The Effects of Abrupt Independence on the Mental Health of First-Year University Students in South Africa: A Scoping Review

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Abstract: *Moving into the world of independence straight from the secondary education context is distressing for most first-year university students. The expectation of independence is abrupt for the aforementioned university students, as they quickly move from being dependent on their caregivers and secondary school educators to being independent in their daily living and learning. This, alongside other factors such as academic factors, psychological factors, social factors, and lifestyle factors, compromise the well-being and mental health of these students. The proposed study aimed to investigate the effect that abrupt independence and transitioning to tertiary education had on the mental health of first-year undergraduate students in South African universities. For the proposed study, the researchers conducted a scoping review, with the guidance of the authors Arksey and O'Malley's methodological framework (2005). The proposed study made use of the PRISMA-scR for data charting and accessed the following online databases: Sage Journals, Taylor and Francis, ScienceDirect, EbscoHost, Google Scholar, and the University of Western Cape's online database 'uKwazi'. This research intended to map the key issues of abrupt independence on first-year university students for early intervention development at the secondary school level and to identify any gaps in the literature. Approval for the proposed scoping study was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) of the University of the Western Cape.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

The transition period from high school to university is extensively recognised as a huge leap to more independence and responsibility for most South African students (Thompson et al., 2021). A glance into the recent literature shows that numerous factors contribute to how first-year students' experiences the shift from high school to university. These factors include but are not limited to the family structure (Daniels et al., 2019), academic performance (Groenewald et al., 2021), and social support that students encounter (Mostert & Pienaar, 2020). These factors contribute to how students adjust to university and acquire independence. For some students, this leap to independence can be seen as extreme, especially when the aforementioned factors

contribute negatively to the well-being of students. Thus, for some students the process of obtaining independence is not straightforward, and could affect their mental health adversely. It is a challenge for students as they must transfer from controlled environments such as their home and school to taking responsibility for academic, financial and social aspects of life (Thompson et al., 2021). There are significant understandings of the transition of high school students to university and how these affect their mental health. However, there are still gaps in the literature, which includes the lack of long-term research in how independence affects the mental health of students and ways in which universities can help for a smoother transition for first-year students by focusing on more factors that play a role in the transition (Thompson et al., 2021).

1.2. Statement of the problem

Gaining independence is seen as a milestone in the lives of many young adults and most people reach independence at their own pace. For many teenagers, high school could be seen as a safe net whereby they mostly rely on their parents and teachers. The shift from high school to university occurs abruptly and leaves students little to no time to prepare for an independent life (Thompson et al., 2021). This could lead to strenuous effects on the mental health of first-year students finding it difficult to adjust to university (Bantjes et al., 2019).

In accordance with studies by Thompson et al. (2021) results conclude that transferring from school to university could lead to anxiety and distress. It also mentions how factors such as financial and social support worsen these effects (Mngomezulu et al., 2017). Other studies show the long-term deterioration of mental health of undergraduate students with low psychological, emotional and social well-being (Eloff & Graham, 2020). These studies show that the independence of first-year students contributes to a decline in the mental health of students and it also shows how other factors worsen these effects (Thompson et al., 2021). These studies are significantly important in the South African context where poverty and other environmental factors contribute to students being disadvantaged. Since most students are disadvantaged, they are more dependent on their parents and thus the abrupt independence which occurs in university is more challenging for them (Daniels et al., 2019).

Therefore, more focus should be placed on the disadvantaged and underprivileged university students to gain a better understanding of how substantial the effect of independence is on students.

1.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect that abrupt independence and transitioning to tertiary education has on the mental health of first-year university students in a South African context by making use of a scoping review. The goal is to see if there is a direct relationship between independence and the deterioration of the mental health of students. It is also to examine whether these effects contribute to the onset of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression.

1.4. Conceptualisation
1.4.1. Transition

Transition can be described as a transition or change from one state, topic, or location to another. The focus of this study will be on the transition from high school to university. This refers to "institutional transition" and includes transitions from one structure or system to another, from one employment to another, or from one educational context to another (O'Donnell et al., 2016).

1.4.2. Independence

Independence can be described as the quality or state of being independent, not subject to control by others (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2024). In the context of this particular study, independence is an umbrella term which includes factors such as financial independence, physical independence and academic independence.

1.4.3. Mental health

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as a state of wellbeing characterised by self-awareness, the capacity to handle everyday pressures, productive and successful employment, and the capacity to give back to one's community (Galderisi, 2015). The ability to operate efficiently in daily life depends on one's mental health, which affects many elements of one's life, including employment, relationships, and general quality of life. The focus of the study will be looking at how independence affects the mental health of first-year students.

1.4.4. Depression

Depression is a mental illness characterised by sadness, loss of pleasure, guilt, low self-esteem, changes in appetite and sleep, inability to concentrate, and feelings of exhaustion (Rondon, 2018). If these issues become chronic or recurrent, they may significantly hinder an individual's ability to manage their daily responsibilities. Depression can lead to suicide in its worst form (Rondon, 2018). This study has examined how depression may result from a variety of university adjustment factors.

1.4.5. Anxiety

In pursuance with Barlow et al. (2023), anxiety refers to a mood state characterised by marked negative effects and body symptoms of tension in which a person apprehensively anticipates future danger or misfortune. Anxiety may involve feelings, behaviours and psychological responses. When this emotion persists, it may result in a disorder. In the context of this study, the focal point has been how certain factors in the adjustment to university could lead to anxiety in individuals.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Entry into university and psychological development

The entry age into university is typically 18 years old. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, individuals who are in the adolescent phase (13-19 years) are in the 'identity vs role confusion stage', and in this stage ongoing support and encouragement is from loved ones is key for children, to help them develop a healthy sense of self in terms of understanding who they are and essentially learn to be more independent of others (Erikson, 1985, as cited in Papalia & Martorell, 2024). On the contrary, Arnett et al. (2015) identifies individuals from age 18 to 29 as emerging adults rather than adolescents. These individuals are past the adolescent stage, but do not consider themselves as fully independent adults but they are entering adulthood, hence they identify as emerging adults. The commonalities in both stages is that these individuals are in the process of finding out who they are outside of other people but still require support in this transition to being independent. This phase of identity formation along with other factors, can predispose first-year students to mental-health issues (ul Haq et al., 2018).

2.2. Factors which predispose first-year students to mental health issues

Undergraduate university students are found to be more susceptible to mental health issues as compared to individuals in other environments (Mofatteh, 2021; Limone & Toto, 2022). Depression, anxiety, and stress have been found to be the most prevalent mental disorders in research (local and international) done on undergraduate students whereby majority of the sample are first-year undergraduate students (ul Haq et al., 2018; Mofatteh, 2021; Limone & Toto, 2022). Substance use disorders are also quite prominent (Johnston et al., 2017).

Five factors have been found across different research to be responsible for the mental health issues of many first-year students: Academic factors, psychological factors, social factors, and lifestyle factors. Academic factors that predispose students to mental health issues include the academic degree in which the student is undertaking and the pressure of performing well academically (Mofatteh, 2021; Limone & Toto, 2022). The school environment and how students adjust to the expectations, the tight schedules and the amount of studying, also affects the mental wellbeing of students (Limone & Toto, 2022). The society that an individual comes from can either protect or predispose students to mental health issues. Students who come from lower socio-economic-status societies are at a higher risk of developing mental health issues because they feel pressured to work extra hard to ensure that they do not fail and can come out of poverty (Limone & Toto, 2022). Students' mental health is affected by their relationships with others, and those who are lonely, isolated and have a low self-esteem and low self-confidence are more likely to struggle with mental health issues (Mofatteh, 2021; Limone & Toto, 2022). History of trauma, neglect and abuse in childhood are some psychological risk factors, if untreated, that can predispose individuals to mental illness in adulthood, especially when in a stressful environment like university (Limone & Toto, 2022). Those who already have mental conditions going into university are also more likely to struggle dealing with the challenges of independence and this may further compromise their mental health (Mofatteh, 2021). The lifestyle habits that one adopts either in university or before university have been found to have an influence on the mental health of students (Limone & Toto, 2022 & Mofatteh, 2021). Unhealthy lifestyle habits can predispose individuals to mental health issues. Many first-year students are open to exploring with alcohol and substances (including illegal substances), however, some students end up taking excessive amounts of these substances and using them as coping mechanisms which predisposes them to mental health issues (Oduaran & Akanni, 2019; Mofatteh, 2021; Limone & Toto, 2022). Rosenthal et al. (2018) have found that the consequences of alcohol, rather than the amount of alcohol consumed, caused mental health issues. Lack of proper sleep has also been found to be a lifestyle factor which predispose students to mental health issues (Limone & Toto, 2022).

2.3. The relationship between emotional well-being and mental health of first-year university students

Emotional well-being is an integral part of mental health and it is characterised by "happiness, interests in life, satisfaction and quality of life and the ability to recognise, express and regulate one's emotions" (Liu et al., 2019, p.1). Another article states that flourishing "the experience of feeling good" (Volstad et al., 2020, p.1) is an indication of emotional well-being. The emotional well-being of first-year students has an impact on their mental health (Liu et al., 2019). Because first-year students need to adjust to the pressures and expectations of university life, their ability to handle these pressures and flourish can maintain their mental health, however students who are unable to deal with their emotions as they go through these adjustments can experience negative emotions which overtime may manifest as mental illness (Liu et al., 2021). The ability to flourish (emotional well-being), despite challenges in university, can protect against negative emotions and mental illness (Voldstad et al., 2020).

One study indicates that some first-year university students are not emotionally mature and as a result are unable to adjust to the expectations of university life, which compromises their mental health (Dlamini et al., 2020).

2.4. Research question

What is the impact of abrupt independence on the mental health of first-year undergraduate students studying at South African universities?

2.5. Aim and objectives

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect that abrupt independence and transitioning to tertiary education has on the mental health of first-year university students in the South African context. The following objectives assisted in achieving this aim:

- To consult secondary data that articulates the transitions from school to university in a South African context;
- To determine the factors of independence that are associated with transitioning from secondary school to university;
- To examine the mental health status and coping strategies of first-year students adjusting to independence in university.

3. Methodology

The research design for this study was a scoping review. A scoping review is a research synthesis method designed to outline the current literature on a wide-ranging subject. It highlights essential concepts, uncovers research gaps, and categorises the types of evidence present, acting as an initial phase prior to undertaking more comprehensive systematic reviews (Peters et al., 2023).

The purpose of a scoping review is to provide a comprehensive and broad overview of the research available on a topic, to identify gaps in knowledge, and to highlight areas where further research is needed (Tricco et al., 2023). The scoping review for this study has involved a comprehensive study of available literature on the topic of abrupt independence and mental health of first-year university students in South Africa. When performing a scoping review, Arksey and O'Malley (2005) outline six specific stages that should be followed: The steps are as follows: (1) identifying the research question; (2) searching for relevant studies; (3) selecting studies; (4) charting the data and collecting it; (5) summarising and reporting the results; and (6) consulting with stakeholders. However, the last step has been omitted because there are no stakeholders to consult with.

Stage 1 – Identifying the research question

As specified by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), during this stage it is important to choose a research question which is aligned to the scope of the study. The research question that we have looked at is 'what is the impact of abrupt independence on the mental health of first-year undergraduate students studying at South African universities?'. This pertains to our study as it will look at how abrupt independence affects the mental health of first-year students. In developing a research question, we looked at the research which pertains to pertains to our study by making use of the PCC method as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: PCC (Participants, Content, Context Approach)

PCC	Definition	Example
Participants	Important characteristics (age, and other factors)	First-year undergraduate students
Content	Key concepts and scope and breadth of the search	Effects of abrupt independence on mental health
Context approach	Clearly defined and includes cultural, geographic, gender, racial or populational factors	South African universities

Note: PCC table by Arksey and O'Malley (2005)

Stage 2 – Identifying relevant studies

When searching for the literature and identifying relevant studies, it is important to be as comprehensive as possible as this is the most critical aspect when conducting scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2023). For the present study, the research team has developed a preliminary research strategy. We have searched for literature using online databases such as SAGE journals, Taylor and Francis, Ukwazi, EbscoHost and Google Scholar. We have used these databases as most of the research pertaining to our study has been found on these databases.

Additionally, the research found in these databases were peer reviewed and relevant to the literature we looked at. Our preliminary Boolean string was informed by our preliminary literature review. This includes searches: (independence) OR (financial independence) AND (mental health) OR (Mental well-being) AND (Undergraduate Students) OR (first-year students). The research team has decided that the study will include studies which are published in English only. It has also included studies published within a 15-year period (2008-2023); this is because a limited amount of literature has been found on the research topic pertaining to the South African context. The time period was expanded to increase the probability of finding more studies relevant literature. As mentioned previously, the current study has also included peer reviewed articles and articles published in South Africa/ pertaining to South African universities. The scoping review has excluded articles that were not published in English, peer reviewed or in full text. Additionally, articles that have not pertained to the title of the study has been excluded; this included articles not including studies about first-year undergraduate students in South Africa, or mental health.

Stage 3 – Study selection

The research team chose which literature reviews to include in the scoping review at this point (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The research team chose the final literature in accordance with the suggestions made by Levac and associates (2010). The team has gathered to study and talk about the research question or its terms (Levac et al., 2012). Duplicates were manually eliminated when the team came to agreement on the search results.

In relation to the recommendations by Levac et al., (2010), the reviewing of the title has involved two stages a title/abstract screening stage and a full-text screening stage. In the 'title/abstract screening' stage, research articles have been sorted alphabetically according to the surnames of the relative authors, thereafter, articles have been split evenly between research group members. The PCC framework was used to screen the titles of the articles found (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Articles were then labelled "include" or "exclude" based on the PCC framework, this relates to whether the article pertained to the scope of our study (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). If a title appeared to be vague, it was still reviewed using the PCC framework to screen titles (Levac et al., 2012). When uncertainty occurred about whether an article should be included or excluded a third party, the supervisor, has been consulted to act as a mediator. In the second stage, the research team has viewed the 'full-text' of the selected articles (Levac et al., 2012). The inclusion percentage has been calculated using the critical appraisal tool by

Roman and Frantz (2013) (see table 2). This process has involved a cut off approach whereby an acceptance score of satisfactory (34%- 66%) and good (66%-100%) has been needed for articles to be accepted (see Table 2). A second round of appraisal has been allowed for full text articles which have scored satisfactory (34%- 66%). In the process of eliminating titles, a PRISMA flowchart has been documented (see Figure 1) and has provided rigour for the study (Levac et al., 2012). This was crucial since it allowed for a quick evaluation process and prevented unnecessary implementation of numerous study designs and procedures.

Table 2: Methodological and Quality Appraisal Tool

Criteria and Scores
1. Were the participants representative of the population under study?   Yes [1]   No [0]
2. What was the source of data?   Primary [1]   Secondary [0]
3. Does the article discuss the mental health/well-being of first year undergraduate students?   Yes [1]   No [0]
4. Does the article discuss the factors affecting first year independence?   Yes [1]   No [0]
5. Does the article discuss the factors affecting first year adjustment?   Yes [1]   No [0]
6. Does the article mention implementation strategies that can be put in place?   Yes [1]   No [0]
7. Is there mention of coping strategies utilised by first year students?   Yes [1]   No [0]

Scoring: Total score divided by total number of all applicable items multiplied by 100		
Bad (0%-33%)	Satisfactory (34%-66%)	Good (67%-100%)

Stage 4- Charting the data

After locating the research which pertains to the literature, the research team began extracting and summarising the findings (Levac et al., 2012). Choosing which information to include was a crucial aspect of this stage (Levac et al., 2012). This has been done using a qualitative thematic analysis method to group the information and arrange it in accordance with our main ideas (Tricco et al., 2023). The research team has then created a "data charting form" to decide which variables to report on, according to Levac and colleagues' (2012) recommendation. We then made use of a self-adapted version from Petticrew and Roberts' (2006) data extraction tool for the present scoping review. The PRISMA-ScR and other predetermined factors, as indicated by Tricco et al. (2018), has been used to inform the tool (see Appendix C). While we examined the literature to gather particular data pertinent to our topic and research question, the PRISMA-ScR has been improved throughout the course of the study. This was so that irrelevant data could be eliminated because charting is an iterative process (Levac et al., 2012). In order to test our customised data extraction technique, we randomly selected two articles from the final included selection of articles and reviewed them using our modified method, where each reviewer rated their own article.
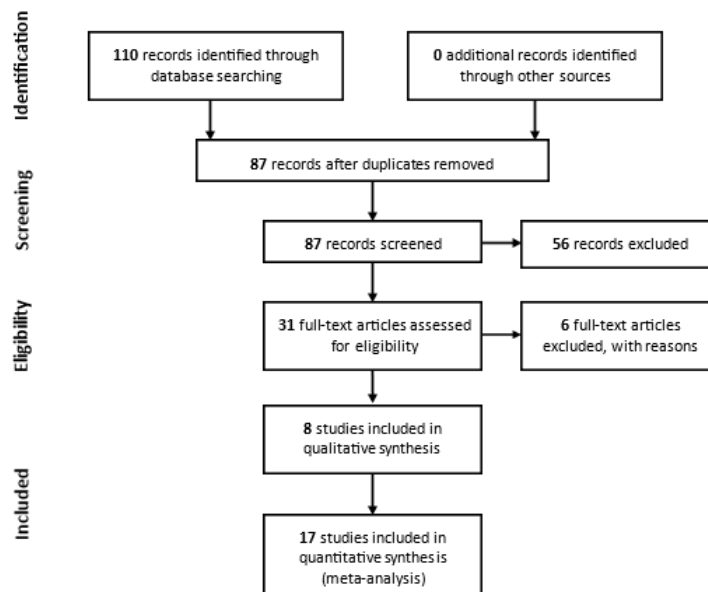
Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart (Moher et al., 2009)

Stage 5 – Collating, summarising and reporting the results

In order to alert the reader to any potential biases in the reporting and suggestions, it is crucial to maintain a clear reporting strategy (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The research team has addressed the significance and influence of the study's findings in a larger context to increase the validity of the approach used in a scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The PRISMA- ScR has served as our guide for charting and reviewing our findings in the final phase (Tricco et al., 2023). According to Levac et al. (2012) this will be accomplished in three steps (2012). These steps will involve (1) analysing the data, (2) disclosing the findings, and (3) giving the findings context (Levac et al., 2012). We have examined the data from step one and provided both a numerical summary of the results and a thematic analysis of the quantitative results. In step two, we have summarised the findings from step one and mapped them in accordance with the PRISMA-ScR criteria. In the third step, we have summarised our findings and related them to the research question, talked about the implications for future study, and considered any gaps in the literature that our literature review may have revealed.

4. Data Results

4.1. Overview of results

This study aimed to investigate the effects of abrupt independence and transitioning to tertiary education on the mental health of first-year university students in South Africa. In analysing the data included in the study, the reviewers categorised the articles into themes of adjustment and mental health.

Study selection and sources of evidence

As explained in the methodology section, the reviewers entered relevant keywords into the following UWC databases through which a total of 110 articles were identified: Sage Journals Online (11), Taylor and Francis (13), Ukawzi (38), Google Scholar (31), EbscoHost (10), and ScienceDirect (7). The keywords used in the data search included the following: independence, mental health OR well-being OR adjustment, first-year university student OR college student, and South Africa.

During the screening phase, as suggested by Moher et al. (2009) in the PRISMA flow chart process, there were 23 duplicates removed from the results yielded. Thus, the reviewers were tasked with performing the title and abstract screening on a total of 87 records. Following this, 56 records were excluded from the study, as they did not meet all the inclusion criteria or lacked relevance to the objectives of the study. The reviewers were assigned 31 records that were eligible to undergo full-text screening and critical appraisal (see Figure 1).

Moreover, the full-text articles were assessed for its eligibility to be included in the study using the critical appraisal tool (see Table 2) presented in the Methodology section (Roman & Frantz, 2013). This was done to ensure that all articles in the study represented the sample, method, and key ideas as related to the objectives of the study. After scoring each article, the reviewers organised them into the respective categories according to the following grading system: bad (0-33%), satisfactory (34%-66%), or good (67%-100%). Articles that scored between the satisfactory and good categories, were considered for inclusion in the scoping review. Furthermore, the articles were reviewed by the co-supervisor of the research study to ensure that it was suitable. The databases yielded the following results after the critical appraisal, EbscoHost 3 articles; Google Scholar 12 articles; Sage Journals Online 1 article; Taylor and Francis 3 articles; Ukawzi 6 articles. Therefore, a total of 25 articles were deemed suitable to use in the current study.

4.2. General description of the studies reviewed

A great majority of the reviewed studies included the following keywords or words pertaining to these keywords in their title: mental health/healthcare (Bantjes et al., 2019, 2020; Lawal et al., 2018; Olasupo et al., 2018; van der Walt, 2019); adjustment experiences (Daniels et al., 2019; Dlamini et al., 2020; May & Pitman, 2023; Nel et al., 2016; Olasupo et al., 2018; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023; Papageorgiou & Callaghan, 2018); transition (Ajani & Gamede, 2020; McGhie, 2017; McGhie et al., 2015; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023); and student experience/first-year student experience (Bayaga et al., 2022; Dlamini et al., 2020; Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Nel et al., 2016; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020). Furthermore, the remaining studies focused on coping strategies of first-year students, highlighting one of the objectives of the current study.

4.3. Purposes/aims of studies

It was noted that among the reviewed studies, there is a great focus on the impact of adjustment experiences on first-year university students, whether academic or social (Dlamini et al., 2020; May & Pitman, 2023; Nel et al., 2016; Olasupo et al., 2018; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023; Papageorgiou & Callaghan, 2018).

One study concentrated on mental healthcare utilisation amongst first-year students and the various sociodemographic factors that may influence this (Bantjes et al., 2020). Other studies aimed to explore the onset of common mental disorders within the respective population, as well as the symptoms students experienced and associated sociodemographic variables (Bantjes et al., 2019; Pillay et al., 2020).

Furthermore, some of the reviewed studies investigated students' experiences of transitioning from secondary to tertiary education institutions (Ajani & Gamede, 2020; McGhie et al., 2015; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). Finally, amongst the twenty-five reviewed studies, two studies focused on students' ability/inability to cope and the effectiveness of their coping strategies (Engelbrecht et al., 2020; Mason, 2017).

4.4. Description of samples

The overall age range amongst the reviewed studies was 16-40 years old, with the majority of the studies sampling participants between 18-25 years old (Bantjes et al., 2019; Engelbrecht et al., 2020; Mason, 2017; May & Pitman, 2023; Motsabi et al., 2020; van der Walt, 2019). It is important to note here that some studies indicated mean ages and did not necessarily indicate full age range of the participants. Moreover, there were studies that included participants younger than the respective mean age of first-year students, with some as young as 16 years old (Lawal et al., 2018; Olasupo et al., 2018; Pillay et al., 2020). While other studies were inclusive of first-year students who were older than 25 years old (Bantjes et al., 2019; Lawal et al., 2018; Olasupo et al., 2018; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020; van der Walt, 2019).

4.5. Geographical location/setting

With respect to the geographical location of the reviewed studies, as stipulated by the aim and objectives of the current scoping review, only studies conducted in South Africa were included in the study. Thus, the geographical location of all 25 studies reviewed is South Africa (Ajani & Gamede, 2020; Bantjes et al., 2019, 2020; Bayaga et al., 2022; Daniels et al., 2019; Dlamini et al., 2020; Engelbrecht et al., 2020; Lawal et al., 2018; Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Mason, 2017, 2023; May & Pitman, 2023; McGhie, 2017; McGhie et al., 2015; Motsabi et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2016; Olasupo et al., 2018; Oppong Asante et al., 2022; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023; Papageorgiou & Callaghan, 2018; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Pillay et al., 2020; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020; Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020; van der Walt, 2019).

To go into more depth, these studies took place at different universities across the provinces of South Africa, including the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Kwa-Zulu Natal, and the Free State.

4.6. Design of studies

With reference to the research methodology, sixteen of the reviewed studies were of a quantitative nature (Bantjes et al., 2019, 2020; Daniels et al., 2019; Lawal et al., 2018; Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Mason, 2023; May & Pitman, 2023; Olasupo et al., 2018; Oppong Asante et al., 2022; OwusuAgyeman & Mugume, 2023; Papageorgiou & Callaghan, 2018; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Pillay et al., 2020; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020; Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020; van der Walt, 2019). One of the studies under review conducted a mixed-methods study (Bayaga et al., 2022). Furthermore, a total of eight studies were of a qualitative nature (Ajani & Gamede, 2020; Dlamini et al., 2020; Engelbrecht et al., 2020; Mason, 2017; McGhie, 2017; McGhie et al., 2015; Motsabi et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2016). The research design of reviewed studies reflected cross-sectional studies overall, while the main data collection methods included surveys, focus groups and individual interviews.

4.7. Measures/instruments used in studies
4.7.1 Mental health measures.

The mental health measures used in the reviewed studies were multidimensional in nature. The assessment measures identified in the studies included the following: the Mental Health Screening Questionnaire; General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28); Ryff Psychological Well-being Scale (PWB); Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ); Orientation to Happiness Scale (OHS); the University Student Depression Inventory (USDI); the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SwLS); and National Income Dynamics Study (Lawal et al., 2018; Mason, 2023; Olasupo et al., 2018; Oppong Asante et al., 2022; Pillay et al., 2020; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020; van der Walt, 2019). Some of the items on these measures included "I feel worthless" and "I have thought about killing myself", "in most ways, my life is close to my ideal", and "how do you feel about your life as a whole right now?".

4.7.2 Adjustment measures.

Similar to the mental health measures, the adjustment measures used in the studies were multidimensional in nature. As identified in the reviewed studies, these are some of the assessment measures that were used; Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire, Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), College Adaptation Questionnaire (CAQ), Adolescent Coping Scale, the Scales of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE), and Social Adjustment Scale (Daniels et al., 2019; Mason, 2023; May & Pitman, 2023; Olasupo et al., 2018; Oppong Asante et al., 2022; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). These are some of the items used included in the measures stated, "I find it difficult to adjust to student life" and "I consider membership of a social group/club as an important aspect of social cohesion".

4.8. Meta-synthesis of reviewed studies

Reviewing the studies revealed that there are common themes of mental health and adjustment. Particularly, accessibility to mental healthcare, common mental disorders, and symptoms amongst first-year university students, and factors that impact student mental health. Furthermore, studies focus on factors influencing students' adjustment experiences to the university environment.

4.8.1. Mental health: accessibility of services and symptomatic experiences

A common theme throughout many of the studies is that first-year students' mental health is affected in their transition to university, whether on a small or large scale. With regard to the utilisation of mental health services amongst first-year university students, Bantjes et al. (2020) noted that use of services is low with less than 20% of students accessing mental healthcare. Studies demonstrate that more than 30% of students indicated having at least one common mental disorder, with the most common being depression (Bantjes et al., 2019). Furthermore, participants reported various symptoms of decreased mental health as well as instances of suicidal ideation amongst 7% of the sample in the study by Pillay et al. (2020).

Moreover, the reviewed studies highlight trends in the relationship between mental health/common mental disorders and socio-/demographic factors (Bantjes et al., 2019; Pillay et al., 2020). Studies found a significant association between symptoms of depression and demographic variables such as age, gender, and geographic background (Pillay et al., 2020).

4.8.2. Common trends of student adjustment experiences

Among the studies reviewed, it is noted that students' experiences of academic, social, and financial adjustment are significantly linked to stress and the success of the academic year. Studies found that there a various positive and negative experiences associated with first-year student's adjustment to the university environment (Dlamini et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2016; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). Moreover, the studies reviewed emphasises that failure to adjust and academic failure are significantly associated, with approximately 60% of students reportedly failing one or more subjects (McGhie, 2017). Finally, these trends in adjustment experiences are commonly influenced by various sociodemographic and economic factors.

5. Discussion

This paper presents an abundance of invaluable insights into the myriad challenges faced by first-year university students in South Africa as they navigate the critical transition from secondary school to university and independent living. This scoping review illuminated a wide range of factors that contributed to the mental health struggles experienced by these students. These factors encompass not only the overwhelming academic pressure they face, but also the

arduous process of social adjustment, the obstacles presented by language barriers, and the numerous cultural differences they encounter. One of the most significant findings of this illuminating study was the revelation that a considerable number of students grapple with the demanding workload and intricate time management skills required in the university environment. This, in turn, creates a fertile breeding ground for stress, anxiety, and even burnout, all of which can have a profoundly negative impact on their overall well-being, including their mental health.

The pressing matter at hand underscores the urgent necessity for universities to allocate ample support and resources to assist students in effectively managing their academic responsibilities and cultivating efficacious study habits. Furthermore, the study identifies yet another vital aspect, namely the profound impact of social adjustment on mental well-being. It is no secret that numerous students encounter considerable difficulties in living with roommates who may possess dissimilar habits or backgrounds; as a result, some individuals may resort to adopting detrimental coping mechanisms such as excessive drinking or smoking. To tackle this issue head-on, universities can play a pivotal role by offering various opportunities for students to forge connections with their peers who possess similar interests and values, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity. Moreover, educational institutions can take the initiative in promoting and advocating for healthy lifestyle choices, ensuring that students are equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to make informed decisions regarding their overall wellbeing.

The study not only sheds light on the profound influence of language barriers on both academic performance and mental well-being, but it also underscored the pressing need to address this issue promptly and effectively. It is evident that students coming from rural high schools, who have limited exposure to English-taught subjects and English in general, often encounter significant difficulties in comprehending and articulating their thoughts in this language, resulting in a profound sense of frustration and inadequacy. To alleviate this distressing predicament, universities must take proactive measures by offering a wide array of language support services and resources, designed specifically to facilitate the enhancement of students' English proficiency. By providing such invaluable assistance, universities can ensure that these students are empowered to overcome the obstacles posed by language barriers, thereby enabling them to excel academically and preserve their mental well-being.

Overall, this research paper offers a wealth of invaluable insights into the myriad challenges that first-year university students in the beautiful country of South Africa face. It serves as a powerful reminder of the urgent need for universities to step up and provide the necessary support and resources that are crucial in helping these students successfully navigate the often daunting transition from secondary school into university which entails independent living. With this solid foundation of support in place, universities can effectively contribute to the overall mental well-being and happiness of their beloved students, while simultaneously enhancing their academic performance and fostering a true sense of success in their educational journeys.

6. Ethics

This study aimed to adhere to all the ethical principles in research. Additionally, the research study obtained ethical approval from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, also known as HSSREC. The research study successfully fulfilled its objective of striving for high-quality academic writing. To avoid plagiarism, the study properly referenced

all the articles used for the review, following the seventh edition referencing method of the American Psychological Association (APA).

7. Significance of the study

The research paper's significance lies in its contribution to understanding the difficulties that first-year undergraduate students encounter as they transition from secondary education to university, and how these difficulties impact their mental well-being. The study offers valuable insights into the factors that make first-year students more susceptible to mental health problems, such as adjusting to university life, transitioning from high school, gaining independence, facing academic challenges, managing social relationships, coping with language barriers, and dealing with financial constraints. The study's findings can guide the development of interventions aimed at supporting the overall welfare of first-year undergraduate students. Moreover, the study emphasises the importance of providing adequate support to help first-year students overcome the challenges they face during their transition to university.

The study, in addition to highlighting the importance, places great emphasis on the necessity for more extensive and in-depth investigation to delve into the numerous difficulties encountered by first-year undergraduate students during their transition to university.

Furthermore, it underscores the criticality of devising and implementing targeted interventions to offer the necessary support for their mental well-being. By employing a scoping review of the literature as its methodology, the study ensures a thorough and all-encompassing examination of the challenges faced by first-year undergraduate students, as well as the profound impact these obstacles have on their mental health. To further bolster the credibility and transparency of the study's findings, it adopted a structured appraisal tool and adhered to the PRISMA-ScR checklist, thereby guaranteeing the reliability and trustworthiness of the research outcomes.

The importance and relevance of this research paper are deeply rooted in its immense potential to provide valuable insights and knowledge that can be utilised to effectively guide and shape the creation of interventions specifically designed to offer unwavering support and assistance to the overall well-being and holistic development of first-year undergraduate students embarking on their educational journey. The remarkable findings derived from this study possess the ability to act as a catalyst in the formulation and implementation of comprehensive policies and multifaceted programmes that are uniquely tailored to tackle and address the obstacles and hurdles that inevitably arise during the often challenging transition phase experienced by first-year undergraduate students as they embark on their academic journey within the university setting. Moreover, these groundbreaking findings have the incredible potential to foster and nurture the mental health and overall well-being of these students, helping them to navigate the various complexities and intricacies associated with their initial foray into the world of higher education.

8. Limitations of the study

While this research study offers valuable insights into the difficulties encountered by first-year university students in South Africa, there are a few limitations that need to be considered. Firstly, the study is constrained by its scoping review methodology, which relies on existing literature and may not encompass all relevant studies. The inclusion criteria employed in the

study might have excluded certain studies that could have provided valuable insights into the mental health challenges faced by first-year students in South Africa. Furthermore, the quality of the studies included in the review may vary, which could potentially impact the validity of the findings.

Secondly, the research was constrained by its sole focus on first-year university students in South Africa, which may not be readily applicable to other settings. The cultural and societal factors that contribute to the mental health difficulties encountered by these students may be distinct to South Africa, and the findings may not be transferable to other nations or regions. Thirdly, the research is limited by its reliance on self-reported information provided by students. Although self-report measures are frequently employed in studies, they are susceptible to bias and might not accurately depict the experiences of all students.

Considering this, it is imperative that future investigations aim to address these limitations and strive to offer a more exhaustive and comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by first-year students in South Africa, as well as in different educational contexts around the world.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study provides valuable insights into the mental health challenges faced by first-year university students in South Africa. The study highlights the various factors that contribute to these challenges, including academic pressure, social adjustment, language barriers, and cultural differences. The holistic findings of the study underscore the need for universities to provide adequate support and resources to help students navigate the transition to independent living and promote their mental health and well-being.

While the study is limited by its scoping review methodology and focus on first-year students in South Africa, it provides a foundation for future research to explore the impact of cultural and societal factors on the mental health of university students in other contexts. The study's recommendations which were articulated in the discussion of this study provide a roadmap for universities to develop more targeted and effective support programmes for students from diverse backgrounds. Overall, this research study highlights the importance of promoting the mental health and well-being of first-year university students in South Africa and beyond. By addressing the challenges faced by these students, universities can help improve their academic performance and success, and promote their overall health and well-being.

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