



# Self-compassion as a Mechanism to Facilitate the Adjustment of first-year Students to University Environments

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Accepted: 12 September 2023  
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## Abstract

Despite high enrolment rates at higher education institutions, a perturbing number of first-year university students discontinue their studies. As first-year students constitute a vulnerable group, it is important to investigate ways in which to facilitate their adjustment to university. Extant research within student populations, including first-year students, deems self-compassion to be a robust protective factor in adjustment to university. However, studies rely largely on quantitative research designs, overlooking the voices and everyday experiences of first-year students. Accordingly, this study aimed to qualitatively explore experiences and practices of self-compassion amongst first-year students when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university. To capture in-depth, rich, thick contextual data, 12 South African first-year students participated in semi-structured interviews in their first semester, while follow-up interviews were conducted with 9 participants in the second semester. Themes generated through reflexive thematic analysis highlighted the yin and yang of self-compassion as a valuable conceptual tool to understand and promote first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion. Further, students' experiences of self-compassion are more nuanced and contradictory than previous research has indicated. Lastly, receiving social support and being self-compassionate constitute reciprocal processes that students engage with in distinct ways, affecting both the depth and breadth of their experiences. Based on this research, self-compassion is vital for strengths-based mental health programmes amongst first-year students. Programmes should promote the practice of the yin and the yang of self-compassion, foster an accepting approach to experiences, and recognise the nuanced, potentially contradictory nature of self-compassion.

**Keywords** First-year students · Freshmen · University students · Self-compassion · Adjusting to university · Positive psychology

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## 1 Introduction

Globally, university students are considered to be a key population for influencing economic growth, success and youth employment, not only of individual students but of nations at large (World Bank, 2021). The pursuit of higher education serves as a valuable extrinsic and intrinsic source of meaning to students, due to its promise of creating fulfilling career opportunities (Nell, 2014). Increasingly, higher education institutions such as universities are being recognised as integrated settings where health, well-being and flourishing can be promoted so as to maximise academic outcomes, facilitate career transitions, and foster lifelong positive health behaviours (Sanci et al., 2022).

Research consistently indicates that students who experience difficulty with adjusting to university are at greater risk of terminating their studies in their first and second years of study (Behr et al., 2020; Daniels et al., 2019). For instance, between 2016 and 2017, 6.3% of first-year students in the United Kingdom dropped out of university (Study International, 2020). In addition, between the fall semesters of 2019 and 2020, 24.1% of all first-time full time American freshmen discontinued their studies (Hanson, 2022).

Further, there is a curious paucity of recent statistics regarding dropout rates amongst first year South African students. However, available data from the South African National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition has indicated that between 50% and 60% of undergraduate students drop out during their first year of study (Van Zyl cited in Nkosi, 2015). Such high dropout rates amongst first-year students have detrimental consequences for the economy, higher education institutions and individual students (Mtshweni, 2022).

While adjusting to university, students must negotiate the developmental tasks associated with young adulthood. In so doing, they tend to experience a range of personal development- and growth-opportunities (Owens et al., 2021). However, during their first year, students may simultaneously experience challenges that, if unaddressed, can lead to psychological distress, poor academic performance and a decline in well-being (Conley et al., 2013; McGhie, 2017), for which they may require mental health support (Arnett, 2014; Mason, 2013).

Typical challenges that students face as part of the process of adjusting to university include a lack of social support, loneliness, homesickness amongst those who moved to attend university, demanding academic workloads, financial difficulties, and worry about future debt (Conley et al., 2013; Fook & Sidhu, 2015; Moosa & Langsford, 2021). Students might also experience a diminished sense of competence (Hailikari et al., 2016), as well as difficulty settling into university life and finding their place and role in the new social and academic setting (Mudhovozi, 2012; Nel et al., 2016).

In developing countries like South Africa students tend to experience context-specific challenges such as entering university from positions of inequality in terms of race, schooling, class, and socio-economic resources (Chetty & Pather, 2015; Pather et al., 2017). Further, they might have unfulfilled expectations that can negatively influence their academic performance (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018), as well as poor time management and personal motivation (McGhie, 2017). Students might also

experience difficulty with adjusting to a multiracial and cultural society (Chetty & Pather, 2015).

The aforementioned challenges tend to influence students' experiences of adjusting to university and render first-year students a particularly vulnerable group. Indeed, epidemiological studies have consistently highlighted the prevalence of common mental disorders and suicidal behaviour amongst undergraduate students as a global concern, even predating the COVID-19 pandemic (Alonso et al., 2009; Auerbach et al., 2016; Kiekens et al., 2021).

Specifically, a pre-COVID-19 survey with students from 19 universities across eight countries (Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Spain, USA) revealed 12-month prevalence rates of 35% for at least one common mental disorder amongst first-year students (Auerbach et al., 2018). In addition, 12-month prevalence rates of 17.2% for suicidal ideation, 8.8% for suicidal plans, and 1.0% for suicide attempts were determined (Mortier et al., 2018).

In particular, results from the recent South African national student survey with undergraduate students from 17 universities revealed 30-day prevalence rates of 37.1% for anxiety disorders, 38.7% for disruptive behaviour disorders, 16.3% for mood disorders, and 6.6% for substance use disorders (Bantjes et al., 2023c). Further, survey data from first-year students at two South African universities showed combined 12-month prevalence rates of 53.7% and 58.5% for major depressive episode, generalised anxiety disorder, and suicidal ideation (Bantjes et al., 2023b).

While the above-mentioned studies position the prevalence of common mental disorders as a global concern, some researchers argue that the focus should shift towards understanding how students succeed despite their challenges (Bantjes et al., 2023a; Bantjes et al., 2023b). Understandably, common symptoms of mental disorders, which have been associated with substantial social and academic impairments, can place first-year students at risk for dropping out of university (Alonso et al., 2009; Bantjes et al., 2020; Bruffaerts et al., 2018). However, Bantjes et al. (2023a) warn that following a crisis narrative regarding student mental health may risk portraying the everyday stressors and vicissitudes of life as pathological, thus overlooking student resilience.

Bantjes et al. (2023b) also emphasize the importance of creating effective, accessible mental health interventions on campuses to enhance student wellness. It is therefore vital to consider potential protective factors that could reduce students' vulnerability to mental health difficulties and facilitate their adjustment to university environments whilst promoting their well-being. Accordingly, self-compassion is of particular relevance for the current study.

Seminal author Neff (2003a) asserts that the theoretical underpinnings of self-compassion are not based on performance evaluations of self or others to meet ideal standards, but rather on adopting feelings of compassion in recognition of common humanity. In terms of Neff's (2003a) model, self-compassion consists of three facets, namely, self-kindness versus self-judgement, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification.

Self-compassion entails the ability to adopt a caring and compassionate attitude toward oneself, recognize one's experience as part of shared human experience, and bring non-judgmental awareness to one's painful thoughts and experiences instead

of over-identifying them (Neff, 2003a). In contrast, a lack of self-compassion could entail an individual's harsh judgement of themselves, perceiving their experiences as abnormal and avoiding or over-identifying with their emotions (Germer & Neff, 2019). Although the facets of self-compassion are distinct, they enhance and impact one another (Neff, 2003b, 2023), with a self-compassionate frame of mind being created through the interactions and combinations of the three facets (Germer & Neff, 2019).

Neff and Germer (2018, p. 38) coined the phrase the “yin and yang of self-compassion” to understand the nuanced nature of self-compassion as a construct. The yin of self-compassion involves “being” with oneself, whereas the yang of self-compassion involves acting in the world in an empowered manner (Neff & Germer, 2018). These processes further entail the relevant actions that individuals engage in to be self-compassionate, either by soothing themselves and allowing the experience of emotions, or actively trying to do something about the situation. Further, Neff's (2018, 2021) concept of fierce self-compassion declares that self-compassion is not only about validating and soothing oneself, but also about taking empowered action. It can therefore be argued that self-compassion not only applies to engaging in self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, but also to being motivated and empowered in the face of challenges.

Importantly, self-compassion has been found to increase an individual's capacity to build coping mechanisms that enhance their ability to thrive in negative emotional states, ultimately leading to benefits such as higher levels of life satisfaction, emotional intelligence, social connectedness and a heightened sense of well-being (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Of particular relevance to the current study, research consistently indicates that self-compassion has the potential to enhance a number of known protective factors that can aid students during the process of adjusting to their first year at university. Highlighted protective factors include a sense of community and belonging, greater perceived social support, optimism, perceived competence, and the use of cognitive reappraisal when faced with unpleasant experiences (Brodar et al., 2015; Doorley et al., 2022; Neff & Germer, 2017; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019; Wang & Lou, 2022). As Poots and Cassidy (2020) have postulated, self-compassion and social support mediate the relationship between academic stress and well-being.

Further, self-compassion has the potential to act as a buffer against challenges experienced while adjusting to university as it has been found to increase students' levels of well-being and reduce levels of anxiety, stress, and depression (Kotera et al., 2021; Kotera et al., 2022; Neff et al., 2018; Paucsik et al., 2022; Sünbül & Güneri, 2019). This protective function applies even when students experience chronic academic stress (Zhang et al., 2016) and feel burnt out due to academic demands (Lee & Lee, 2020). Specifically, self-compassion seems to assist students in adjusting to university life (Aini & Pratiwi, 2021; Aydin, 2023; Neff & Davidson, 2016; Scott & Donovan, 2021). As the preceding evidence indicates, being self-compassionate tends to have a noticeable impact on the emotions and thought processes that individuals experience during difficult times. Being kind to oneself in times of adversity might therefore lessen the intensity of negative emotions and generate more positive emotions.

Research on self-compassion in student populations has relied largely on quantitative research designs, consistently finding self-compassion to be a robust protective factor in adjustment to university (Brodar et al., 2015; Doorley et al., 2022; Neff & Davidson, 2016; Neff & Germer, 2017; Poots & Cassidy, 2020; Scott & Donovan, 2021; Viskovich & De George-Walker, 2019; Wang & Lou, 2022; Yu et al., 2023). Recently, Ferrari et al. (2022), have advocated for understanding self-compassionate behaviour as a system of interacting processes that may be influenced by time frame, current situation and the individual, thereby highlighting the value of researching individuals' everyday experiences. For this reason, it is important to qualitatively explore the potential protective role of self-compassion and the nuances that may underlie this mechanism to facilitate students' adjustment to university.

The study aimed to qualitatively explore first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university. Therefore, how first-year students experience self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university was explored. Two research questions are of interest. Firstly, how do first-year students experience the challenges posed by adjustment to university? Secondly, how do first-year students experience self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university?

## **2 Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

Twelve students were recruited through purposive sampling. In terms of inclusion criteria, we recruited participants who had registered for their first year at a South African university for the first time and were willing to be interviewed about their experiences. The students' disciplines included, but were not limited to, Psychology, Anthropology, Social Science, English, and Education. Participants were from various ethnic backgrounds (eight black, three white and one coloured participant), and their ages ranged from 19 to 29 years. Eight participants identified as female and four as male. All participants were invited to interviews via WhatsApp and e-mail messages.

### **2.2 Research Design**

This study utilised a qualitative approach to understand individuals' experiences in-depth and capture rich contextual data that entailed both consistencies and variations regarding their everyday lives (Yin, 2016). To assist in capturing participants' experiences, qualitative data which focused on meaning-making were collected. Thus, a qualitative approach, embedded in an exploratory and descriptive design (Willig, 2021) was utilised to explore and describe first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university environments.

## 2.3 Measures

### 2.3.1 Interview Schedule

Individual semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2013) were conducted to obtain rich, in-depth descriptions and insights into participants' experiences of self-compassion while adjusting to university. In their initial interviews, participants were provided with a vignette, a non-threatening short story about a hypothetical character in a particular realistic scenario with whom participants could identify (O'Dell et al., 2012). What follows entails an extract from the vignette that participants received:

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

The vignette was utilised as a tool to facilitate the interview process given that self-compassion is arguably a construct that would be unfamiliar to first-year students. Participants' reflections on the vignette character provided valuable data that would probably not have been voiced in response to initial interview questions focused solely on their personal experiences. Interview questions included: "What do you think happens next?", "What challenges are you currently experiencing at university?", "And when you think about these challenges, what thoughts are going through your mind?", as well as "Can you think of some ways in which you are unkind or kind towards yourself when you experience such challenges?".

In the follow up interviews, conducted in the second semester, interview questions included: "In our first interview, you mentioned that being aware that others are going through similar experiences could make a difference to you because \_\_\_\_\_. How (if at all) has this awareness helped you when faced with the challenges you experience at university?" and "What can one do to become more aware that others are going through similar experiences and challenges?".

## 2.4 Interview Procedure

Interviews were conducted by the second author at a quiet venue on campus on days and at times that were convenient for the participants. The duration of the interviews ranged between 25 and 60 min. Participants indicated that they were comfortable being interviewed in English, the official medium of instruction and functioning/teaching and learning at the university, although some were not English mother-tongue speakers. One participant responded in their mother-tongue, a language they shared with the interviewer.

While twelve students participated in the initial round of interviews conducted in the first semester, only nine of the students opted to participate in the follow-up interviews. The latter were scheduled during the second semester to allow for potential shifts in experiences of and adjustment to university life. Interviews were

audio-recorded, after written informed consent was obtained. Moreover, the data were transcribed verbatim.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen as an appropriate method as participants' experiences and their sense-making are prioritised, and the richness of the data, including nuances, minutiae, and complexities are focused on (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Data analysis entailed six recursive steps, commencing with data familiarisation and the generation of initial codes, followed by theme construction, revision, definition and naming, and culminating in the production of the research report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022).

As the researchers, we were instrumental in the data analysis process, and brought our own subjectivity and critical reflexivity to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). Our approach was predominantly inductive, as we remained surprised by the data, initially generating codes from the data organically, outside of existing theoretical frameworks. A degree of deductive analysis was also applied as we kept in mind theories and models of self-compassion and adjustment to university. Our interpretations of the data thus prioritised participants' meaning-making over our own theoretical knowledge, everyday experiences and personalised "tried-and-tested" practices of self-compassion. Arguably, in assuming an abductive approach (Reichertz, 2014) we generated richer, thicker interpretations and themes than we would have produced, had we adopted an exclusively inductive or deductive approach to the data. In this way, we were able to address our research questions comprehensively and creatively.

## 2.6 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical clearance was obtained from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State (Ethical clearance number: UFS-HSD2018/1118/1908/21). Trustworthiness was achieved through member checking, by keeping a research journal, providing a clear description of the methodology, and presenting rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences. Moreover, the researchers reviewed themes, discussed variations and dissimilarities, and agreed on the themes presented in this article. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in data reporting.

## 2.7 Findings

Three themes regarding first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university were generated during the data analysis process:

- The value of the yin and yang of self-compassion.
- Students' contradictory experiences of self-compassion.
- A reciprocal relationship between receiving social support and being self-compassionate.

## 2.8 Theme 1. The Value of the yin and yang of self-compassion

In the current study, students engaged in the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion, either directly or indirectly, to be more compassionate towards themselves. Indeed, it can be deduced that self-compassion has the potential to function as a protective mechanism when students experience vulnerability and feel emotionally exposed. Engaging in the yin and yang of self-compassion could potentially empower and protect students, as Alex shared:

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

Engaging in the yin and yang of self-compassion seems to have encouraged Alex to be more compassionate towards herself when she feels vulnerable. By speaking to individuals in her support system including family members and friends, Alex took action to protect herself against feeling overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions including disappointment. Moreover, by providing herself with what she needed, she was kinder and accepting of herself and her emotional experiences.

When the participants experienced vulnerability, engaging in the yin and yang of self-compassion also facilitated experiences of hope and empowerment. As Xolani stated:

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

Xolani experienced social adjustment as challenging because he found it difficult to interact with others. However, he showed self-compassion, comforting and soothing himself through positive self-talk, after he had a positive though stressful experience when engaging with his peers. Xolani adopted a balanced view of the situation by acknowledging that current experiences do not predict future experiences. In this way, he was able to motivate himself to interact with others whilst feeling emotionally exposed.

Participants' accounts highlighted nuanced experiences regarding how engaging with peers could contribute to becoming more self-compassionate. Based on the vignette, Daniel reflected that: "If you can make it out of it, I also can make it out of it" and "let me just find out how they did it". Thus, in Daniel's view, peers can be a motivational factor and a source of hope, assisting in transcending challenges.

Based on the data, an awareness of common humanity can motivate students to engage in problem-solving behaviour and help them to feel empowered when they feel vulnerable. Importantly, engaging in the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion can be conceptualised as having a twofold function: It first helps

students to be kind towards themselves instead of blaming themselves and, secondly, it empowers them to take action and experience a sense of hope.

## 2.9 Theme 2. Students' Contradictory Experiences of self-compassion

From the data, it became evident that participants had nuanced, contradictory experiences of self-compassion. At times, when faced with academic disappointment either in their own lives or as expressed in their responses to the vignette, the participants revealed that self-compassion indirectly helped them to cope more effectively with the challenges they faced. However, their accounts highlighted that they experienced positive and negative components of self-compassion simultaneously.

For instance, certain participants indicated that they responded mindfully to their challenges or became aware of their common humanity but still experienced isolation and self-judgement. Importantly, some participants' accounts highlighted that whenever they over-identified with harsh judgements, they soothed themselves by viewing their over-identification tendencies through a self-compassionate lens.

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

Michelle and Lebogang highlighted tensions between simultaneously being self-compassionate and engaging in help-seeking behaviour. Michelle shared: *"And then you're unsure, like, should I ask the lecturer for help or is she going to say no, you didn't study hard enough, so you afraid of that, rejection, in a sense."*

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

Similarly, Lebogang highlighted her contradictory experiences of self-compassion. In contrast to Michelle, however, she was more inclined to engage in help-seeking behaviour, as illustrated by her statement: *"Rather be stupid and ask for help than keep quiet."* Here, Lebogang adopted a negative judgement about her cognitive abilities while simultaneously wanting to engage in help-seeking behaviours. Her will-

ingness to engage in help-seeking behaviours could imply a belief in being capable of achieving academic success. Notably, she might not have been over-identifying with her judgements about herself and therefore appeared to be more willing to take self-compassionate action by asking for help. It therefore seems plausible that over-identification with harsh self-judgement influences whether students follow through on their intention to request help.

### **2.10 Theme 3. A Reciprocal Relationship Between Receiving Social Support and Being self-compassionate**

The participants indicated that receiving social support could reinforce their practices and experiences of self-compassion. This entailed their being more inclined to experience positive emotions on a regular basis, being mindful, and becoming aware of common humanity. For instance, Xolani shared:

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

Xolani lived with his mother and had access to her support whenever he struggled to cope with a challenge. When he ruminated on what he believed to be negative aspects of his experiences, his mother’s advice prompted him to adopt a mindful perspective. Arguably, engagement with his support system made Xolani more aware of his perceptions of a situation. The support he received from his mother guided him to be more mindful and, in this way, to soothe himself.

Importantly, experiencing self-compassion also assisted participants in recognising their peers and family as support systems. Alex, for example, shared:

*But then I took a step back and said: Just relax, it’s completely new, it’s all an adjustment. If you mess up, you’ll still have your friends and your family who will support you no matter what.*

When Alex adopted a mindful perspective regarding her experiences of adjusting to university, she became more aware of her family system as a source of emotional support. Acknowledging her own unrealistic expectations seems to have resulted in Alex being kinder to herself and viewing the situation more mindfully. She also became aware that she would still receive support from her friends and family even amid disappointment and perceived failure. Notably, for Alex, perceiving that her loved ones would support her unconditionally was more of a comfort than actually receiving their direct support. Self-compassion could thus potentially influence students’ perceptions of their support systems, serving as a valuable resource in their adjustment to university.

There were also notable variations in students’ levels of access to their support systems. Whether participants live with, are located close to, or are geographically distant, their families seemed to be a key factor in accessing social support. As Karabo shared:

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

Karabo experienced the support she received from her parents as less effective due to geographical distance. It is plausible that students' perceptions and beliefs about their experiences might influence how they perceive and receive support from others. Here, Karabo's perception that her family was inaccessible contributed to a sense of isolation. It is also plausible that she may have over-identified with the idea that she did not have anyone to talk to, thereby intensifying her feelings of isolation. In Karabo's case, a lack of perceived support could have led to an absence of self-compassion, while a lack of self-compassion could have prevented her from actively reaching out for support from her family or peers. This is noteworthy because students might find it more difficult to cope with challenges when they lack self-compassion, and are, in addition, reluctant to engage with their social support systems.

### 3 Discussion

This study aimed to explore first-year students' experiences and practices of self-compassion when faced with the challenges of adjusting to university. In so doing, how first-year students experience self-compassion as a possible mechanism to facilitate their adjustment to university was investigated. The findings highlight the value of the yin and yang of self-compassion in this context and further showcase students' experiences of self-compassion as nuanced and contradictory. Finally, the findings also reveal receiving social support and being self-compassionate to be reciprocal processes that they engage with in unique ways.

To elaborate, the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion could empower and protect students as they are able to be kinder to themselves, accept their emotional experiences mindfully, and reach out for support. Participants engaged either directly or indirectly in the yin and yang of self-compassion, which served as a protective mechanism against the challenges that they faced in adjusting to university.

Indeed, participants' efforts towards soothing and validating themselves when faced with academic and social difficulties were interpreted as engaging in the yin of self-compassion (Neff & Germer, 2018; Yarnell et al., 2019). Further, contacting their support systems, actively requesting help, and receiving support from family and friends constitute examples of participants simultaneously engaging in the yang of self-compassion (Neff & Germer, 2018; Yarnell et al., 2019), and practising fierce self-compassion (Neff, 2018, 2021).

Jarecki et al. (2020) assert that individuals might at times need the yin of self-compassion more, while at other times, the yang of self-compassion is required. However, both aspects lead to well-being and are necessary to develop the most balanced self-compassion in an individual (Neff, 2018; Yarnell et al., 2019). Arguably, engagement in these twin processes is necessary for optimal functioning amongst first-year students.

This study's findings align with Neff's view that, by taking cognisance of yin and yang aspects, both of which are required for optimal functioning, individuals are more motivated to take self-compassionate action when they are kinder to themselves (Neff, 2018; Neff & Narisetti, 2021). Moreover, Bruk and colleagues (2018, 2021) postulate that vulnerability is the willingness to be open to risk, uncertainty, and emotional exposure in situations despite fears, with self-compassion buffering against stress and anxiety in vulnerable situations.

Accordingly, it is plausible that the twin processes of the yin and yang of self-compassion could empower and protect students who feel emotionally exposed. Thus, it is argued that students would be more fully able to experience the yang of self-compassion, which includes taking action such as asking for help and reaching out to their support systems, after first engaging in the yin of self-compassion by comforting, validating, and soothing themselves when faced with challenges.

Another pertinent finding is that participants experienced both positive and negative facets of self-compassion simultaneously. Bayır-Toper et al. (2022) maintained that authenticity has a moderating effect on compassion for self and others. Moreover, the authors question the assumption that compassion for others starts with the self.

It is thus plausible that, in the context of the current study, reflecting on and showing compassion towards a peer that students can relate to also assisted them in being more self-compassionate. This might explain how awareness of common humanity could also be a way for students to soothe themselves after over-identifying with their adverse experiences.

Consequently, self-compassionate students could initially respond with a lack of self-compassion when faced with failure and disappointment. However, in so doing, they might become more aware of their common humanity. Thus, self-compassionate students might have a greater ability to respond to challenges by using their awareness of their common humanity to soothe themselves, even after initially over-identifying with their experiences.

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

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

Many participants alluded to experiencing tensions between being self-compassionate and engaging in help-seeking behaviour. Some participants who considered asking for help expressed negative self-judgements about their cognitive and

academic capabilities. However, not all the participants over-identified with their self-judgements.

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

While many participants in the current study were able to respond with self-compassion, they expressed a tension between being self-compassionate and striving towards academic success. Accordingly, students might be more inclined to be self-compassionate when they believe that they can achieve academic success and, therefore, experience higher levels of self-efficacy, despite fearing that they may fail academically. Existing studies indicate self-compassion to be positively associated with self-efficacy in students (Babenko & Oswald, 2019; Manavipour & Saeedian, 2016; Smeets et al., 2014). As the findings from the current study concur with existing research, it is argued that being self-compassionate helps students to believe in their capabilities as they might be less inclined to over-identify with perceived failure. In turn, students can experience higher levels of self-efficacy as they might not link their academic success directly to their worth as individuals.

A third compelling finding in the current study is that students engaged in the reciprocal processes of receiving social support and being self-compassionate in nuanced, distinct ways. Participants referred to how members of their support systems encouraged them to be more mindful.

For example, the advice they received from family members often involved adopting a different perspective regarding the challenges they were facing. Consequently, these students used mindfulness to soothe themselves when experiencing academic challenges and difficulties with adjusting to the university environment. This finding is consistent with that of Wilson et al. (2020) who concluded that undergraduate students with higher levels of perceived support were more mindful, and moreover, that mindfulness mediated the relationship between perceived social support and well-being amongst this group.

Further, research indicates that self-compassion mediates the relationship between perceived social support and well-being amongst student populations (Jeon et al., 2016; Kroshus et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Consequently, this study's findings could explain those of De la Iglesia et al. (2014) and Li et al. (2021), who concluded that perceived quality of support has a stronger influence on mental health than the actual structure of a social support system. Therefore, in the current study, we argue that it is essential to consider how students perceive their support systems, in addition to the type of support that they receive. It is posited that self-compassion could thus potentially influence students' perceptions of their support systems, serving as a valuable resource in their adjustment to university.

In the current study, participants' perceptions regarding the availability of support influenced their willingness to engage with their support systems. This finding aligns with that of Nagai (2015), who confirmed that social support has a positive effect on the intention of engaging in help-seeking behaviour. Moreover, it echoes that of Heerde and Hemphill (2018), who stated that informal help-seeking behaviour is dependent on the availability of social support systems and that both processes need to work together to achieve health and social benefits. Further, geographical distance was a factor that influenced the extent to which participants engaged with their social support systems and experienced the benefits thereof. Importantly, self-compassion possibly influenced whether they viewed geographical distance as a hindrance to receiving support from their loved ones. The findings thus revealed how a lack of self-compassion can also play a role in students' experiences of social support.

In summary, the findings in the current study have highlighted how first-year students experience, practice, and utilise self-compassion as a protective mechanism during the process of adjusting to university. Further, the use of a more open-ended approach characterised by a qualitative research design may be regarded as a strength of this study.

As with L'Estange et al.'s (2016) research, a qualitative research design distinguishes the current study from much existing, largely quantitative research which tends to rely primarily on the Self Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a). Indeed, in this study, a qualitative research design has allowed for consistencies and variations in first-year students' experiences to "emerge without imposing a pre-defined framework of what constitutes experiences of self-compassion" (L'Estange et al., 2016, p.741).

### 3.1 Limitations and Future Research Directions

From the 12 recruited participants, only nine responded to an invitation to a follow-up interview in the second semester. The reason for the three participants withdrawing from the study was unclear. It is thus uncertain whether there were differences in experiences of self-compassion between individuals who participated in the follow-up interviews, and those who did not.

Further, we did not track the post-study academic performance of the participants and are unaware of whether any students later discontinued their studies. Accordingly, conclusions cannot be drawn about how such students experience and practice self-compassion. Future studies should therefore utilise a longitudinal approach to track students' experiences of self-compassion and success rates at university in order to elucidate self-compassion's role in student outcomes.

In response to the call for researchers to study diverse individuals with various intersectionalities (Brat et al., 2017) participants in the current study varied in age, gender, ethnicity and study discipline. However, in future research, samples could entail more varied student populations including individuals with historically marginalised identities, and first-generation students.

In the current study, data were collected via semi-structured interviews. The participants shared nuanced, complex experiences regarding their peers, families, and social situations and in the future, it could be beneficial to explore their experiences

within the context of a group as well. Given that group participation can create awareness of common humanity as an element of self-compassion, focus groups may be a useful tool for data collection in future research.

Utilising a mixed methods approach could also yield valuable data, supplementing the findings of the current study. Specifically, responses on self-report measures such as the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a) could serve as a baseline for understanding students' experiences of self-compassion. Researchers could build on this understanding by gathering rich, nuanced data using a multi-modality approach, for instance engaging with textual and visual modes of expression and data.

Moreover, future intervention-based research should explore how self-compassion training could be embedded in existing learning and support programmes for first-year students. In this way, student well-being, and life-long positive health behaviours may be promoted along with student retention and success.

**Acknowledgements** This manuscript is based on Maroné Oosthuizen's Master's dissertation. We would like to thank the participants for their time and invaluable insights and express our gratitude to Prof Corli Witthuhn and Prof Annette Wilkinson for their feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

**Funding** No funding was received for this study.  
Open access funding provided by University of the Free State.

## Declarations

**Ethical Considerations** This study was conducted in accordance with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki and ethical approval was granted by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State, South Africa.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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