

Research Article

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First Year Dreams to Final Year Realities: An Exploration of Exit-Level Perspectives of Students at A South African University

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Abstract

Background/purpose. This study examines students' exit-level perspectives as they transition from a South African university into the world of work. Grounded in Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Resilience Theory, the research examines how final-year students consider their readiness for life after university, the challenges they encounter, and the support systems that shape their experiences.

Materials/methods. Employing an interpretive phenomenological approach, data were gathered through open-ended questionnaires from six participants involved in a longitudinal project tracking their university journey from entry to exit.

Results. Thematic analysis identified four main themes: readiness and preparation for life after university, transition difficulties, the role of support networks and services, and the effects of extracurricular involvement. While some students expressed cautious optimism and confidence in their readiness, many shared concerns about job prospects, financial security, and the practical experience required. The results highlighted the crucial role of comprehensive institutional support, including mental health services, mentorship, and inclusive extracurricular activities, in fostering resilience and adaptable coping strategies.

Conclusion. This study reveals that the transition extends beyond academic milestones to encompass significant personal change, driven by socio-emotional development, identity formation, and systemic challenges within the South African context. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of universities in creating environments that equip graduates with both technical and soft skills, fostering lifelong learning and adaptability. Ultimately, the research enhances understanding of how higher education can better prepare students to navigate complex personal and professional terrains after graduation.



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1. Introduction

Starting university can be an accelerating and liberating experience for a student (Richardson et al., 2012), but the transition period can be filled with stressors and unknowns (Harris, 2019). These stressors are summarised by Worsley et al. (2021) and McMillan (2013) and include aspects such as increased workload, sharing and living with strangers, cultivating a sense of independence, performing domestic tasks, and developing a sense of belonging in a new environment away from home. Possessing autonomy has been identified as a key driver of student success, as it is essential for succeeding in practical, independent study (Thomas, 2012; Worsley et al., 2021). Over time, literature has increasingly highlighted that transition into and out of university extends far beyond the mere transfer of knowledge and that it is essential to consider the identity formation of the student and the restructuring of what the person does in the university environment (Christie et al., 2008; Crafter & Maunder, 2012; McMillan, 2013). Araujo et al. (2014) describe the transition through university as a process rather than a once-off event. These transitions, according to Araujo et al. (2014), range from cultural to social to academic. Understanding student transition is crucial because it enables the implementation of interventions, such as the one reported by Lei et al. (2020), to support students with autism spectrum disorder, thereby ensuring a smoother transition into university and addressing diverse student needs.

The South African higher education sector is faced with high attrition and low retention rates, with the majority of dropouts occurring during students' first year of study (McGhie, 2017). Tett et al. (2017) noted that few studies consider and track the students' transition into and out of university over time, especially from the students' perspectives. In an attempt to bridge the gap in the literature, particularly in the South African context, the authors undertook a study to explore the experiences of a group of first-year students enrolled at a South African University in 2022. According to the university's 2025-2029 strategic plan, the university's mission is to:

- graduate citizens who are capable of realizing the aspirations of society;
- produce new knowledge impacting key challenges of the region;
- Engage critically with communities of discourse and communities of people to identify pathways to equitable development.

While this strategic mission statement sounds laudable in the context of South Africa as a country amongst the most unequal in the world and the university being a mirror to that society, there is a great need to continuously explore the extent to which and the manner in which such statements and plans are implemented. The experiences of students as they enter university (induction), navigate and balance university life (being), and exit university (becoming) should be a central concern to institutions of higher learning to improve students' individual and collective experiences and to promote social justice while advancing the university project. According to Meehan & Howells (2019), universities' concerns extend beyond metrics that measure student retention and success; it is also about how well students are performing overall. A program launched at the institution in 2024 was the Talent Pipeline Project. The project aims to upskill Grade 12 learners, thereby providing the university with a broader pool of students to select from and producing university-ready matriculants who are better positioned to succeed at a higher education institution.

This research paper is part of a series (See Awung et al., 2024; Fru et al., 2024). While the previously published work focuses on the students' experiences during the induction phase as they entered university, this paper reports on their perspectives after they have graduated and exited the university or are busy exiting the university as final-year students in 2025. This paper aims to address the following research question: "What are the exit-level students' reflections of their readiness to embrace the world of work?"

2. Literature Review

2.1. Readiness and Preparation for Post-University Life

Preparation for the demands of the current work environment is a top priority for universities to equip their students with the skills necessary for employability and work readiness. It is therefore vital for higher education institutions (HEIs) to prepare their students not only for skills related to a specific job, but also to focus on cognitive, emotional, and practical skills. This means that HE institutions need to make their programs relevant to prepare their graduates better to meet the unique challenges in the work-related environment (Ryan et al., 2025). Graduate readiness refers to the state of being prepared and equipped to enter the workforce, beyond university (Peersia, 2024). Multiple terms are used in the literature to refer to work readiness, such as 'graduate skills' and 'graduate attributes', which aim to prepare students for employability and preparedness beyond the university (Wong, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017; Caballero & Walker, 2010). These attributes are meant to indicate the range of qualities and skills that will help students to stand out in their communities after their lives as students in a HE environment (McCabe, 2021). In the context of this study, the attributes that the institution expects its students to possess include being competent citizens, knowledgeable intellectuals, skilled professionals, critical thinkers, caring and empathetic individuals, innovative problem-solvers, entrepreneurial thinkers, and work-ready individuals. A clear articulation of these attributes is therefore crucial for tracking the institutional experience of students and their employability.

HEIs have a responsibility to promote work competencies and adaptability in their students, meaning that they will have graduates who are more flexible, employable, and adaptive individuals capable of meeting the challenges set in a changing working environment (Dilks, 2021). In mentioning this, it becomes vital for HEIs to have programs that narrow the gap between the institution's curriculum and the market-related skills needed to operate successfully in a changing school environment (Martins, 2020; Succi & Canovi, 2019). The complexities in real-life practices in the workplace tend to produce graduates who have a wide variety of knowledge, and it is therefore essential that HEIs equip students with the necessary hard and soft skills to prepare them for challenges beyond the university (Toom, 2021; Tang, 2018; Tang et al., 2014). These skills, but not limited to, include knowledge of the specific subjects, disposition to act in professional situations, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, life-long learning and information, entrepreneurship, work ethic skills, and leadership (Mwita, 2023; Maren, 2021; Biletska, 2021; Ngang, 2015). Equipping students with these skills will make the transition from university to real-life practice more seamless and practical.

2.2. Transition Challenges in Higher Education

According to the literature, the challenges experienced by students as they transition from school to university can be summarised in four broad categories: (1) academic challenges, (2) social and emotional challenges, (3) external constraints, and (4) identity and language. Academic challenges refer to the transition to increased workload and academic pressures due to higher academic standards and expectations in a new academic environment (McMillan, 2013; Mulaudzi, 2023; Parker et al., 2017). It is common for these to lead to stress and anxiety (Mulaudzi, 2023). It is also reported that students experience loneliness and have difficulty making new friends or maintaining friendships due to larger class sizes compared to schools (MacNamara & Collins, 2010; McMillan, 2013; Mulaudzi, 2023; Wangeri et al., 2012). Wangeri et al. (2012) report that females have had higher levels of adjustment in social relationships compared to males. Black and minority ethnic groups were less likely to share a 'traditional student lifestyle' and less likely to engage in social activities on campus and as part of university life, such as joining student societies, compared to white students (Parker et al., 2017). In this case, the researchers identified the need for more inclusive

social spaces and activities that cater to the diverse needs of students. Financial challenges, managing a budget, and balancing home and academic responsibilities can be classified as external constraints (MacNamara & Collins, 2010; McMillan, 2013; Mulaudzi, 2023). Wangeri et al. (2012) link this to student autonomy, highlighting that students exhibit a fear of the unknown and a desire for personal independence. This is particularly true for students who prefer and are used to a structured school environment (MacNamara & Collins, 2010). A new university environment also results in the development of a new identity, which can be challenging to deal with. McMillan (2013) reports that non-native English speakers experienced language barriers and associated them with feelings of exclusion. Parker et al. (2017) found that black and minority ethnic groups felt more welcomed by their previous educational settings and felt less welcomed at university compared to white students.

2.3. Support Networks and Services

In equipping students with the skills and attributes required for the workplace, HEIs must provide them with the necessary support to enable success in their studies and future careers. Therefore, HEIs are expected to deliver high-quality, inclusive educational services to students, both as individuals and as part of a community (Camilleri, 2021). Some of these services include, but are not limited to, lecturer support, career guidance, counseling, and academic advising. These benefits also ensure inclusive access and success, which are essential for achieving social justice and economic efficiency, key components of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Students who utilize these services will be able to improve their academic performance and raise their chances of earning a degree (Johnson et al., 2022; Jamaludin, 2021). However, the transition into the workplace can have various challenges for the newly appointed individual, and it is evident that the new appointee receives some forms of support, which is essential in buffering the effects of role stress on burnout (Tang & Li, 2021). These workplace support needs must expand to include mentorship, supervisory support, peer support, organizational support, training, and development (Wikström, 2023; Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023; Stanley & Sebastine, 2023; Jehangir, 2022). The quality and effectiveness of support networks and services are significant and have been identified as key factors in enhancing retention, especially for early entrants in the workplace (Sá, 2023; Diggs-Andrews, 2021). Ivey and Dupré (2022), for example, indicated that mentoring, a widespread workplace practice, is one of the support structures that provide positive outcomes in organizations. It is evident from various studies that well-supported structures will make newly appointed employees more competent in their roles and are more likely to be satisfied and engaged (Charette, 2023; Stone & Worsley, 2022; Pradhan & Hati, 2022).

2.4. Extracurricular Engagement and University Experience

Meshcheryakova (1994) describes extra-curricular activities as a set of transformative actions carried out outside the educational process in direct connection with it. A vast array of extracurricular activities, including leadership development programs, community service and volunteering, internships, and work-integrated learning, contributes to the student's holistic development (Sator, 2024; Jackson & Rowe, 2023; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022). These activities are considered particularly important for developing soft skills, which prepare graduates for the global employment market (Fakhretdinova, 2021). Studies conducted by Leksuwanun (2023) and King (2022) confirm that students who participate in extracurricular activities at the university level not only indicate that such participation is essential for their success, but also that it is more likely to enhance their academic achievement. This is, therefore, an important learning activity for students to improve their experience during their university journey and will translate into a smoother transition into the workplace, enabling them to achieve the social good and address individualistic challenges that may arise (Rahayu & Dong, 2023; Dickinson, 2021).

2.5. Transition, Resilience, and Exit-Level Experiences of University Students

This study adopts transition theory and resilience theory as theoretical frameworks. The two theories are used to understand the participants' preparedness (or lack thereof) and coping strategies. According to Sueningrum et al. (2022), transitional theory provides researchers with appropriate instruments for understanding the circumstances of individuals undergoing transitions from one life situation to another. Schlossberg (1981) contends that transition occurs when a problem leads to a change in one's perception of the world and oneself, resulting in a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships. This implies that when an individual faces a situation requiring them to transition from their previous situation to a new or impending one, their perceptions and behaviors are expected to change to adjust to the new reality. Schlossberg's (1981) model of transition suggests that this process is influenced by three key factors: the nature of the transition, the pre- and post-transition environments, and the disposition of the individual experiencing the transition.

The above conceptualization is significant in that it underscores the importance of experiences leading up to the transition, the realities of life after the transition, and personal attributes in shaping how individuals experience the transition. This is important to this study, as it seeks to understand how the participants' experiences during their university journey, their hopes and expectations, as well as their readiness for transitioning from university to the world of work. Schlossberg (2011) later developed another model, the 4S framework, which posits that the self, situation, support, and strategy are key factors influencing transition. We, however, find this model less applicable to this study than the former because it focuses more on transition-stage factors, with little attention to prior experiences and post-expectation of transition. It is for this reason that we believe that the three-factor model is more appropriate for a study of this nature, which focuses on exit-level students' perceptions of their transition, the institutional support they have received in their academic journey, and the network of relationships that they have created, their expectations and fears, as well as their abilities to adapt to change (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 6).

Resilience theory, on the other hand, focuses on an individual's ability to succeed amid adversity (van Breda, 2018). The theory has attracted the interest of researchers in recent years as they find it useful for understanding experiences of higher education students as they transition into and out of university (Zarotti, Povah, & Simpson, 2020). According to Nandy et al. (2021), resilience theory is underpinned by three key phases of experiencing adversity: the deteriorating, adapting, and recovering phases. The deteriorating phase is temporal and reflects a state of despair on the part of the individual as a result of their personal circumstances within a given context (Zarotti et al., 2020). The adapting phase refers to the process of using personal actions, interventions, and supportive mechanisms to overcome adversity, whereas the recovering phase focuses on how adversity contributes to individuals' personal growth (Hunter-Johnson, 2017).

Resilience in higher education students involves the coping mechanisms they develop, such as autonomy and the ability to seek help when necessary (Werner, 1995). It is for this reason that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are known to develop coping strategies more easily than those from comfortable backgrounds. This is because the financially disadvantaged are used to acting without support or relying on community members for help (Werner, 1995). She further asserts that students' abilities to adapt to adversity and develop resilience depend on protective factors in the family, community, and institution. This is significant in that it sheds light on the various factors that help higher education students cope with the burdens of the academic journey and transition to life outside the university. It is for this reason that Storms et al. assert that resilience theory is valuable for uncovering the perceptions and experiences of higher education students as they navigate the various stages of university life. For this paper, we find the theory appropriate because its three phases are essential for understanding the challenges, coping

mechanisms, and support systems that the participants rely on to overcome adversity and succeed in their academic project.

3. Methodology

This paper is situated within a phenomenological design framework known as the interpretive phenomenological design approach. Hartman and Squires (2024) describe Interpretive phenomenology as a research design that seeks to understand experiences from the perspective of people who have lived through those experiences. They claim that such research does not argue whether a person's experience is valid, but that the simple fact that the individual experienced the phenomenon means it exists. This aligns with the nature of this study, which emphasizes university students' lived experiences of transitioning to university, with a specific focus on the exit phase. In determining this design, we were equally guided by the epistemological assumption that the realities of the participants regarding their lived experiences of university transition are socially constructed and subjective (Turin, Raihan, & Chowdhury, 2024), and our role as researchers is to co-construct these subjective meanings through interpretation. This implies that this study equally adopts an interpretivist research paradigm. As we strive to uncover the hidden meanings and make sense of the participants' experiences, we have employed established theories of resilience and transition.

The sampling method for this study was purposive. As explained in the introduction, this study is a part of a broader project that sought to investigate students' experiences of university transitions from entry to exit levels. Level. The initial phase of the project at the entry level involved twenty-five students registered in their first year of study in 2022 (Awung et al., 2023; Fru et al., 2024). These students were drawn from various faculties in the university. They were enrolled in different programs, which included three-year degree programs, such as those in the Faculty of Humanities, and four-year degree programs, like those in the Faculty of Education. This study, the final phase of the project, involved six students. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) suggest that, although there is no specific rule regarding the number of participants required in interpretive phenomenology research, small sample sizes of six to eight participants are generally considered appropriate.

They argue that small sample sizes ensure that the qualitative data gathered is not overwhelming, allowing for an opportunity to examine similarities and differences between individuals. In line with the logic of qualitative research, studies within the interpretive phenomenological orientation should focus on depth rather than breadth. To obtain the sample, an email was sent to all students who participated in the initial study in 2022. Only three students responded to the email. A snowball process was initiated to find the other three students, bringing the total number to six. Four of the six students are completing their final year in the Faculty of Education, while two graduated from the Faculty of Humanities, having pursued a three-year degree. Due to logical reasons, the data was collected using open-ended questionnaires. Tombs and Strange (2024) submit that qualitative questionnaires can generate rich contextual data if the researcher can harness and prioritize qualitative research values and paradigms throughout the research process, and that the ontological position taken intends to explore how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Tombs & Strange, 2024). As part of establishing rigor, we applied reflexivity in developing and using the questionnaire by meaningfully interconnecting literature, research questions and foci, findings, and interpretations with each other.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using the Interpretive phenomenological analysis framework described by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012). This framework includes the following processes:

- a. Multiple readings and making notes. This initial stage involves close reading of the questionnaire several times to immerse ourselves in the data.

b. Transforming notes into Emergent Themes. This stage involved making detailed and comprehensive notes from the questionnaires to reflect the source materials and transforming those notes into emerging themes.

c. Looking for relationships and grouping themes. At this stage, we identified connections among emerging themes, grouped them by conceptual similarity, and assigned a descriptive label to each cluster. Some emerging themes did not fit with the developing structure or had a weak evidence base.

d. Writing up an IPA study. The last phase involves writing up the narrative account of the study. This involved writing the themes out one by one. Each theme was described and exemplified with excerpts from participants' responses, followed by our analytic process, which involved nuancing the themes with the existing literature and the study's theoretical framing.

To address researcher bias and ensure reflexivity, the study integrated reflexivity into the design of the open-ended questionnaire, carefully aligning literature, research questions, findings, and interpretations with one another. In addition, the interpretive phenomenological analysis involved multiple readings, detailed notetaking, and theme development, with researchers consciously nuancing their interpretations through existing theory and literature. This iterative process of cross-checking participant accounts with analytic reflections helped minimize bias and ensured that the researchers remained critically aware of their role in co-constructing meaning.

4. Results

This section presents the rich qualitative findings from a semi-structured questionnaire survey on students' experiences of the transition from university to the world of work. A closer examination of the qualitative data showed that their perspectives revolved around themes such as 'Readiness and Preparation for Post-University Life', 'Challenges Faced During Transition', 'Support Network and Services', and 'Extracurricular Engagement and University Experience'. These themes are outlined next.

Theme 1: Readiness and Preparation for Post-University Life

The first theme emerging from the graduates' written responses concerns their readiness and preparation for post-university life. Two graduates had the following to say.

"I feel cautiously optimistic about transitioning out of university life."

"I think I'm ready and well prepared. I've built contacts and gained clarity on my life's direction."

Theme 2: Challenges Faced During Transition

The second theme identified in the graduates' written responses concerns the challenges they face during the transition from university to post-university life. Two graduates had the following to say:

"My primary challenges while preparing to leave university include finding employment, building professional networks, and achieving emotional readiness for the transition."

"I'm concerned about financial stability and navigating the job market, as it seems like in South Africa the rate of unemployment keeps decreasing."

Theme 3: Support Networks and Services

The third theme, generated from the participants' written responses, deals with the support networks and services available to graduates. Two graduates had the following to say:

"My social connections and networks within the university have been beneficial in shaping my post-university life."

"The mental health services offered by the university have been very helpful to me."

Theme 4: Extracurricular Engagement and University Experience

The fourth and final theme, derived from the participants' written responses, centers on extracurricular engagement and the university experience. The following responses were shared by the graduates:

"I worked as a tutor during one year of my time at the university, and this experience has been incredibly beneficial as I transition out."

"My academic journey has significantly influenced my perceptions of life after university. I've developed a growth mindset, learned to approach challenges critically, and gained confidence in my abilities."

5. Discussion

The study reported on the exit-level perspectives of students as they finalized their undergraduate journey and transitioned out of university. Following an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach towards their written responses to the semi-structured questionnaire survey, it was determined that their perspectives centered around themes such as 'Readiness and Preparation for Post-University Life', 'Challenges Faced During Transition', 'Support Network and Services', and 'Extracurricular Engagement and University Experience'. A deeper analysis and interpretation of the themes, set against the backdrop of the core theoretical tenets of Schlossberg's (1981) Transitional Theory and Rutter's (1979) Resilience Theory, will be shared next.

The first theme emerging from the graduates' written responses concerns their readiness and preparation for post-university life. The theme portrays how graduates perceive themselves to be emotionally and academically prepared for life after university. Harvey (2001) reminds us that although graduates may express optimism and confidence in their academic abilities, feelings of anxiety related to employment and financial stability can be a reality, indicating the need for practical preparation and support during the transition process. The statements *"I feel cautiously optimistic about transitioning out of university life"* and *"I think I'm ready and well prepared. I've built contacts and gained clarity on my life's direction"* reveal the participants' cautious optimism, suggesting that although they felt prepared, a level of uncertainty about the future still existed. The second quote, on the other hand, painted a more optimistic picture. The graduate felt more confident and had a clear picture of life after university due to supportive contacts and well-prepared plans for the world of work. This view is related well to Resiliency Theory's emphasis on 'personal strengths' and 'adaptive coping strategies' in response to life challenges. For example, the references to 'cautious optimism' or 'emotional preparedness' suggest a level of psychological resilience, as the graduates are ready to confront future challenges despite potential difficulties they may face that could hinder their progression (Masten, 2001). One also encountered the graduates' reflections on 'emotional readiness' and 'self-perceived preparedness' for post-university life, which correspond to Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, which reiterates how one's individual factors, supportive systems, and strategies affect one's transition process.

The second theme generated from the graduates' written responses concerns the challenges they face during the transition process as they move from university to post-university life. Rosenberg (2015) reminds us that challenges faced during this transition often include uncertainty about securing employment, financial instability, and a lack of practical experience, which can prompt feelings of stress and anxiety. The written quotes *"My primary challenges while preparing to leave university include finding employment, building professional networks, and achieving emotional readiness for the transition,"* and *"I'm concerned about financial stability and navigating the job market as it seems like in South Africa the rate of unemployment keeps decreasing"* highlight the

graduates' recognition of a series of multifaceted challenges in the transition from university to post-university life. These included the need for 'secure employment', 'establishing professional connections', and 'managing emotional preparedness'. One also finds particular concerns about 'financial insecurity' and the 'difficulty of entering a competitive job market', especially in a country with a rising unemployment rate, such as South Africa. All these concerns seemed to intensify the level of stress and anxiety about the post-graduation plans of the participants. With these responses in mind, resemblances are found with Resilience Theory, as it reflects the individual's awareness of the need to develop coping strategies and resilience to overcome obstacles faced (Masten, 2001). The quotes related to 'financial instability' and 'the competitiveness of the job market' are everyday stressors that are characteristic of post-university life and are associated with Transition Theory. They are often regarded as stressors that shape a graduate's resilience (Schlossberg, 1981).

The third theme, generated from the participants' written responses, deals with the support networks and services available to graduates. In the context of post-university experience, support networks and services are considered resources that stem from social or institutional sources, aimed at assisting graduates in navigating the challenges of transitioning to post-university life. Hughes and Lee (2019) suggest that resources such as mentorship, peer support, career guidance, counseling services, and other professional resources can be deemed valid for providing emotional, practical, and professional assistance. Given this understanding of supportive networks and services in the context of a post-university transition, some graduates responded that *"My social connections and networks within the university have been beneficial in shaping my post-university life"* and *"The mental health services offered by the university have been very helpful to me."* These two responses highlight the significance of social networks and connections in promoting resilience. This particular response highlights how supportive relationships can be beneficial in helping individuals adapt to the challenges graduates may face. It may also help the graduate develop coping mechanisms to counter the challenges faced (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). In this particular case, the graduate's social connections with the university contributed to their emotional and professional development, which is essential for navigating the post-university experience (Masten, 2001). The second response underscores the potential of mental health services as a critical support mechanism for the post-university transition experience. This aligns well with Transitional Theory, which suggests that such supportive services were regarded as necessary to help individuals cope with the uncertainties and challenges they face (Schlossberg, 1981), thereby enhancing their overall ability to adapt to the post-university experience.

The fourth and final theme, derived from the participants' written responses, centers on extracurricular engagement and the university experience. In the context of a post-university experience, extracurricular engagement and university experience are considered activities and involvement outside of formal academic coursework, such as sports, leadership roles, and internships that contribute to the personal development of the graduate (Astin, 1984). It has been found that such experiences assist graduates in developing transferable skills, enhancing leadership skills, and forming meaningful social connections that contribute to the graduate's readiness for life after university (Kolb, 1984). With this understanding of extracurricular engagement and university experience, the following responses were shared by the graduates: *"I worked as a tutor during one year of my time at the university, and this experience has been incredibly beneficial as I transition out,"* and *"My academic journey has significantly influenced my perceptions of life after university. I've developed a growth mindset, learned to approach challenges critically, and gained confidence in my abilities"*. An analysis of the first response revealed how extracurricular engagement, such as 'tutoring', contributed to the resilience of the graduate since practical skills were developed that seemed to increase the self-efficacy of the graduate. The latter allowed the graduate to gain confidence, which was essential for overcoming challenging periods during the transition from

university to the post-university phase. Through the lens of Resilience Theory, such experiences are crucial for instilling coping mechanisms in graduates to navigate the uncertainties of life after university (Masten, 2001). The second response, on the other hand, points to Transition Theory, since the graduate's growth mindset towards challenges in the post-university climate was instrumental in the emotional and cognitive preparation for transitioning out of university. Finally, the concept of 'self-efficacy' is considered a crucial aspect in both Resilience and Transition Theory, as self-efficacy emphasizes the importance of individual beliefs and internal resources required to adapt to life changes (Bandura, 1997).

6. Conclusion

Universities have a critical mandate to ensure that they produce students with the qualifications and competencies necessary to thrive in an ever-evolving and complex global landscape and contribute meaningfully to society. Grounded in resilience theory and transition theory, and informed by interpretivist phenomenological design, this study highlights the exit-level experiences of transitioning from a South African university. The findings from this study revealed that while academic and social experiences of university transition have helped some students develop resilience and confidence, factors such as performance fears, independence, socio-emotional fears, financial concerns, and career and employment fears have created uncertainty and anxiety in other students. The paper emphasizes the importance of quality education that empowers students with lifelong learning skills, as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal number four on quality education.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Botes, Felix, Awung, Fru & Wepener: Conceptualization, literature review, methodology, data analysis, critical revision of the manuscript, writing, editing/reviewing.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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