso shared the following insight,

> *knowing that everyone is going through similar things and, like in my residence, even speaking to the older students like the ones that are part of RCs [residence committees]. Speaking to them and expressing what you*

> *are going through, they would be like, 'Oh!' I've been through something like that … ask them about certain things, and they can help you through all of that and your friends as well; you know that they kind of go through similar things, and you can help each other through that* (Male, group 1, campus 1).).

A notable observation is that participants from Campus 2 and Campus 3 did not mention or have any knowledge of day residences when prompted. This lack of knowledge may suggest that day residences were unavailable or not standard on these campuses for commuting students. Therefore, only participants from Campus 1 benefited from day residences, while Campus 2 and Campus 3 did not offer this accommodation option for commuting students.

As established (see 2.5.7), day residences serve as a means for commuter students to participate in student life, thereby contributing to their social adjustment. While student life activities have traditionally been associated with on-campus residences, introducing day residences expands these opportunities to commuter students. As Tumelo mentioned, commuter students can engage in various out-of-classroom social activities and co-curricular activities that promote a positive social aspect of the overall student experience. This inclusion of commuter students in student life activities further supports their integration into the social fabric of the university.

As Tumelo highlighted, day residences not only facilitate participation in student life activities but also provide a space for commuter students to relax and socialize between their classes. Tinto (2012) claims residences have become valuable spaces for commuter students to unwind and recharge. As discussed before (see 2.5.7), commuter students often lack dedicated areas on campus to relax after attending classes. Day residences, however, fill this gap by offering a designated space specifically for commuter students.

Moreover, the presence of day residences aligns with the concept of the sticky campus model (see also 2.5.7). The sticky campus model encourages commuter students to remain on campus even after their classes are over, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and engagement. By providing spaces for relaxing and socialising, day

residences encourage commuter students to spend more time on campus, interact with their peers, and fully participate in the campus community.

6.4.2.2 Service-learning modules and faculty events as best practices for social adjustment

In 2.5.6, the literature findings established that participation in campus events exposed students to the institutional culture. In addition, faculty culture significantly shapes academic departments' behaviour, norms, and values (Gunsalus, Luckman, Burbules, and Easter, 2019). It provides a framework for interpreting events and actions and influences the relationships between staff and students. Empirical research revealed that participants from all campuses and genders experienced positive outcomes from engaging in faculty activities and service-learning modules, providing valuable opportunities for meaningful interactions with peers and lecturers beyond the traditional classroom setting. Participants viewed service-learning modules and faculty events as best practices offered by the university that facilitated their social adjustment.

This active engagement allowed participants to cultivate relationships, receive support, and establish a sense of belonging within their academic community. They perceived participation in service-learning and faculty events as indicative of faculties caring about student development, social well-being, and career aspirations. Lindo shared his perspective that

> *travelling with my professors to help local communities made me realise that my faculty cares about making a change. The community was delighted to be with us, and I also loved to be there socialising with them. I saw that with my degree I can change people's lives for the better* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

Service-learning modules allowed participants to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world settings while positively impacting their communities. These experiences enhanced their learning and fostered a sense of social responsibility and personal development. By working together on service projects, participants, including Lindo, could collaborate with their peers and engage in shared experiences that promoted teamwork and a sense of purpose. Laide explained,

> *I love modules that enable you to work with communities. You get to see your lecturers and fellow students differently. You build strong bonds with them because we always communicate via WhatsApp group chat* (Female, group 7, campus 3).

Refi believed,

> *my faculty helped me see that I am passionate about helping communities. We only went once to a village around here and I loved seeing people there. I felt important, which made me feel like I now represent the university; I am no longer in high school. Like I am an adult who can change the world* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Furthermore, Sipho reported concerning faculty events,

> *Attending these events, you get exposed to the faculty culture and see that people care about you and value your presence* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Participation in service-learning modules and faculty activities offered participants valuable opportunities for social adjustment and integration into the university environment. Through service-learning, Lindo and Refi discovered their strengths and witnessed local communities' respect and regard for university students. This experience not only helped them develop a sense of self-confidence but also allowed them to connect with others and establish a sense of belonging within the community.

Service-learning modules are linked to the content and objectives of students' courses, providing them with practical and experiential learning opportunities. They are designed to integrate academic knowledge and skills with community service, allowing students to apply their learning in real-world contexts and contribute to the betterment of society.

However, it is essential to note that not all academic programmes or courses include service-learning modules as part of their curriculum. As a result, some participants may not have had the opportunity to participate in service-learning experiences. Thus, while service-learning can be a valuable component of student engagement and social

adjustment, it is essential to recognise that it may not be universally applicable across all academic programmes. Nonetheless, participants who have had the opportunity to engage in service-learning reported a meaningful and impactful experience that contributes to their social integration, personal growth, and understanding of community needs.

By participating in faculty events, such as social gatherings or academic activities, participants like Sipho were able to familiarise themselves with the culture of their respective faculties. This socialisation process allowed them to navigate and understand their academic community's expectations, practices, and dynamics. Engagements in faculty activities and service-learning modules facilitate social adjustment and contribute to the overall student experience and satisfaction.

6.4.2.3 First-year orientation as best practice for social adjustment

In addition to the academic benefits noted in 6.3.2.1, participants across genders and campuses reported that orientation was the best practice regarding social adjustment. Participants' experiences during orientation align with the understanding that orientation programmes facilitate social integration. By engaging in social activities during orientation, participants could meet and interact with a diverse group of students, potentially forming friendships. Participants reported that these initial connections during orientation were a foundation for ongoing social relationships. They felt that the social activities during orientation helped them connect with individuals with similar interests, experiences, and characteristics. Thokozani explained that,

> *during orientation, they asked us to share where we come from and also encourage us to talk in our home languages … so I was able to see that there are Zulu speakers from where I come from* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

The insights shared by participants emphasised the valuable role of orientation in providing social connections and equipping students with essential social skills for success in a university. Senior students who have navigated the university experience played a significant role in imparting their knowledge and advice to incoming students. Participants mentioned that senior students informed them about essential skills

needed for thriving in a university, including communication, involvement in student organisations, and participation in extra-curricular activities such as sports. These skills go beyond academic performance and contribute to a holistic university experience. This peer-to-peer guidance during orientation enabled participants to learn from those who have already navigated the challenges and opportunities of higher education. Xoli recalled,

> *I love soccer and I used to play it in high school. When I came here, I thought I would never play it again because I thought university was just about studying all the time. So, in the orientation, they showed us the football ground. They also linked me to senior students who were already playing it. Now I play for the school [university] team* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

The importance of early registration for social acclimatisation was a significant aspect highlighted by participants. At South African universities, student protests during the registration period can disrupt the normal functioning of the university and hinder students' ability to participate in orientation activities. Participants overcame these challenges by completing their registration early and actively engaging in orientation activities. Early registration allowed them to familiarise themselves with the university environment, connect with fellow students, and participate in the various programmes and events designed to facilitate their social integration. Sam reported,

> *It was also easier for me to make friends because I made sure that I registered early and I met some people during the first week, I think it was orientation. We had conversations and just from there, I saw that it was quite easy to make friends* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Sam's experience reflects the benefits of early registration in allowing participants to fully immerse themselves in the orientation activities and start building connections with their peers. This early engagement enhances their sense of belonging and enables them to establish a social support network from the beginning of their university journey. Early registration also helped participants access the university's necessary resources and services. It enabled them to secure their preferred courses,

obtain relevant materials, and settle administrative matters. As reported in 6.2.2.6, some participants missed many classes because of registration issues.

Although dated, the study by Street, Smith and Olivares (2001) still provides valuable insights into the impact of registration timing on student success and dropout rates. Their findings indicate that students who register early, regularly, or on time have a higher success rate than those who register later.

According to Street, Smith and Olivares (2001), late registrants are likelier to miss critical tuition hours, including essential programmes like orientation. Orientation is typically held during the initial weeks of the academic year before classes start. It is a vital introduction to the university, providing students with important information, resources, and opportunities for social integration.

Students who register late and miss orientation may experience difficulties acclimating to the university environment, establishing social connections, and accessing essential support services. Thus, late registration can harm their overall adjustment and academic performance. Furthermore, Street *et al.* (2001) found that late registration was associated with higher dropout rates. These findings underscore the importance of early and regular registration in facilitating a smooth transition into university life. By registering on time, students can participate in vital programmes like orientation, receive crucial information, and establish the foundations for social and academic integration.

6.4.2.4 Peer mentor programme as best practice for social adjustment

As established in the literature (see 2.6.2), peer mentor programmes offer valuable social support to first-year commuter students. In addition to the academic advantages reported in 6.3.2.2, empirical findings suggest that participants from Campus 1 and 2 found that the programme played a crucial role in fostering social connections and providing valuable information. Peer mentors, who are more experienced students, served as guides and sources of support for participants. Participants reported that the peer mentor programme allowed them to develop meaningful friendships with peers and mentors within their mentorship groups. These mentorship groups provide a platform for students to connect with others who share similar experiences and interests, creating a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Hloni remarked,

> *When I came here, I did not know anyone, so it helped to be allocated a mentor. She helped and motivated me because … we spoke the same language and I felt like she understood me* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Participants mentioned that communication within their mentorship groups occurs through the WhatsApp social network. This digital platform allowed for sharing important information about various campus events, health awareness campaigns, scholarship opportunities, and webinars. By receiving such information, participants stayed informed and actively participated in relevant activities and opportunities. Luthando claimed,

> *We have attended many motivational and growth webinars and workshops shared by our mentor. For example, I attended the growth mindset session … which was very informative* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Luthando's experience further exemplifies the positive impact of the peer mentor programme. Her participation in the mentorship group and access to information through WhatsApp allowed her to stay connected and engaged in campus life, making the university experience more supportive.

Peer mentors take on multiple roles to support mentees, acting as role models by demonstrating successful social behaviours and personal growth strategies. They also serve as coaches, guiding and supporting mentees as they navigate challenges and make critical decisions. Importantly, peer mentors are also friends, providing mentees with a supportive and understanding presence. The participants' experiences substantiate Malan's assertion (2018, as seen in 2.6.1) that peer mentors serve as role models for first-year commuter students by exemplifying behaviours associated with success.

Tinto (2012) also emphasises the significance of having mentors with similar backgrounds, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This representation can inspire and motivate students, as they see firsthand that individuals from similar circumstances have succeeded in the university environment. Hloni’s experience reflects this sentiment, as she finds motivation and reassurance in knowing that students with similar backgrounds can thrive and succeed at university.

Participants also mentioned that mentor and mentee relationships played a significant role in enabling social adjustment.

Literature (see 2.6.6) highlighted that mentor and mentee relationships are multifaceted, interactive and evolving through phases. Malan (2018:81) found that "the informal interactions that the mentees and mentors had with one another led to valuable friendships that made the relationship more comfortable and approachable". Trust-based relationships between mentors and mentees are the cornerstone of successful mentoring.

In the empirical study, participants reported developing formal and informal relationships with mentors. Rele claimed,

> *I feel like we have established some sort of a friendship with some boundaries. Knowing that our mentor helps us with this and that. Of course, we can go to him for other things but for the sake of professionalism, we choose not to take that route* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

The boundaries mentioned by Rele indicate that some participants conceived their relationship with mentors as different from other peer friendships (see also 2.6.6, which suggests that these mentor and mentee relationships could be formal or informal). In their view, the friendship with mentors was considered formal rather than casual. Thus, formal friendship only applies in specific spaces and may not be appropriate in others. Participants further elaborated that this formal friendship with mentors primarily existed when discussing campus-related matters. Len explained that

> *I am friends with my mentors. But we only talk about academic things. So, I can't invite him when I go to a nightclub; I don't want him to see me in those places because he might not respect me* (Male, group 2, campus 1).

Participants (such as Klerk and Wayne) reported that confidentiality in one-on-one engagements significantly enabled them to trust their mentors. Mentors assured participants that their conversations were private and confidential and that nothing would be disclosed to anyone outside the mentoring relationship. In doing so, the

assurance instilled confidence in participants, enabling them to engage in open and unrestricted discussions with their mentors. Klerk reported,

> *First of all, they [mentors] understand the importance of confidentiality. When you tell them something, they don't go around telling everyone else. So, it gives you a feeling of comfort knowing that you can go to someone and talk to them when you're going through the most* (Male, group 2, campus 1).

In addition, participants felt that mentors listened and respected their views. Thus, participants felt accepted and valued when mentors actively listened to them. Wayne reported,

> *I feel that my mentor cares about what I tell him; he even remembers what we talked about before when we meet again. I feel like I can't lie about anything because he remembers all our conversations. It makes me trust him more because it shows that he genuinely listens and cares about my issues* (Male, group 2, campus 1).

This active listening and respect were also confirmed by Wayne, who reported that it helps when mentors pay attention to what mentees say. Hill *et al.* (2022) posit that active listening is an essential mentoring skill that encourages mentees to share more. Active listening also means mentors follow through on their promises to mentees (Hill *et al*., 2022). Finally, Tinto (2012) argues that positive involvement in a student community, such as peer mentorship groups, allows students to feel a sense of self-worth and promotes retention.

6.5 EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENTS

Participants across genders and campuses expressed various perspectives on what facilitated their emotional adjustment to the university environment. While analysing their responses, several perspectives emerged regarding how they viewed emotional adjustment, namely,

- "*it is feeling like you are deeply connected to the university*" (Matt, male, group 1, campus 1).

- "*it is a feeling. I don't know how to explain it but a feeling that you have when you think about the university*" (Luthando, female, group 6, campus 2)
- "*it is like feeling that the university is your new home completely*" (Bianca, female, group 7, campus 3)

Overall, participants described emotional adjustment as a feeling that they are part of the university. In literature (see 3.3.1), first-year students go through the separation phase when they leave their familiar environment and adjust to a new university environment. This phase of university life is the most emotionally overwhelming and stressful time. However, there were emotional adjustments success stories (6.5.1) and best practices (6.5.2) reported by participants.

6.5.1 Success stories in the emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students

Participants identified living with family (see 6.5.1.1) and supportive friends (see 6.5.1.2) as success stories for emotional adjustment into university. These stories highlight two critical supportive networks in a commuter student's life: family and friends. They provided a sense of connection, understanding, and support during their university journey, helping them transition into their new university environment.

6.5.1.1 Living with Family

As established in the literature findings (see 3.3.1), separation from family can be a difficult emotional challenge for first-year students who move away from home. Thus, students who do not move from home can benefit from having family support in their first year at university (see also 6.4.1.2). To this end, empirical findings revealed that participants from various genders and campuses highlighted the significant role of having a supportive family in mitigating the emotional challenges of transitioning to university. In addition to the academic and social advantages previously reported (see 6.3.1.1 and 6.4.1.2, respectively), Inno said,

> *… so, I'm very close to home, so I never feel homesick. My sister drives me to university in the morning and my parents fetch me in the afternoon. So, my parents know my university friends and vice versa. As I said earlier,*

> *most of my friends come from the same high school I was in* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Lerato recounted,

> *I commute to campus daily so I'm used to it now. I enjoy living with my parents because they understand that I am a student and when I say I have work to do, they don't disturb me. So I am never stressed about university* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Participants found value in maintaining connections to their home environment, including their family, friends, and community. They highlighted that the emotional support and familiarity provided by their home environment played a crucial role in their emotional adjustment to the university. Staying connected to their homes helped them maintain stability and comfort during stress or homesickness. Simultaneously, participants recognised the importance of developing a sense of belonging and connection to their campus environment. Hence, they expressed that solid affiliation to university and home environments benefited them significantly. Tebogo said,

> *at the beginning of the year, I had challenges meeting friends. I stayed at home and only came here when I needed to, and I was never around during sports days and other social activities. But my brother, who was a student here, told me I needed to make friends. So, I started coming here during the weekends, and I met my friends during that time. So, now I can say I feel like I belong to both home and university because I have friends on both sides. My siblings are my friends at home, and we are very close. I like that because they don't put me under pressure to do things I don't want to do. But also, my university friends now understand me, so they don't tell me to go to the club or date this guy or do this and that. I can now say I have friends on both sides, and they know each other* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Dusi, Messetti and Falcón (2015) call having a sense of connection to both university and home a hybrid sense of belonging. These authors define a hybrid sense of belonging as when an individual feels a sense of affiliation to two communities simultaneously. The dual affiliation to both home and campus environments offered

participants a sense of balance and support. “The benefits of experiencing a sense of belonging to a community have been extensively demonstrated in various contexts, including increases in students’ skill development, perceived self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, involvement, persistence, and academic success.” (Fernandes *et al.*, 2017:32).

Pokorny, Holley and Kane (2017) found that students from poor backgrounds benefit from a hybrid sense of belonging. These students are usually intimidated when they transition to university and, in turn, struggle to establish a university support network. As Tebogo reported, Pokorny *et al.* (2017) found that family support bridges the gap between university and home. Sibling support positively impacts commuter students’ emotional well-being (Pokorny *et al*., 2017).

6.5.1.2 Supportive friends

As revealed in the literature discussion in 3.3.2, students who can make friends immediately as they enrol could be integrated into the social system much quicker than those who cannot. The empirical findings suggest that participants from various genders and campuses highlighted the significant role of personal friends in providing emotional support during their transition to a new place. In addition to the social advantages previously reported by Campus 1 and 2 participants (see 6.4.1.2), these friendships played a crucial role in creating a sense of safety, value, and emotional well-being. Luthando supported that,

> *My side, I used to describe myself as a loner. I came around March. When I came here, I was always in my room. My roommate sometimes went out with friends, and I would stay in my room and cry, like, how can I talk to these people? How can I tell them that I need people to spend time with, I need friends so that I could feel safe here. Then, another time, my roommate found me crying because I felt the pressure was too much and I had nobody to talk to. And she said, sometimes you don't always need to be alone. Being on your own will cause you depression. So, I became friends, and being with them taught me a lot. Apart from the language, most of my friends are Zulu and Sotho, and I am Tswana. So apart from that, they taught me things I wasn’t exposed to* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Participants acknowledged that their friends were a source of comfort and understanding during this period of change. They opined that having friends offered new and different perspectives on life. As such, participants reported that having friends exposed them to new ways of doing things. Thokozani claimed,

> *I used to think I could not attend varsity because of my background. I come from rural areas, and no one in my family has even a diploma. But meeting up with different friends helped me to see things differently. They told me I could be the first in my family to get a degree. So, they said I could also motivate my younger brothers and sisters to pursue education. Now I feel proud to be coming where I come from* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

It is encouraging that Luthando overcame her emotional challenges through supportive friends. It is also positive that Luthando could develop a friendship despite the language differences.

As briefly discussed in 6.4.1.2, friends are critical in supporting first-year students. First-year students have the desire to belong and feel emotionally accepted. Friends play a crucial role in fulfilling these needs, offering simple companionship and more complex psychosocial support. As Thokozani reported, the presence of friends provides reassuring company, especially in unfamiliar situations. Having friends to share experiences with, study together, or simply spend time with can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and enhance the overall well-being of first-year students (Picton, Kahu and Nelson, 2017).

Emotionally adjusted students report fewer emotional and behavioural disorders (Dlamini *et al.*, 2020). Instead, they report satisfaction with the university environment. The psychosocial support provided by friends to Thokozani allowed him to change his perception of himself. It is usual for first-generation rural students to feel out of place at university. Their parents' lack of higher education experience, combined with the fact that they come from rural areas, students like Thokozani may experience cultural shock.

6.5.2 Best practices in the emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students

Participants highlighted peer mentors' emotional support best practices regarding emotional adjustment within the university environment (see 6.5.2.1).

6.5.2.1 Peer mentors' emotional support

In addition to the academic and social benefits (see 6.3.2.2 and 6.4.2.4), participants highlighted the valuable role of peer mentors in providing emotional support during their adjustment to the university. Participants across genders but those from Campus 1 and 2 reported that peer mentors assisted them in dealing with emotional issues related to adjustment. Participants expressed that peer mentors were instrumental in helping them navigate the stress and emotional challenges associated with adapting to a new environment.

Furthermore, participants mentioned that peer mentors demonstrated reassurance and empathy toward their adjustment challenges. Peer mentors' understanding and compassion created a supportive and non-judgemental space for participants to express their emotions and seek guidance. Peer mentors, fellow students who had already gone through similar experiences, could relate to and understand the emotional aspects of the transition. Angel explained,

> *mentors make you feel that what you are going through is okay because they went through it also. That reassures me in some kind of way, like, if you went through it, then okay, I'm going to be fine. Even without reaching a resolution or anything, just because you can reassure me that I will be fine, I just relax. So, mentors are able to help us feel better when we are going through some kind of situation* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Participants acknowledged that peer mentors significantly encouraged them to 'take up space' on campus, which involved actively participating in various campus activities and student organisations. By taking up space, participants meant engaging in opportunities available on campus and making their presence known. Mentors provided guidance and support to participants, encouraging them to step out of their comfort zones and seize the opportunities that the university environment had to offer. Participants reported that mentors created an enabling environment where they felt

empowered and confident to explore their interests and actively engage with campus life. Zivo affirmed,

> *I can say that it was emotionally challenging at first. I feared taking space, and that's the only thing I think was challenging. After meeting with my mentor, Mr Siyathokoza [mentor], he referred me to someone … she inspired me to take more space, put myself out there, and realise that there are opportunities. There are opportunities for us on campus, and they are there for us to take, so I shouldn't be scared to take these opportunities. So, I started participating more in student politics and I was elected as part of the student faculty leaders. Imagine being a first year and I am already in student leadership positions* (Female, group 6, campus 2*).*

Furthermore, mentors provided psychological support and offered solutions when participants faced stress related to their courses. Sam asserted,

> *He also told us that if we struggle in our courses or modules, we must come together as a group and find a solution. He told us that it doesn't help to suffer alone, but you can connect with other people to get help and progress. In high school, I used to do things alone but here I share with my classmates and it has helped me deal with the stress from my courses* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

As the literature highlighted (see 2.6.1, 2.6.3, and 2.6.4) peer mentorship creates a welcoming and supportive higher education context to stimulate emotional well-being by referring to relevant support services. This referral to other services was confirmed in the empirical study when participants noted that a significant advantage of the peer mentorship programme was its ability to connect them with university support services they had been unaware of. They expressed that the programme had introduced them to various available student services that helped during emotional distress. Thus, participants viewed the peer mentor programme as a gateway to other student support programmes. Thandi opined:

> *I feel that it's a very vital programme with regard to exposure. Stepping into varsity, you're not aware of the things that varsity has to offer, to the point where most first years just come to university and go home, and that's your*

daily life. Whereas there are so many communities that you can be part of. There are so many things that you can join here and build yourself. So, I feel that it's very important that the first years take advantage of having a peer mentor because the last thing you want to do is leave here with just a degree. So, I feel that you must get all the exposure and use everything that the university has to offer to the best of your abilities and, most importantly, belong to a community because it takes, you know, a village to get a degree. So, you need that support system to form a home away from home experience (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Another participant reported that they benefited from mentors' knowledge about the university. Angel stated,

the most beneficial thing about the programme is that mentors have a link to other things. Yeah. So they can refer me to academic advisors if I'm looking for academic advice. If I'm looking for emotional support, they can refer me to one while still being able to assist me to some extent. They know other resources but in my case, that has been the most beneficial thing about the programme (Female, group 3, campus 1).

It also became evident that through the peer mentor programme, first-year were referred to other programmes such as student counselling services, campus clinics, etc. Sabelo reported,

So, they let you know who to contact if you have challenges (Male, group 5, campus 2).

The participants' overall experiences regarding emotional support demonstrate the validity of Malan's claim (2018, as seen in 2.6.1) that UFS peer mentors offer psychological and emotional support to first-year commuter students.

6.6 AI 4D CYCLE'S SECOND STEP: DREAMING

The second step is ***dreaming***, where participants identified opportunities for growth in enhancing adjustment to university. As established in 4.4, the dreaming phase opened a space for creative opportunities, focusing on improvement areas and shifting challenges to strengths and opportunities. Participants identified opportunities for

growth in academic (see 6.6.1), social (see 6.6.2), and emotional adjustment (see 6.6.3).

6.6.1 Opportunities for growth in academic adjustment

Participants mentioned that there are opportunities for growth regarding the academic overload in the first year (6.6.1.1), differences in teaching and learning methods (6.6.1.2), large classes (6.2.1.3), late classes (6.6.1.4), underpreparedness for online classes (6.6.1.5), and poor academic advising (6.6.1.6).

6.6.1.1 Managing first-year academic overload

Participants highlighted opportunities for improvement in managing academic workload during the first year. They envisioned a future where the workload is thoughtfully structured, allowing for a more balanced and manageable academic experience. As the literature findings established in 2.5.2, first-year commuter students sometimes feel underprepared and overwhelmed by the university's academic demands. In addition, Kamel (2018:87) defines academic overload “as a student’s feelings of being overwhelmed by their academic requirements or responsibilities while pursuing a degree at university”. Academic overload occurs when students feel unable to manage the demands of academic tasks, which may lead to students doubting their ability to promptly complete tasks (Kamel, 2018).

The empirical findings highlighted participants' experiences across genders and campuses, revealing a significant challenge in managing the volume and complexity of university assignments, tests, quizzes and examinations. They acknowledged the need for better workload planning and support systems to help first-year students transition from high school to university more smoothly. Semi revealed,

> *for me, it was the workload. The workload is exponentially more in university compared to high school. And you have to reach out to your lecturers if you need guidance constantly. And we were never really used to sending emails almost every day. Like having to read textbooks for the meaning of something and having to refer to like lecture slides and textbooks is a lot* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Participants thought that the notional hours[4] for each module could be improved to give them enough time to complete other tasks on campus. Khona reported,

> *I think lecturers are not checking each other when giving us work. You will find that I have three assignments due at the same time. In other modules, I am expected to do quizzes and other activities* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

The amount of work Semi had to perform for her studies made her feel overwhelmed. When writing assignments, she was required to read extensively and cite various sources, including books, articles, and lecture notes. High school had not prepared her for the amount of reading she would do in university. Semi, therefore, felt unprepared for university. The participants further discussed underpreparedness issues (see 6.6.1.5), also debated in 2.5.2.

Participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the pre-university advice they received, noting that it had led to unrealistic expectations. Despite this challenge, they recognised an opportunity for improvement in providing more accurate and practical guidance to incoming students. This accurate guidance could help align students' expectations with university life's realities, facilitating a smoother transition and better academic adjustment. Sabelo reported,

> *The other thing is that when you're doing matric and you meet people already in university, they do not tell you about bad things that happen in university. They only tell you about the good things, like wearing your clothes, not a school uniform, and other nice things. But from what you are expecting to what you are getting are way different things. I did not expect to read this much* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Regarding the disparity in academic effort between high school and university, Lindo said,

> *I feel like the difference between high school and universities is that academically at university you would need to be hands-on. There's always that constant pressure of deadlines, tests, and all that. I feel like in high*

[4] Notional hours are "the estimated learning time taken by the average student to achieve the specified learning outcomes of the module or programme" (Stellenbosch University, 2020:1).

> *school, in matric to be specific, the pressure was not there, it was just there when we were writing tests and exams* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

Participants reported a challenge with the articulation gap.[5] According to participants, there was a disparity in teaching and learning between high school and university. Thus, participants like Lindo felt that high school had not prepared them to deal with such disparities.

Sabelo's realisation that his prior perceptions of universities were unrealistic was a shared experience among participants, especially for those who were the first in their families to attend university. Strydom and Loots (2018) suggest that the disconnect between reality and expectation is particularly prominent among first-generation students in South Africa. Being the first in their families to attend university, these students may lack the necessary guidance and understanding of what to expect, leading to unrealistic expectations. Many students enter university with optimistic expectations, assuming that it will be similar to their experiences in high school or that it will not be academically challenging. However, the reality of university education often proves to be more demanding and rigorous than anticipated.

6.6.1.2 Enhancing transitional support between high school and university teaching and learning approaches

As discussed in 3.3.2, the transition to university involves learning new knowledge and skills on new norms, values, and beliefs. Participants identified an opportunity for growth in bridging the gap between high school and university teaching and learning approaches. They recognised that the significant changes in the academic environment can be overwhelming, suggesting that enhancing transitional support could prepare students better for the new academic demands. Rele said,

> *as much as there are lecturers, you make the decisions. You are the one who does everything in study materials; you have to keep up. When you have to submit, no one follows you, so you must do it yourself* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

[5] Articulation gap is the disparity between the learning requirements of higher education programmes and the knowledge and competencies of students entering universities (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014).

The degree of intellectual independence required at universities astounded the participants. They discovered that the university emphasises individual study, which makes students accountable for their learning. Landi expressed that,

> *the amount of independence and autonomy you have over daily decisions. And I think the whole thing of knowing that no one's going to say go to class, submit this, or this is due. I found myself not to say procrastinating, but I was a bit delayed. I would find out that some tasks, oh my word, this is due today because I was expecting someone to constantly be like, you have a quiz due on Friday. And to keep pushing me until I finish the quiz* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Filwe also reported,

> *When you are here, you are on your own. No one will push you, unlike in high school where they used to run around asking us to submit. But here, whether you submit or not, nobody cares. You are on your own, so it is very difficult and stressful* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Participants expressed concerns about the university's quick pace of teaching and learning. They felt that the limited time allocated for each topic and the rapid progression of the curriculum made it challenging to fully understand and absorb the course material. This sense of constantly playing catch-up created frustration and hindered their ability to thoroughly grasp the content, leading to difficulties in exams and assignments. Pano stated,

> *Just the fast pace of everything. You can get through a whole topic in just one day. You're trying to stay up to date, but you've got all these other modules as well. So that was also very different because in high school, they would take their time and space it a bit in one section, and then you would come back and revisit everything. However, you can't do that here; everyone is rushing for time* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Participants identified a combination of factors that led to their perception that the difference in teaching approaches between high school and university presented an opportunity for growth regarding their academic adjustment. Participants like Filwe

were accustomed to instructors reminding them about deadlines and providing guidance in studying for assessments. However, lecturers did not continue this practice in university, expecting students to be independent learners. This transition to a more self-directed learning approach posed a challenge for participants who struggled to adapt without the same support and reminders they were accustomed to. Magnusson and Zackariasson (2018) support that higher education independence relates to taking the initiative, arguing, motivating, critical thinking, responsibility, etc.

Participants felt a mismatch between how lecturers delivered course content and their ability to comprehend it. Pano, for example, felt that lecturers did not give students enough time to master a topic before moving on to the next. Munawaroh (2017) describes teaching methods as how lecturers deliver the subjects to students using specific methods matching students' perceived characteristics. On the contrary, participants felt that the teaching methods used by lecturers did not match their academic characteristics.

Moreover, university students are expected to have specific academic competencies and abilities that would enable them to comprehend their course contents. However, as discussed in 2.5.2, the articulation gap is wide in the South African context. Therefore, concerning academic competencies, participants such as Rele felt they were not at a level the university expected them to be.

Additionally, participants like Filwe reported feeling left behind academically; the concern of being left behind led to academic stress. Participants, including Filwe and Landi, reported feeling overwhelmed, lost, and stressed. Tinto (2014) argues that when first-year students feel overwhelmed, lost and stressed by the new teaching methods, they are likely to withdraw or drop out of university. Thus, it can be argued that participants such as Filwe and Landi are at risk of dropping out, given the amount of academic stress they reported. Grayson (2014:1) supports that there is an opportunity for South African universities “to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning”, including understanding the academic competencies of new students. However, Tinto (2014) argues that many lecturers are not trained to teach and deal with first-year challenges. Thus, the lecturers that participants mentioned might not have the necessary skills to deal with first-year academic stress.

6.6.1.3 Preparing first-year students for large in-person classes

The literature findings (see 2.2.2) show that universities struggle with large enrolments due to massification. The increase in enrolment figures has led to overcrowded classes. The number of students in a class and the staff-student ratio have increased exponentially. The DHET (2015) posits that student-staff ratios vary in South Africa but are generally high. The empirical findings reveal that participants from various genders and campuses identified large in-person classes as areas needing improvement regarding academic adjustment. They were taken aback by the significant increase in class sizes compared to their experiences in high school, where they were accustomed to low teacher-learner ratios. The sheer number of students in these large classes posed challenges and impacted the quality of education. Participants reported reduced class engagement, impersonal learning experiences, and difficulty accessing lecturer support as some of the challenges of large classes. Boity specifically emphasised the difficulties associated with large classes and their effects on the learning environment,

> *We got tutors and everything, but sometimes you need that one-on-one. But you are in a class of hundreds of people, sometimes even more. It is just overwhelming* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Participants claimed that they sometimes did not have enough seats during lectures. Lebo expressed that,

> *sometimes we sit on the floor during our classes because all the tables are occupied, and we cannot even write the notes from lecturers* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

Participants also spoke about the poor physical states of some classes. Moke claimed,

> *some lecture rooms were crowded and there was no ventilation. In summer, it got hot and stuffy; I just could not sit there any longer* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

In 6.3.1.3, participants revealed that lecturers shared their notes on Blackboard; however, some did not. Due to this, participants had to attend overcrowded classes even when it was difficult. Tebogo reported that,

> *It was difficult to leave crowded classes because some lecturers did not upload their slides on Blackboard. So, if you have a test coming, you just have to sit there while it is hot and crowded* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Large classes negatively affect students' academic adjustment, particularly commuter students who rely heavily on their classroom experience. Tinto (2014) argues that when commuter students come to campus, the first place they go to is the classroom, and when class is over, they leave. Participants like Moke and Tebogo expressed dissatisfaction with the classroom experience and even reported feeling disgusted towards the university. Given an option, these participants said that they would not attend their classes.

When a class exceeds its intended capacity, it can harm the quality of education and the overall learning experience. Participants like Boity felt engaging in meaningful interactions with their lecturers was challenging. They reported that asking questions, seeking clarification, or receiving individualised attention was difficult. This limited interaction hindered participants' learning process and made it harder for them to fully grasp and understand the course material.

6.6.1.4 Changing class times from late to early

The literature findings (see also 2.5.4) established that commuter students struggle with attending late evening events, including late classes, due to transportation issues. The empirical results suggest that participants spent a short time on campus before returning to their off-campus housing. Thus, they were not pleased with the late classes. What was concerning, though, was that participants such as Angel and Sipho felt powerless to change the circumstances regarding late classes. While some participants decided to skip late lectures without alerting anybody, others chose to inform their lecturers and student leaders of their predicament. Since their problems were not addressed, first-year commuter students like Pontso, Sipho, and others felt alienated.

Participants from various campuses and genders expressed their dissatisfaction with late classes. They reported that attending classes during late hours made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe, especially if they had to travel home alone or in poorly lit areas. Angel said,

> *I had such a big problem with late classes because literally during my first semester, on my first day, I had a class from 6 to 8 p.m. I couldn't understand who set this class like I'm a first year and live far away. So, honestly, I was scared; I didn't understand why this class was this late. I felt we weren't being considered when such things were made* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Participants expressed concerns regarding the design of the timetable, which they believed did not adequately consider commuter students. They complained about the scheduling of late classes, which exposed them to potential safety risks. Female participants specifically voiced their fear of crime near the campus. They reported types of crime included kidnappings, rape, other sexual assaults, robberies, and physical harm. Sipho said,

> *I feel relatively safe on campus. But then what happens the minute I step out? Yeah. And who will be accountable for me the minute I step out of the gate? Because now it did not happen on the university premises. I mean, there are many cases of kidnappings and rape of students in the news. So, I feel that this is a big issue, and no one is being held accountable. No one is doing anything to sort it out, and no one is speaking up for us as commuter students about classes that end this late* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Thando emphasised the need for the institution to consider that not all students reside on campus or have safe access. She reported,

> *I think it feels safer when you're on campus because of the different emergency posts and stuff, so you can walk at night and know I'm closer to the emergency. But as soon as you get off campus and have to walk to your place, it's like it's out of the university's control. But at the same time, the university made that class process late. So, they must share some responsibilities regarding timetable planning and all those things, so they don't schedule late classes* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Thus, female participants reported occasionally choosing not to attend late classes due to their fear of crime. Pontso said,

> *they should just say late classes are for residence students only and not us commuters. I mean, who even attends these late classes? When I see that I have a class scheduled to end at 7 or 8 pm, I just accept that they are not for me, so I do not attend* (Female, group 7, campus 3).

On the other hand, male participants did not raise concerns specifically about incidents of rape or kidnappings. Instead, their primary focus was on common crimes such as robberies. Kamo complained,

> *Because some of my classes end at 7 pm, walking alone is very difficult when it is dark. Especially in winter, it gets dark very early. There are junkies along the way, so I might get robbed or something* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

In addition to being concerned about crime, participants also mentioned missing late classes due to transportation issues. Bonga explained,

> *I use a bus that drops me very far from home. So, I have to walk from the bus station to home, which is a huge problem for me when it gets dark. I decided not to attend my late classes because I fear walking home late* (Male, group 7, campus 3).

Missing late classes has led to some participants thinking about dropping out. According to Tshego,

> *I have thought about just dropping out from university because I have missed so many late classes. I have talked to my lecturers, but nothing is done* (Female, group 7, campus 3).

Participants believed that considering some students' inability to attend late classes, the university should avoid scheduling them altogether. As an alternative, participants suggested the possibility of scheduling early morning classes. They proposed that the university provide transportation services for commuter students if early morning classes were not feasible. Audi proposed that,

> *I would have honestly preferred a class that would start at 7:00 AM rather than a class that starts at 6:00 PM and ends at 8:00 PM; then it would make*

> *sense. I mean, they have numbers, so they should look at how many of us do not attend late classes. Since they know how many people will be in these late classes, they can organise some transport or anything like that for students on every single day or varsity shuttles to accommodate commuting students. But for me, I feel that there should be no class after 6:00 PM because it just doesn't make sense* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Participants felt that the university, including the student leadership, disregarded commuter students. Kele complained,

> *We have reported the issue of late classes and lack of transport to our SRC [Student Representative Council]. But they don't seem to be interested. We want these classes cancelled, or they must provide transport for all commuting students* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

6.6.1.5 Preparing first years for online classes

The literature findings (see 2.5.2) found that underpreparedness for the university was common among commuter students and led to unsatisfactory learning outcomes. The empirical findings established that participants from Campus 1 and 2 had several modules taught online and reported being unprepared for them. Participants from Campus 3 said they attended in-person classes, so challenges with online or hybrid classes were irrelevant. However, Campus 3 participants did use technology for other learning requirements. Campus 1 and 2 participants reported that adapting to online and hybrid teaching and learning was challenging and complex, especially because some were unfamiliar with the technology or had limited experience using online platforms like Blackboard. Additional difficulties, such as navigating online learning platforms, included accessing course materials, submitting assignments, participating in online discussions, and communicating with lecturers and peers. Lerato observed that

> *using Blackboard for the first time was a bit challenging for me because I never went to an online school or something. So, it was my first time getting into online classes here in varsity* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Despite earlier reporting of the advantages of online learning (see 6.2.1.1), some participants expressed concerns about juggling family obligations with online course requirements. Tsamai reported,

> *there are also a few challenges of studying online. It was the first time that I was introduced to online learning. So, I had to adapt to learning how to study while at home. It is also challenging because when you are home, you're expected to do chores and all those things* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

Participants acknowledged that participating in academic activities using an online or hybrid delivery system was challenging. Ketso complained,

> *I get bored with long online lectures. It is difficult for me to stay focused for long* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

Also, participants were concerned that other students would see the condition of their homes when they were on a video call. Ketso further pointed out,

> *… it was difficult for me to ask questions because some lecturers wanted us to show our faces when asking questions. I come from rural areas, and our house is not in a good state* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

The utilisation of technology has become prevalent in higher education, especially since 2020. As established (see 2.5.8), the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted traditional teaching and learning methods in higher education. Many institutions transitioned to online teaching and learning, which profoundly impacted the student experience (Zalat *et al*., 2021). Although universities resumed in-person classes in 2021, numerous modules continue to be taught online or in a hybrid format.

Participants from rural areas encountered difficulties adapting to online teaching and learning. Due to network challenges, these participants faced obstacles in attending online classes. According to Maphalala, Khumalo and Khumalo (2021:32), in areas with limited or no connectivity, such as rural regions, "it is difficult if not impossible for students in those areas to participate in online learning". Consequently, many students sought accommodations with internet connectivity near their universities.

Tinto (2012) argues that engagement is a fundamental factor for academic success. The author posits that when students actively engage with faculty members and peers, they are more likely to persist and graduate from university. However, participants like Ketso reported that engagement in online sessions presented challenges, particularly in lengthy lectures. As a result of diminished interest and engagement, individuals like Ketso are at a higher risk of dropping out of university.

6.6.1.6 Strengthening academic advising

The empirical findings established that participants from Campus 1, regardless of gender, expressed dissatisfaction with the adequacy of academic advising, which occasionally resulted in incorrect academic choices. Participants felt that the academic advisors did not provide accurate and comprehensive information regarding module registration. Palesa complained,

> *But I think there could have been a more detailed version of guidelines for first years. For example, we didn't know we had to be registered for modules in the second semester. Because somebody has been in the system for some time, they take things for granted. They don't explain properly to you what maybe you should be on the lookout for and what you should be doing next. So, I spent much time worrying about registration while other students attended classes* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Participants, including Palesa, are expected to be enrolled automatically for the second semester based on their first-semester course registration. However, they were unaware they needed to register separately for second-semester modules at the beginning of the academic year. Consequently, they found themselves in a situation where they had to miss some classes during the second semester because they had not enrolled on time. Furthermore, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the level of academic advising they received, which hindered them from making well-informed choices. Tumelo proposed that,

> *knowing, let's say, how to go about switching degrees, switching modules, and stuff like that, would help I think they were just some gaps* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

The importance of receiving reliable advice for success at the university is emphasised by Tinto (2012). Particularly for students like Tumelo who were undecided about their majors or wish to switch, advising in the first year is critical. The lack of proper advice when changing majors can increase the likelihood of dropout or extend the time to complete the degree (Tinto, 2012). Moreover, selecting the wrong majors can lead to students changing programmes later and accumulating credits without progress toward a degree (Tinto, 2012). Consequently, some students may find themselves in their fourth or fifth year without completing their three-year degrees due to insufficient degree credits to graduate. Effective academic advising can help students graduate in the minimum required time.

6.6.2 Opportunities for growth in social adjustment

Participants mentioned that there are opportunities for growth regarding the language (6.6.2.1), diversity of campus (6.6.2.2), social engagement of first-year commuter students (6.6.2.3) and social discomfort of first-year students (6.6.2.4).

6.6.2.1 Language as an opportunity for social adjustment

As established in the literature findings (see 3.3.3), the informal social environment is connected to campus climate and student relationships. Effective communication with peers is a crucial opportunity for establishing connections. Thus, lacking language abilities can harm students' ability to form such bonds. The empirical findings suggest that participants, irrespective of gender and campus, identified an opportunity for growth in using language to form meaningful friendships outside the classroom. Participants mentioned that they often gravitated towards friendships based on shared language and cultural similarities, inadvertently excluding other students. However, participants mitigated the communication challenge by speaking English. By communicating in English, which was not their native language, participants created a common ground for cross-cultural communication. English became a lingua franca, serving as a medium through which they could bridge the language barrier and establish connections with peers. Lindo explained,

> *I'd like to say that when I first came here, obviously, I'm from KZN [KwaZulu-Natal], and most of the time I speak Zulu. So, I came here they speak Sesotho and Sepedi and other languages. And for me, it was a bit*

> *challenging because … It was also tricky because my roommate spoke Sesotho. So, we had to speak English most of the time because he didn't understand Zulu. So English was the only language we could communicate with* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

Participants reported that they felt uncomfortable and experienced challenges with their language identities during the transition to the university environment. Participants expressed that the university brought together students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, creating uncertainty and unease. As such, some thought they would never acclimatise socially. However, many attempted to learn the dominant languages of their campuses. Menzi also explained,

> *language barrier was a challenge for me. I come from KZN, and we mostly use IsiZulu but here people speak Sesotho …. I started to use English to communicate with people* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

Participants like Menzi mentioned attempting to learn the dominant language on their campuses to overcome language challenges. By investing time and effort into acquiring proficiency in the dominant languages, they sought to enhance their communication skills and increase their sense of belonging within the university community.

Participants also reported feeling the cultural shock of being in a new city and province. They said that moving to a new location entailed adapting to a different environment, customs, and social norms, which was overwhelming. Thus, linguistic and cultural challenges were not confined to their campuses but to the broader new society. Public transportation was particularly daunting for participants facing language communication barriers. Participants reported that understanding transportation routes, interacting with drivers or fellow passengers, and following instructions were challenging. Menzi mentioned that,

> *even when I buy groceries, I have challenges communicating with drivers and fellow passengers. At the beginning of the year, I was even scared to say where the taxi [minibus taxi] should drop me because I did not know how to say it in Sesotho. I kept quiet until everyone was out and told the driver in English. He showed me that I had passed my bus stop. Luckily, he was kind enough to drive back* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

Moreover, participants observed a difference in how local people call the university compared to new students. They felt that locals used languages they were not familiar with. Participants' observations regarding the difference in how local people refer to the university compared to new students highlighted the interplay of language and historical context. The clash between these naming conventions contributed to linguistic disconnection for new students. Bonga said,

> *at the beginning of the year, I had to take two taxis before I got my current accommodation closer to the university. Explaining to taxi drivers where I was going was a challenge for me. Imagine that I can't speak the local language because I am Tsonga, but I must explain that I am looking for a taxi to the university. Also, I realised that they call the university with different names not what I know … call the main campus UOFS. Apparently, it's an old Afrikaans name, but I did not know that. Also, they call this campus Vista* (Female, group 7, campus 3).

However, language diversity can also lead to ethnic discrimination. Thus, some participants felt excluded and stereotyped because of their language. Yanda complained,

> *the challenge for me is that campus administrators use Sesotho when they talk to you because you are black and are stubborn to change to English so that you understand. I know a little of Sesotho, but sometimes they speak so fast you can't hear them. So, even in class, they assume you all can understand Sesotho* (Female, group 6, campus 3).

Assuming language proficiency based on racial or ethnic background, as highlighted by Yanda, is concerning. Stereotyping individuals' language abilities based on race or appearance can lead to exclusion and marginalisation of students who do not fit those assumptions. Thus, participants felt that university administrators and faculty members were unaware of these biases. Swartz *et al*. (2017) state that universities can sometimes homogenise black students because of race. For example, Swartz *et al*. (2017) found that "several students talk about faculty members assuming they know a particular African language because they are black and how this practice excludes Black foreign students". As Yanda complained, university administrators and lecturing

staff sometimes code-switch when engaging with students and in most cases, they use the Sesotho. Therefore, students not competent in Sesotho were excluded.

Thus, language can heighten cultural and racial tension, affect a sense of belonging, and become the cause of shame and marginalisation, which can lead students to drop out (Swartz *et al*., 2017). Given the language barriers, participants, like Lindo felt that communication with other students was challenging.

6.6.2.2 Opportunity for growth in diversities on campuses

Literature findings established that commuter students experience cultural shocks when they come to university (see 2.5.6). In addition to linguistic differences (see 6.6.2.1), the empirical findings reveal that participants across genders and campuses reported that there is an opportunity to improve relationships with diverse students. Participants from monolingual and monocultural backgrounds felt uncomfortable when exposed to a diverse environment, especially when interacting with individuals from different gender, race, and cultural groups. These feelings of discomfort stemmed from a lack of exposure to and understanding of various cultures, languages, and perspectives. Participants reported that it was difficult for them to navigate and form meaningful connections in an environment that differed from what they were accustomed to. Therefore, participants said there was self-imposed segregation, which further exacerbated the lack of social adjustment. Self-imposed segregation meant that participants socialised primarily with students from similar language, culture, or racial backgrounds. Angel explained,

> *The biggest challenge I had was the whole thing of diversity … I live in a very diverse country, but having to experience it as a different story. So, it took a while for me to finally be integrated, which was very weird because I'm a huge extrovert. I was just not used to seeing many races and cultures in one place. I also met students from West Africa, which was a huge cultural shock because they spoke French* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

There was limited socialising among different ethnic groups outside of the classroom, as reported by participants. Thus, participants felt that this lack of socialisation led to tensions and hindered the development of an inclusive and diverse campus environment. Sicelo affirmed,

> *When I came here, I was finding it difficult to have friends. I started associating myself with people from Eastern Cape since I am also from there ... After that, things were better* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

Some female participants reported that they attended single-gender high schools and, as a result, lacked prior friendships with individuals of the opposite gender. Since the university they now attend is a mixed-gender environment, they expressed difficulties associating with the opposite gender. Participants also mentioned that their family's gender socialisation posed a barrier to forming friendships with individuals of the opposite gender. Specifically, female participants expressed hesitance in establishing relationships with male students due to concerns about potential unwanted sexual advances. Neli supported

> *so, because I was coming from a girls' high school, we had the whole stigma about boys. Being a bit naive that, ohh boys, I can't be friends with boys and things like that … we are forced to have that co-dependency going on. I had a real fear of boys in the beginning like they would harm me or something … I need to form part of the community because there's no way I'm going to get this degree on my own* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Neli overcame her fears and became an active university community member due to her determination to complete her degree. While Neli's academic goals are commendable, her experience highlights the complex challenges some female students face. She continuously felt fearful and anticipated traumatic encounters when interacting or forming relationships with male students. Hloni also recalled,

> *When I came to university, everyone at home warned me about hanging out with boys. So even now I try to avoid it in class and even in our social events. But you can't just avoid them all the time* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Swartz *et al.* (2017) assert that by perpetuating pervasive attitudes, behaviours, and invisible structures, universities can serve as fertile grounds for the proliferation of patriarchy, homophobia, misogyny and sexism. Their research also reveals that students encounter discrimination across different aspects of student life (Swartz *et*

al., 2017). These findings support participants like Hloni and Neli, shedding light on their challenges within the university environment.

6.6.2.3 Opportunity for social engagement of first-year commuter students

In 2.5.3, the literature findings reveal that travelling time, home, and work responsibilities reduce the time first-year commuter students spend engaged in educationally purposeful activities. In addition, as established in 1.1.5 and 2.5.3, their opportunities for social engagement within the university environment are limited. Thomas and Jones (2017) further support this notion by arguing that commuter students generally exhibit lower levels of social engagement than other student populations. Empirical findings established that participants, inclusive of genders and campuses, reported that social engagement was challenging. The challenge was primarily because they only came to the campus when necessary, resulting in fewer opportunities to interact with fellow students.

In 6.4.2.1, it was established that informal student gatherings, particularly in day residences, provided vital opportunities for promoting social engagement and adjustment. However, not all participants were part of day residences, which meant they did not have access to such social organisations. Lindo claimed,

> *As a commuter student, it's different because when you leave off campus, most people just mind their own business and don't interact as much as people do when living on campus and residence. So, by living off campus, we sort of do our own thing and everyone just focuses on themselves. Yeah, but it's tricky when you stay off campus because you don't interact as much as when you stay on campus* (Male, group 1, campus 1).

According to the findings discussed (see also 6.3.1.1 and 6.4.1.2), participants highlighted that their primary social support networks were derived from their families and friends. Interestingly, some participants noted that their circle of friends predominantly consisted of individuals who were not students. Xoli stated,

> *Staying off-campus is a challenge because I don’t stay in a student accommodation … I stay with working people, and some are unemployed. So, they make noise and don’t understand when you tell them you must*

study. These guys host weekend parties, and I sometimes join them (Male, group 5, campus 1).

Thus, Xoli expressed that he decided to reside in a non-student housing facility within the city where his campus is situated. Consequently, he shared his living space with individuals from diverse backgrounds unaffiliated with the university. As a result, he spent much time outside his campus with non-students, which hindered his ability to establish meaningful friendships with fellow students.

Furthermore, participants from various genders in Campus 3 voiced their difficulties finding time and space to engage in the social aspects of university life. Their considerable time commuting was the primary reason for this lack of time and space. Leto reported,

As I said, I took two taxis to the university before moving to my current off-campus accommodation. I did not have time to socialise with anyone. After class, if I had assignments, I would just go to the library or computer labs and do my work. So I did not know anyone and had no friends (Female, group 7, campus 3).

Participants also expressed a lack of awareness regarding available student support services, primarily due to their limited participation in social activities. They revealed that they were unaware of trained psychologists ready to assist students. They lamented that adjustment issues were mentally challenging and believed consulting psychologists could have helped them address their mental health concerns. Pontso affirmed,

I did not know the university has psychologists or counselling people. I needed that because I struggled with the whole adjustment thing. Everything was overwhelming and affected my mental health. I did not think I would last this long in this university (Female, group 7, campus 3).

The study conducted by Bloomquist (2014) revealed that some commuter students experience a lack of motivation in their studies due to their constant interactions with individuals who are not students. As stated by Bloomquist (2014:52), the absence of individuals in their home environment who are also engaged in studying leads to a

decline in their motivation to study. This finding aligns with Xoli's explanation regarding his non-student peers.

According to Reilly (2018), there has been a significant increase in the demand for mental health treatment and counselling services on university campuses since 2009. This high demand can be attributed to various adjustment issues students face, including difficulty managing workloads and feeling overwhelmed.

As discussed in 2.3, some commuter students live closer to the university, while others live far from the university. Just as Leto reported, Maguire and Morris (2018) also found that distance plays a crucial role in the ability of commuter students to participate in social events. The study revealed that those who have to travel or walk for 30 minutes or more often find themselves unavailable for social gatherings. Moreover, Maguire and Morris (2018) discovered that some commuter students prioritise socialising with peers as a low priority. Particularly, students living far from the university tended to view social engagement as a potential distraction from their academic pursuits. As stated by the authors, "It is interesting to note that some of our commuter students were quite reluctant to engage beyond the academic sphere, as they are concerned this may harm their academic achievements." (Maguire and Morris, 2018:38).

6.6.2.4 Personal traits and opportunity for social adjustment

As revealed in the literature findings (see 3.3.1), adjusting to a new environment with strange people might induce anxiety and stress, which may lead to an early departure. Empirical research findings suggest that participants, across all genders and campuses, highlighted personal traits as significant in the campus environment, affecting the opportunity to socialise with others. Reserved participants expressed that engaging with the social climate posed challenges and often induced feelings of anxiety and discomfort. These feelings indicate that some participants found navigating and connecting with others more challenging. Landi supported this stating,

> *it's not easy for me to go out and talk with other people, even at home, like I'd rather stay home and read a book. I'd rather stay home and lock myself inside the house. So, when I got here, luckily, my roommate was a huge extrovert. So, through her, I could interact with other people and make new friends. Still, it has been difficult because I'm struggling, like, I'd say I've*

gotten better with making friends. However, interacting with people is uncomfortable for me (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Furthermore, participants also emphasised the impact of psychological factors on socialisation within the campus environment. Thando, for instance, commented on this aspect,

it doesn't matter how much I try to participate in social events; it is always difficult. I am a loner. So yeah, I did not even want to come to this interview session, but I just told myself that your topic is relevant to me, and I want to contribute. I like small groups like this because I can speak and not feel judged (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Female participants reported social anxiety more than their male counterparts. Landi claimed,

I think females are more reserved compared to males. I notice that males are loud and not afraid to make mistakes, while females are shy. I am not saying all females but the ones I know are not as talkative as males; maybe females fear being judged by how they look or dress, I don't know, but I think women are smarter but just they don't brag about it (Female, group 3, campus 1).

Participants also mentioned that race and gender are essential in social adjustment. Sipho maintained,

I agree with her, black male students even participate more in sports like soccer. I always see white female students jogging on campus and playing netball, but I don't see black female students. Maybe they are worried about other things, but I think the university should promote sports among black female students (Female, group 3, campus 1).

As briefly discussed in 6.4.1.1, some students possess personal traits that can impede the social adjustment process. Specifically, reserved students may encounter challenges when engaging with their peers, resulting in slower social adjustment. Reserved students typically prefer solitude or spending time with a small group of close

friends and seek quiet environments (Cain, 2012). Like Thando's experience, reserved students often hesitate to initiate conversations that could lead to friendships. Instead, as Cain (2012) argues, they tend to be better listeners than talkers and approach social situations cautiously, much like Landi reported. Furthermore, Gleason (2016) suggests that reserved students may avoid social settings and extracurricular activities, preferring to maintain a certain distance from highly stimulating social environments.

Social anxiousness, also known as social phobia, emerged as a common trait among students that affected their ability to build relationships. This psychological condition involves avoiding social situations due to the fear of being negatively judged by others (Schneier and Goldmark, 2015). As reported by Landi and Thando, social phobia can be highly stressful for students who experience it, and it can significantly impact their learning, teaching, and social lives as they actively avoid social or performance situations (Schneier and Goldmark, 2015).

Students with social phobia often perceive themselves as incompetent in social situations, as Thando also mentioned. Furthermore, they tend to have negative self-perceptions and self-evaluations, believing that others view them as inadequate, uninteresting, peculiar, unattractive, and so on (Liao, Xia, Xu , and Pan, 2023). These cognitive distortions increase anxiety and reinforce avoidance behaviours associated with social phobia.

As explained by Landi and supported by the findings of Schneier and Goldmark (2015), women tend to experience more severe social fears in specific situations compared to men. The study highlighted that women often report discomfort when interacting with authority figures, giving speeches, working while being observed, entering a room with others already present, and being the centre of attention. They also express fears of speaking up in meetings, expressing disagreement with unfamiliar individuals, and giving presentations to groups. These findings align with the experiences shared by participants regarding the differences between male and female students. Consequently, student leadership positions at many universities tend to be occupied predominantly by male students. Although these are general statements from Schneier and Goldmark (2015), they support what participants expressed regarding the difference between male and female students.

Moreover, Cornell, Kessi and Ratele (2022) argue that the higher education experience is influenced by intersecting factors such as race, gender, and sexual identities. As Sipho commented, black female students are particularly affected by the intersection of race and gender. According to Kessi and Cornell (2015:7), being in an environment where racial identity is salient can lead to feelings of isolation, a lack of belonging, and low self-esteem for black female students. Cornell *et al.* (2022) further argue that black female students often feel alienated from the social environment of universities. Consequently, some participants, like Sipho, may struggle to participate in extramural activities due to these intersecting factors. These findings highlight the complex experiences that female and black students may face in higher education, shedding light on the additional challenges they may encounter in social engagement and participation.

6.6.3 Opportunities for growth in emotional adjustment of first-year commuter students

Participants mentioned several areas related to emotional adjustment as opportunities for growth. These areas included: opportunities to establish meaningful friendships (6.6.3.1), race and class (6.6.3.2), stress and anxiety (6.6.3.3), opportunities to develop independent identity (6.6.3.4), and socio-economic opportunities (6.6.3.5).

6.6.3.1 Opportunities to establish meaningful relationships

As the literature reveals in 1.1.5 and 3.3.2, commuter students struggle to make friends. The empirical findings established that participants across genders and campuses struggled to establish meaningful friendships. They believed their motivation and mental health suffered from their inability to build meaningful relationships. In contrast to the viewpoint expressed in 6.4.1.2, participants reported that making new relationships at university and distancing themselves from high school friends was crucial. This shift in perspective suggests that participants recognised the importance of emotional adjustment within the university environment and the potential benefits it could bring, such as expanding their social networks and finding support among their peers. They acknowledged that relying solely on existing friendships from high school might limit their opportunities for personal growth and hinder their opportunities to engage fully in the university experience. Pano explained,

okay, I need to add to this point like you need new people as a first-year student, and there needs to be a heavier emphasis on that. Because the person you are in high school and the person you are in varsity are two completely different people. And if you want to surround yourself with the same high school circle, you will not make it in varsity. Sometimes, you need new insights and perspectives and personalities. But, for me, it wasn't easy to make friends … I was just coming here for classes and leaving soon after. I did not find time to socialise. That impacted my mental health because I felt I could never make friends. I started bunking classes also because I was not motivated to continue ... always coming here and being miserable. But I met someone at the taxi rank one day who had the same challenges as me and we ended up communicating through WhatsApp. Now we are friends, and I am always with her after our classes (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Participants also reported that the first few months were nerve-racking concerning meeting new friends. As discussed in 3.3.2, transitioning to university can be stressful for students. However, friends may be one of the mechanisms that counteract the difficulties and stress associated with the transition to university. Thus, failure to establish meaningful friendships can cause stress and anxiety (see 6.3.2.4). Busa said,

yeah, let's say it takes time with somebody I haven't met before. Because at first, you're nervous. You're both nervous. You don't know how things are going to go. Everyone is just trying to find their feet … everyone else is nervous. For me, it was the most difficult thing to do. I am usually uncomfortable starting conversations with new people unless in class if a lecturer says I must. But on my own, I have always struggled to make friends, even in high school. So, yeah, I am naturally a shy person. I just keep to myself. So, even when I needed help, I just couldn't say anything. Even now, I still don't have friends, but maybe acquaintances like classmates. But I am not as afraid now because I've adapted to the environment. So yeah, I still face challenges alone but now I am more confident than before (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Busa's situation, as described, reflects a potential risk outlined in Tinto's theoretical framework (see 3.3) regarding students who struggle to establish social connections and cope emotionally. According to Tinto, students who cannot form supportive relationships and find a sense of belonging within the university community are more likely to experience feelings of isolation and become demotivated over time. Thus, isolation and demotivation could ultimately increase the risk of dropout.

Some participants stated having had negative friendship-related experiences. Encouragement toward engaging in excessive drinking, sexual activities, or prioritising social aspects over academics created challenges for participants trying to balance their social lives and academic responsibilities. Tshepo complained,

> *I can say having friends at the beginning was a challenge. The kind of friends I had did not motivate me to study. We were always talking about alcohol, sports, and women. We never just sit down and study. If I wanted to study, I had to switch off my phone and come to campus. So, I started focusing more on girls than school [university]. If we had money, we would drink from Thursday until Sunday. So, there was this friend who stayed alone in a commune, he had a sound system, and we were always there to drink and invite girls over* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

In seeking to establish friendships, some participants, like Tshepo, pursued bonds detrimental to their emotional well-being. Their poor decisions were the result of peer pressure. They claimed that choosing the incorrect friends resulted in psychological suffering and low self-esteem. Sabelo said,

> *so, you need to try to fit in like, for example, you need to get a girlfriend because everyone has a girlfriend, and they are having sex. So now all your friends are bragging about that, so if you have a roommate and his girlfriend visits, you have to make space for them by leaving your room every time. You end up pressuring yourself to get a girlfriend just to fit in. But I couldn't get girls because I couldn't talk to them and had doubts about myself. This thing of not having a girlfriend affected me so much because I saw myself as a loser. Luckily, I was able to get a girlfriend eventually* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Sabelo's experience reflects the negative consequences that can arise from choosing friends who exert a negative influence or engage in harmful behaviours. Peer pressure significantly impacted participants as they transitioned to university life. Participants reported another form of peer pressure related to socioeconomic inequalities. The pressure to fit in and meet certain social expectations was a challenge to participants from disadvantaged backgrounds. They felt compelled to adopt a particular lifestyle, dress a certain way, or acquire expensive items to conform to the standards set by their peers. The desire to fit in and avoid being different led to heightened anxiety.

Participants from rural areas, in particular, mentioned succumbing to peer pressure regarding their appearance. They needed to conform to specific fashion trends or prevalent styles among their peers. This pressure stemmed from a desire to be accepted and avoid being singled out as different or not fitting in. Lelani explained that:

> *sometimes you meet friends with better resources than you, and they put you under pressure to do things with them like going out and buying certain stuff like branded clothes. And when you do not have the money to maintain this lifestyle, you get disappointed and feel you don't belong here* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

The pressure to fit in extended to even their accents, where participants from rural areas felt the need to speak in a 'Model C' accent. These participants emphasised how pupils who talked with Model C accents distinguished themselves from those who did not. Students were perceived as having higher socioeconomic positions if they spoke with a twang or Model C accent. As a result, one's perceived socio-economic class was correlated with their speech. Participants acknowledged that they had to alter their speech patterns to connect with these students. As a result, having a particular accent became a requirement for inclusion. However, this behaviour was mainly noted among black students. Hence, accent-based discrimination was noted among black students. Xoli reported,

> *when I came here, I noticed that some students from Model C schools spoke with a twang. I come from a rural school where everybody is black, so my accent is just black. It was difficult for me to talk to them because I spoke Zulu most of the time, and they only spoke English. But their names*

and surnames were Zulu, so I don't know why they did not speak it; maybe they thought speaking Zulu was beneath them (Male, group 5, campus 2).

The educational background can indeed play a role in shaping accents, as Toefy (2021) mentions. The Model C accent refers to how black students who attended formerly white schools tend to speak, which can be associated with social class hierarchies. These hierarchies can lead to perceptions and judgments based on accents, including attributions of prestige, pleasantness, and intelligence, as highlighted by Agarwal (2018). These perceptions may challenge individuals like Xoli, whose accents are not considered prestigious within the established hierarchies.

Holloway-Friesen (2018) discovered that the quantity and calibre of new relationships impacted student adjustment. Moreover, this author reported that commuter students generally had half the number of friends compared with residential students in their first year of university. Tinto (2012) emphasises that the nature of involvement and the quality of friendships play a vital role in emotional adjustment. Positive and supportive friendships can contribute to emotional affiliation with the university, while damaging and non-supportive friendships can stress and challenge students' transitions. Participants like Tshepo, Sabelo and Lelani mentioned experiences where friends pressured them to engage in behaviours counterproductive to their academic goals and emotional well-being. Peer pressure, defined as a change in behaviour to conform to peer norms, can indeed influence students' attitudes and actions, as stated by Chen and Deng (2021).

Hambrick (2018) argues that university students may feel pressured to behave in specific ways due to comparisons with their peers. This pressure can lead to changes in behaviour, such as increased alcohol consumption and loss of focus on academic goals, as observed with Tshepo. As Chen and Deng (2021) highlight, peer pressure can undermine students' self-confidence and self-esteem and induce anxiety. These factors, including educational background, accents, and peer pressure, can significantly impact students' emotional well-being, adjustment, and dropout risk. Furthermore, Chen and Deng (2021) argue that peer pressure can weaken students' self-confidence and self-esteem and make them anxious. These authors (2021:594) say that "in university life, there is all the interpersonal pressure that comes from peers, as

everyone tries to find good friends and get acquainted with the people around them more quickly".

6.6.3.2 Opportunity for growth in university support for commuting students from disadvantaged backgrounds

As established in 2.5.1, some first-year commuter students come from poor backgrounds. The empirical findings reveal an intersection of race and class with participants. They pointed out that many white commuting students generally had cars, which sets them apart from black students who face challenges related to public transportation, as discussed in 2.5.4. However, regardless of race, students with access to cars did not encounter the difficulties associated with public transportation and late classes. The intersection of race and class within the context of commuting students is consistent with Gormley's (2016) articulation that commuter students who drive to university have a higher social standing than those using public transport to commute. Participants reported that this intersection shaped the experiences and opportunities available to students from different racial backgrounds. Sipho claimed,

> *most white students in my class have cars and do not mind when classes are scheduled very late … Also, when you use the library at night, you see a lot of white students, but they all have cars. So, they don't walk home after; they drive, unlike us who don't have cars* (Female, group 3, campus 1).

As discussed in 6.6.2.4, the intersection of class and race creates unique challenges for black commuting students in South African higher education. As discussed in 2.5.4, these students often face significant transportation challenges, such as limited funds for travel and the time-consuming nature of relying on public transportation. These challenges highlight the enduring impact of race and class on the experiences of commuting students in South African higher education. Consequently, there is an opportunity for growth in how universities support commuting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring they receive adequate assistance to overcome these limitations.

6.6.3.3 Opportunity to improve stress-coping mechanisms for new students.

As established in the literature findings (see 3.3.2), transitioning to university can induce student stress and anxiety. Empirical findings revealed that participants identified an opportunity to improve stress-coping mechanisms for new students. Their stress was related to multiple aspects of their lives, including the overwhelming pressure to excel academically while simultaneously trying to build social connections and engage in various activities.. Sam pointed out that,

> *it was stressful to deal with everything. What made it worse was staying off-campus because you have to deal with transport, food, academics and social life* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Participants reported also academic workload as a significant stressor (also see 6.6.1.1). As established in 3.3.2, the transition to university brings a range of academic demands, such as managing coursework, assignments, and exams. Thus, the academic stress reported by participants was related to feeling overwhelmed by the work needed to succeed in their courses. Thokozani said,

> *For me, I am doing five modules, and the problem is that you sometimes have assignments in all modules due simultaneously. Sometimes I can't submit on time, which causes me to feel stressed. Like, I am going to fail. Like I am wasting money and time by being here. So, the academics are stressful* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

Furthermore, participants reported feeling anxious about the transition to university. Tumelo pointed out,

> *And the whole thing that everything is new and finding your confidence to go up to people and talk to them … Most people are nice on campus. Yeah, most people are willing to talk to you and stuff like that. But it's that anxiety. You need that confidence* (Female, group 4, campus 1).

Some participants claimed they were constantly stressed out and had no idea what was causing it. Leto claimed that,

> *Sometimes I get stressed and I don't know why. And then anxiety as well. Sometimes the academic pressure will be so high that you don't know what to do and the anxiety comes and goes* (Female, group 7, campus 3).

Although Leto claimed she did not know what was causing her anxiety, LeBlanc (2019) contends that various factors could cause it. These factors include lack of sleep, living with roommates, managing demanding workloads, excessive caffeine consumption, and loneliness.

As Thokozani reported, the pressure to perform academically while fulfilling the demands of student social life can overwhelm new students. Elias *et al.* (2011) argue that stress can come in different ways in a student's daily life. It can be related to financial difficulties, failure in academics or sports, health issues, etc. Furthermore, it can be caused by adjustment issues (Elias *et al.*, 2011).

Sam reported that depression and anxiety are some of the many problems experienced by students, which is consistent with the findings from Reddy, Menon and Thattil (2018). Mutinta (2022:1) found "the level of mental distress to be higher among students than reported in most previous studies on the student population in South Africa". This author (2022) argues that students with higher levels of mental distress are most likely to experience cognitive challenges, achieve poor academic results, and use drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms. Thus, as discussed in 6.4.2.1, the high consumption of alcohol reported by participants could be a stress-coping mechanism.

LeBlanc (2019) posits that anxiety among first-year students is expected. Just as Tumelo reported, LeBlanc (2019) argues that the sharpest increase in anxiety occurs during the initial transition to university. Anxiety rises during the first semester of university and remains high during the second semester. Thus, the first year of university is a high-risk period for the onset or worsening of anxiety (LeBlanc, 2019).

6.6.3.4 Opportunity to develop an independent identity

As established in 3.3.2, transitioning to university often entails the experience of newfound independence for many first-year students. It marks a significant shift as they

navigate being alone for the first time, requiring them to assume responsibility for various aspects of their lives. Empirical findings suggest that participants across genders and campuses recognised the emotional challenges associated with becoming independent and taking on responsibilities without parental guidance. This transition was highlighted as particularly difficult, indicating an opportunity for to enhance support mechanisms to help students navigate these challenges. The shift from relying on parents for guidance and decision-making to relying on peers can be daunting. Participants expressed that they had to navigate their daily duties and make essential choices without the direct guidance and support they were accustomed to.

Furthermore, they mentioned that carrying out everyday responsibilities and having the discipline to do what they should do without anyone guiding them was challenging. Semi said,

> *The transition coming here was hard because I used to always be indoors at home. I was always monitored. I'd ask for permission to do anything, and now I have to come here and be alone. So, I had to change my mind. So now I'm trying to be my own person and make my own decisions. Like I had friends but it was still tough for me to get used to that. I still had the mentality that you have to be indoors and be told what to do* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Participants also reported that independence felt overwhelming, intimidating, and lonely. Semi added,

> *the sense of independence can sometimes be overwhelming, especially when you are coming from a protected environment, and now you find yourself alone with your peers* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Furthermore, Moke noted that,

> *being independent was just too much for me. Like everything rest with you. At home, a helper assisted with laundry, cleaning, and things like that. But now the owner of our student accommodation only allows cleaners to clean communal places like the kitchen and bathrooms, so they don't clean our*

rooms, and we have to do it ourselves. Also, cooking is too much (Male, group 1, campus 1).

Participants also mentioned that their parents had encouraged them to become independent. Parents encouraged the participants to apply to universities far from home because they wanted them to accept maturity. However, participants claimed that being far from home was an emotionally draining experience. Ntobe said,

firstly, I didn't like the idea of coming here. But then my parents decided that I should come here. They didn't want me to go to other universities closer to home. They said no, we want you to go somewhere far so that you can find yourself because I was so attached to my grandmother. So okay, I decided just to come here. But then, being here, yeah. I'm a social person, but I cried the moment I got here because I felt like I did not belong here. Because the pageant and modelling industries are unavailable here, I cannot do many things I want to do here. But then at some point, I was like, maybe God brought me here because He wants me to find something (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Irvin said,

I had such a difficult time becoming independent. Like last year, I was this highly dependent learner going to high school, but now I must be an adult fast. I feel like I wasn't prepared for this. I am 18 years old this year, so technically, I am not an adult yet, but I have to behave like one if I want to survive (Male, group 2, campus 1).

Furthermore, older participants who moved to off-campus student housing reported struggling to adjust to being away from home. They had responsibilities back at home, and thus, they frequent home a lot. Kat said,

the transition was draining for me; I don't want to lie. There was a lot of change from being a full-time employee to being a student. And also, being away from home was another issue. I spent more time at home than here because I couldn't adapt to a new environment. So, five days of being here on campus was a lot for me. I was travelling in and out almost every month.

> *I would stay at home for four months and then come here only if something needed me to be here. So, the first semester was like my mind did not register that I was a student. And also, I had businesses that were taking a lot of my time back home* (Male, group 5, campus 2).

However, some participants enjoyed the freedom of being away from home. They reported that independence allowed them to make mistakes and learn. Filwe reported,

> *I think independence had the opposite effect on me. Personally, I like independence, I like being here and being able to make my own decisions and make my own mistakes without someone having to tell me what to do. Because I am from a very strict household, where I'm told what to do, this must be done, so I don't like rules. I don't like being told what to do … I could make my own rules and even if I make mistakes, it's a learning curve. For me, independence had the opposite effect on me, I like it. I enjoy it* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

Another participant claimed she was always independent at home. However, she did not feel supported emotionally by her parents. Thus, moving away from home helped her to feel supported by her peers. Refi stated,

> *I feel like at home I was independent but in a guided manner. The parents wouldn't tell me what to do, but I had to report to them before I did something. But here, it was very easy for me to transition emotionally wise. At home, nobody noticed when I was not fine, but here my friends are very close to me, so I'm not used to that. I'm used to being alone when I'm not okay. But here, my friends are always there to help me with those emotions* (Female, group 6, campus 2).

As participants articulated, independence is the ability to make decisions without supervision. It also relates to being self-sufficient concerning managing a monthly budget, attending classes, and overall balancing social and academic life, just to name a few. Worsley, Harrison and Corcoran (2021:1) argue that “living beyond their familiar support structures often leaves students in need of compassionate humans to turn to for support or advice”. Thus, independence, as Irvin reported, can be a scary and lonely experience.

6.6.3.5 Socio-economic opportunities

The literature findings (see 2.5.5) revealed that student funding is challenging in the South African higher education landscape. Empirical findings established that participants across genders and campuses cited students' socio-economic challenges as influencing their emotional well-being and academic performance. In particular, participants highlighted the financial difficulties faced by students concerning the delays in disbursement of funds by the NSFAS. NSFAS delays led to students experiencing difficulties in affording necessities like food. Khona stated,

> *you know, sometimes NSFAS don't pay on time. By that time, you don't have food. So, you get stressed, and it's hard to attend classes when hungry. So, I can say lack of money causes emotional issues* (Male, group 8, campus 3).

Stress and hunger resulting from a lack of funds affected students' emotional well-being and overall mental health. Khona suggests that financial difficulties have emotional and practical consequences that hinder his opportunities to attend classes regularly and perform well academically.

6.7 CONCLUSION

This study's examination of first-year commuter students' experiences at the case study university, framed within the AI framework, has highlighted strengths and areas for potential enhancement in the university's support systems. Focusing on the first two steps, namely the Discovery and Dreaming steps of the AI process, this chapter has uncovered success stories, best practices and identified opportunities for further development to support better students' academic, social, and emotional transitions.

In the discovery step (see 6.2), participants highlighted the crucial role of personal support networks, mainly family and friends, in easing their transition to university life. Alongside these personal connections, university-led initiatives such as first-year orientation and peer mentoring programmes emerged as critical best practices. These programmes significantly fostered students' engagement and integration within the academic and social spheres of university life. Therefore, the discovery step revealed that the successful integration of first-year commuter students into university life largely depends on strong personal support networks and well-designed institutional

support programmes.

The dreaming step (see 6.6) offered participants a platform to envision potential improvements in their university experience. Their insights highlighted two areas requiring attention curriculum overload and socio-economic challenges. This feedback suggests that universities must continuously adapt their strategies to create a more supportive environment that addresses the diverse needs of commuter students. By doing so, universities can improve the facilitation of these students' full integration and success in the academic and social dimensions of university life.

While the discovery and dreaming steps highlight the peak experiences of students and areas for improvement, the next chapter focuses on designing a framework aimed at supporting the adjustment of first-year commuter students. Additionally, the chapter will recommend a practical implementation plan for the proposed framework.

CHAPTER 7
AI 4D CYCLE'S THIRD AND ADAPTED FOURTH STEP

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the conclusion and recommendations for the proposed framework for a peer network. With particular reference to the AI formulation, the chapter examines which activities or initiatives have successfully engaged commuter students in the academic, social, and emotional integration into the case study university environment in the past (see 7.2) and how these successes can be built upon (see 7.5).

7.2 AI 4D CYCLE'S THIRD STEP: DESIGNING STEP

The third step involves designing plans for the future, which reflects the evaluation of participants' perspectives on enhancing existing peer mentorship practices. This step includes creating new strategies and visions to improve the current services offered by the peer mentorship programme.

7.2.1 Evaluation of the best practice activities and initiatives that engaged commuter students in the case study university environment

The best practices reported by participants in the peer mentor programme, covering academic (see 6.3.2.2), social (see 6.4.2.4), and emotional (see 6.5.2.1) adjustments, align closely with the goals of the case study university's programme. Two reports, compiled by the UFS Division of Student Affairs – the 2021 and 2022 First-Year Experience Committee Reports – serve as sources of information regarding the university's peer mentor programme. This programme is designed to support first-year students in their transition to university life by enlisting trained senior undergraduate students as peer mentors to create a supportive atmosphere promoting individual growth and development. It offers socio-emotional support by organising students into peer groups with an assigned mentor, fostering relationships built on trust and camaraderie.

To guide these interactions, mentors are provided with a framework that includes themes such as "The Bigger Picture," "Turning Dreams into Reality," "Personal Growth and Development," "I Am a Unique, Autonomous, and Worthy Human Being," and

"Fostering a Positive Attitude that Reflects Perseverance and Success." These themes focus on crucial areas such as goal-setting, personal growth, affirmations, and cultivating a positive mindset, all aimed at helping students navigate the academic, social and emotional adjustment challenges and succeed. Mentors and mentees meet bi-weekly to discuss these themes.

Mentors and mentees are automatically grouped into asynchronous discussion groups on Blackboard, where they engage in dialogue on the assigned discussion themes and other relevant student-related topics. Beyond these group discussions, mentors and mentees are encouraged to partake in one-on-one conversations to foster deeper connections. Each discussion cycle also incorporates a facilitated synchronous session on Blackboard Collaborate, offering multiple timeslots to accommodate participants' schedules. The programme uses nudge communication where SMS, emails, and WhatsApp groups are used. Marketing efforts for the programme feature podcasts, infographics on the virtual student orientation page, and testimonial videos from former participants, which are shared on Blackboard organisations and the university's Facebook page.

All these thematic discussions were reported positively in the engagement with participants (see 6.3.2.2, 6.4.2.4, 6.5.2.1). The specific evaluation details are provided below in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Selected evaluation of the peer mentor programme and presenting opportunities for growth

Current best practices in the peer mentor programme (*participants' perspectives*)	Case Study University Peer Mentor Programme (*what the peer mentor programme currently offers*)	Opportunities for growth in the peer mentor programme (*the gaps in the current peer mentor programme*)
Participants identified several best practices from the peer mentor programme that supported their academic adjustment. These included effective time management strategies, guidance and orientation, exposure to a range of academic programmes, and increased awareness of behaviours that could lead to academic exclusion (see 6.3.2.2).	Themes such as "Turning your dreams and aspirations into reality" focus on goal-seeking and goal-setting behaviour. These themes, combined with one-on-one mentor and mentee discussions, offer significant benefits for academic adjustment.	While participants reported several academic adjustment best practices of the peer mentor programme, low levels of engagement between mentees and mentors pose a risk of not fully benefiting from the programme (see 7.3.1).
Participants reported the following social adjustment best practices: development of trust-based and meaningful relationships,	Mentors and mentees are encouraged to participate in one-on-one conversations to foster	Relationships between mentors and mentees could be enhanced (see 7.3.1). Some mentors were reported to

information sharing, role modelling, inspiration and motivation, active listening and respect, and confidential discussions (see 6.4.2.4).	deeper connections.	be unavailable, aloof and reluctant to engage with mentees, signalling a lack of communication and fewer opportunities for one-on-one conversations.
Emotional adjustment benefits reported were reassurance and empathy, encouragement, and referral to other services when they need emotional support (see 6.5.2.1)	Two themes for the peer mentor programme relate to the facilitation of emotional adjustment: “I am a unique, autonomous, and worthy human being” and “Fostering a Positive Attitude that Reflects Perseverance and Success”. These themes explore the value of personal growth and affirmation.	There is an opportunity to enhance mentors' ability to build personal connections and foster open communication, which would provide better emotional support. Additionally, improving active listening skills was highlighted as a critical area for development (see 7.3.1).
Monitoring and evaluation		
Participants acknowledged the evaluation survey at the end of the peer mentorship cycle.	In the case study university, mentors and mentees are often asked to complete an evaluation form after each discussion cycle. This evaluation aims to establish the experience of both mentors and mentees and to identify areas for improvement.	Participants mentioned that there is an opportunity to improve monitoring in the programme, which would also positively impact accountability (see 7.3.2). They reported that they would prefer that monitoring be conducted during the discussions so that issues are addressed before the end of the programme cycle.
Marketing		
Participants mainly heard about the programme through word of mouth from a friend.	The peer mentor programme’s marketing strategies include a variety of channels designed to reach and engage students. These strategies encompass: • Podcasts and infographics are featured on the virtual student orientation page. • Testimonial videos from former participants are accessible on Blackboard organisations and the university’s Facebook page. • Nudge communication, employing SMS, emails, and WhatsApp to encourage participation and maintain engagement.	Despite the diverse marketing strategies for the peer mentor programme, participants identified areas for improvement. Campus-specific marketing was identified as an area of improvement (see 7.3.4).

7.3 Opportunities for growth in the Peer Mentor Programme

Participants highlighted opportunities for growth within the peer mentor programme, indicating the framework of a future peer mentor network. Beyond what has been reported as the programme's best practices, participants identified areas that could be enhanced to support their integration into the university's academic, social, and emotional environments better. Therefore, in addition to the activities or initiatives that have successfully engaged commuter students, participants crafted plans for a future peer mentor programme. These plans comprise a desired framework that could support a more effective and comprehensive approach to first-year student integration into the academic, social, and emotional environments. Therefore, a framework for a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students ought to improve the relationship between mentors and mentees (see 7.2.1), improve responsibility and accountability (7.2.2), pay attention to gender dynamics (7.2.3), and extensive marketing (7.2.4).

7.3.1 Relationship between peer mentors and mentees

The literature and empirical study confirmed that peer mentor and mentee trust-based friendships (see 2.6.3 and 6.5.1.2) were crucial for first-year student success. However, some participants stated that the relationship between mentors and mentees could be improved. Some of the areas that participants believed could be improved concerning the relationship between mentors and mentees are listed below:

Peer mentor availability: noting that peer mentors were senior students with academic and social commitments; however, their availability to meet with mentees could be improved. Participants would prefer that mentors have communicated timeframes and timetables for one-on-one engagement. Essentially, participants argued that engagement with mentors should not happen by chance but rather be planned and intentional.

Meeting spaces for physical engagement: noting that engagement on the peer mentor happened primarily on Blackboard Collaborate; however, participants felt that there is a need to have more physical engagement. They reported that participants not in day residences do not have a dedicated space to engage with their mentors. Participants shed light on a significant challenge faced by participants who were not

part of the day residences at the university. Finding suitable meeting spaces to interact with their mentors proved difficult for these students. Unlike day residence members, who likely had more access to shared living and learning spaces or designated meeting areas, commuter students not part of day residences faced limitations in finding convenient and planned meeting spaces with their mentors. Without access to designated meeting spaces, the interactions between these students and their mentors became sporadic and unplanned. As established in the literature (see 2.6.6), regular meetings are crucial for building solid mentor-mentee relationships and ensuring consistent support and guidance throughout the transition process.

Active listening and engagement: participants mentioned an opportunity for growth in active listening and engagement in the peer mentor programme. The literature (2.6.2) indicates that successful mentorship relies heavily on mentors' willingness to engage actively with mentees, offering guidance, support, and a listening ear. However, empirical study feedback suggests a gap in this engagement. Some participants reported that their mentors seemed disengaged, negatively impacting on the mentee experience. This lack of genuine interest and enthusiasm from mentors led to poor communication and limited the development of a trusting and supportive relationship.

Building personal connections and open communication: participants emphasised the importance of personal connections and open communication between mentors and mentees. They felt a need to improve these areas, highlighting that mentors should actively strive to understand their mentees personally to facilitate better guidance and support. Participants also stressed that this should be bidirectional, as mentees must be open and communicative about their experiences and challenges, allowing mentors to provide informed and relevant advice.

Mentor commitment: participants reported that the attitude and commitment of some peer mentors required improvement. They expressed concerns about certain mentors' lack of genuine commitment. The perception of mentors being aloof or disinterested led to a breakdown in communication and negatively affected the mentoring experience. The literature (2.6.2) supports the notion that mentors' willingness to actively engage is crucial for the success of mentorship programmes.

7.3.2 Peer mentor monitoring and evaluation

The literature (see 2.6.8) recommends that the work of mentors is monitored to ensure accountability and management of mentors' workload. Participants in the empirical study reported that accountability could be improved in the peer mentor programme through monitoring and evaluation processes. Participants outlined the following areas as opportunities for growth:

Enhancing accountability and feedback mechanisms: participants felt there is a need for improved accountability and continuous feedback within the mentorship programme. They recommended implementing mid-programme surveys for mentees to assess mentor performance, ensuring mentors fulfil their responsibilities. These recommendations underlined the importance of monitoring mentorship activities to ensure accountability and continuous feedback.

Addressing mentor experience and training: participants mentioned that there is an opportunity to address issues of mentor experience. They reported that some mentors demonstrated a lack of experience and suggested that they may require additional support and training. They felt that providing mentors with training could help them to understand their roles and responsibilities better, ensuring they are well-prepared to support mentees.

Promoting mentor initiative and proactivity: participants felt that some mentors did not proactively engage with mentees unless prompted. They advised that mentors should actively seek to know their mentees, suggesting that proactive engagement is crucial for effective mentoring.

Frequency of one-on-one meetings: participants mentioned the importance of increasing the frequency of the one-on-one meetings between mentors and mentees. Participants noted that additional meetings beyond the biweekly schedule could enhance the mentoring experience, improving monitoring and accountability. They suggested that despite varying schedules, arranging more frequent meetings would be beneficial.

Effective monitoring is crucial for the peer mentorship programme's success for first-year commuter students. It helps to identify challenges or issues promptly, allowing

for corrective action and improvement. Additionally, promoting bidirectional communication, where mentors and mentees take responsibility and are held accountable, is essential for a successful mentorship programme. This approach ensures the peer mentorship programme operates as intended and delivers the expected outcomes. Further, Swart *et al.* (2019) recommend incorporating peer mentorship programmes into each academic programme's curriculum and timetable. In this case, the workload can be better managed to ensure mentors are not overwhelmed.

7.3.3 Sensitive gender, power and ethical dynamic concerns within peer mentor practices

Minor participants raised some gender, power and ethical dynamic concerns within peer mentor practices. Due to the sensitive nature and for confidentiality purposes, these aspects were not addressed, but the relevant institutional authorities were informed.

7.3.4 Marketing of the peer mentorship programme

In the empirical study, participants mentioned the following opportunities for growth in the marketing of the peer mentor programme:

Improving awareness of the peer mentor programme: participants mentioned the need for enhanced marketing efforts to promote the mentorship programme. Participants primarily heard about the programme through word of mouth, suggesting a gap in formal marketing channels. They recommended that the university do more to market the programme, particularly to first-year commuting students.

Addressing campus-specific marketing gaps: Participants from Campus 3 reported a lack of marketing regarding the peer mentor programme. They highlighted that in Campus 3, students were unaware of who their mentors were and how to access their support.

7.4 AI 4D CYCLE'S FOURTH STEP: ADAPTED DELIVERY STEP

The fourth step is delivering, focusing on recommendations for implementing the proposed framework for a peer network. According to the AI formulation, the delivery step requires following an implementation plan to realise the proposed framework. However, given that I am not a leader of the case study university peer mentor programme, nor am I still attached to the university for employment, this step is adapted to include only the proposed framework and recommendations for implementation by responsible parties at the case study university.

7.4.1 A framework for a peer network that supports first-year commuter students

Establishing a successful first-year commuter mentorship programme necessitates a structured peer network framework (Figure 7.1) that incorporates the essential elements of effective mentoring. The primary objective is to offer comprehensive support, guidance, and resources to first-year commuter students, facilitating their smooth transition into university life. The proposed peer network framework envisions an exemplary peer mentor programme designed to support the academic, social, and emotional integration of first-year commuter students into the university environment.

The proposed network framework for first-year commuter student success (see Figure 7.1) is based on five pillars of effective peer mentorship (adapted from Mentutor, 2023):

Figure 7.1: First-year commuter student network framework for student success

Figure 7.1 illustrates the first-year commuter student framework that supports their success. The diagram was designed to show the key pillars of the framework, which underpin the central objective: first-year commuter student success. Each of the five pillars, as depicted in the diagram, contributes to the comprehensive support of first-year commuter students and is outlined below:

1. Guidance and support

- **Encourage participation:** motivate mentees to engage actively in the thematic sessions of the peer mentor programme.
- **Provide direction:** offer guidance on academic and personal matters, including emotional and social aspects, within the mentors' scope of competence.
- **Referral to services:** when issues extend beyond the mentor's expertise, direct mentees to appropriate student services.
- **Promote open communication:** foster an environment of trust and confidentiality, encouraging mentees to share concerns and ideas, especially in one-on-one meetings.
- **Active listening:** pay close attention to mentees' concerns and thoughts.
- **Exhibit enthusiasm:** mentors should demonstrate commitment and passion for their role.
- **Inspire mentees:** share personal experiences and success stories to motivate and encourage mentees.

2. Goal setting

- **Encourage goal development:** support mentees in creating personal and professional goals.
- **Discuss challenges:** help mentees anticipate potential obstacles and strategies and ways to overcome them.

3. Skills development

- **Promote mutual learning:** encourage mentors and mentees to learn and grow together.
- **Development of soft skills:** mentors should cultivate leadership, goal-setting,

and problem-solving skills. These soft skills will likely sustain mentors' interest in the programme and enhance their effectiveness.

- **Model positive behaviour:** mentors should exemplify constructive attitudes and behaviours.
- **Reflect on experiences:** guide mentees in reflecting on their experiences and learning for personal growth.

4. Networking

- **Foster social connections:** create an environment where mentorship is a space for developing friendships and social connections.

5. Honest feedback

- **Mid-programme assessment:** conduct regular assessments to determine the progress and gains of mentees. If the relationship between mentors and mentees is not optimal, consider reassigning mentees to a different mentorship group to ensure a better fit and more productive interaction.
- **Encourage self-reflection:** help mentees to assess their actions, thoughts, and behaviours within and outside the mentorship context.
- **Identify strengths and areas for growth:** assist mentees in recognising their personal strengths and areas needing improvement.

An effective first-year commuter mentorship programme is grounded in the principles of trust, confidentiality, personal and professional growth, learning, social connection, and honest communication to identify growth areas, as depicted in the diagram. By incorporating these essential components, a peer mentorship programme can greatly enhance the first-year experience for commuter students, promoting both their academic and personal success. The study has developed a proposed implementation plan to realise these proposals, detailed below

Recommended Implementation Plan:

1. **Recruitment and training:**

- Select mentors who demonstrate strong commitment.

- Provide comprehensive training on effective mentoring practices and clearly outline programme expectations.

2. **Matching process:**

- Pair mentors and mentees based on shared interests, academic goals, and backgrounds.
- Ensure compatibility to foster a productive and supportive mentoring relationship.

3. **Orientation:**

- Conduct an orientation session to introduce the programme, outline expectations, and provide resources.
- Facilitate initial meetings between mentors and mentees to establish rapport.

4. **Ongoing support and evaluation:**

- Schedule regular check-ins to provide continuous support for both mentors and mentees.
- Collect feedback and periodically evaluate the programme's effectiveness to ensure ongoing improvement.

5. **Resources and activities:**

- Provide access to academic resources, workshops, and social events that support mentees' development.
- Organise activities designed to promote community building and engagement among participants.

7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are derived from the empirical findings discussed in Chapter 6 and the proposed framework outlined (see 7.4.1). The framework and the implementation plan form the foundation of this study's recommendations. Additionally, the study further elaborates on some of the recommendations below:

7.5.1 Enhancement of mentor-mentee relationships

Below are recommendations to improve monitoring and evaluation:

Availability of peer mentors: communicate and structure dedicated timeframes for one-on-one mentor-mentee engagements to ensure planned, intentional interactions. Balancing these engagements with the schedules and availability of mentors and mentees is essential for mentors and mentees. Increasing the frequency of engagements could potentially infringe on valuable academic and social time for mentors, who are also students. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain a balance that supports meaningful interaction without overburdening either party.

Meeting spaces: promote and encourage using day residences as meeting spaces for physical engagements.

Active listening and engagement: Improve mentors' active listening and engagement skills to build trust and ensure effective communication.

Building personal connections: encourage mentors to understand mentees personally, fostering open communication and robust support systems.

Mentor commitment: Address issues related to mentor commitment, ensuring mentors are genuinely invested in their roles.

7.5.2 Monitoring and evaluation

Below are recommendations to improve monitoring and evaluation:

Accountability and feedback: introduce continuous feedback mechanisms, such as mid-programme surveys, to monitor mentor performance and enhance accountability.

Mentor training: provide additional training to mentors to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge, addressing any gaps in their experience.

Proactive engagement: encourage mentors to proactively engage with mentees, promoting initiative rather than waiting for mentees to seek help.

7.5.3 Gender, power and ethical dynamics

Below are recommendations to improve gender and power issues:

Institutional attention: sensitive topics related to mentees' experience with gender and power issues should be referred to relevant professional services within the university. Peer mentors' referral responsibility should be strongly emphasised to ensure mentors understand they are not responsible for solving problems outside their competence. Effective referral requires close collaboration with other university support services, ensuring mentors know exactly where to direct mentees for specialised assistance.

7.5.4 Marketing and awareness

Below are recommendations to improve marketing and awareness:

Enhanced marketing efforts: improve the visibility and awareness of the peer mentor programme through formal marketing channels, especially targeting first-year commuter students.

Campus-specific strategies: address campus-specific marketing gaps, ensuring that students are well-informed about the programme and how to access mentor support, particularly in underrepresented campuses.

7.6 CONCLUSION

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the existing knowledge on peer support for first-year commuter students. The research enriches the understanding of effective support mechanisms by delving into the success stories and best practices related to the academic, social, and emotional integration of these students at the case study university, the research enriches the understanding of effective support mechanisms. The study offers a holistic five-pillar framework and a practical implementation plan to enhance peer mentorship and support for first-year commuter students. Future studies, which are beyond the scope of this study, could explore several areas not covered in this research. For example, I also would be interested in the long-term effects of peer support programmes on the academic success and retention rates of first-year commuter students beyond their initial year of study.

Expanding the research to include various types of institutions, such as rural universities, large public institutions, and private universities, to assess the adaptability and effectiveness of the proposed five-pillar framework across different educational settings. Exploring the role of digital platforms and technology in facilitating peer mentorship and support, particularly for commuter students with limited on-campus presence. Additionally, it is important to highlight that significant findings emerged beyond the initial scope of this study. These unintended insights, such as the challenges posed by large class sizes and other systemic issues, offer valuable perspectives that could inform the university's approach to supporting first-year commuter students. These findings should be regarded as potential areas for further research, aimed at developing comprehensive strategies that address not only the immediate needs of commuter students but also the broader institutional factors affecting their academic, social, and emotional well-being.

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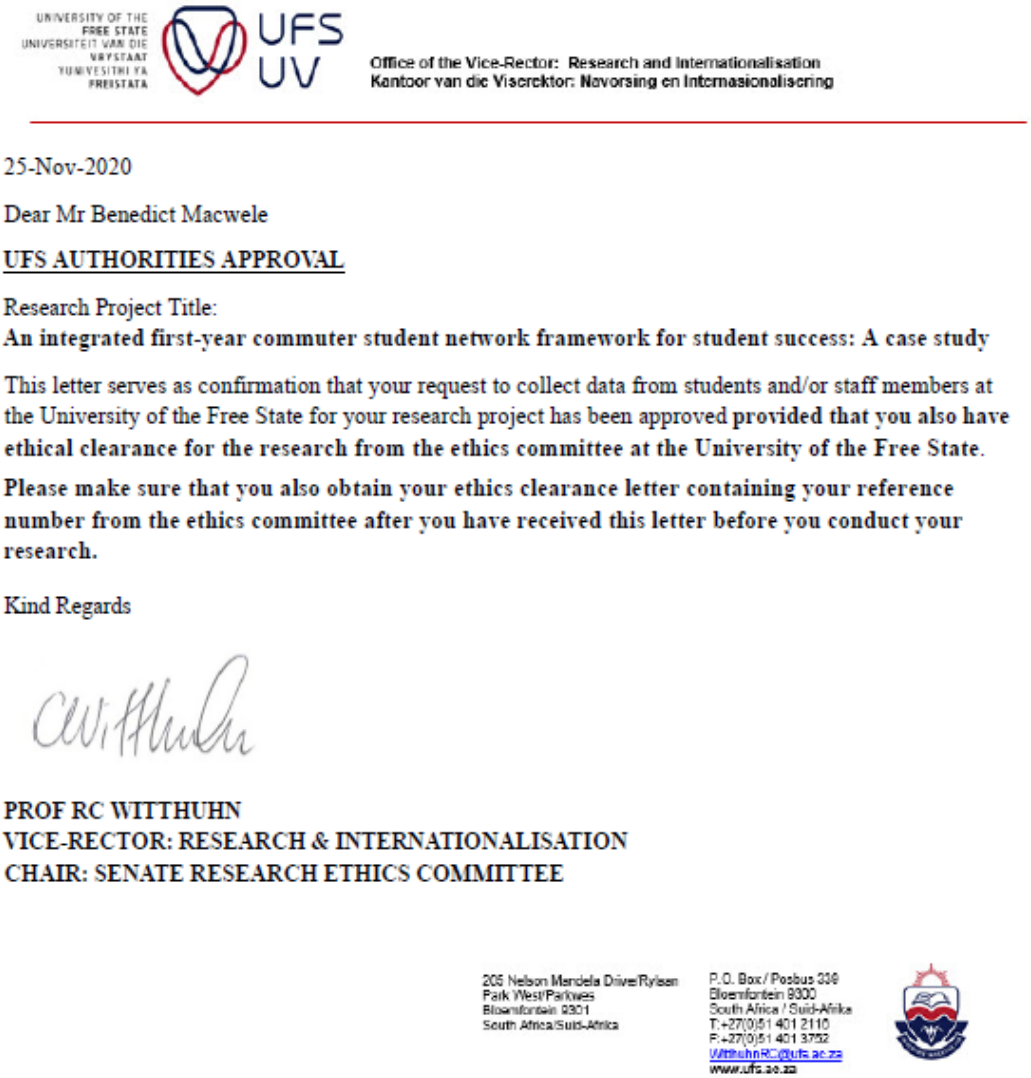
APPENDIX A: GATEKEEPER APPROVALS[6]



UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA
UFS UV

Office of the Vice-Rector: Research and Internationalisation
Kantoor van die Visrektor: Navorsing en Internasionalisering

25-Nov-2020

Dear Mr Benedict Macwele

UFS AUTHORITIES APPROVAL

Research Project Title:
An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study

This letter serves as confirmation that your request to collect data from students and/or staff members at the University of the Free State for your research project has been approved **provided that you also have ethical clearance for the research from the ethics committee at the University of the Free State.**

Please make sure that you also obtain your ethics clearance letter containing your reference number from the ethics committee after you have received this letter before you conduct your research.

Kind Regards

PROF RC WITTHUHN
VICE-RECTOR: RESEARCH & INTERNATIONALISATION
CHAIR: SENATE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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[6] *For confidentiality reasons, I am unable to include the analysed documents from these institutions as attachments. However, if requested, these documents can be made available to examiners for examination purposes.*

Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support
Durban University of Technology
Tromso Annexe, Steve Biko Campus
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20th April 2021
Mr Mathole Macwele
c/o School of Higher Education Studies
Faculty of Education
University of the Free State

Dear Mr Macwele

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE DUT

Your email correspondence in respect of the above refers. I am pleased to inform you that the Institutional Research and Innovation Committee (IRIC) has granted **Full Permission** for you to conduct your research "An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study" at the Durban University of Technology.

The DUT may impose any other condition it deems appropriate in the circumstances having regard to nature and extent of access to and use of information requested.

We would be grateful if a summary of your key research findings would be submitted to the IRIC on completion of your studies.

Kindest regards.
Yours sincerely

DR LINDA ZIKHONA LINGANISO
DIRECTOR: RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT DIRECTORATE

NELSON MANDELA
UNIVERSITY

PO Box 77000, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, 6031, South Africa mandela.ac.za

Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee (Human)
Tel: +27 (0)41 504 2347
Sharlene.Govender@mandela.ac.za

NHREC registration nr: REC-042508-025

Ref: [H21-EDU-ERE-EAP-002]

24 May 2021

Dear Dr Holtzhausen

TITLE: **AN INTEGRATED FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENT NETWORK FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY**

PRP: Dr SM Holtzhausen
PI: Mr M Macwele

Your application for ethics approval to conduct research at Nelson Mandela University has been considered by the REC-H on the basis that the study has been duly vetted and approved by the University of the Free State (UFS) Ethics Committee.

Kindly use the following ethics reference number **H21-EDU-ERE-EAP-002** together with your University's ethics clearance number in any correspondence with gatekeepers and participants at the University. Ethics clearance is valid for one year.

Please inform the REC-H, of any changes that may arise during the execution of the study, particularly to the methodology.

It must be noted that the Nelson Mandela University assumes that the Research Ethics Committee responsible for providing the original ethics approval/clearance has undertaken both ethics and scientific review of the protocol according to the National Health Research Ethics Committee (2015) Guidelines, and assumes primary responsibility for oversight with regard to any ethical issues that may arise in the course of the study. The Nelson Mandela University would also wish to be provided with an executive summary of the findings from the research.

We wish you well with the project.

Yours sincerely

Govender

Dr S Govender
Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee (Human)

cc: Department of Research Development

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520
Tel: +2718 299-1111/2222
Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za
Research Data Gatekeeper Committee

NWU RDGC PERMISSION GRANTED / DENIED LETTER

Based on the documentation provided by the researcher specified below, on 22/02/2021 the NWU Research Data Gatekeeper Committee (NWU-RDGC) hereby grants permission for the specific project (as indicated below) to be conducted at the North-West University (NWU):

Project title: An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study.

Project leader: Dr S Holtzhausen
Researcher/Project Team: B.M. Macwele

Ethics reference no: -
NWU RDGC reference no: NWU-GK-21-006

Specific Conditions:

- Due the COVID-19 pandemics the Committee would like to advice the researcher to practice the necessary caution and adhere to the National Covid-19 Guidelines when conducting research with participants.
- The researcher may approach the various Directors within the NWU management who are the document owners of the designated documents the researcher wishes to use as part of their data collection. If these documents are in the public domain, it is not necessary to request permission to make us of the documents.

Approval date: 22/02/2021 **Expiry date: 21/02/2022**

General Conditions of Approval:

- The NWU-RDGC will not take the responsibility to recruit research participants or to gather data on behalf of the researcher. This committee can therefore not guarantee the participation of our relevant stakeholders.
- Any changes to the research protocol within the permission period (for a maximum of 1 year) must be communicated to the NWU-RDGC. Failure to do so will lead to withdrawal of the permission.
- The NWU-RDGC should be provided with a report or document in which the results of said project are disseminated.

Please note that under no circumstances will any personal information of possible research subjects be provided to the researcher by the NWU RDGC. The NWU complies with the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA) as well as the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI). For an application to access such information please contact Ms Annamarie De Kock (018 285 2771) for the relevant enquiry form or more information on how the NWU complies with PAIA and POPI.

The NWU RDGC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU RDGC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance

Yours sincerely

Prof Marlene Verhoef
Chairperson NWU Research Data Gatekeeper Committee

Original details: (22351930) C:\Users\22351930\Desktop\test 2.docm
13 November 2018

Current details: (22351930) M:\DS\16503\Monitoring and Reporting Cluster\Ethics\Applications RDGC\Updated RDGC Permission Letter.docm
15 November 2018

File reference: 1.1.4.3

Tshwane University of Technology
We empower people

Research Ethics Committee

The TUT Research Ethics Committee is a registered Institutional Review Board (IRB 00005968) with the US Office for Human Research Protections (IORG# 0004997) (Expires 23 Jan 2021). Also, it has Federal Wide Assurance for the Protection of Human Subjects for International Institutions (FWA 00011501). In South Africa it is registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-160509-21).

May 3, 2021

REC Ref #: REC/2021/02/004
Name: Macwele BM
Student #: 2018287900, UFS

Mr BM Macwele
C/o Dr SM Holtzhausen
School of Higher Education Studies
University of Free State

Dear Mr Macwele,

Decision:No Ethical Approval Required

Name: Macwele BM
Project title: *An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study*
Qualification: Doctoral degree, University of Free State
Supervisor: Dr SM Holtzhausen
Co-supervisor: Dr WP Wahl

Thank you for submitting the revised project documents for review by the Research Ethics Committee (REC), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). In reviewing the documents, the comments and notes below are tabled for your consideration, attention and/or notification:

- **Proposal**
  - **Data Collection, (Section 7).** The initial documents requested are in the public domain, but the documents mentioned above (in the resubmission) are not specifically titled or requested, and will have to be described with more clarity when the decision is made to request these from the TUT environment.

The Research Ethics Committee, Tshwane University of Technology, reviewed the revised project documents at its meeting on April 19, 2021. **No ethical approval** is required.

Yours sincerely,

TS Ramukumba (Prof)
Deputy Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee
[TUTRef#2021-02-004-MacweleBM]

RE: Application to conduct research at the University of Johannesburg (UJ)

GL Govender, Lee-Anne <lee-anneg@uj.ac.za>
To Mathole Macwele
Cc Proposal, Research; Burger, Kinta; Helani, Godfrey
You replied to this message on 2021/06/18 16:01.

Dear Mr Macwele

The Registrar has confirmed that you may utilise the information on the Annual Reports displayed on the UJ website. Herewith the link Annual Reports (uj.ac.za)

You may also contact Mr Godfrey Helani for additional information on Student Affairs. Please note that UJ is only allowed to share de-identifiable data.

Regards
Lee-Anne

Ms Lee-Anne Govender
Director
Corporate Governance
Telephone: 011 559 4894
E-mail: lee-anneg@uj.ac.za
Website: www.uj.ac.za
Office: A Ring 405, Kingsway Campus, Auckland Park

UNIVERSITEIT • STELLENBOSCH • UNIVERSITY
jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

INSTITUTIONAL PERMISSION:

AGREEMENT ON USE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION IN RESEARCH

Name of Researcher: Benedict Mathole Macwele

Name of Research Project: An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study

Service Desk ID: IRPSD-1970

Date of Issue: 17 December 2020

The researcher has received institutional permission to proceed with this project as stipulated in the institutional permission application and within the conditions set out in this agreement.

1 WHAT THIS AGREEMENT IS ABOUT	
What is POPI?	1.1 POPI is the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013. 1.2 POPI regulates the entire information life cycle from collection, through use and storage and even the destruction of personal information.
Why is this important to us?	1.3 Even though POPI is important, it is not the primary motivation for this agreement. The privacy of our students and employees are important to us. We want to ensure that no research project poses any risks to their privacy. 1.4 However, you are required to familiarise yourself with, and comply with POPI in its entirety.
What is considered to be personal information?	1.5 'Personal information' means information relating to an identifiable, living, individual or company, including, but not limited to: 1.5.1 information relating to the race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, national, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental health, well-being, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth of the person; 1.5.2 information relating to the education or the medical, financial, criminal or

	employment history of the person; 1.5.3 any identifying number, symbol, e-mail address, physical address, telephone number, location information, online identifier or other particular assignment to the person; 1.5.4 the biometric information of the person; 1.5.5 the personal opinions, views or preferences of the person; 1.5.6 correspondence sent by the person that is implicitly or explicitly of a private or confidential nature or further correspondence that would reveal the contents of the original correspondence; 1.5.7 the views or opinions of another individual about the person; and 1.5.8 the name of the person if it appears with other personal information relating to the person or if the disclosure of the name itself would reveal information about the person.
Some personal information is more sensitive.	1.6 Some personal information is considered to be sensitive either because: 1.6.1 POPI has classified it as sensitive; 1.6.2 if the information is disclosed it can be used to defraud someone; or 1.6.3 the disclosure of the information will be embarrassing for the research subject. 1.7 The following personal information is considered particularly sensitive: 1.7.1 Religious or philosophical beliefs; 1.7.2 race or ethnic origin; 1.7.3 trade union membership; 1.7.4 political persuasion; 1.7.5 health and health related documentation such as medical scheme documentation; 1.7.6 sex life; 1.7.7 biometric information; 1.7.8 criminal behaviour; 1.7.9 personal information of children under the age of 18; 1.7.10 financial information such as banking details, details relating to financial

	products such as insurance, pension funds or other investments. 1.8 You may make use of this type of information, but must take extra care to ensure that you comply with the rest of the rules in this document.
2 COMMITMENT TO ETHICAL AND LEGAL RESEARCH PRACTICES	
You must commit to the use of ethical and legal research practices.	2.1 You must obtain ethical clearance before commencing with this study. 2.2 You commit to only employing ethical and legal research practices.
You must protect the privacy of your research subjects.	2.3 You undertake to protect the privacy of the research subjects throughout the project.
3 RESEARCH SUBJECT PARTICIPATION	
Personal information of identifiable research subjects must not be used without their consent.	3.1 Unless you have obtained a specific exemption for your research project, consent must be obtained in writing from the research subject, before their personal information is gathered.
Research subjects must be able to withdraw from the research project.	3.2 Research subjects must always be able to withdraw from the research project (without any negative consequences) and to insist that you destroy their personal information.
Consent must be specific and informed.	3.3 Unless you have obtained a specific exemption for your research project, the consent must be specific and informed. Before giving consent, the research subject must be informed in writing of: 3.3.1 The purpose of the research, 3.3.2 what personal information about them will be collected (particularly sensitive personal information), 3.3.3 how the personal information will be collected (if not directly from them), 3.3.4 the specific purposes for which the personal information will be used, 3.3.5 what participation will entail (i.e. what the research subject will have to do), 3.3.6 whether the supply of the personal information is voluntary or mandatory for purposes of the research project,

	3.3.7 who the personal information will be shared with, 3.3.8 how the personal information will be published, 3.3.9 the risks to participation (if any), 3.3.10 their rights to access, correct or object to the use of their personal information, 3.3.11 their right to withdraw from the research project, and 3.3.12 how these rights can be exercised.
Consent must be voluntary.	3.4 Participation in the research project must always be voluntary. You must never pressure or coerce research subjects into participating and persons who choose not to participate must not be penalised.
Using the personal information of children?	3.5 A child is anybody under the age of 18. 3.6 Unless you have obtained a specific exemption in writing for your research project, you must obtain 3.6.1 the consent of the child's parent or guardian, and 3.6.2 if the child is over the age of 7, the assent of the child, before collecting the child's information.
Research subjects have a right to access.	3.7 Research subjects have the right to access their personal information, obtain confirmation of what information is in your possession and who had access to the information. It is strongly recommended that you keep detailed records of access to the information.
Research subjects have a right to object.	3.8 Research subjects have the right to object to the use of their personal information. 3.9 Once they have objected, you are not permitted to use the personal information until the dispute has been resolved.
4 COLLECTING PERSONAL INFORMATION	
Only collect what is necessary.	4.1 You must not collect unnecessary or irrelevant personal information from research subjects.
Only collect accurate personal information.	4.2 You have an obligation to ensure that the personal information you collect is accurate. Particularly when you are collecting it from a source other than the

	research subject. 4.3 If you have any reason to doubt the quality of the personal information you must verify or validate the personal information before you use it.
5 USING PERSONAL INFORMATION	
Only use the personal information for the purpose for which you collected it.	5.1 Only use the personal information for the purpose for which you collected it. 5.2 If your research project requires you to use the personal information for a materially different purpose than the one communicated to the research subject, you must inform the research subjects and Stellenbosch University of this and give participants the option to withdraw from the research project.
Be careful when you share personal information.	5.3 Never share personal information with third parties without making sure that they will also follow these rules. 5.4 Always conclude a non-disclosure agreement with the third parties. 5.5 Ensure that you transfer the personal information securely.
Personal information must be anonymous whenever possible.	5.6 If the research subject's identity is not relevant for the aims of the research project, the personal information must not be identifiable. In other words, the personal information must be anonymous (de-identified).
Pseudonyms must be used whenever possible.	5.7 If the research subject's identity is relevant for the aims of the research project or is required to co-ordinate, for example, interviews, names and other identifiers such as ID or student numbers must be collected and stored separately from the rest of the research data and research publications. In other words, only you must be able to identify the research subject.
Publication of research	5.8 The identity of your research subjects should not be revealed in any publication. 5.9 In the event that your research project requires that the identity of your research subjects must be revealed, you must apply for an exemption from this rule.
6 SECURING PERSONAL INFORMATION	
You are responsible for the confidentiality and security of the personal information	6.1 Information must always be handled in the strictest confidence. 6.2 You must ensure the integrity and security of the information in your possession or under your control by taking appropriate and reasonable technical and organisational measures to prevent:

	6.2.1 Loss of, damage to or unauthorised destruction of information; and 6.2.2 unlawful access to or processing of information. 6.3 This means that you must take reasonable measures to: 6.3.1 Identify all reasonably foreseeable internal and external risks to personal information in your possession or under your control; 6.3.2 establish and maintain appropriate safeguards against the risks identified; 6.3.3 regularly verify that the safeguards are effectively implemented; and 6.3.4 ensure that the safeguards are continually updated in response to new risks or deficiencies in previously implemented safeguards.
Sensitive personal information requires extra care.	6.4 You will be expected to implement additional controls in order to secure sensitive personal information.
Are you sending any personal information overseas?	6.5 If you are sending personal information overseas, you have to make sure that: 6.5.1 The information will be protected by the laws of that country; 6.5.2 the company or institution to who you are sending have agreed to keep the information confidential, secure and to not use it for any other purpose; or 6.5.3 get the specific and informed consent of the research subject to send the information to a country which does not have data protection laws.
Be careful when you use cloud storage.	6.6 Be careful when storing personal information in a cloud. Many clouds are hosted on servers outside of South Africa in countries that do not protect personal information to the same extent as South Africa. The primary example of this is the United States. 6.7 It is strongly recommended that you use hosting companies who house their servers in South Africa. 6.8 If this is not possible, you must ensure that the hosting company agrees to protect the personal information to the same extent as South Africa.
7 RETENTION AND DESTRUCTION OF PERSONAL INFORMATION	
You are not entitled to retain personal information when you no longer need it for the purposes	7.1 Personal information must not be retained beyond the purpose of the research project, unless you have a legal or other justification for retaining the information.

of the research project.	
If personal information is retained, you must make sure it remains confidential.	7.2 If you do need to retain the personal information, you must assess whether: 7.2.1 The records can be de-identified; and/or whether 7.2.2 you have to keep all the personal information. 7.3 You must ensure that the personal information which you retain remains confidential, secure and is only used for the purposes for which it was collected.
8 INFORMATION BREACH PROCEDURE	
In the event of an information breach you must notify us immediately.	8.1 If there are reasonable grounds to believe that the personal information in your possession or under your control has been accessed by any unauthorised person or has been disclosed, you must notify us immediately. 8.2 We will notify the research subjects in order to enable them to take measures to contain the impact of the breach.
This is the procedure you must follow.	8.3 You must follow the following procedure: 8.3.1 Contact the Division for Institutional Research and Planning at 021 808 9385 and permission@sun.ac.za; 8.3.2 you will then be required to complete the information breach report form which is attached as Annexure A. 8.4 You are required to inform us of a information breach within 24 hours. Ensure that you have access to the required information.
9 MONITORING	
You may be audited.	9.1 We reserve the right to audit your research practices to assess whether you are complying with this agreement. 9.2 You are required to give your full co-operation during the auditing process. 9.3 We may also request to review: 9.3.1 Forms (or other information gathering methods) and notifications to research subjects, as referred to in clause 3; 9.3.2 non-disclosure agreements with third parties with whom the personal information is being shared, as referred to in clause 5.4;

	9.3.3 agreements with foreign companies or institutes with whom the personal information is being shared, as referred to in clause 6.5.
10 CHANGES TO RESEARCH	
You need to notify us if any aspect of your collection or use of personal information changes.	10.1 You must notify us in writing if any aspect of your collection or use of personal information changes (e.g. such as your research methodology, recruitment strategy or the purpose for which you use the research). 10.2 We may review and require amendments to the proposed changes to ensure compliance with this agreement. 10.3 The notification must be sent to permission@sun.ac.za.
11 CONSEQUENCES OF BREACH	
What are the consequences of breaching this agreement?	11.1 If you do not comply with this agreement, we may take disciplinary action or report such a breach to your home institute. 11.2 You may be found guilty of research misconduct and may be censured in accordance with Stellenbosch University or your home institute's disciplinary code.
You may have to compensate us in the event of any legal action.	11.3 Non-compliance with this agreement could also lead to claims against Stellenbosch University in terms of POPI and/or other laws. 11.4 Unless you are employed by or studying at Stellenbosch University, you indemnify Stellenbosch University against any claims (including all legal fees) from research subjects or any regulatory authority which are the result of your research project. You may also be held liable for the harm to our reputation should there be an information breach as a result of your non-compliance with this agreement.
12 CONTACT US	
Please contact us if you have any questions.	Should you have any questions relating to this agreement you should contact permission@sun.ac.za.

Annexure 'A'

Instruction:

Please send this Notice to permission@sun.ac.za. If you have any difficulty completing the Notice, please contact the Division for Institutional Research and Planning at 021 808 9385. You must confirm that the Notice was received.

NOTIFICATION OF INFORMATION BREACH

Name of Researcher: _____

Name of Research Project: _____

Service Desk ID: _____

A security breach happens when you know (or you **reasonably believe**) that there has been:

(a) loss of Personal Information ("PI")
(b) damage to PI
(c) unauthorised destruction of PI
(d) unauthorised access to PI
(e) unauthorised processing of PI

Date and time of security breach:	
Brief description of the security breach (what was lost and how). Please identify the equipment, software and/or physical premises and whether it is by hacking, lost device, public disclosure (email), theft or other means:	
Name of the person/s responsible for the security breach (if known):	
Is the security breach ongoing?	
Describe the steps taken to contain the security breach:	
What steps are being taken to investigate the cause of breach?	

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM DATE

14 June 2022

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Mathole Macwele 2018287900 051 401 9847

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of Education: School of Higher Education Studies

STUDY LEADER(S)' NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Main Supervisor: Dr S.M. Holtzhausen, X2046; Co-supervisor: Dr W.P. Wahl, X2819

WHAT IS THE AIM/PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study aimed to develop a framework for a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students that could address their academic, emotional, and social needs.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I am a doctoral candidate at the UFS. I also work as an Institutional Researcher in the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning at the UFS.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

Yes

Approval number: UFS-HSD2020/1434/0911

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You have been invited to participate in the study on the grounds of being a student at the UFS. You have been selected because of your ability to provide insights into matters related to the experiences of first-year commuting students concerning peer mentorship support at the UFS. You will form part of a focus-group discussion where you will be grouped with fellow first-year commuting students.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The focus-group discussions involve audio taping. You will be asked open-ended questions and you are expected to respond to the questions asked by the researcher. It is anticipated that the discussion will take one hour. The study is anonymous and voluntary; the researcher will ensure that your details and audio recordings are stored in a secured environment in accordance with the UFS ethical regulations.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and there are no penalties for withdrawing or opting out of the study. However, once the focus-group discussion has been concluded, it will not be possible to withdraw or correct any written and recorded statements. The focus-group discussions will be digitally recorded and transcribed to inform the research analysis. You will not be named in any publications related to this study. There are no direct benefits for participating in the study. If you do decide to take part, you will be given the study's information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a written consent form.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There are no monetary benefits from participating in this study. This study aims to contribute to the development of commuter student success and networks, while also contributing to the achievement of UFS student success goals in the UFS

Strategic Plan 2018–2022 and Learning and Teaching Strategy 2019–2024. Therefore, I envisage that as a first-year commuter student, you will benefit from the study findings.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The researcher will ensure that information or data gathered from participants will not be divulged to a third party. Furthermore, this study will protect your identity by encouraging the use of pseudonyms to assure the anonymity of your provided information. In order to minimise any potential level of inconvenience and discomfort, participants' anonymity will be maintained and protected in case of self-disclosure. In cases of emotional discomfort by any participant pertaining to any issues being discussed, they will be encouraged to make use of the appropriate UFS support service for counselling.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your name, student number will not be recorded, and no one will be able to connect you to your answers. Your responses and comments will be given a code, for example, P1 for participant 1 and P2 for participant 2. Moreover, FG1 will be used for focus-group 1 and FG2 will be used for focus-group 2. These codes will be used in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. I will transcribe the data and therefore no third party will have access to the original audio recordings. However, your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the members of the Research Ethics Committee. In any case, any person who is not working in the study will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. There may be publications in the form of journal articles, conference presentations, or books, however, the researcher will maintain and protect your anonymity by not sharing your identity in these platforms. This study uses the focus-group data collection method. A focus group is a gathering of a few people who usually share common

characteristics such as age, background, geography, etc. The set comes together to discuss a predetermined topic. In a focus group, there is free expression of opinion, thoughts or views, even if they differ from yours. Please note that you will be exposed to other participants in your focus-group discussion. While every effort will be made by the researcher to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the focus-group discussion, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat your information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I advise you not to disclose personally sensitive information in the focus group.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

Any hardcopies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at the UFS's Main Building storage for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval, if applicable. Once the five years have elapsed, papers and electronic data will be shredded and deleted.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There is no monetary payment for participating in this study. There are no anticipated costs incurred by the participants. The researcher will conduct virtual focus-group discussions via Microsoft Teams.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Mathole Macwele, at 0514019847 or Macwelebm@gmail.com. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Mathole Macwele, at 0514019847 or Macwelebm@gmail.com. Should you have concerns about the way in which the

research has been conducted, you may contact Dr SM Holtzhausen, at 0514012046 or HoltzhSM@ufs.ac.za. The possible risk to you in taking part in this study is the emotional aspect related to your experience as a first-year commuter student in the UFS and if you experience such a thing, I will encourage you to use the appropriate UFS support service for counselling.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I,_____(participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am preparedto participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I amfree to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findingsof this study will be processed anonymously into a research report, journal publicationsand/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the focus-group discussion.

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): _

_____

Signature of Researcher:

_____

Date

APPENDIX C: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA

UFS UV

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

05-Jul-2021

Dear Mr Benedict Macwele

Application Approved

Research Project Title:
An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study

Ethical Clearance number:
UFS-HSD2020/1434/0911/21

We are pleased to inform you that your application for 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

Adri du Plessis
Digitally signed by Adri du Plessis
Date: 2021.07.06 10:20:25 +02'00'

205 Nelson Mandela Drive
Park West
Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

P.O. Box 339
Bloemfontein 9300
Tel: +27 (0)51 401 9337
duplessisA@ufs.ac.za
www.ufs.ac.za

APPENDIX C1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE RENEWAL 2022

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA
UFS UV

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

17-Jun-2022

Dear Mr Benedict Macwele

Continuation/Report Approved

Research Project Title:
An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study

Ethical Clearance number:
UFS-HSD2020/1434/0911/21/22

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

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APPENDIX C2: ETHICAL CLEARANCE RENEWAL 2023

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
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YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA
UFS UV

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

15-Mar-2023

Dear Mr Benedict Macwele

Continuation/Report Approved

Research Project Title:
An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study

Ethical Clearance number:
UFS-HSD2020/1434/0911/21/22/23

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

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APPENDIX C3: ETHICAL CLEARANCE RENEWAL 2024

UNIVERSITY OF THE
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VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA

UFS

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

17-Apr-2024

Dear Mr Benedict Macwele

Continuation/Report Approved

Research Project Title:
An integrated first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study

Ethical Clearance number:
UFS-HSD2020/1434/0911/21/22/23

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.

Please complete a finalisation report as new further data collection is planned. The ethics number stays valid after finalisation.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sean van der Merwe
Vice-Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

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APPENDIX D: FOCUS-GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Title of the study:	A first-year commuter student network framework for student success: A case study
Principal	Mathole Macwele
Supervisor:	Dr S.M. Holtzhausen
Co-supervisor:	Dr W.P. Wahl

Dear Focus-Group Participant(s)

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. As I have already indicated, this study aims to develop a framework for a supportive peer network for first-year commuter students that could address their academic, emotional, and social needs. The focus-group discussion will consist of four sections to address this topic, namely academic integration, social integration, emotional support, and peer mentor programme. Each of these four sections consists of its own set of questions. Please be at ease, because I will guide you step-by-step through these questions.

SECTION 1: ACADEMIC INTEGRATION

1.1 Would you say the peer mentors assisted you in dealing with the academic transition from high school to university? Please motivate. (*What did you notice as the difference between university and high school in your first-year studies?*)

1.2 As a first-year student, could you share insights into your academic journey while commuting? Please explain. (*Now, as a first-year student, tell me about your academic experience.*)

1.3 What support from the peer mentor programme did you find the most helpful in enabling you to cope with academic challenges? Please motivate. (*If you were running the programme, what topics would you include?*)

1.4 Would you say peer mentors helped you develop success strategies? (*dealing with challenging curricula, meeting critical deadlines, gaining confidence*). Please explain.

SECTION 2: SOCIAL INTEGRATION

2.1 Could you share insights about your social experience *(e.g. making friends, attending social events*) as a commuting student? Please elaborate.

2.2 Would you say the peer mentor programme helped you to feel welcome and make friends? Please elaborate.

SECTION 3: EMOTIONAL INTEGRATION

3.1 As a commuting student, could you share insights about your emotional experience (*e.g. stress, the anxiety of a new place, homesickness, feeling lonely*) that you had to deal with in in order to integrate successfully to university? Please motivate

3.2 Would you say the peer mentors helped you cope with emotional adjustment to the new university environment? Please motivate.

SECTION 4: PEER MENTOR PROGRAMME

4.1 If you were to recommend the peer mentor programme to others, what would you say are the most significant benefits of participating in this programme as a commuting student?

4.2 Would you recommend that the UFS has a separate peer mentor programme dedicated to first-year commuting students? Please elaborate.

4.3 What things did you experience, while participating in the peer mentor programme that did not work optimally in the peer mentor programme? Please elaborate (*e.g. schedule, content covered, relationship with mentors*).

APPENDIX E: LANGUAGE EDITING

CORNELIA GELDENHUYS

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17 August 2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Herewith I, **Cornelia Geldenhuys (ID 521114 0083 088)** declare that I am a qualified, accredited language practitioner and that I have edited the following PhD thesis:

AN INTEGRATED FIRST-YEAR COMMUTER STUDENT NETWORK FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY

by

Benedict Mathole Macwele

2018287900

All changes were indicated by track changes and comments **for the author to verify, clarify aspects that are unclear, make the necessary adjustments and finalise.** The editor takes no responsibility in the instance of this not being done. The document remains the final responsibility of the author.

.....
C GELDENHUYS
MA (Lin) cum laude, MA (Mus), BA Hons (French), HED, HDL, UELM

Accredited member/Geakkrediteerde lid, SATI, Membership/Lidmaatskap: 1001474 (A/E-E/A)
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