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EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID-19: A STUDY AT A UNIVERSITY IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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DECLARATION

I, Mufaro Mpofu, do hereby confirm that I am aware of and understand what plagiarism is and its consequences. I declare that the dissertation, which I hereby submit for the degree of Master of Social Science in Development Studies at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution. I confirm that where secondary information has been used, I have sufficiently referenced and given credit to the author(s).

ETHICS STATEMENT

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this dissertation, has obtained the required research ethics approval/ exemption for the research described in this work. The author declares that they have observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of ethics for scholarly activities.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation contributes to discussions on how international students can be better supported by universities in South Africa. It focuses on the experiences and challenges of African international students at a university in the Gauteng Province of South Africa during the Covid-19 lockdown. African international students were the focus of the study due to their particular vulnerability and them being a majority of the international students in the country. International students always face adversity in their host countries and in times of crisis these adversities are worsened. Effective student support provided by institutions of higher learning has assisted in alleviating the pressures of these challenges, however, there was little existing literature regarding whether the support structures that worked before the pandemic also worked during the pandemic. In addition, many of the support structures that were in place before the pandemic were either not as effective as hoped or did not accommodate African international students at all. The objective of this study was to increase the knowledge of the challenges and experiences African international students face during times of crisis. It is hoped that this will be of benefit to decision making in universities to improve international student support and maximise their contribution to the university and wider development goals. The findings of this study, based on information gathered from the 37 participants, indicate that the university in question was not adequately prepared for a pandemic. Discoveries and recommendations are made in seven main areas: international student representation; challenges of getting visas; international student support services; counselling services; furthering of technological advancement and its use in education; assimilation of international students in a new environment; and issues of financial assistance for African international students.

KEYWORDS: South Africa, African international students, international student support, Covid19

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

IEASA	- International Education Association of South Africa
ISD	- International Student Department
NSFAS	- National Student Financial Aid Scheme
ODL	- Open Distance Learning
SADC	- Southern African Development Community
SAPS	- South Africa Police Service
SRC	- Student Representative Council
SSS	- Student Support Services
UitGP	- University in the Gauteng Province
UKZN	- University of Kwazulu-Natal
UNHCR	- The UN Refugee Agency
UN	- United Nations
VFS	- Visa Facilitation Services Global

CHAPTER 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This dissertation contributes to discussions on how international students could be better supported by universities in South Africa. There are 26 public universities in South Africa and six of them are in the Gauteng province (Universities South Africa, 2023; UniRank, 2023). This study focuses on the experiences and challenges of African international students at a specific public university in the Gauteng Province (UitGP) of South Africa during the Covid-19 lockdown. It explores the impact of the pandemic on these students from the beginning of the state of disaster on 23rd March 2020 till the time of carrying out and writing up this research during 2021 and 2022.

African international students are the focus of this dissertation as they have been found to make up between 66 and 79 percent of the international students in South Africa (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015; MacGregor, 2014; Zar, 2009). The University of Pretoria, for example, had just over 13 000 postgraduate students in 2021, 4 500 of them were international students, of which 67 percent came from other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries (Times Higher Education, 2020). Another example was the University of Cape Town where out of a total of 23 000 students, 4 500 were international students and most of them hailed from SADC countries (educations.com, 2020). In 2007, the total number of international students in South African universities rose to 53 000, of which two thirds of that number (over 35 000) came from other African countries (Zar, 2009). The number of African international students in South Africa has been rising since. In 2017, there were a total of 60 334 international students from other African countries in

South African Universities, of which over 48 000 came from the SADC region (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021).

Once a student begins studying at an international institution, it is the responsibility of educational specialists and the institution to academically guide and assist that student in their daily adaptation throughout their newly embarked tertiary institutional journey in order to enable them to fulfil their dream (Kumar, 2021). This should involve doing everything to provide their international students with a convenient and safe environment to study and have a good international experience (Kumar, 2021). This should encompass every aspect or condition of student life, from living in normal times to living in a state of crises. The students themselves must also communicate with the university with regards to what their goal is to enable the university to assist them accordingly.

Jooste and Hagenmeier (2020) argue that the manner in which international students are treated during the Covid-19 crisis is important to South Africa as it could determine whether or not the country maintains its position as one of the most desired higher education destinations. They show the importance of international students to South Africa and that to continually attract more international students, one must be able to accommodate them not just in the sense of accommodation, but more widely in terms of their needs such as financial help or assistance with the challenges that come with relocation. Despite the conditions, including during a crisis like a pandemic, it is essential that international students are supported sufficiently and it is the responsibility of the host institution and indeed the country, to reflect on what could have been done better if that had not been fulfilled. If the development of countries through the strengthening of international bonds and exchange of intellectual ideas through international human capital is to occur, the process needs to be

nurtured from both the international student side and the university side. Host countries and institutions cannot thrive from the benefits of international students whilst the students themselves are not receiving adequate support. That would be described as exploitation and not a mutually beneficial relationship.

International students are defined as individuals who voluntarily move from their country of origin to another country to pursue a higher education degree (Inouye et al, 2022; OECD, 2017). Others define international students as a heterogeneous group whose common element is their status as well their intention of getting academic training in another country away from their home country (Nwokedi and Khanare, 2020). For the purpose of this dissertation, an international student is defined as an individual who lives and studies in another country that is not their country of origin (Zar, 2009) and who requires a study permit to study in South Africa¹. Similarly, an African international student is an international student that comes from another African country. It is important to note that I, as the researcher, am an international student myself, therefore the dissertation topic is of particular significance and will contain direct examples from personal experiences in addition to that of the participants involved in the study. I am from Zimbabwe and only came to South Africa, in 2017, strictly for academic purposes. I have been in South Africa for six years at the time of writing this dissertation. I therefore qualify as an African international student. There are different kinds of international students given their varied socio-economic background and immigration statuses. This study focuses on the most common and often shared experiences of these students but does make some notes of differences of experience.

¹ There are students whose origins are in other countries, but due to factors such as their families having permanently relocated to South Africa, they have gained residence or citizenship status so do not require study permits. There are not included in this study.

With regards to the vulnerability of African international students compared to other international students, African and Asian students experience higher levels of discrimination in Western countries than other international students and their domestic counterparts (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015). When it comes to adjusting to their new environment, the general notion is that the onus is on international students to fit in and little responsibility is given to the host institution or society (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015). This does not bode well for African international students given their already existing vulnerability. Furthermore, it has been argued that some of the biggest challenges international students face can be attributed to the host society's inadequacies:

“Perceived cultural discrimination, verbal insults and physical assaults experienced by international students both inside and outside the university are prime examples that some of the problems faced by international students have less to do with their own adjustment and have more to do with the host institution and the host society's shortcomings”- (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015. p 81).

Such inadequacies, as stated above, have particular implications for African international students. In the South African context, African international students endure a culture of discrimination, insults and even assaults. This is evident in views shared by both Oliver (2020) and Zar (2009) which illustrated that black African migrants are targeted the most when it comes to discrimination.

African international students specifically, struggle with immigration policy controls which are viewed as discriminatory (Kasese-Hara and Mugambe, 2022). In addition, because international students experience a cross cultural transition when they go to university, support structures are important in their adaptation and when dealing with the challenges

that come with that cross-cultural transition (Kasese-Hara and Mugambe, 2022). Unfortunately, culturally sensitive support structures are limited for African international students or may be deemed as Eurocentric (Kasese-Hara and Mugambe, 2022).

Both primary and secondary qualitative research methods were used in the research that informed this dissertation. Primary research methods were used in and around the specific university, which formed the case study for this research and is referred to as the UitGP for the duration of this dissertation. The study sought to answer questions not only about how African international students felt they were supported, but also what support measures would have been feasible to implement by the university, for the betterment of itself and its students. The study shows the importance of African international students and the reasons why it is beneficial to ensure adequate support for them. The primary research methods which were used included 1) interviews, which took place with both students and key informants either face to face or telephonically. Interviews were used along with semi structured questions in order to probe further and gain as much firsthand information as possible which was to the benefit of the study (Berg, 2001). The next primary research method is 2) auto ethnography, which is giving a voice to personal experience. In this case auto ethnography is used on myself as the researcher and as I am an African international student, and a personal perspective experience not only adds value and contributes information to the study but creates a sense of relatability and expresses the significance and importance of the study.

Secondary research methods included the use of secondary sources to enable further understanding and give context to the study. Sources included the internet, books, journals, reports, blogs, newspaper reports, and publications from the Department of Higher Education

in South Africa and from the chosen university for the study. All research methods are elaborated further in Chapter 3.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows. Chapter one is the introduction and background of the study. What the study is about, its goal, along with the motivation behind it is described in this chapter. Existing literature is used to give further understanding of the topic and why it is relevant to development. Chapter two is a literature review showing the current state of knowledge in relation to international student support and the impact of Covid-19. The theories related to the topic are explained and developed with the use of existing literature and included in this chapter is also the description of the research problem along with an explanation of the significance of the study, which then leads to the description of the study's objective.

Chapter three is the methodology chapter. Here, methods regarding how the information was sourced and collected are described and explained. Also included is the ethical concerns section which explains the clearances that were required for the study to continue and how they were acquired along with how ethical considerations were dealt with in order for the study to continue without causing harm. Chapter four presents information that was discovered from the interviews such as common patterns, differences of experiences and other ambiguities. Links to the literature review are also made in this chapter. Chapter five is discussions and conclusions where the main findings are described and recommendations made.

1.2 BEFORE COVID-19

A survey of 1 700 international students from seven universities from the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng provinces in South Africa that was conducted in 2014 found that international students in South Africa faced challenges in relation to funding opportunities, accommodation, support and adjustment to the new environment, a lack of friends and at times xenophobia (MacGregor, 2014). International students involved in the study were asked how their experiences could be improved. Their responses were that they would have appreciated the following: visa and tuition support; improved accommodation; increased cultural awareness among university staff, such as teachers; support to find internships; and more social interaction opportunities (MacGregor, 2014). Other challenges that mostly African international students faced in South Africa included adjustment problems, such as being caught in the middle of a fight between South African students and their government over fees and being stranded with nowhere to stay when universities were shut down due to protests (Mokgwasi, 2017).

The issue of xenophobia is one that has plagued the country of South Africa for years as evident in the descriptions and examples that are used below. It is among one of the many factors that affect the wellbeing and general livelihood of international students in South Africa. Further explanation about xenophobia is given by Crush and Ramachandran (2009) who state that:

“Xenophobia is not a natural response by native populations to the presence of foreigners. Like racism and nationalism, it is a social and political phenomenon that contributes to the marginalization and/or exclusion of migrant groups in social and national setting” (Crush & Ramachandran, 2009. p.6)

Xenophobia is defined as:

“Attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity.” (European Commission, 2023)

More definitions include it as a fear or hatred of strangers or fear of anyone different from an individual (Soloman and Kosaka, 2013; Fritscher, 2023) An example of such xenophobic acts or indicators of xenophobia that contribute towards marginalization and exclusion include the use of the word “amakwerekwere”, which was used as a label only for African foreign nationals (Oliver, 2020). It was used to express the level of discomfort certain South African individuals had towards foreign African nationals (Oliver, 2020). Beginning in 1994 and reaching a horrific level of disaster in May of 2008, black African migrants were the most targeted group of people when it came to xenophobic attacks (Zar, 2009). One of the most recently documented and horrific acts of xenophobia to have occurred in South Africa thus far occurred to Elvis Nyathi, a Zimbabwean national living in Diepsloot, who was burnt alive by a mob (Magubeni, 2022). The attack occurred due to protest action that was motivated by the increasingly high crime rate in the area and some locals blamed foreign nationals for it (Wicks, 2022). Hearing and reading about such acts of violence have the potential to negatively affect the mental state of others, especially African migrants, including students, who cannot help but feel that they could be the next victim. From a personal perspective, not only is it heart-breaking, but fear inflicting as well, to witness and read about a fellow countryman being treated in such a manner. Due to such an atmosphere, African international students in South Africa lived and still live in fear of becoming the next victims of discrimination (Zar, 2009).

Although to a degree, it is safer to be within a university due to the availability of security guards and other authority and public figures, gated areas and security services that patrol constantly, the safety of being a university student can only do so much. It does not change the discriminatory tendencies of some students who do support xenophobic acts, nor does it protect one from the world beyond the boundaries of the university. A personal experience of mine of such incidences was a verbal form of xenophobia from a staff member who refused to acknowledge me as a non-South African student and insisted on addressing me in isiXhosa with the expectation that I should understand because I was black and because of my surname.

At the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, for example, many African international students shared that they had an experience of xenophobic treatment by staff members during the registration period as they were required to have their fees paid in full at the beginning of the year, which was different compared to their local counterparts who could pay in fractions (Murara, 2011). Though it is not the fault of staff members who are just implementing a widespread university policy, this however was a policy which disadvantaged international students, and indirectly added towards the misconception that international students have money. In addition, the international relations office at the University of Western Cape did not deal with African international students, but mainly dealt with students who attended the university on exchange programmes and hailed from Europe and North America (Murara, 2011). The International Student Relations Officer, who Murara (2011) interviewed, continued to state that they do not expect non-national students to attend the university and seek bursaries or funds or financial assistance from the university because they believe that foreign students have money (Murara, 2011). This ideology of the university and certain employees of the university has meant that the level of alienation for international

students is further exacerbated and African international students must fend for themselves more.

More examples of xenophobic incidences include experiences from African international students from the University of Venda in Limpopo who experienced hate speech in the form of derogatory names being used to refer to them as it is speculated that they practice witchcraft in order to have great academic performance (Maseko, 2019). A specific demonstration of xenophobia from a university staff member occurred at the University of KwaZulu Natal where a supervisor allegedly judged African international students harshly with bad grading marks and feedback on their examinations all because of their accents (Maseko, 2019). It was also discovered that this harsh treatment was not experienced by students who were either of the same race or nationality as the staff member (Maseko, 2019).

1.3 WIDER IMPACTS OF COVID-19 IN SOUTH AFRICA

According to the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD, 2020a), the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in South Africa on the 5th of March 2020. Ever since that day, more and more Covid-19 cases appeared across the country (Wiysonge, 2020). The President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced on the 23rd of March 2020 that on the 26th of March 2020 the country was going to go into a nationwide lockdown due to the Corona virus pandemic (South African Government News, 2020). The minister of health delivered daily press releases to keep the country informed and to attempt to educate the nation on what Covid-19 is, how it spreads and how to prevent it (Wiysonge, 2020). Some of the preventative measures that were taken included the ban on international travel and the closure of 35 out of the 53 land ports South Africa has. In addition, gatherings of more than 100 people were

disallowed in all spheres of society from religious, cultural, to economic gatherings and the closure of all levels of academic institutions (South African Government, 2020). The South African Government pushed for a change in normal everyday behaviour to stop the spread of the virus which included wearing of masks, social distancing, and self-isolation (South African Government, 2020). In the midst of all this, the pandemic exposed some long-standing weaknesses within South Africa such as its failing labour market with extremely high levels of unemployment (Fengler et al, 2021).

With regards to the economic impact Covid-19 has had on South Africa, Álvarez-Iglesias et al (2021) stated that Covid-19 threatens to push approximately 3 million people into poverty. Towards the end of 2020, during the lockdown, 13 million students, across all education levels and institutions, were left without adequate education and between March and April of 2020, a survey of approximately 6 000 people aged 18-59 showed a decrease in employment rates (Álvarez-Iglesias et al, 2021). According to the (World Bank Group, 2021), by the end of 2020, the number of employed people in South Africa had fallen by 1.5 million, and workers' wages had fallen by 10-15 percent. Unemployment rates for people aged 15-24 were 74 percent and 51 percent for people aged 25- 34 (World Bank Group, 2021). According to Stats South Africa (SA) (2022), the number of unemployed people increased, resulting in a total of 8 million unemployed people in the second quarter of 2022. The youth remain the most vulnerable group as the number of unemployed people aged 18-34 increased by 92 000 between the beginning of April and the end of June (Stats SA, 2022). Due to the pandemic, South Africa's economy slowed down by 16,4 percent in the second quarter of 2020 (Menzies and Erwin, 2020). The construction industry was the biggest loser with a manufacturing decline of 74,9

percent in 2020, household spending decreased by 49,8 percent and because of the alcohol and cigarette ban, consumer spending on the same items fell by 92.4 percent (Stats SA, 2020).

As of August 2020, South Africa continued to record the highest number of Covid-19 related cases in the SADC region and accounted for 90 percent of all the Covid-19 related deaths in the region (Mbunge, 2020). Constant cleaning and disinfecting of schools, taxi ranks, buses and medical centres were among measures that were put in place to prevent the further spread of the virus (Mbunge, 2020). The South African health system was also affected by the lack of personal protective equipment and the increase in the country's mortality rate. The country's mortality rate increased by 2,2 percent between March and August 2020 due to Covid-19 related cases (Mbunge, 2020). Deaths were concentrated among people with underlying conditions as they were more vulnerable to Covid-19 (Mbunge, 2020).

In addition to the socio-economic problems caused by the supply disruptions and a decrease in human and industrial activities during the lockdown, there have also been an increase in mental health problems that continue to plague the country. As stated by Mbunge (2020, p 1811):

“Covid-19 significantly change [sic]daily lives and ultimately lead to mental health problems and substance abuse.”

Covid-19 had other wider and indirect effects on South Africa, such as the increase in Gender Based Violence (GBV) cases across the country. It is said that GBV and Covid-19 were twin pandemics in South Africa as cases of GBV increased dramatically in the country after the Covid-19 lockdown commenced (Dlamini, 2021). In the first week of lockdown, the South African Police Service reported receiving 2 300 calls related to GBV, and by mid-June 2020, 21

women and many children had been killed by their intimate partners (Amnesty International, 2021). Due to the lockdown, many women and children found it difficult to escape their abusers. In addition, South Africa's Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development, Ronald Lamola, admitted on radio in June 2020 that there were weaknesses in the criminal justice system that was failing to aid victims of GBV (Amnesty International, 2021).

1.4 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Some of the same problems international students faced before Covid-19 as mentioned above by (MacGregor, 2014 and Mokgwasi, 2017) were still prevalent and were made even more severe by the pandemic. International students in South Africa also experienced some of the same challenges as the wider population. International students from different South African universities expressed concerns around challenges with access to food, medical aid, and academic assistance during Covid-19 (Brima, 2020). It became difficult for certain administrators at universities to provide food, safety and accommodation for international students who had nowhere else to go as they only had the accommodation that they were provided by their universities (Mathiba, 2020).

The closure of universities also caused the further scarcity of food for those who remained. An African international student, from Zimbabwe, at the UitGP was photographed carrying a food parcel that was donated to some of the university residences by a non-governmental organisation called Kindness Like Confetti (Study International, 2020). Such an act emphasized the level of severity of the food situation to the point where donations were needed, but also showed an initiative done by the university to assist, however, the question remained as to whether this was enough.

Many students struggled to access their academic information and use academic resources when they were at home due to either bad networks in their area or data being expensive. Many also left their academic materials such as laptops and books when they had to evacuate their residences. This was because there were only a few days in-between the national lockdown being announced and when it was going to take effect, therefore many students left the country in a hurry (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). In addition, it was also expected at that time that they were going to return to university very soon (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021), meaning there was no need to carry a lot of their belongings. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

The manner in which students exercised resilience during the pandemic is of importance and further justifies the topic's importance. It was found that one of the biggest problems facing students during the lockdown was the lack of relation with lectures and that the presence of family and neighbours were also considered as resilience-promoting factors during the lockdown confinement (Sarmiento, et al. 2021; Zhou and Zhang, 2021). With many students and lectures struggling with the shift to online learning and with many international students being stuck in residences without family, this only made matters worse. The quality and quantity of a relationship was seen as a protective factor and that successful coping is easier with physical relationships compared to online virtual ones (Sarmiento, et al. 2021). In this regard the move to learning and social interactions being online during the pandemic tested the resilience of many people. This negatively affected the mental and emotional state of many.

1.5 DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

On the 30th of September 2020, Minister of Education, Blade Nzimande made a speech after the country had moved to level one of the Covid-19 disaster response measures. In his speech, he mentioned that South African students were to receive help regarding access to financial assistance (South African Government, 2020). In addition, he mentioned that students were to receive help regarding laptops and other devices that are needed for students to access the internet and continue with their academic courses given that many courses were at that time being delivered online (South African Government, 2020). He stated that only students who qualified to be or were funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), a scheme that only funded South African students, were to receive these devices and that other agencies and service providers were involved to further assist the process and ensure that students are supported (South African Government, 2020). This was similar to an initiative the UitGP implemented whereby it provided its students with laptops and other devices to ensure that they had access to the internet and could participate in online learning. Students who were outside of South Africa and in addition did not have access to computers, laptops, affordable data, and a conducive study environment were labelled as students at a higher risk of falling behind as the academic year continued (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). In his general Higher Education and Training response to the pandemic speech, Blade Nzimande only mentioned international students twice (South African Government, 2020). On these two occasions, there was no mention of any type of assistance offered to international students, which may have signified a lack of inclusion in assistance plans for international students, especially in emergency or state of disaster situations. This is supported by Jooste and Hagenmeier (2020) who mentioned that Blade Nzimande granted allowances for groups of students, including final-year and postgraduate students to access laboratory equipment. He

did not, however, make any reference to the exclusion of international students that was occurring (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2020).

The decision made by the government of South Africa to resume contact classes and continue the 2020 academic year was viewed by some as questionable. It showed a certain level of alienation towards international students. The International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) expressed concerns surrounding the integration of international students as universities began to open before international borders did (IEASA, 2020). This meant that some contact classes were to resume yet international students could not attend these classes as they could not enter the country. International students could only get back into South Africa at Level 1 (IEASA, 2020). It was unclear as to how teaching was intended to continue when international students were not back yet and the IEASA questioned whether or not international students were to receive extra time and assistance to catch up (IEASA, 2020).

The manner in which institutions of higher learning had initially responded to the pandemic was largely due to the influence and decision-making process of the South African government. One could say that universities in South Africa were merely following the rules, that it was the type of relationship between the two and that it was not entirely the fault of universities for the lack of consideration and integration of international students in these decisions. However, universities had the authority to execute these rules in the manner that they saw fit in line with their vision as mentioned by Blade Nzimande in his speech:

“Each institution has taken a different approach to the risk-adjusted, phased-in return, dependent on their context and readiness, and in line with their own detailed institutional plans and strategies” (South African Government, 2020),

It could therefore be concluded that universities could have done better in the initial response to the pandemic and in the integration of international students. Using the UitGP as an example, some of the initial university responses included the provision of free data for students to participate in online learning. In addition, on the 27th of May 2020, the Principal of the UitGP sent out a mass email to the university community, which I received as well, stating that the delivery of learning material such as laptops and other academic equipment will take place to cater to those students who are not able to connect online due either electricity problems, a lack of internet connection, or equipment. The efforts that were made to mitigate the risks and impact of the pandemic are commendable, however, both the South African government and institutions of higher learning should note that there is value in looking at what the experiences of international students were and how the responses could perhaps have better accommodated them.

1.6 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES GLOBALLY

Looking at the issue of international student support globally, the example of Australia was one that has been written about quite extensively. During the Covid-19 lockdown, international students in Australia were informed that they should go back to their home countries and that if they could not afford to do so, they would have to live in Australia at their own cost (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020). This affected approximately 700 000 international students, of which when some type of help was offered, not only was it inadequate, but it was limited only to students deemed to be in serious circumstances (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020). Students had to prove that they were in a dire situation through applications and providing bank statements, a process which delayed many in receiving help (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020). In addition, international students were still

required to pay their fees which were already higher than those of their local counterparts. This continued even after international students expressed the need for a reduction in fees since their classes were online and they could no longer use most campus facilities (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020.) This inadequate treatment towards international students affected them greatly and it has been argued that it could be detrimental to Australia as many students were reconsidering the country as a higher education destination due to the poor treatment (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020). The same sentiments were shared by The Pie News (2020) who reported that in a survey, three in five international students said that they were less likely to recommend Australia to anyone else due to their unpleasant experience. This became evident as the following year Australia enrolled 210 000 fewer international students compared to the previous year (Maslen, 2021).

Other examples include the United States of America (USA) whose government came to the decision of not giving international students study visas if they took all their courses online (Xiong, et al, 2020). This was later revoked after heavy resistance, but the damage had already been done as the students had gotten a negative impression towards the USA (Xiong, et al. 2020). The impact of poor treatment of international students is shown in 88 percent of colleges and universities in the USA predicting a decrease in international student enrolment in the 2020/21 academic year (Martel, 2020). In addition, because classes were moving online, international students were not able to take advantage of the opportunity of cultural immersion and networking that studying abroad offered. Those who did travel back home also faced high internet costs and inconvenient schedules due to time differences, all while paying the same tuition fees (Kanwar and Carr, 2020). In addition, students found it difficult to attend online lectures as they had to connect to servers overseas which were hard to access the learning websites and that caused them to be disconnected (Li, 2020). The lack of

sufficient support to accommodate international students was to the disadvantage of the host countries and universities, which among other things lost substantial amounts of income due to lower enrolments and were detrimental to the future of international students.

More examples include international students at the University of Alabama in Birmingham who were reported to be anxious and stressed regarding their next semester of academics (UA in Birmingham, 2021). In addition, many of them were stranded in dorms or apartments with no support or social interaction (University of Alabama in Birmingham, 2021). An international student from China in the United States, shared that certain international students who were not lucky enough to be allowed to stay in the university accommodation began sleeping and living in their friend's living rooms and basements (Li, 2020). Furthermore, international students whose visas had expired during the lockdown became illegal migrants and had no help resolving the issue (Li, 2020). This further explained the common feeling of helplessness and alienation that an international student faced.

African international students have also been the victims of racial discrimination in other countries since the pandemic began. In countries such as China, Cyprus, and India, African international students have been perceived as the bringers of Covid-19 (Salmi, 2020). This has been worsened by statements from political leaders, such as Northern Cyprus's Prime Minister who was eager to use the pandemic as an opportunity to "clean them out", yet many universities had expressed their need for foreign students (Salmi, 2020).

1.7 RESEARCH PROBLEM

It is one thing to acknowledge that there are various existing and continuous problems that international students face. It is another, however, to actively do research on them and come up with solutions to decrease their occurrence. For years, it has been known that many

international students experience problems or some form of difficulty in their host countries. Most of the times, it is the exact same problems that occur over and over again. And now, because of a crisis situation, these problems have been worsened, and new burdens have emerged. More thorough research into this problem was needed in order to inform adequate action that could help resolve these issues. As mentioned by Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing (2015. p 90):

“Further research that is responsive to the academic as well as non-academic challenges and difficulties experienced by international students in South Africa will contribute to the production of knowledge in this area, and also has the potential to advocate for fruitful and productive international student experiences.”

By learning from the Covid-19 crisis, interventions can be improved and the value of international students maximised.

Data, such as that of Mbous et al (2022), illustrate similar struggles international students faced on a daily basis in many different countries. The university experiences of international students from different countries and ethnicities with different situations and struggles have been made available. There was very little information that I could find however, regarding the experiences and challenges of specifically African international students in African universities during the Covid-19 lockdown. Most literature on the topic of international students and how they were affected by Covid-19 addressed the struggles of international students in Europe, USA, China and Australia, for example the University of Alabama at Birmingham (2022).

Very little literature was available with regards to whether or not students were satisfied with the help they received, what the international students struggled with specifically and how

they would have liked universities to assist them better, especially in African countries. This was another part of the gap this study intended to fill.

In addition, the majority of the literature available regarding the struggles of African international students during the Covid-19 lockdown touched on: primary struggles experienced in the beginning of the lockdown, such as travel bans (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021); concern as to whether international students were going to be able to travel back home (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021.); and academic performance of students; (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2020). Much of this literature was also not very in-depth (probably due to the speed of publication after the crisis began), neither did it touch on the types of support international students received from their respective universities and what could have been feasibly implemented by the universities to improve the situation. There was also little existing literature regarding whether the student support structures that worked before the pandemic worked during it. There was little to no research, that I could find, regarding the effectiveness or success of these existing student support services during Covid-19. As Hall (2010) argued:

“further research is needed to explore the role of Student Support Services (SSS). This may offer solutions to improve programme assessments, better serve academically disadvantaged populations, and determine best practices of Student Support Services” (Hall, 2010. p 5).

Bringing information to the attention of universities with regards to the positive and negative experiences students face, and student’s perspective on this, could be beneficial as institutions would be aware of how they can further feasibly cater to their students. This study adds to the literature on this specific topic and produced data that hopefully contributes to making the UitGP the leading institute in this regard.

1.8 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to increase the knowledge and understanding of the challenges and experiences African international students faced during Covid-19. This is done by documenting firsthand information from student's experiences both before and during Covid-19. It seeks to contribute to discussions on how international students could be better supported by universities in South Africa.

1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of the study is that the information gained will hopefully assist in decision-making processes within universities that are working on transformative policies that include and are to the benefit of international students. This is aimed to better the university and educational experience of international students and maximise their contribution to their university and wider development goals. Further potential benefits to the institution include reputation enhancement, increasing international student numbers, and a greater contribution to human capital development. These are key as South African Universities struggle to maintain their international standing and the country as a whole struggles with a lack of skills and a range of development crises.

1.10 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question is: What can we learn from the challenges and experiences that African international students faced during Covid-19 to ensure improved support systems for such students in the future?

The sub-research questions are:

1. What were/are the challenges and experiences of African international students during the Covid-19 lockdown?
2. Did the support structures that existed before Covid-19 at the UitGP actually help during it?
3. How did the UitGP, the South African Government, and others such as home country embassies, assist African international students during the lockdown and what were international students' experiences of this?
4. What do African international students believe would ameliorate their challenges during both in and out of crises situations and make their university experience better?
5. Considering what is feasible financially and otherwise, how, if at all, could African international students at the UitGP have been better supported during the Covid-19 lockdown to improve their experience and enhance the reputation of the University?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the existing ideas and schools of thought on the topic are explained. The chapter starts off by explaining the benefits of African international students to the host universities and countries, and then touches on the common challenges that African international students experienced before Covid-19 that hindered their benefits from being maximised are described. Next, the already known common challenges they faced during the pandemic are addressed, followed by the impact Covid-19 had on international students. The chapter then touches on interventions, such as student support services, that worked before Covid-19 and could be learnt from in order to alleviate the pressures of these challenges, especially in crisis situations. Last to be addressed are the arguments and various thoughts that surround student support services and how they should be. A limitation is that the published academic literature specifically on the impacts of Covid-19 is still fairly limited due to the phenomena being a recent one. The reasons why the chapter is structured in this manner is to enable readers to see and understand the topic's importance along with creating a type of flow that promotes a build-up to the significance of international students and their benefits and why they deserve to be accommodated adequately especially, during crisis times.

The decision to not use a theoretical framework in this study was due to it being an exploratory study. It did not start with a particular framework but sought to explore what was happening including the debates on the issue. In addition, the topic, at the time of writing,

was fairly new with little academic information surrounding the effects of Covid-19 on African international students and support structures in institutions of higher learning during the pandemic. Therefore, there was not much of a foundation to build a framework on. I do offer a framework in the concluding chapter, based on my research, to help illustrate the key findings and considerations.

2.2 BENEFITS OF AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The treatment of international students is a development issue because of the importance of tertiary education in the advancement of society and international students play a role in that. So valuable is the contribution of international students that it has been argued that “international students form the very foundation of a well-connected, diverse, and globalized world” (Kumar, 2021. p 1). They bring a tremendous amount of value in three areas: 1) universities and university life (Kumar, 2021; Ford, 2021; Hughes, 2019); 2) the host country’s development, in this case South Africa (Kumar, 2022; Hughes, 2019); and 3) development on the African continent (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021; Ratshilaya, 2017).

Firstly, for university life, international students create and promote diversity in universities (Ford, 2021; Institute of International Education, 2023). This mimics the kind of life students would have outside academia as they work with different people from different backgrounds in an increasingly globalized world. International students enrich the learning environment by bringing in different cultural perspectives and they are an important source of income for universities (Ford, 2021). International students also assist in the process of internationalisation in the host country (QS, 2021). Internationalisation is the process of involving a more international audience or dimension in tertiary education in order to

enhance the quality of education and research for both students and staff (UFS, 2020; Teferra, 2019). Others such as (Knight, 2003) propose the definition of internationalisation as:

“The process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education”- (Knight, 2003. p. 2).

Essentially, internationalisation is when international students improve the level of education and tertiary education experiences in host universities and countries. Using a South African university example, international students enhance the international profile of a university through internationalisation programmes (University of Pretoria, 2021). In addition, international students have increased diversity on campuses and have increased university rankings (University of Pretoria, 2021). Quacquarelli Symonds, otherwise known as QS Rankings, are an annual publication of university rankings, comprising of the global overall and subject ranking (QS, 2023). In other words, they name the world’s top universities for the study of 51 different subjects and five faculty areas (QS, 2023). QS Rankings are prestigious rankings that evaluate an institution’s popularity and performance (Times of India, 2022, QS, 2023). They are the best known and most used world university rankings (Collier, 2022). They rank different institutions based on a number of factors, one of which is the ratio of international faculty staff and the students in university (Times of India, 2022; Collier, 2020; Laura, 2023). There are six indicators in total. These are, academic reputation, employer reputation, student-to-faculty ratio, research citations per faculty member, proportion of international faculty, and proportion of international students (Collier, 2020). This shows how widely accepted it is that international students add to the quality of university and academic life. Reasons why international student and faculty ratios are important include how it shows the institution’s ability to attract a high-quality international audience and implies a global

outlook as it builds international sympathies and global awareness (Laura, 2023). International students are also part of the reason why universities develop international connections and relations (Kumar, 2021).

International students in addition are a benefit to universities financially as they bring in foreign currency (Ford, 2021; Aloyo & Wentzel, 2011). Five main categories of international student spending were identified. These were monthly living expenses, upfront living expenses such as medical aid, tuition fees, books and stationery, and visiting family expenses (Aloyo & Wentzel, 2011). From these expenses, it was calculated that the direct annual total expenditure per international student in South Africa in 2008 was R 78 167 (Aloyo & Wentzel, 2011). This means that the total income any university in the country would gain from international students alone would be the total number of international students present at that particular university in 2008 multiplied by the total expenditure.

Secondly, having more international students has been identified as a benefit to South Africa's economy. With the total number of registered international students in South Africa in 2008 being 38 011, and if we multiply that by the total expenditure per international student which is R78 167 as mentioned above, we can estimate a total direct annual spend of R2 971 205 837 from international students alone. Cassidy (2017) estimated that in 2015, international student visitors contributed over R100 billion to the South African economy. International students in South Africa have dined out and travelled more than their domestic counterparts and therefore have contributed economically both to the tourism and non-tourism sectors (Hughes, 2017). This is not just unique to South Africa, using global examples, it has also been estimated that international students studying in colleges and universities in the USA contribute \$39 billion per year to the country's economy and support 400 000 jobs (Krislov,

2019). In 2018, international students contributed \$45 billion to the economy of the United States of America (Institute of International Education, 2023). They also assist in contributing to America's scientific and technical research and bring an international view and/or perspective to classrooms, helping prepare American undergraduates for global careers (Institute of International Education, 2023). International students also contributed £42 billion to the economy in the United Kingdom in 2021. This increased from £31 billion in 2018/9 showing the increasing benefit from the rising number of international students choosing it as their desired tertiary institute destination (The Guardian, 2023).

International students permanently enhance a country's human capital when they stay on as educated professionals in the country and have a positive welfare impact such as employment creation and adding to tax revenue (Aloyo and Wentzel, 2011). 38 percent of international students involved in a study of 181 international students that was conducted at six different universities in South Africa expressed that they would want to stay in South Africa after they have completed their studies (Aloyo and Wentzel, 2011), which could add to human capital in the country. The internationalisation of higher education brought with it the introduction of local/indigenous knowledge to the international community. In addition, internationalisation came with the opportunity to strengthen South African institutions which have historically been disadvantaged and increased knowledge production, intellectual property, and innovation (DHET, 2019).

Thirdly, the African continent has benefited from educated international students who return to their home countries and apply the skills acquired to the development of their countries and the continent. This also applies to those who stay in other African countries even if they do not go back home. 90 percent of Africa's jobs are informal and are associated with low pay

and low production (Mail and Guardian, 2015). A remedy for this is the skilled individuals a tertiary institute can produce (Mail and Guardian, 2015), thereby reemphasizing the need for educated students including international students. The benefits of more tertiary students include income and economic growth, increased global competitiveness and progress in healthy and stable political institutions (Amin and Ntembe, 2020). Future Africa, a leading research institution at the University of Pretoria that focuses on the development of Africa, believes that the generation of knowledge is the pillar of development for the continent (Future Africa, 2021). In addition, Future Africa has focused on the mobilisation of human capital and building networks across the African continent (Future Africa, 2021). As Kumar (2021, p 1) states, international students bring “a unique skillset, fresh outlook, young talent, and cultural perspective to accelerate the growth of a nation and make it more diverse and developed”. This can be a shared reality for every country on the African continent, leading to development on a mass scale for the continent. International students also indirectly become ambassadors of their host nation after graduating, which can lead to exchanges between the host country and the student’s home country, thereby assisting both nations (Kumar, 2021).

An initiative established by the African Union called the Mwalimu Nyerere African Union Scholarship Scheme is built on the vision of the positive contribution tertiary study in Africa can have for the continent. The scholarship scheme advocates for African students to study in other countries in Africa and to remain after they have completed their degrees (Ratshilaya, 2017). The intention is to promote the circulation of expertise and education within the African continent through funding, thereby limiting the loss of critical human resource capacity to Western countries (Ratshilaya, 2017). Because South Africa is a favoured higher

education destination (US News,2022; Collier, 2021) with the top five universities in Africa being in South Africa, its role is extremely crucial.

2.3 CHALLENGES FACED BY AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BEFORE COVID-19

There are two common categories of challenges identified in the literature that have hindered the process of maximising the benefits of and to international students. These are 1) finances (MacGregor, 2014); and 2) challenges of relocation which include challenges with integration (Chasi, 2020).

For the first category, some of the reasons for financial strain include their home country's economic instability and currency weaknesses. Some students such as those coming from countries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015) may not have the same financial resources as others. This is in line with Bourdieu's (2011) statement that students enter the world of higher education from different financial standings in society and are thereby to an extent at a disadvantage. Many African international students not only looked after their own needs, but also felt they had to send money back home for their impoverished families (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015). There had also been a lack of financial aid for international students in South Africa to worsen the financial strain on international students; universities were being forced to increase their fees due to the higher education system in South Africa experiencing financial struggles and a lack of public funding (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015). International students in South Africa and in many other countries already paid more than their local counterparts, therefore raising fees further complicated their situation. The tuition fees for international

students are accompanied by an international student levy that the student has to pay, and together, the amount is sometimes double the amount that local students pay (Mail and Guardian, 2015).

The struggles of international students when it comes to adjusting to their new environment can be categorised in three ways. Firstly, psycho-social adjustment refers to the mental wellbeing of the students and the influence experiences in their social setting has on them (Biyela, 2019). The second is psychological adjustment which refers to their emotional wellbeing and their level of satisfaction in their new environment, which includes social support and coping mechanisms (Biyela, 2019). The last category refers to the socio-cultural adjustment which is the ability for the individual to fit in (Biyela, 2019). If these categories are not fulfilled, international students find it difficult to successfully assimilate into their new environment.

Other challenges of relocation include experiencing xenophobia. Fewer African international students attended universities in South Africa due to xenophobic fears and because of visa delays (du Plessis, 2017). Following xenophobic attacks and xenophobic fears in South Africa, according to Professor Maxi Schoeman who was the deputy dean at the time, in 2017 the faculty of Humanities alone at the University of Pretoria received 200 fewer applications per year for postgraduate studies as compared to over 1 000 in previous years (du Plessis, 2017). Although higher education establishments have not been hotspots for xenophobic attacks, international students are a part of the larger community and this results in them being unable to escape the effects of xenophobia whilst in South Africa (Swanzy and Langa, 2017).

2.4 KNOWN CHALLENGES FACED BY AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID-19.

There are three already known common challenges that international students faced during Covid-19. These are: 1) academic concerns such as not having the right equipment or not having access to data (Mathiba, 2020); 2) material constraints, which ranged from food shortages (Brima, 2020) to finances (MacGregor, 2014); and 3) challenges of relocation, which included visa troubles (Chasi, 2020).

Academic concerns emerge as many international students did not have adequate equipment such as laptops and textbooks to continue with their studies during the lockdown (Mathiba, 2020). In addition, international students who had travelled outside the country at the beginning of the lockdown were essentially excluded from returning to campus because the Department of Higher Education and Training confirmed that international students outside the country could only return to campus for face-to-face interaction under Stage 1 (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). This meant that international students outside South Africa could not access the study and research facilities they required on campus for academic progress and performance, leading to a likely negative effect on their academics (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). This further increased the concern about their academic performance for international students as they feared that they will not be able to finish their courses adequately and on time.

The shortage of food is one that is listed among the common challenges international students faced during Covid-19. Due to the pandemic, global food supplies became threatened, and in South Africa, a \$26 billion coronavirus rescue package was launched to

cushion the effects of the pandemic on struggling households, yet international students were not part of the target for that relief package (Olaniran and Uleanya, 2021). When it comes to food insecurity, the strongest predictor of food insecurity is race as 79 percent of black African students at the University of Free State in South Africa were found to be food insecure in 2013 as compared to 24 percent of white students (Devereux, 2018). In addition, due to the lockdown again, many international students lost their jobs and did not receive much help after that. An article on the experiences and struggles of Nigerian students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) during the Covid-19 lockdown found that many suffered from a reduced cash flow and struggled financially (Oyewo, 2020) which also inevitably affects their food supply.

Challenges of relocation were made worse by the closure of 266 out of the 412 Home Affairs offices due to Covid-19 cases between March and December 2020 (SA Government News Agency, 2020). According to the International Academic Programmes Office at the University of Cape Town, students whose current visas expired and had remained in South Africa to renew them, could not travel back home (University of Cape Town, 2020). They would be deemed as undesirable by the state, regardless of whether they had a pending renewal application or proof of renewal (University of Cape Town, 2020). This would jeopardize their chances of getting visas in order to be able to return to South Africa in the future. Even if there was a delay or backlog within the Department of Home Affairs, international students who still had pending visas could not travel back and had no option but to stay in South Africa (University of Cape Town, 2022). The Department of Home Affairs was not the only entity responsible for visa delays. The South African Police Service (SAPS) is responsible for giving out police clearances when an individual is applying for a visa and without that clearance,

students cannot get their visa, and ultimately cannot register at their university (Quinlan, 2022). SAPS has a backlog of 85 000 applications for police clearances and this contributed to international students being unable to travel home (Quinlan, 2022). Essentially, after the closure of universities, the possibility of many international students being left stranded was high. They had to decide whether to risk losing their visas by going home where they will at least have accommodation or try and find some way to remain in South Africa.

To further reiterate the vulnerability of African international students, many South Africans regard the term “foreign national” as a euphemism designated specifically to black Africans whose home is elsewhere (Mbembe, 2029). This notion is inclusive of African international students. The United Nations News (2022) note that one of the main targets of discrimination and xenophobia in South Africa is low-income black African migrants, encompassing all who fall under the umbrella, including students.

Despite the large marginalisation and the clear vulnerability of non-South Africans of African origin in the country, during Covid-19 there were establishments that catered for and included the needs of non-South Africans in their aid relief plans during that difficult period. An example of an external establishment that deals with international students and migrants in South Africa that became a beacon of hope for many is the Nelson Mandela Rhodes Foundation. The Nelson Mandela Rhodes Foundation is an organisation founded in 2003 that finds, funds, and empowers young African leaders in South Africa (Mandela Rhodes Foundation, 2022). The foundation offers a scholarship for African students to study in South Africa and enables them to participate in a residential Leadership Development Programme (Mandela Rhodes Foundation, 2022). During Covid-19, the Foundation recognised what they termed as the: “vulnerable position of marginalized African foreign nationals in South Africa

during the Covid-19 lockdown” and though they commended the efforts made by the general populous to join resources in order to offer some form of relief, they acknowledged that many African foreign nationals were not able to benefit from the relief strategies due to them not being South African (Ndebele and Sikuza, 2020). This is evident from one of the requirements to qualify for the special R350 Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant provided by the South African Government from 30 March 2020 is that one must be a South African citizen or permanent resident (South African Government, 2022). In light of this, the Foundation reallocated some of its funds to help African foreign national households in South Africa with supermarket vouchers that could be used for food, electricity, data, or toiletries. This was with the firm belief of Ubuntu, an African philosophy which means a person is a person through other persons (Ndebele and Sikuza, 2020). Presumably, this could only meet the needs of a relatively small number of people, the significance of this initiative is of high value and out of that small number people, international students would be present.

Other organisations that had similar initiatives include The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The UNHCR, along with its ambassadors, launched a care and compassion campaign to help people who were likely to struggle under the tough lockdown restrictions (Pond, 2020). They distributed hand sanitizers, masks, and food parcels to informal settlements in Pretoria and Johannesburg (Pond, 2020). On the day of distribution, 380 families, inclusive of both South African and foreign households such as those from Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Somalia received food parcels and other amenities (Pond, 2020) and the chances of there being several international students within those families are high. The need for such initiatives illustrates the dire conditions for many in the country including international students from African countries as mentioned above.

2.5 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

The nationwide lockdown that was implemented due to the pandemic included the closure of universities. Due to university closures, most international students were forced to vacate residences and travel back home, incurring expenses they had not budgeted for (Chasi, 2020). Other international students faced difficulty travelling due to pending visa renewal applications and a lack of help to resolve the issue (Mathiba, 2020; Chasi, 2020). An estimated 5 382 international students were stranded in university accommodation in the whole of South Africa and required assistance from higher education institutions which were under resourced (Chasi, 2020).

The difficulties international students faced in South Africa during this period included the issue of limited contact and communication with their university. All students were required to update their contact information on a regular basis to ensure that the university could get a hold of them. However, due to university closures and specifically international students travelling back to their home countries, thereby not being available on South African mobile networks, many could not be reached (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021).

Students who had managed to go home were concerned about their academic performance in terms of being able to finish their studies (Mathiba, 2020). In addition, many students at home did not have an adequate internet connection to participate in online learning nor did they have adequate equipment to continue with their studies at home such as books and computers (Mathiba, 2020).

With regards to international students travelling back home and not being able to return and those international students who were stuck in South Africa, one of the main reasons that

controlled this was the different lockdown stages. There were 5 lockdown levels. Level 5 meant all lockdown regulations applied, travel both within and out of the country was not permitted and only essential services were allowed to operate (South African Government, 2020; eNCA, 2020). Level 4 involved allowing some activities to resume subject to extreme precautions and borders remained closed with the exception of repatriation flights (South African Government, 2020; eNCA, 2020). At this stage some campus activities resumed, but students outside the country could still not return. Levels 2 and 3 meant further easing of restrictions but maintaining physical distancing and restrictions on some leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence of the virus and Level 1 was when most normal activity could resume and borders were open (South African Government, 2020; eNCA, 2020). At these stages most face-to-face campus activities resumed, but international students outside the country still faced obstacles, such as obtaining visas, to returning.

With regards to food, due to dining halls being closed and students having to fend for themselves with their own money, which was already limited, food scarcity became more severe. Nigerian students from the University of KwaZulu Natal were reported to have even undertaken crowd funding in order to feed themselves and pay for accommodation (Oyewo, 2020). The provision of food in addition to accommodation and safety services to non-national students who remained in South Africa became a great challenge (Mathiba, 2020).

The issue of inclusivity and representation became evident as the country eased its restrictions towards the end of 2020. It is said that:

“A possible reason why considerations and plans did not specifically cater for international students is the lack of well-informed representation at the national level. For example, when the Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation

(DHESI) established a dedicated Covid-19 Team in mid-March 2020, this did not include representation of bodies that can specifically speak for international students”- (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021. p 217)

Plans regarding the successful completion of the 2020 academic year mainly included South African students and international students who were in the country, but not much regard or attention was given to those who were outside the country (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). An example I experienced, that added to my feelings of alienation, was an email received from the Vice Chancellor stating that students who were struggling to connect online for online learning would be supported by the university and were to be provided with equipment delivered to them. However, the email went on to state that international students who were outside of the country were to contact the heads of their departments themselves and make alternative arrangements.

Unfortunately, there was little to no existing literature that could be found regarding the survival strategies of African international students during Covid-19 given that not many academic publications surrounding the topic were available at the time of my research. This is amongst the gaps this study contributes to filling. Covid-19 affected the agency of international students yet there were ways that they still showed agency. The term agency refers to the ability of an individual to exert control over their life despite the structural and institutional challenges that might constrain them (Inouye et al, 2022; Biesta and Tedder, 2007). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as constructing engagement with structure. Agency can be used and expressed in different ways by different individuals, but while it shows some freedom of action by the individual, it also always depends on the relationship with structure (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). A global example of agency is

international students in America contesting the decision of not being given their study visas if they took all their courses online as mentioned above (Xiong, et al, 2020). The visa decision was later revoked after heavy resistance.

2.6 STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

A factor that had, over the years, assisted in enhancing the experience of international students through alleviating the pressures they face, had been effective student support provided by institutions of higher learning. Student support systems are services that help students with problems such as finances, transport, childcare, substance abuse, and income and employment issues so that they are able to attend classes and complete their degrees (Whitmer, 2012). Effective student support ensures the successful assimilation of a student into an institution's culture, enhances their student experience, and helps achieve good outcomes (Prebble et al., 2004). Student support services were found to increase the GPA of a student by a tenth of a percentage and improve student retention by ten percent (Cummings, 2014). Such support help students who might be academically challenged increase their chances of graduating (Hall, 2010).

If a student does not have an academic, emotional, and social connection with their university, the chances of them dropping out are higher. Student support services are therefore important because they help to decrease the dropout rate of students and increase the quality and diversity of varsity experiences for them, ensuring that they stand a better chance of completing their degrees (Ciobanu, 2013). They also promote community involvement through internships and temporary employment (Ciobanu, 2013), therefore contributing to wider development.

In times of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, people were in isolation and campuses were closed, yet the educational calendar continued through the implementation of Open Distance Learning (ODL). Open Distance Learning was essentially learning that occurred online through using electronic devices and the internet (Tech Target, 2021). Teachers and learners participated in learning from a distance without the traditional face-to-face interaction. Student support services were extremely important in ODL because due to the lack of physical interaction, students may become demotivated, feel isolated and disoriented and may exhibit a decrease in engagement (Nsamba and Makoe, 2017). This then leads to students dropping out, which makes it crucial to provide adequate student support, otherwise the resulting failure would lead to students neglecting their studies because they are not satisfied (Nsamba and Makoe, 2017).

It has been argued that:

“An adequate support service should meet or exceed students’ needs and expectations. This means that distance education institutions should provide the required and desired student support services.”- (Nsamba and Makoe, 2017. p 92)

With this in mind, an appropriate way to measure the quality of such services was to measure the expectations and the experience of the beneficiaries of the services (Parasuraman et al, 1985), in this case, the African international students. This was because the students’ expectations and experiences of the service help in evaluating the quality of those services (Parasuraman et al, 1985).

2.7 ARGUMENTS THAT SURROUND STUDENT SUPPORT

There are various arguments regarding the manner in which support for international students should be implemented that are reflected in different approaches in different contexts and institutions. Factors influencing approaches include the population of local students compared with the population of international students and issues such as the extent to which financial assistance, accommodation, and basics such as food are needed. Prebble et al (2004) stated that more attention had to be given to retention practices instead of needing students to conform to a standard set of expectations. Retention refers to a student's ability and action to become an involved actor in his or her institution (Hagedorn, 2006). Others give meaning to retention as the engagement a student has with their institution and the engagement the institution gives to the students (Tight, 2020). Retention also refers to the process of keeping students enrolled in an institution of higher learning (MSM Higher ED, 2023). Essentially, retention practices are activities or strategies that enable individuals to be able to stay enrolled in an institution of higher learning and be able to complete their qualifications and possibly enrol again to further their qualifications. Student support services should not be standardised because all universities and colleges are not the same, however they all had to exceed the students' expectations in order for the support to be considered sufficient.

Learning communities, support groups and courses, comprehensive programming and peer study partnerships were proven to assist international students with academic support in order for them to succeed academically (Andrade, 2006). It has been argued that to improve student success, institutions must offer a robust first year experience which consists of a supportive community and close relationship with instructors, early exposure to career

planning and enhanced student support services which offer solutions to life problems such as emergency financial assistance, assistance with housing, and assistance with food and childcare (Mintz, 2019). Other services deemed important to support international students include academic assistance, language support, career development, and mental wellness services (Martirosyan et al, 2019). Strategies that surround student support services should be centred around developing customised career resources, mental health outreach, and campus navigation (Martirosyan et al, 2019). It was further explained by Andrade (2006), that support services should not only focus on the transitional challenges of international students by adding new budgets and programmes but should rather introduce them to already existing programmes and personnel must receive extra training.

To combat the discrimination and insensitivity international students faced, it has been suggested that university employees should receive extra training in order to deal with the diverse student cultures they encountered, especially when it came to international students in order to avoid, for example as stated above, verbal xenophobia (Ratshilaya, 2017; Mettlemeier and Cockayne, 2020). In addition, it was suggested that high performing international students should receive funding from their universities (Mettlemeier and Cockayne, 2020; Ratshilaya, 2017), along with more job opportunities to battle the financial strains they encountered which negatively affected their academic experiences (Ratshilaya, 2017). It is also argued that resources and efforts must be directed towards the internationalisation of the university curriculums and teaching approaches in order to meaningfully include international students and promote intercultural interaction (Mettlemeier and Cockayne, 2020).

Student support services included various interactions or social events that enabled international and South African students to connect, because it was evident that international students had a higher tendency of befriending each other (Lee, 2006; Ratshilaya, 2017). This was to assist in overcoming the feeling of alienation and in addition it helped the student have more access to individuals with useful resources. This would benefit international students by them having fewer academic problems, fewer social difficulties, having improved communication, alleviating home sickness, and better general overseas adaptation (Zhou, et al. 2008). Great attention must be paid to the experiences of the students that are already enrolled and to fostering positive interactions between international students and locals of the host nation (Lee, 2006).

A different argument states that international students should be afforded opportunities that are just as equal and beneficial to those that are afforded to domestic students, such as not being subjected to high tuition costs because they are international students (Tannock, 2013). International students should have equal opportunities with domestic students to enrol in their courses and the number of international students should not come disproportionately from the wealthy, middle class and elite families (Tannock, 2013). More reasons why international students should be afforded equally beneficial opportunities as domestic students, is because of the contribution they give. In Canada, international students, including visiting family members contributed \$21,6 billion to the economy in 2018 but they are still treated as second class citizens (Mohamed, 2020). The cost of an undergraduate degree for an international student in Canada is \$17 744; three times more than a Canadian would pay (Mohamed, 2020). With the amount of economic contribution international students have towards Canada, only five out of the ten provinces provide public healthcare for foreign

students, forcing them to get private health insurance (Mohamed, 2020). Essentially an international student's quality of health care is dependent on how much they can afford.

2.8 CONCLUSION

International students provide a variety of benefits ranging from improving the educational institutions to country and continental development. The demand for tertiary students' contribution to wider development is high and international students have a role to play in it. To ensure that their role is fulfilled, however, adequate support must be given to international students to cater for the challenges they face in their host country.

Based on existing literature, it is evident that support for African international students was inadequate before and more so during Covid-19. There are examples of international students exercising agency to address their challenges in these times, but this was within a limiting structural and institutional context.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the manner and process through which the research was carried out and information was collected and analysed is described. The reasoning behind the chosen combination of qualitative methods and the case study used is explained along with their benefits to the study. The limitations of these methods, where applicable, are explained as well. The chapter has seven sections, the first is an explanation of the chosen research method the study used. The second section explains the relevance of the UitGP and why the university in question was selected for this study. Third is primary research methods, where all primary research methods used in the study are described in detail. The fourth section is secondary research methods. Sources from which secondary information was derived from are described. The next section is the data analysis section. It describes the manner in which information gathered is used, analysed and displayed. This is then followed by the ethics section which explains the ethical clearance process and how ethical concerns were dealt with. The last section illustrates the limitation that were encountered in the study and how they were rectified.

3.2 RESEARCH METHOD

The study undertook a qualitative research approach where both primary and secondary sources of information were used. Qualitative research approaches subjectively assess attitudes, opinions, and behaviour of people (Kothari, 2004). They are used to answer

questions about experiences and perspectives, investigating beliefs in order to understand personal perspectives and encounters (Hammarberg et al, 2016). These qualitative research methods assisted in gaining in depth information regarding the experiences of African international students and detailed information from the perspective of key informants from the case study of the UitGP and from outside establishments dealing with international student support during Covid-19.

The term key informants refer to employees from the UitGP and from other outside establishments who deal or work with and assist international students with their entry and assimilation into their tertiary institutional life. Key informants are of value as they give a different and wider perspective with regards to what they had to deal with in terms of the provision of services to assist international students. The international students interviewed are the primary research participants whose experiences form the focus of this study.

3.3 CHOSEN CASE STUDY

The UitGP was chosen as the study site because it is one of the largest contact universities in South Africa with a total of seven campuses and 50 000 students (Elikplim, 2021). It also has 4 500 international students (Times Higher Education, 2023), who make up nine percent of the entire student body. This provided a larger population of international students to sample from for a full diversity of experiences. It was also near my place of residence which increased the level of feasibility regarding data access. Data collection was made easier as well due to existing contacts already had which were located in the same vicinity. In addition, the useful information gained from the study was to be to the UitGP's benefit by assisting it to become the leading institution in the further enhancement of student support for international students.

A case study is a good way to explore a specific setting in order to thoroughly understand it (Gustafsson, 2017). The advantages of using a case study approach are that it offers evidence that complements a certain experience (Krusenvik, 2016). In this case, evidence is required in relation to whether student support structures adequately assisted international students with their challenges during the pandemic. Case studies also tend to have a wider web for catching information and they can focus on real life situations (Krusenvik, 2016). The case study design chosen for this research was of an exploratory nature. Exploratory case studies are used when examining situations with no clear single set of outcomes (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

3.4 PRIMARY RESEARCH

Kothari (2004) defined primary data collection as information that was collected for the first time, afresh. Others defined primary sources of information as the oral or written testimonies of eyewitness and as information that was direct and original, from the source (Berg, 2001). The primary research methods used in this study consisted of: 1) interviews with both students and key informants; and 2) auto ethnography.

3.4a INTERVIEWS

Interviews were held telephonically and/or face-to-face. Much of the field research was carried out while Covid-19 was still a threat. Therefore, when there was a need for face-to-face interviews, Covid-19 prevention measures such as the wearing of masks, social distancing and hand sanitising were performed as per guidelines from the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD, 2020b). Interviews done telephonically, or using online platforms, are an advantage as they enable one to connect with people who cannot be

reached physically due to their location (Berg, 2001), or in this case for Covid-19 safety reasons.

All face-to-face interviews took place in and around the UitGP at a site that the research participant was comfortable with and had agreed to. Interviews were audio recorded, if the research participant agreed, to ensure that the information was easily reviewed and revisited in full afterwards. Repeat visits and repeat interviews with students were also done to gather more in-depth information and assess any potential changes they experienced since the first interview.

In total, there were 37 individuals who were interviewed for the study, with 28 being African international students and 9 being Key informants. An overview of all the participants involved in this study is provided in Annex E, with pseudonyms used throughout to protect their identities. Justification for why there were 37 participants in the study is due to there being no new information that was being gained from the interviews. This is called saturation and it occurred before reaching 37 participants however data collection ceased at 37. Saturation is when no new information of value emerges from the data collection process or when there is enough data to replicate the study (Christensen et al., 2015; Fusch and Ness, 2015). Saturation can also be defined as:

“The point at which gathering more data about a theoretical construct reveals no new properties, nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory”- (Hennink and Kasier, 2022. p. 1)

3.4A(i) AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Starting with African international students, 28 were interviewed in total. 26 were African international students from the UitGP. The age range was 21- 37 years of age. There were 14 female and 12 male participants. There were eight undergraduate students, ten Honour's students, six Master's candidates, and two PhD candidates. In terms of countries, 17 were from Zimbabwe, two from Malawi, and one each from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Eswatini. The remaining two are African international students from other universities who were both 23 years old and from Zimbabwe. One was male and other was female with one doing undergraduate studies, while the other was an Honour's student.

The reasons as to why there is a higher number of participants from Zimbabwe compared to other countries is firstly because I am a Zimbabwean national myself. It was therefore easier to find many international students from Zimbabwe who were willing to be a part of the research. Secondly, there is a high population of Zimbabweans in South Africa. Zimbabwe was the largest origin country accounting for 24 percent of all immigrants in South Africa in 2020 (Moyo, 2021). Thirdly, it is because of their majority within international student populations. Further on in the study, in Chapter 4, it is revealed and confirmed by a high standing key informant that Zimbabweans are amongst the three countries that dominate the international student population in the UitGP. This is again reemphasized and confirmed by another key informant who reveals that Zimbabweans dominate the international student population in residences at the UitGP.

African international students were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to obtain information quickly and inexpensively (Berg, 2001).

Convenience sampling uses research participants who were close by and easily accessible (Berg, 2001). Convenience sampling was affordable, easy, and ensures that participants are readily available (Etikan et al, 2016). The purposive element of the sampling ensured gender diversity in respondents which was seen as important to capture the experiences of women and men, which were potentially different, and to ensure women's and men's voices were heard. To further cover a diversity of experiences, it was ensured that research participants covered those from different years of study, faculties, courses, and national and ethnic backgrounds.

In this study, students were recruited from international student clubs and societies that existed within the university. This was done online to avoid risks from Covid-19. In addition, contacts with international students that I already had as an African international student, were used to identify potential research participants. These existing contacts were approached, informed about the study, their consent gained, which led to participation. Recruitment of further interviewees occurred through advertising the study on open platforms such as social media and posters. Further research participants were identified by asking existing participants to share my contact details with anyone else they knew who would fit the requirements for the study. Willing students then communicated for further information and possible participation. This continued until the study reached a level of saturation.

3.4A(ii) KEY INFORMANTS

Key informants from the UitGP and other universities in South Africa were selected due to their experience with or knowledge of student affairs and support. They were identified from already existing contacts obtained from being an international student and from related work.

They were interviewed in their personal capacities and provided perspectives from their experience and knowledge of the topic, with regards to what they did in their positions, what they felt they could have done better, and what they thought their universities could feasibly implement for the betterment of themselves and their students.

There were nine key informants in total that were interviewed and of these six were from the UitGP. These included heads of university departments, managers of international student facilities, the International Student Division (ISD), the department of accommodation, and members of the Student Representative Council. These departments had been selected due to their involvement with a high number of international students. The key informants from the UitGP included four women and two men with ages from 34-58. In terms of educational history, there was 1 PhD graduate, 1 Master's graduate and the rest were a mixture of other postgraduate degrees and diploma holders. All are South African citizens.

The remaining three participants came from external establishments dealing with scholarships for international students, departments from different universities, building coordinators and Student Life managers from places of residence that were not under the UitGP. They were approached for interviewing in their personal capacities to gain an understanding of their practices and how they handled some of the challenges international students faced. There were two male participants and one female participant with ages ranging from 25-52. One was a South African citizen who held postgraduate degree, another a German citizen who is a Master's holder, and one was a Kenyan citizen who is a PhD holder.

Purposive sampling was used to select these key informants which is when a researcher uses existing knowledge regarding a certain group of individuals to select subjects that represent that specific population (Berg, 2001). In this case, the population was key informants with

knowledge and experience of international student support. The concept behind this method is to focus on individuals who have an abundance of the desired experience or information relevant to the study (Etikan et al, 2016). This therefore ensures the maximum utilization of the researcher's resources available such as time.

Key informants were interviewed in their individual capacity, therefore there was no need for institutional permission. Their establishments are not mentioned. In addition, for the purpose of further recruitment I gave permission to these already existing key informants to share my contact details with anyone else they knew who would fit the requirement for the study and willing participants then contacted me.

An interview guide was used for all interviews. Questions for international students covered issues such as what they had experienced during the lockdown, what type of help, if any, had they received and what they thought would be feasible for them to receive were asked (Annex A). Questions for key informants included what they thought could be feasibly implemented to help international students through times of crises and what type of help had been given, especially during Covid-19 (Annex B). The interviews were semi structured to enable the interviewer to probe further beyond their prepared questions to gain in-depth information (Berg, 2001). The questions used were also open ended which allowed the interviewee to respond in their own way naturally, without any limitations being used. This was valuable when exploring the experiences, thoughts, and attitudes of individuals (Christensen et al., 2015). At the end of all interviews, participants were given the opportunity to ask the researcher questions they may have had and afterwards they were thanked for their time.

3.4b AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is “giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding” (Wall, 2008. p 38). Advantages of autoethnography include that the personal experiences that were documented compliment, and in some cases fill gaps in existing literature (Adams et al, 2017). In addition, the research method gives insider knowledge regarding certain experiences, allowing them to be articulated in a different and slightly more detailed manner as opposed to outsider knowledge (Adams et al, 2017). Personal experience as an African international student in South Africa created context and promoted a sense of relatability especially when it came to the interviews with students.

As I am an African international student, autoethnography was used to draw on personal experiences and in this way the study gained an additional research participant. I am from Zimbabwe and I have been studying in South Africa for seven years and I am currently pursuing a master’s degree. I took myself through the same questions as applied to other students in interviews and I added to the research and this dissertation with descriptions of my own experiences as a student both before and during the pandemic. I do not, however, include my own experiences in the analysis and presentation of what was found from the interviews with the other students. My personal experiences made it easier for me to relate to the students’ experiences. I however took care in analysis to ensure I balanced this with views from the key informants and existing literature and had clear evidence to support any conclusions. Taking myself through the same interview questions as other participants was a method to ensure uniformity and enriched the findings with my personal experiences.

3.5 SECONDARY RESEARCH

Secondary research is research that relies on information that has been organised and published by other people (Bouchrika, 2020). Secondary sources were used to enable further understanding and give context to the study. Sources included the internet, books, journals, reports, blogs, newspaper reports, and publications from the Department of Higher Education in South Africa and from the chosen university for the study. The chosen university's policies and programmes for student support were reviewed to obtain information regarding how they were, and potentially could be more, accessible to international students during Covid-19, future crises, and in normal university life. The kind of information that was searched for using these sources included the challenges African international students faced in African countries and why, publications about African university struggles during Covid-19, the effect Covid-19 had on international students, and what universities had done to address these impacts. Information about what universities would experience if their international student population was to decrease due to a lack of effective support was also searched for.

Due to the study being based on a recent and continuing phenomenon, and the time lag from research to publication, not many academic publications surrounding the topic were available at the time of the research and writing up. Because of this, part of the secondary research for the study was based on non-academic sources such as blogs and newspaper reports as they provided a more current source of information. These sources also gave more in person detail than other official publications and were useful to gain information while waiting for academic publications to be made available.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the process of evaluating and scrutinizing information gathered to get some insight on it to support findings and assist in decision making (Calzon, 2021). Data analysis can also be defined as being made up of three components, these being: 1) data reduction, which was the process of making raw qualitative data more manageable; 2) data display, which was putting the data in more organised fashion to draw valid conclusions from; and 3) data conclusion and verification (Berg, 2001). After interviews were done, qualitative data transcription was used to sort the interview data gathered in the interviews and captured in the audio recordings of the interviews. Transcription is a translation or transformation of recorded sounds and images to text (Davidson, 2009). Close observation of data through repeated listening assisted in the realisation of new ideas and discovery of new findings (Bailey, 2008). The benefits of transcriptions were that they put qualitative data into text form making patterns easier to find and preserving accuracy (Rev, 2020). Data was then displayed and organised to identify commonality, patterns, and certain ambiguities to then enable a conclusion. Organising the data enabled differences to be found and explained, along with particular phenomena that had not been recognised before to be discovered. The type of data analytical approach used was a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying themes or patterns within qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis approaches assist in identifying and interpreting patterns to make sense of them in order to address a particular issue (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.7 ETHICAL CONCERNS

When conducting research that involves human participation, research ethical approval is required (Fleming and Zegwaard, 2018). With this in mind, before the research was undertaken, an ethical clearance was requested and gained from the University of Pretoria Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee and the University's Survey Committee (Annex C and D).

Before any interviews were carried out, consent forms (Annex F and G) were made available to the interviewees for them to sign to confirm their granting of consent. The consent forms were sent to the participants either electronically or handed over to them in person. It was then signed and handed back to the researcher and the research participant was given a copy to keep. This created and further enhanced the level of trust with the participants. The consent forms acted as confirmation that the participants were fully informed of the research purpose and that they were willing to participate in and contribute to the study. It also involved confirming that they were comfortable, that they were aware that the information they gave was to be used in a research report, that they had the option to withdraw at any time if they wished, after which their information was to be deleted and not used in the research report, and that their identity was to be kept confidential. The identity of research participants remained confidential, and pseudonyms were used within the study and in this dissertation to ensure this. The information about the identity of the research participants was not and will not be shared with anyone outside the project and results were not reported in a way that identified them.

Key informants were interviewed in their individual capacities and neither their names and identities, nor the names and identities of their institutions were revealed, nor will they be revealed. Permission from their institutions was therefore not required.

Data from these interviews was recorded and stored on the researcher's mobile device. Only the researcher had access to the device which was password protected with the combination only being known by the researcher and in addition the device required facial recognition in order to be accessed. This ensured security and confidentiality of the data. The data will also be stored in University of Pretoria systems for 15 years and is only to be used for academic purposes.

The research was focused on the experiences of students and the knowledge and perspective of key informants in what was a difficult situation for all. To avoid misrepresentation, participants were asked to be honest and were informed that the interviews were not aimed at the judgement of the university, nor was the research being done by or for the university itself. No reputational harm came to the institution by ensuring that the study focused only on the wider lessons and ideas to be learned rather than looking for faults in the university's practices.

3.8 LIMITATIONS

The limitations that were encountered with purposive sampling, a method that required the selection of information rich cases, was the initial difficulty in finding willing and information rich participants. This was however overcome by the advertisement of the study.

A limitation with convenience sampling was the possibility of outliers, which are cases where some data does not belong or correlate with the purpose of the study (Etikan et al, 2016),

however, this was rectified through the explicit description of the involvement of African international students only and semi guided questions for both students and key informants, which ensured participants did not go off topic.

CHAPTER 4

DATA GATHERED

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the information that was discovered from the primary research is described. In addition, it reflects on and makes links to literature, thereby not only giving support to some of the theories that exist within the study, but also re-emphasizing the gravity of certain issues that surround international students and student support systems.

This chapter is divided into two sections, the African international student section, and the key informant section. The first section is the African international student section, which describes the information that was gathered from the African international students during the interviews. The African international student section has two different participant groups. These are African international students from the UitGP group and African international students from other universities group.

Both groups in the African international student section underwent the same in-depth interview process. Each group's interview information will be expressed in three subsections, these are Pre Covid-19 Experiences, During Covid-19 Experiences, and Institutional Assistance. Due to the interviews being semi structured, along with the differences in experience, various follow up questions that were asked for various individuals that are mentioned and described.

The second section is the key informant section. This section describes the information that was gathered from all key informants during the interviews. The key informant section has

two different participant groups. These are the key informants from the UitGP group and various other establishments working with international students.

Both groups in the key informant section underwent the same in-depth interview process. Each group's interview information will be described in three sub-sections in this chapter. These sub sections are: pre covid experiences, during covid experiences and key informant reflections.

4.2 AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

4.2a Participant Group: Students from the UitGP

(i) Pre Covid-experiences of students at the UITGP

In this sub section, the challenges experienced by international students are explored. When African international students from the UitGP were asked what negative experiences or challenges they went through in the years before Covid-19, the six most common issues identified, in no particular order, were: 1) language barriers; 2) xenophobia; 3) finding accommodation; 4) visa troubles; 5) the process of registering as a student at the university; and 6) challenges of support from the UitGP. Each of these challenges is elaborated on below.

International students struggle to integrate themselves into their new environment because of language barriers. Ten out of the 26 students from the UitGP said that they experienced difficulty in socializing due to language differentiation. This is illustrated by personal experience. Because I could not speak any of the South African languages, I found it difficult to be friends with the black South African students in my residence. I then formed more friendships with the white South African students because I could speak English with them and felt more welcomed by them, but it was still difficult nonetheless because I then had to

endure some racial comments that were said to me as jokes. I felt that I had to force myself to bear it because I feared not belonging and I was desperate to make friends. Ibo, a 24 year old Nigerian, shared that many people thought that he could speak one of the local languages because he was a black African until he explained to them that he was from Nigeria and does not know any South African language. Fitting in was very difficult for him because, in addition to only speaking English, he had a distinct accent. This then led to feelings of loneliness and alienation. Similarly, Anelle, a 21 year old Zimbabwean, could only speak English and she received negative feedback because of that from locals. She mentioned that she understood the situation in the manner that because she was black, she was expected to be able to speak one of the African languages.

Within the country of South Africa exists a nature of xenophobia that is accompanied by high levels of violence against foreign nationals, especially those from other African countries. Whether verbal or physical, it has a negative effect on the person on the receiving end. Non-South Africans in the country live in constant fear of being the next victim. International students in university are in a better environment as this environment does not support xenophobic behaviour. Universities offer security services that are constantly available on campus and around residences, universities come with gated communities and residences, and universities that include international students do not condone violence against them. This protection does not, however, extend outside university grounds, therefore the fear of being a victim of xenophobia is forever present. The sense of fear is worsened by the media with numerous and detailed reports of the horrendous attacks inflicted on immigrants. Anelle speaks about how she experienced verbal xenophobia when she received negative feedback from locals because she could only speak English and none of the South African languages. More xenophobic related issues came from Zelda, a 23 year old law student from Zimbabwe,

who, in a reflective and anxious tone, expressed that in the five years that she had been in South Africa, she always carried a fear of being targeted because she was a foreigner.

The issue with accommodation is that it is expensive for international students and difficult to apply for, especially given that many residences need international students to have certain documentation, such as work permits, to allow them to apply. It is problematic in the sense that without the required documentation, a non-South African is expected to pay 12 months' rent upfront instead of paying per month, which is easier and the norm for South African students. Chipso, a 21 year old public administration student from Zimbabwe, described how she found it difficult to apply for private accommodation that would allow her to pay rent monthly after leaving university residence accommodation. Instead, the accommodation options she encountered needed documentation such as a work permit or a residence permit from people who were not South Africans. Only then would they allow her to pay monthly, otherwise she was required to pay rent for the entire year upfront if she used her foreign documentation. If she used her parents or her own details to sign the lease, she was going to have to pay the full 12 months upfront because foreign documents were used. This therefore, means she could not use her study permit as all her other documents are still of foreign origin. Daniel, another Zimbabwean, adds that it's difficult to apply for accommodation especially when one does not have proof of income and being Zimbabwean makes it even more difficult when one's own country's currency is not the best.

The issues that surround visa renewal processes, such as the application process itself, the communication from Visa Facilitation Services Global (VFS), and the abnormally long waiting periods are stressful and troublesome for international students. VFS Global is a services specialist for governments and diplomatic missions around the world (VFS Global, 2023). It

manages the administrative and non-judgmental tasks related to passports and visas for governments so that they can solely focus on the task of assessment (VFS Global, 2023). It was explained to all students by VFS employees, who took their visa renewal applications, that their visas would come out in six to eight weeks, but it took more than that. According to some UitGP employees, some students have waited two years for visas. For me, it took eight months from the time I applied for a visa for it to be ready for collection. Panashe (21, Zimbabwean) stated that it was supposed to take three months to get his visa, but it came out eight months late. Idris (23, Malawian) had to travel to different countries to get the documents that were needed for him to get his visa; this became financially straining. He explained that he is from Malawi, but he got his very first visa whilst staying in Botswana so he had to go back to Botswana and apply there again. There were, however, some other documents that were needed from Malawi which no one could get on his behalf, so he also had to travel there.

Anelda (22, Zimbabwean) explained her story which is an example of the stresses of the registration process. She said that she had uploaded all her documentation for the university to verify, but there was no communication received back with regarding her final admission. There was no communication for a long time and she also experienced difficulty with her programme when registering online because the system allowed her to register, but she did not qualify for the programme, yet she did not know this then. Such poor communication can also happen to South African students, however, the impact on international students is more severe due to things like having to travel and the difficulties and costs of communicating from another country. In addition, Anelda's visa also came out late, which further delayed her registration process. Munashe (21, Zimbabwe) shared that for him, registration was a problem because locals were prioritized over him for resources such as funding. He felt that

everything required him to be a citizen. There were limited opportunities for international students to get bursaries and fees for student registration and tuition were high.

When it comes to the topic of jobs at the UitGP, from personal experience, it is slightly more challenging to get a job on the main campus for an international student as compared to a local South African due to the preference for South Africans. Although there is absolutely nothing wrong with that and it is commendable and recommended to put locals first to promote a sense of indigenisation, however, it is undeniable that the preference, is to a degree, detrimental to international students. With the need for some kind of stable income during the years before the pandemic being high, the efforts made in finding some kind of job at the university, even online, were futile for me.

When asked if they had sought help from their university regarding the negative experiences and challenges they went through before Covid-19, out of the 26 students from the UitGP, 13 said yes, eight said no and five were non-responsive or indifferent. The five who were indifferent never really interacted with the university. Not asking for assistance was not a deliberate choice, as it was with the eight who said no. It was more that these students just did not think to share their concerns with the university, nor did they try to make themselves aware of the type of support services that could have been offered to them.

Of the eight who said no, four of the students said that they preferred either helping themselves or seeking help from their friends as opposed to seeking help from their university. Two of them stated that they felt that the university did not provide the space for them to seek help. For example, Funke (24, Malawi) shared that the people who were in charge of helping international students were South Africans. Because of that, she felt that she did not want to bother them with her issues because she felt that they were not going to

understand her situation let alone help her in the manner that she required. She further added: “I just felt like an outsider immediately” as she expressed her feelings of alienation and lack of inclusion. When asked if she thought it would make the situation better to have more non-South Africans working in the International Student Department to promote relatability, without hesitation and with passion she responded “Yes!”.

Of the 13 students who had sought help from the university before Covid-19, seven indicated that although they did seek help, they either were not satisfied with the help or did not receive any help. For example, two of them went to the university seeking funding, but did not receive any funding during their studies from 2018 to 2020. Most funding opportunities were also closed to international students. They described their experiences as “less than satisfactory” and did not want to elaborate further as they seemed irritated and annoyed. Four students shared very specific experiences, like Danai (23, Zimbabwean). She described that she sought assistance for visa applications but the help she received was unsatisfactory. Communication from the university was slow: “Sometimes you would have to send the emails over and over again before they actually reply to you”, she explained. After this experience, she never asked for help from the university again and preferred the help of her friends and other international students. She also believed that the reason why the help was not satisfactory was because the university does not understand the stress of being an international student.

Tsego (25, Botswana/Zimbabwe) asked for help from the university but explained that it was as if one was “asking them to do you a favour”. She described her experience whereby she went to the international student division to ask for help and when she asked a question

about a particular problem she did not understand, the staff member seemed angry or annoyed about her even asking.

Panashe was informed by the university that if she did not have her visa ready in time, then there was not going to be much that they could do for her, and this was after she had asked her university to help her because she was going to miss the registration date. Amara (22, Cameroon) went to a Student Representative Council (SRC) member for her university seeking help. She approached the SRC member who had the international student portfolio but to her surprise, they were not an international student. She was not satisfied with the help she got because to her it seemed that they were more focused on managing the admin that came with the changing of the Afrikaans building names at the time instead of focusing on how best to assist students. In addition, the SRC representative could not relate to how international students were feeling as Amara stated that she got what she described as “prepared responses” from the SRC member.

On a more positive note, the six remaining students from the 13 who sought assistance from the university were satisfied with the help received. They gave the university praise for how they handled their situations. Tapiwa stated that he managed to finally get some financial aid, though it came after four years. Anelda stated that she was very distraught after the stressful situation that had ensued regarding her programme and her registration process. Her Faculty Advisor, however, helped a lot by introducing her to alternative programmes she could take and giving her time to pick the ones she was interested in. They then allowed her to register. Kevin, a 37 year old PhD student from Zimbabwe, mentioned that the members of staff that he associated with on campus assisted him with getting proof of residence and with opening

a bank account, along with assisting him to secure accommodation, which was a great need for him.

Anelle shared her story that when she needed help, university employees were very understanding and spoke to her in English. After she had experienced a mugging incident in the early days of being in South Africa, her house parents and the house committee of her residence were helpful and checked in on her regularly. Though the counselling department was fully booked at the time and she was informed that she could only get assisted after a two week waiting period, her house parents stepped in and ensured she got assistance immediately. She confirmed that if it was not for her house parents who fast-tracked everything for her, it would have taken a long time for her to get help as she feels that the counselling department of the university was highly understaffed. She was however satisfied with the help she then got.

With everything that international students went through during the years before Covid-19, each of them showed agency in different ways through their coping mechanisms to get themselves through tough times. Out of 26 international students that were interviewed, half of them said that their main coping mechanism was family and friends. Out of the remaining half, four stated it was a matter of mind set in order for them to get through tough times. Being self-disciplined, working through it, being resilient, and just trying over and over again. These were all ways the students described that they get through difficulties. An example is Munashe, who shared that for him being an architecture student he could not afford materials, so he resorted to dumpster diving and looking through rubbish to find materials to build his models. He had to “beg and borrow” as he described it.

Three students shared that their main coping mechanism to get through tough times was religion and prayer and four students stated that making friends with other international students is what helped them get through. Tarisai (22, Zimbabwean) said that she would keep to herself a lot and only spoke to people who she felt comfortable with. She became friends with another Zimbabwean in her residence and the reason for that is because she felt comfortable speaking to someone who understood her in all aspects. The remaining students used sports and watching South African television shows to learn the language as a way to cope with everything that was happening to them.

Some testimonies from students contained positive feedback, such as one from Tsego who gratefully expressed that university employees are selfless in their actions and were very helpful. She gave an example of a particular staff member who gave her their personal cell number and helped her with her problems even during the holidays. Anelle said that for her, being in residence gave her access to people who could offer immediate help when they needed assistance. She is grateful to the House Committee members and her House Mother who helped her during her stay in the residence. This is supported by Chipo, who also mentioned that after she had arrived late for orientation, being put in residence helped her as she was assisted by the residence leadership that came in the form of house committee members and residence leadership interns. They ensured that she was comfortable and she was given a mentor. These mentors were senior students in the residence who assist juniors in assimilating into the residence and into university. Chipo's house committee also had international students in it which made it more accommodating.

The security services of the university were highly commended by a fair number of the participants, with special mention of what is called “the green route”, which is when security personnel escort you home from campus at night.

Funke commends the university for their honesty and integrity. She was happy with the manner in which the university is very firm when it came to how certain things regarding administration were done. Special mention went to the availability of international student societies which enabled international students to build a community amongst themselves and interact with each other as much as they also interacted with locals in order to get a holistic experience. Takanai (25, Zimbabwe), said that for him personally, comparing the UitGP with what is available back home in Zimbabwe, he is in constant awe and that enables him to use the university’s resources to the fullest. He also says that he is impressed with the leadership programmes the university has and believes that international students appreciate the university more than locals. The university’s communication was also commended.

It is also important to note that there were some students who did not have anything positive to say about the university. Nine out of 26 students said that they had no positive feedback towards the university for two main reasons. The first was that some did not really engage with the university that much, therefore the university was not aware of what challenges they were going through. Due to the lack of interaction with the university from the student’s side, they did not really see where the university could help. Therefore, they did not have anything bad to say about the university, nor did they have anything good. They were very much neutral. Others also preferred the help of friends as opposed to the university, hence the lack of interaction. The rest of the students expressed that their reasons for not having anything positive to say about the university was because of delayed responses, no tangible resolutions

to problems, and the obstacle that is the language barrier that international students endure, in particular the many university employees who do not use English as the neutral language.

(ii) During Covid-19 experiences

The Covid-19 lockdown saw many international students from the UitGP being widely dispersed and immersed in several different experiences. These experiences and challenges include adjusting to online learning, mental and emotional strain, anxiety related to concerns for family, academic struggles, the challenges of relocating back home, and financial struggles.

The move to online learning was difficult for all students. International students who had to go home to countries with poor internet connectivity were in a worse situation. Due to campus being closed and face-to-face lectures were no longer permitted, online distance learning became the mode of learning to continue with the academic year during the lockdown. This was a struggle for many international students as they found it hard to adjust: “it was hard, umm, especially adapting from on campus classes to online”, said Leroy. Because academics had shifted to being online, this also promoted a decrease in participation as some students started to relax. International students who were in their final year of their studies and had to do practical work began to question whether or not they were going to be able to complete their degrees on time. Other factors that made online learning difficult for some international students were the lack of availability of data or Wi-Fi and electricity. One student explaining his situation back home in Eswatini said that they had to get Wi-Fi installed at home and it took a month, and in that month he was using data that he had to pay for with his own limited money and the network was very unstable. Idris, who had gone back to Malawi, mentioned that data was very expensive for him back home as well, and because of this, he missed the first three weeks of his master’s degree after commencement.

The hard lockdown that began in 2020 also caused immense uncertainty and worry for all students. Students were uncertain about the future and about their academics. Aluna, a 34 year old PhD student from Kenya, said that he was not able to do his fieldwork for his degree because of the pandemic. He was delayed for four months. Other testimonies include Kevin's. When asked how the Covid-19 lockdown was for him, he stated:

“I think it was something that was terrible, frightening, discouraging to the end that at some point I was demotivated, disorientated...It was like a dark cloud was hanging upon me and even the rest of the world”.

The constant worry and feeling of uncertainty that was shared amongst all 26 international students interviewed also translated to their mental and emotional wellbeing being at risk. The majority of the students expressed that they endured high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness.

The 26 African international students were asked how the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown affected their academics. Only six responded positively, stating that the lockdown actually helped them with their academics. All six of these students stated that the lockdown actually helped them focus and zone in on their academics because there was nothing else for them to do and this resulted in an improvement in their marks to the point where two students managed to make it into the Golden Key Society for academic excellence. The Golden Key International Honour Society is a society for students who get results in the top 15 percent of their class or faculty (Golden Key International Honora Society, 2023). This society gives these students access to rewards, scholarships, and opportunities to travel abroad (Golden Key International Honour Society, 2023). One of the students also said, online learning made the workload less and made tests easier.

The remaining 20 international students, all responded negatively, stating that the lockdown did not help with their academics at all. Some students mentioned that their marks dropped and others were forced to extend their studies as they could not finish their degrees in the same academic year. From the data gathered, there were three main reasons as to why most international students struggled with their academics. The first is the strain on their mental and emotional wellbeing as they endured stress and anxiety. This was also coupled with the worry for their own safety and that of family members in relation to catching Covid -19 and not getting the appropriate care. Others struggled with the isolation during lockdown as staying in one room and not being able to do anything and having no interaction with others was difficult for them. This mental and emotional strain then resulted in poor academic performance.

The second reason is due to the move to online learning. Students stated that they learnt better in person as opposed to learning online. Others mentioned that due to poor connectivity and the unavailability of Wi-Fi, their academic careers were in jeopardy. In addition, because they were no longer on campus, and were either stuck in residences or at home, they were not in an environment that was conducive for academic learning and therefore their work ethic, along with their standard of work, was not the same.

The third reason was the impact of their changed daily lives, such the limited movement and isolation. Many students either had to do practical work for their courses or were in the middle of research which required them to interview people or observe social behaviour. Due to the lockdown restriction imposed on movement, human interaction, and social gatherings, many students could not adequately execute their practical course work and research.

Similarly, when students were asked how the pandemic affected their wellbeing, they all expressed that their mental and emotional health took a turn for the worse. Students experienced anxiety and were stressed about the pandemic, their academics, and their families. The lockdown made them feel as though they had no purpose and because of them having nothing to do, it forced many of them to entertain certain thoughts, especially regarding their futures which did not do anything positive for them. Many struggled with the isolation and feelings of loneliness. Anelle shared that her mental wellbeing was challenged during the exam period towards the end of the year. She could not hold any of her food down and basically, as she mentioned: “was surviving on salt and sugar solution”. Munashe confessed that there were times where he resorted to cheating when it came to his academics, he was not able to cope due to his mental state and due to the workload. He felt he had no other option than cheating and he said it at least allowed him to get through.

A total of eight students out of the 26 left South Africa when the UitGP announced that it was going to close and residences had to be evacuated. All eight went back to their home countries and stayed with their families. All the students expressed that they were happy with their living conditions at home and that the environment was conducive for academic productivity. Despite first saying their environment was conducive for study, the students went on to give examples of how they were actually in an environment that had many obstacles to effectively study in. These challenges included power cuts and poor data connectivity. From my personal experience, concerns regarding academics stemmed from not being able to participate in online learning due to poor data networks and not being able to benefit from the free data, that universities arranged for their students to participate in online learning, due to being out of the country. The free data that was arranged was only on South African networks, therefore no one outside the country could benefit. In addition, like myself, many international students

were not in the environment that was conducive for practical research. This includes being in an environment that has a lot of noise, has poor internet connectivity, or does not accommodate academic productivity due to family responsibilities.

Kevin's experience is an example of the primary effects of the lockdown that made it difficult for him to continue with his academics. He explained that he was at the stage in his research where he had to do data collection at a market, but because some of the institutions that were vital to his research were closed, he could not carry on his data collection and his studies were halted. It was also very difficult for him to concentrate on academic assignments due to stress of the ongoing news about the virus spreading in Zimbabwe.

The students who left South Africa shared the challenges that they went through during the Covid-19 lockdown. The most common response that was received was that they struggled with their mental and emotional wellbeing the most. Many suffered from stress and anxiety. In addition to their strained wellbeing, they struggled with the lack of social interactions. Many expressed that they missed their companions and some, because of the lockdown, lost touch with their friends and colleagues and felt as though life was passing them by.

The second most common answer was the struggle with finances. One of the students shared that he was on a scholarship and the funds are paid into his South African bank account. Due to the fact that he had left to go back home, he could not access his funds. In addition, his cell phone sim card was blocked when he left South Africa. As his online banking was linked to that cell phone number, he had no way of accessing his money which could have helped him pay expenses, such as rent as he was still expected to pay for his accommodation back in South Africa. For other students, their parents were not working anymore, having lost jobs due to the impacts of Covid-19, therefore there was no steady inflow of money.

Many students had difficulties with visas when they had to travel home or got stuck in South Africa due to Covid-19. For example, I left South Africa after I had already reapplied for a visa but had not yet received it. I was unaware that I was not supposed to leave the country whilst having a pending visa application. Even if I had known, I had no option but to leave since I was dependent on the accommodation that the university offered me and the residences were telling people to get out. At the time I had no choice about where to stay as it was before the residences reversed that decision and allowed international students to stay. Leaving the country when I did contributed to waiting eight months for my visa to be issued. By the time the visa was issued it was null and void because my academic course had ended. I had to reapply again for another visa in order to do another degree, but that was also not possible as I could not go back to South Africa and the VFS in my home country was closed. Idris explained that because VFS was only opening once every fortnight or so, it was difficult for him to arrange his visa on time. His master's classes started but he was still back in Malawi because he did not have his visa. Mangoma (23, Zimbabwean) struggled with renewing his passport because he was not able to cross the border into Zimbabwe to get the issue resolved.

18 of the research participants from the UitGP remained in South Africa. Of these 18, nine remained either in university residences or privately owned student accommodation. They all expressed that they were happy with their living conditions and that they were conducive for academic productivity, mainly because there was no one else who was there, the residences were quiet. Most buildings were evacuated and there was only a handful of people who remained either in residences or private student accommodation. For example, Zelda was one of only three international students from her residence who could not travel back home and had to remain in a university residence that normally houses 270 students. One of the three international students who remained with Zelda was actually her sister. Measures such

as isolation and social distancing therefore were not a problem for her, though after some time it did start to affect them as they had nothing to do nor did they have anyone to talk to. All students said that they had their own room, had access to Wi-Fi and had electricity. The only issue that mainly affected students who remained in university residences was that since the dining halls were closed, there were limited ways to get food, and with not much money coming in from their parents and shops not being open as much, the fear of food insecurity slowly became a reality. In addition, because there was no cleaning staff coming into the residence, students had to take up the responsibility of cleaning the residence themselves as toilets, showers, common areas, and cooking areas became dirty over time.

When all nine who remained in residences were asked what challenges they experienced during the hard lockdown, five main challenges were expressed: 1) anxiety about academic resources; 2) worry for family members; 3) their wellbeing; 4) financial stability, and 5) food security.

With regards to academics, many of the students did not have access to the on-campus resources that they needed to continue with their studies such as free Wi-Fi, computer labs, practical equipment in laboratories, and the library. They also found online learning quite difficult to adapt to once the academic calendar resumed. Secondly, in terms of family, many of the students could not go home, and they became home sick and lonely. They missed their families very much and found it difficult without their loved ones with them. Students began to stress and worry over the safety of their families with news of the virus spreading. This caused immense anxiety and affected their wellbeing which in turn also affected their academic performance. With the issue of finances, some students no longer had means of making money due to losing their jobs because of the pandemic, others were forced to not

only spend money that they had not budgeted for on rent due to the pandemic prolonging their stay but also on bulk buying of groceries since shops were closing down. Some students had families who stopped receiving income and found it difficult to send money to their children. The issue of food mainly stemmed from dining halls closing and Zelda's experience is a perfect example. Zelda explained that in addition to dining halls closing and her family no longer working, therefore the flow of income to her becoming less, what worsened her food crisis was that the university residence that she stayed in did not allow students to cook in the building, nor were there any other cooking facilities available to her. Food delivery services were also suspended, which then forced her and the other international students to buy non-perishable foods. She mentioned that they asked their university to make provisions for them and that there was talk of them receiving a stove for cooking but nothing ever happened. Their house father is the one who eventually helped them by lending the students his personal gas stove.

The other nine international students who remained in South Africa, but not in student accommodation, had family in the country who they stayed with. They all gave positive responses with regards to their living conditions. Mixed responses were received, however, when it came to whether or not their environment was conducive for academic productivity. The students struggled in the beginning as most students did not see their homes as places for academic work, but rather a place to rest and essentially get away from thinking about academics. In addition, they also struggled with other family members in the house such as siblings who made the environment very noisy and not the best to focus. Apart from this, a particular experience was endured by female international students who did not find their environment back home to be conducive for academic productivity as they were required to constantly do chores such as cleaning, washing, cooking, and babysitting.

From the data obtained, international students who had family in the country and had gone home to stay with them mainly struggled with two challenges: 1) academics such as finishing their courses; and 2) their mental and emotional wellbeing mainly due to concern for the safety of family.

On the academic side, students struggled with whether or not they were going to be able to finish their degrees on time. Trying to remain focused was another challenge as it was easy to get distracted when studying amongst friends and family: “it’s very easy to feel that your work is optional”, Bakam explained. Bakam also mentioned that he found it difficult to convey his thoughts or make a point to his lecturers during online learning. Like Bakam, many other students struggled with the move to online distance learning. He mentions that “it’s very hard to kind of prove yourself or justify your marks if you are not doing it face-to-face”. He prefers contact classes because he is able to ask questions and engage more with the class and get extra attention and he was not able to do that during online classes.

An interesting point of note came from Danai, who was part of the SRC of the UitGP during the lockdown. She stated that she was aware of the struggles the students of the UitGP were going through and that trying to communicate those challenges to a university that she stated was not prepared for a pandemic was difficult. She describes her experience of sitting in on meetings as part of the SRC with high standing individuals in the UitGP and said that it seemed as if no one knew what steps to take to make sure that everyone was catered for. Specifically, she said that “for a really long time, I’d say that international students were kind of marginalized”.

She referred to the example of student residences being evacuated. It was only when international students started saying that that they cannot go home that the university recanted and allowed them to stay. She further explains:

“And then they stayed in res but there was no food provided for them, they eventually opened one dining hall, but those are small things, that when you look at it now, that could have been thought of, that should have been thought of, that should have been prepared for that, when there’s a state of emergency, this is what we need to do”.

In addition, she mentioned that during her time in the SRC, out of 19 members, there were only two international students who were part of the SRC and the person who had the international students’ portfolio was not an international student themselves.

Although these international students who remained in the country were with their family members, it was mainly extended family members who they stayed with. They therefore worried about their immediate family back home, their parents and siblings and friends. Even those who had their immediate family in the country still worried about their family members back home as they were aware that the medical care back home was not as good as that in South Africa. Students became home sick, felt lonely, struggled adjusting to the lockdown, and battled with the lack of interaction and support from their friends and immediate family. Some became paranoid and developed a phobia for germs as they got into the habit of over sanitizing.

Bakam and Amara were two students who had a better experience than most students. They both stated that they were very comfortable and had nothing they struggled with during the lockdown. Bakam, who is from a wealthy family, responded by stating:

“Aahh, I’m living a very comfortable life... I don’t really think I struggled, if anything I was just worried for my friends who couldn’t go back home”.

Amara, who had a generous sponsorship, stated that she was in a position of privilege and was able to stay in private accommodation with the help of a scholarship. Her friends were not so lucky as they were “forced” to leave residence and had nowhere to go, so that was depressing for her. They both stated that their living conditions were comfortable, they had no problem with internet or shortage of devices for studying online and did not express concern regarding finances or food as most students had.

17 out of 26 African international students confessed that during the hard lockdown that occurred in 2020 and in the begging of 2021, they did not seek any help from the UitGP. Most of them felt that it was in their best interest to seek help from their friends who are other international students or from their families rather than seek help from the institution. The reason for this is that the students felt that their institution had not done much for them not only in the past, but also in the present situation, so much so that they had no choice but to seek assistance elsewhere. Panashe sadly explained: “My main institution of learning did not do much for me”, stating that she was demotivated by it and therefore did not seek help. She felt there was no point in going back to ask for help from a place that does not help much to begin with. Funke mentioned that her reason for not seeking help from her university was because she felt like a nobody, that she would be troubling them, and that her problem would not be one worth solving: “I’d be too small for them” she stated. Other students, such as Munashe, did not see the point of going to their university for help: “As an international student right, you are used to hearing there is nothing we can do to help you” he said.

With regards to the remaining nine students who sought help from their university, most of the praise given was from students that were stuck in residences who praised the house parents and heads of university owned residences. Assistance came from either the house father or house mother of the residence and not from a department of the university. The efforts of the heads of residences were praised for their compassion, communication, and sympathy. Heads of Residence were also said to have created an atmosphere of safety for the students which they were very happy with.

Other noteworthy assistance came from lecturers and supervisors of postgraduate students. International students who travelled back home and left their academic equipment did not have access to textbooks, but some lecturers assisted by acquiring soft copies of certain textbooks and making them available to all students.

Some students sought help from the counselling services of the UitGP, however, they were not satisfied with their services. Many students who reached out to the counselling unit could not get hold of them because the telephone number either was not working or would get redirected. In one encounter, a student managed to be appointed a counsellor, however the counsellor was close to leaving the job. When the counsellor left, the student was never reassigned to another counsellor. Another student came forward, stating that he reached out to the counselling unit and did get assisted, however as soon as he was struggling financially and was not able to pay the remainder of his tuition fees in time, he was denied further counselling sessions even though he was still a fully registered student.

(iii) Institutional Assistance

Referring to the period before Covid-19, students were asked what other ways they thought their university could have assisted them better or what their university could have done better to support them. Two main areas were raised. These were help with accommodation and assistance to assimilate for late arrivals. Late arrivals are those who missed orientation week.

For accommodation, international students felt that more provisions could have been made for them. An increase in the quota for international students in residences would have been of great service for them. Anelda felt that she would have been better cared for and assisted by the right people if she had been living in a university residence compared to her living in privately owned student accommodation that was not under the university. She tried to apply for a space in a women's residence and was informed that the residence was full and she ended up being on the waiting list for nearly two years. By the time she finally got accepted into a residence, it was too late as she had settled into the private residence and did not want the inconvenience of moving again. Kevin stated that international students have a lot that they need to do before arriving in South Africa and once they arrive, they may not have much left financially. With this in mind, the university could make some provisions for international students with regards to accommodation, either free or discounted for a short period, so that they can have a place to stay whilst they gather themselves in their new environment.

In connection with late arrivals, international students explained that they arrived late at their university and missed orientation because their visas came out late. In addition to delays caused by the Department of Home Affairs, part of the reason why their visas came out late is because students applied for them late due to receiving their admission letters from the

university at a very late stage. Therefore, sending students their admission letters at an earlier stage, would make the visa application process less stressful and students would arrive in time for orientation. In addition, Anelle stated that it would have been appreciated if the university had a way to help students who arrived late, such as having someone who assists them. She suggested this as a response to the extensive formalities and administration involved in the process of coming to university from a different country for the first time.

Other ways in which students thought that their university could have done better to assist them include having international students meet other people from their own countries first before being introduced to other international students from other countries all at once. Financial aid or more funding opportunities either in the form of partial or full scholarships from the university partnering up with other institutions was also suggested. In addition, students mentioned that university employees could be retrained in order to be more accommodating towards international students. Overall, better communication from the university to the international students is required. An example of a lack of clear information, which could perhaps be resolved with better communication, is that all 26 students said they do not know why they pay an international student levy nor are they aware of where that money goes.

Students were asked what other ways they thought their university could have assisted them better or what their university could have done better to support them through their challenges during the pandemic. Three main areas were expressed. These are: 1) communication; 2) issues surrounding finances; and 3) the need for more participation and interaction both academically and in terms of student wellbeing from the university to the students.

Firstly, better communication and clarity are the two most common responses to this question. Students said that they needed greater clarity from the university about what they were planning to do in response to the pandemic. Danai confessed that to her it seemed like the university was making things up as they went along instead of having a plan or structure. This same notion is supported by Chipo as she said that for her, because everything was shut down, she needed clarity on how the university was going to conduct itself further and what it would mean for her. Due to the lack of communication from the university, it seemed as if they were unsure of what was going on. The communication that was available at the time made some international students feel as though they were an afterthought for the university because in addition to the little information that was being communicated by the university, very little of that communication was regarding international students.

Secondly, for issues surrounding finances, the type of assistance desired was either in the form of financial aid or the reduction of fees. Based on the fact that international students were no longer on campus and were not being given the same varsity experience, nor were they fully utilizing the university's resources, they did not see why they should continue paying the full amount for tuition. Leroy (21, Eswatini) describes his situation whereby he had only been in South Africa for a month and because of the pandemic, he had to go back home. He felt inconvenienced because despite being there for only a month he was made to still pay for a whole year's accommodation and was only refunded 3 percent of his tuition fees.

In terms of the need for more participation and interaction from the university, international students feel that the university could have done more to cater to them. Firstly, when it comes to mental wellbeing, students would have appreciated it if the university reached out to them instead of waiting for students to reach out to the university. Extending a helping hand or just

checking up on international students would have gone a long way through such trying times. Anelle explicitly shares that she felt that her university had no intention of following through with their promise of catering to her wellbeing. This is because for her, there is no sense of the university reaching out to the students. She said that dishing out flyers and free gifts like rulers or pens, as they did on occasion, could only do so much. Ranganai (22, Zimbabwean) sadly voices her opinion that “we are considered last if at all.” She feels that her institution does not look at international students much and that to her, they are more of an afterthought. In addition to the topic of wellbeing, some international students expressed a need for there to be more international student counsellors within the counselling unit of the UitGP to enable relatability.

Zelda gave an example of what she and other students mean by a lack of academic engagement. She said what she needed the most was more engagement from her lecturers in terms of ensuring that they helped and interacted with students academically just as much online as they would have in person. Zelda and other students said they were only given notes and were left alone to do their work instead of having a lecturer go through those notes with them to ensure they understood fully as they would have done during in person lectures. It appears that online learning not only affected the engagement levels of students, but that of university employees and lecturers as well.

When asked if they thought their university’s support structures which existed before the pandemic helped during the pandemic, 19 out of the 26 international students at UitGP responded by saying no. The majority of the reasoning was that those structures were designed to fit a particular context and the pandemic was not part of that context. International students discovered that there were not many support structures still available

during the pandemic and all they received for a prolonged amount of time was emails from the university about what different stages of the lockdown meant. There was an attempt to adapt to the pandemic by converting a lot of the support structures to be available online but not everything worked out and with everything being online, came a certain laziness from university employees administering or managing these support structures. As Panashe saw it “There was a sort of laziness for a lack of a better word, when it came to some of these structures”. Other reasons for saying no pertained mainly to the counselling services of the university. Some international students stated that the number of counsellors they had available was not enough. More counsellors were required in order to accommodate the high demand from students needing help. Many international students shared that even before Covid-19, there existed a two week waiting period before someone would receive help. Many, from their personal experiences and that of testimonies from others, believed that the counselling services of the university were understaffed and overwhelmed and this got worse during the pandemic.

The International Student Department, the Department of Student Affairs, and the SRC were all mentioned, as international students stated that they did not receive much support nor much communication from these structures. Nelson said that the structures in place that were supposed to help international students were not the ones that spoke on behalf of the international students during the lockdown. He described a scenario whereby international students had to come together amongst themselves and go to management to tell them what was wrong:

“They had to take it up to, uum, management and say these are some of the challenges you are not really accommodating us, and so the structures in place weren’t the ones that spoke for us or helped us”.

Five positive responses that came from students who were asked if they thought the support structures that existed before Covid-19 helped during the pandemic. They shared that they were happy with the academic tutoring they had received and the online help that was available. One student mentioned that they were happy with the counselling services that were made available online. This, however, was only because he already had his counselling sessions online before the pandemic, so there was no difference for him when the lockdown began.

The remaining two students could not answer the question either way because they were indifferent or because they had never really engaged with the university’s support structures. They were, therefore, unable to make a comparison between how the support services performed before and during the pandemic.

Despite the various opinions with regards to the weaknesses in the UitGP assistance during the lockdown, it is important to also note the positive aspects and the areas where the students felt that their university did well. Despite the initial lack of consideration for international students, when it came to them having to go home due to residences being evacuated, many international students expressed a high level of gratitude when they were later allowed to stay in their residences. The provision of data and laptops was also appreciated by many international students who were in South Africa to receive it. A few international students who unfortunately were not in South Africa to benefit from such, still

commended the university on providing such equipment, stating that they were happy to know that their friends back in South Africa were at least catered for.

International students mentioned that they were happy that the university decided to give them access to their food money for them to be able to buy groceries. At the UitGP, money is loaded on students' cards to enable them to purchase food at designated dining halls and other eating establishments on campus. Due to establishments being closed, that money could no longer be used until the university decided to give students access to that money. The money on the students' cards was redirected monthly to the bank accounts of students so that they could use it to buy food at shops that were open. Still on the topic of food, the university was commended for taking the initiative of seeking assistance from NGOs who provided food parcels to students to who were stuck in residences.

An example of individual appreciation came from Panashe who was grateful to the university for allowing her to retake an exam he had missed due to connectivity issues. Special mentions of appreciation were made about the staff in charge of accommodation and residences. In particular, students noted the great efforts of house parents of residences who cared for the students who remained in university residences through the lockdown. International students felt that they made them feel secure and communicated with them as much as possible with regard to decisions made by the university and they made them feel cared for.

Some students commended the counselling services of the university. Despite there being an initial unhappiness with the unit, the students who got help expressed that they were happy with the help when it was eventually made available to them.

4.2b Participant Group: Students from other universities

(iv) Pre Covid-19 experiences

William and Rufaro are two African international students from Zimbabwe, both studying in two different South African universities. Both students shared the same disheartening experience of being discriminated against for being international students and not being able to speak any of the native languages in South Africa. Before Covid-19, William said that some of the lecturers at his university would revert to speaking their local languages in the presence of international students during a lecture. Although on the one hand, he did experience a few individuals who were excited to have an international student in their classes, on the other hand, he went through many negative incidents, specifically one he describes where he was told by local students “you are going to steal our jobs and you should go back to your country as soon as you are done.”

Rufaro shares the same sentiments as she explained that in her case, the language barrier was a problem and that in public places, anyone who was not open to speaking English would speak in their language knowing very well that you as an international student did not understand.

William and Rufaro once again both shared another problem with regards to registration. For William, his university had sent his acceptance letter late, therefore it delayed the process of him applying and receiving his visa on time. He explained that his visa came out in March yet his course started in February and the registration process was a nightmare for him. Rufaro mentioned that for her university, international students cannot register if they have not paid

75 percent of their fees up front. Such a request can be problematic especially when coming from a country that was unstable economically like hers.

When asked if they sought help from their respective universities with regards to these challenges, both students said they did not seek help from their universities with regards to the discrimination that they had faced. Rufaro said that she did not feel that her university provided a space for her to ask for help and angrily expressed that “if you are not a citizen, they will not help you.” She was not happy nor was she impressed by her university and had nothing positive to say regarding her experience with them in the years before Covid-19.

William’s reasoning was that because he thought it was an individual case, he did not see the university helping him in that regard, therefore he never asked for help. He did however receive help with regards to arriving late and he was assisted with accommodation for which he was very appreciative. His only wish was that he would have appreciated it if lecturers were more welcoming and more accommodating towards international students.

(v) During Covid-19 experiences

During the lockdown, the continuation of studies was difficult for students who struggled to adjust to the new environment of studying from home. Rufaro said that when the lockdown was announced: “They [the university] chased people out of res, they did not take international students into consideration because where were we going to stay?”.

On top of being abruptly uprooted and struggling to continue with studies, Wi-Fi and connectivity was an issue along with other aspects, such as being required to do house chores which took time away from academic work. Due to the lockdown, extra expenses were incurred which caused a lot of mental strain that took away the focus on studies. William and

Rufaro experienced a drop in their grades and a drop in their mental wellbeing. Their universities did offer online counselling services but the students either never used to them or were not happy with the service that they were attempting to deliver to students. Their mental states were also compromised due to their living conditions. The students stayed in South Africa with relatives, and their living conditions were good due to the availability of food and various other material comforts and devices, however, they were not conducive for academic productivity. Being at home came with its own stresses, therefore one needed an environment built for the purpose of studying. Besides this, relatives were also an issue, and in the case of Rufaro, she had to share a three-bedroomed home with seven other family members.

When asked what some of the challenges were that they went through during the lockdown, they both mentioned their mental wellbeing and not being able to go home to see their families. In addition to these two main challenges were a lack of data, poor network connections, and not having their freedom. Their coping mechanisms ranged from praying and seeking solace from family and friends to the consumption of alcohol, crying, and exercising. These responses, which did not materially improve their situations, reflect quite limited agency being exercised by these students under difficult circumstances where they felt many issues were beyond their control. Students were then asked to state if there was anything positive that came out of the lockdown for them. They mentioned that they at least managed to get their degrees, they did some introspection and learnt to appreciate life and the value of the freedom to move around as that was taken away during the hard lockdown.

(vi) Institutional assistance

The students were asked what they think they needed the most from their respective universities to help them through the difficult period of the lockdown. They responded by stating that more provisions should have been made available to them such as allowing them to stay on campus. Although they were later allowed to stay in university residences, this decision only came after the initial decision for everyone to leave residences was re-evaluated. At some universities, and in this case for Rufaro, international students were only allowed back into residences 6-7 months later. In addition, financial assistance would have been appreciated. Rufaro states that on top of the tuition that she had to pay her university charged what they call a foreign admin fee of R6 970.

Both students agreed that their universities' support structures that existed before Covid-19 did not help during the lockdown. It was mentioned that some international students and even local students see university as a safe haven away from home, therefore being told to leave did not make their situation any better. About the counselling services, Rufaro said that there is only so much that talking about one's struggles can do, especially when one's struggles stem from the environment that they are in.

4.3 KEY INFORMANTS

4.3a Participant Group: Key informants from the UitGP

(i) Pre Covid-19 experiences

In this section, the views and experiences that key informants from the UitGP had with regards to their involvement with international students are examined. These key informants from the UitGP mentioned that before Covid-19, the most common concerns that they were

aware of or that they dealt with when it came to international students were being accepted into a new environment, financial issues, logistics when it came to coming to South Africa, registration, funding, medical aid cover, visa issues, and food security. In addition, there were feelings of being lonely and isolated to due problems regarding integration into the university and being away from support structures. Margret, an employee at the UitGP states that when it comes to visas:

“It’s still an ongoing problem so it hasn’t really changed. Obviously now with Covid it was worse”.

She indicated that the problem is the Department of Home Affairs and it has been a problem for them for many years. She explained that many students have gone for as long as two years relying only on having a receipt as proof of having applied for a visa or its renewal without having the actual valid visa itself. This, she said, is because Home Affairs has had a back log that affects her and affects the students she assists.

Maxwell, one of the managers for international students at the UitGP, adds that applying for a visa is also a challenge as different countries have different requirements. He gave an example of many international students who would take their medical aid documents from their home countries to apply for a visa but when they get to the university, they are informed that they need a medical aid that is registered in South Africa, leading to them having to apply for a second medical aid.

Some of the services and actions these key informants and their institutions offered to international before Covid-19 are explained below. A number of them provide resource support in terms of food and bedding. It is also common for them to refer students to professionals when it came to counselling. They also assist with negotiations for medical aid

plans because in order for you to be a registered student at the UitGP, you need a valid medical aid plan from a South African medical scheme. Most of the key informants also said that they have an open door policy to provide in person and immediate support when needed. International students were also offered a mobile VFS clinic on campus so that they could renew their visas and their applications would not take long or be placed in the general pool of visas to be renewed once they are moved to the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa. This VFS mobile clinic initiative was effective when it was first established by Margret and her team four to five years ago, as she stated, which was between 2017 and 2018, however, it is perceived by the student research participants to be less effective.

When asked how effective they thought their services to international students were before Covid-19, the key informant respondents were divided in two, with three feeling that the services were not as good as they could and should be, while the other three claimed very effective services.

Maxwell responded saying that he feels that things can be improved. He adds that there is a problem with capacity within his office, which is the reason why he thinks that certain services cannot be offered. Ingrid, an employee who is one of the managers for students support at UitGP, has the same view as Maxwell as she said, "it was better than nothing, but I don't think that it was as best as what it could be."

She thinks that a lot more can be done to improve quality of life for international students as she says that many of them do not have the luxury of going home often so they make university their new home. Another who shares the same sentiment is Emily, who works with students at the UitGP. She says that the student department is available to help, but "things still fall in between the cracks." She goes on to mention that the reason for this is due to either

the further complication of the issue the student has, employees being ignorant, or the students asking for help from people who are not really dealing with that problem. These factors lead to service delivery being delayed.

Those arguing the services were of a high standard pointed out that there was an entire office focused solely on international student related issues. Margret stated that she would say that their services were “quite effective” and that they call themselves “the home away from home” for international students. Others said that their services were excellent because all the support was there and international students could go to whoever they wanted to for assistance. As Ingrid put it: “I would say it was excellent because all the support was there and they could go to whoever they could go to.”

The key informants were asked to compare or state the difference between the challenges faced by local students and international students. The most common response was the issue of finances and tuition. Margret revealed that students from non-SADC countries paid double the tuition fees compared to locals. Students from SADC countries pay the same fees as South Africans but with an added international levy. Maxwell adds on, stating that both local and international students complain to the university about the high tuition fees and Emily further confirms that when it comes to finances and tuition, international students have more off a difficult time compared to locals. Emily responded:

“But then if you talk about what is the difference, if I heard your question well, umm, what would be the extra challenges that international students experience, umm, you know, as compared to the local ones, finances have always been the big challenge”.

The second most common response was that international students work much harder than locals in terms of adaptation and academics. Melissa mentioned that international students work much harder in a foreign country compared to their local counterparts and that in her experience, international students further their studies whereas locals are comfortable to reach one level of their degree, which is getting their first degree, instead of considering furthering their education. She adds that international students do not see their families as much as South Africans and the reason for that is that many international students are not that well off; they cannot travel home a lot. Melissa is supported by Ingrid who stated that international students have to work harder to be successful and they achieve a lot academically. Ingrid also noted challenges international students have to overcome, such as language barriers.

Other differences in challenges between local and international students were shared by David, who is a student advisor and head of one of the residences at the UitGP. He said that international students are in a foreign country whereas locals are used to the different locations. Although there are locals who can feel foreign as they enter a new environment, coming from different schools and provinces, even a different quality of life and meeting different people from different races and cultures, international students have it worse. "The challenges wouldn't be the same. I think international students will feel the brunt more than the local students unless if such international students have family in South Africa", David elaborated.

(ii) During Covid-19 experiences

The key informants were asked to state whether they thought that the actions that were taken to assist international students were satisfactory or if they thought more could have

been, and possibly still can be, done. All of them said that more could have been done and more still could be done. None of them expressed that the actions that were taken were satisfactory. At best the only statement that was given that alluded to saying that the actions that were taken were satisfactory was one stating that the university did the best that it could do given the situation. David said:

“I think to a certain level the university tried what they could do, but under the circumstances, I think the university should have stretched itself”.

Emily directly said that no, the actions were not satisfactory because “nobody was prepared... but it is a pandemic, it was a big surprise”. She also confesses that they did not have a lot of money to do things quickly and do things that could mitigate the risks. She also stated that Covid-19 exposed to her that they should really raise their level of knowledge with regards to technology. Others expressed that the university could have stretched itself more. Melisa states that:

“Umm I think this was like a learning process and I think through this time we could have picked up new tools and I think with, picking up the new tools to help the international students in the near future will actually help”.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, international students endured a variety of challenges. The most common of these was the issue of places to stay. International students were concerned about whether they were going to be able to go home or not, where they were going to stay, and if they did leave the country, where they going to be able to go back to South Africa or not. According to Ingrid, students in residences were given three days to vacate and not much consideration was given to international students at the time. David shared the same sentiment as he said that the challenge was that you could not just wake up and go home just

like that because it was a challenge financially. Emily and Margret both added that one of the biggest challenges was when the residences had to be shut down as it was not easy for students to find money to travel home:

“The big one [challenge] was when the residences had to be shut down, and for the international students who were in residences, that was a big frustration. Because what were we saying? Should they get tickets to fly back?” - Emily

Another problem was food security as dining halls were closed. The longer the lockdown ran, the more food became a problem to the point where NGOs got involved and donated food stuffs to some of the students who were stuck in the residences. Emily stated that to mitigate the food security problem, dining hall student cards were converted into vouchers so that students could access some of their money to buy groceries at nearby shopping centres, however, this only worked for students who were still in the country. She mentioned that the argument was that international students who had managed to go back home and be with their families were assumed to be taken care of, therefore there was no need to worry about them. David sadly expressed that what he found to be most difficult in his attempt to assist was seeing students struggle with food. He was aware that the university tried to make the money in the students' meal accounts available for them so that they could buy food for themselves, but he questioned how far that could maintain a person for the duration of what was anticipated at that time.

Other challenges that international students faced during the pandemic, that were mentioned by key informants from the UitGP, were the lack of communication as everything was either closed or had shutdown, the lack of emotional support, and the struggles of not having data. Many students, therefore, could not participate in online learning. Laptops and

data were distributed to students so that they could participate in online learning, however, this was only limited to students who were in South Africa, therefore international students who were outside South Africa did not receive laptops or benefit from the free data. Maxwell mentioned that the university did not have enough money to cover the cost of delivering laptops to students in other countries.

When faced with the question of whether or not they thought the support structures and services provided pre Covid-19 actually helped during Covid-19 and the lockdown, the majority of the group responded by saying no. The reasons given for this answer were that everything was closed down, and students who left in a hurry forgot most of their work stuff in their rooms. Services were also compromised due to people working from home and campus based services could not be offered, although some became available online and were effective, like the library services, however, some services, like the online counselling, failed for other people and were not effective after moving to being online. Other reasons included that working online made things difficult for the employees as they could not give that in-person, immediate help, nor could they get the full story sometimes from students. Emily stated that nobody planned for Covid-19, especially not for the experience of the lockdown. From all these reasons, it is quite evident that there was a lack of emergency preparedness on the part of the university. For those few who responded by saying yes, that the services were sufficient to deal with Covid-19, their reasoning was that the only difference was that there was no face-to-face contact. They believed that the move to being online meant they were still available. Even then, however, from observation, the respondents themselves did not seem that confident in their claims about the services. For instance, Melissa responded by saying that yes, the services that existed before Covid-19 were fully effective during Covid-19 and the lockdown and that the only difference was that there was

no contact, however, she then said: “As for how many of them fell through the cracks, that we don’t know.” A statement such as this contradicts her previous claim that the services were fully effective.

The type of services key informants mentioned that were made available by them to help international students, specifically during the Covid-19 lockdown, included the provision of data as a national arrangement was made with network providers to make certain academic platforms zero rated. This was however only to the benefit of international students who were still in South Africa as those who had left did not benefit from the free data. As Emily said: “They were at the mercy of just finding connectivity in their countries.”

This is the same for the provision of laptops. Emily mentioned that it was easy to give laptops to locals and international students who were in the country and they benefited a lot compared to those who had left. Despite those in country benefitting, the situation was not easy for the student or the staff of the university. As Emily put it

“The pandemic just made all of our lives very very difficult and it complicated, not even complicated, it disrupted service delivery in ways that people, all of us, couldn’t think on our feet”.

On a positive note, Melissa mentioned that support structures like house parents, her offices, and security were available and she hoped that students reached out to them. With regards to international students outside the country, not much could have been done for them due to a lack of resources. Food vouchers were also made available for students stuck in residences. Accommodation was another service that was offered to international students as those who could not go back home were eventually then allowed to stay in residence after initially being told to vacate residences. David said that the university realized that

international students were more challenged than local students and because of that, they provided accommodation for students who could not go home because the initial decision was that all students should go home. An additional piece of information David also mentioned, was that the international student population that lives within his residence is dominated by students that mainly came from Zimbabwe. Maxwell explained that in his honest opinion, they were not ready for the lockdown: “ummm, honestly speaking we were not ready for this.”

He also explained that he and his colleagues did try their best to be the link between international students and the university faculties due to there being no communication to faculty staff from the university to accommodate students in any particular manner. According to him, they also attempted to involve international students in all the decisions that were being made as they realized that international students were not being represented or considered enough. Covid-19 assistance was also made available for any and all individuals living in university residences who tested positive for Covid-19. Isolation facilities on campus were made available to anyone, regardless of them being international or local. These facilities came with the provision of food and medical interventions when needed. Money from the students’ meal accounts was also made available so that students could access it in order to buy themselves groceries at available shops.

Other services included online counselling. Ingrid shared that the online counselling was, in her opinion, successful during the lockdown because the counselling services experienced a 30 percent increase in the use of its services after moving from face-to-face to online services during the lockdown. Emily added that the number of complaints about the counselling services was less compared to when one had to go for counselling physically. This therefore

gave them the confidence that it was working and the service was satisfactory. Emily did, however, acknowledge the problem of delayed services before the counselling services moved online. She also admitted that there was a two-week waiting period for students when they initially asked for help, which she said was not ideal. Seemingly, according to the key informants, this has been rectified by the move to online counselling as they also got more counsellors on board and the move online had the added benefit of anonymity.

(iii) Key informant reflections

Some of the things that Key informants from the UitGP found to be most difficult in their attempts to help to international students included load shedding in the country. Load shedding is the act of switching off parts of South Africa's electrical grid due to insufficient capacity or to avoid a country wide blackout (Crisis24, 2023). The load shedding crisis has gotten worse over the years with a recorded 150 days of load shedding in 2022, which is an extraordinary increase from just 75 days in 2021 and 54 in 2020 (Crisis24). Load shedding got in the way of emails being answered and students receiving immediate help. Some employees of the university struggled with their own data and Wi-Fi networks and therefore connectivity at home, which made communication worse. In addition, Margret mentioned that there was no communication from the Department of Home Affairs or VFS because everything was shut down. In a similar vein, Maxwell explained that of some embassies shut down making the challenge of getting visas even bigger.

It cannot go without mention that students were not the only ones going through hardship. When the key informants were asked what they as individuals struggled with during the lockdown, they all shared that they had undergone a period of emotional and mental struggle. It was difficult to strike a balance between work life and home life with the crisis going on and

working from home, and with the uncertainty that existed with regards to the future, anxiety became very prominent in their lives. Emily said that the lockdown was mentally destabilizing for her. She was very anxious and it got worse as people she knew started passing away. She said that one day she was at home and she received a call from one of her friends. They immediately expressed a sense of relief when Emily answered the phone because they had heard from someone that Emily had passed away due to Covid-19, which left Emily very shocked and made the reality set in even more for her.

4.3b Participant Group: Key informants from other establishments

(iv) Pre Covid-19 experiences

Key informants from establishments other than the UitGP pointed out common challenges they heard from international students. These included the issues of belonging as many students were not around familiar faces, therefore leading to a heightened sense of nostalgia; verification of documents such as for medical aids and visas; the logistics challenges when they are still in their home countries and planning to travel to South Africa; and lastly the workload when they do arrive in South Africa and start their varsity experience. When asked what the difference was between the challenges faced by local students compared to international students, the overall summary of the answers that were given was that international students struggle more than South African students when both populations start their varsity experience. This is due to factors such as locals being able to relate easier than international students in terms of language. It is also not always possible for international students to communicate with parents back home, especially for those who come from less privileged backgrounds, while for locals, home is not so far away. This then

comes with wellbeing issues, such as loneliness and isolation, and most international students cannot travel home as easily as locals.

Student support services were considered relatively effective in catering to international students before Covid-19 and the lockdown. Tamia, who is a student life manager (House Parent) for a university residence, stated that they had an orientation programme tailored to international students. This included teaching them about South African culture so that were able to get used to it and not feel different to other students. Tamia described this approach as effective because it enabled her to build a relationship with the international students so that they are more comfortable to go to her whenever they need help. Likewise, Aldor a professor at another South African university, described that before Covid-19 counselling services were made available for wellbeing issues, scholarships were available for financial aid, students who were at risk of failure were identified by their faculty and they were given someone to provide them with additional help. For him, the support structures at his university, from a lecturer's perspective, were very good.

(v) During Covid-19 experiences

Olaf is a manager from a German scholarship provider based in South Africa. He stated that some of the common concerns international students experienced during the lockdown and Covid-19 were issues of finances, difficulty finding jobs, and not being able to go to campuses. Other common concerns that were mentioned included food insecurity, a lack of medical aid cover, and poor emotional and mental wellbeing. Not being able to go to campuses also decreased the level of undergraduate participation in their education, such as attending lectures and committing to work, as Aldor expressed with great concern that undergraduate students were struggling.

During the interview with Tamia, she emotionally expressed to me that she admits that the support services they offered, that existed before Covid-19, were not fully effective during Covid-19. She states that the pandemic made her realize that there was more to international students than just giving them a programme that was tailored to them and more must be done for international students. Tamia said: "I need to meet them halfway because again, they are far from home."

Some of the services and actions that were offered to international students included but were not limited to: offering office space to students so that they can work since they could not go on to campuses; and arranging donations from private organisations which included blankets, food, and counselling. The key informants could see how some international students found it difficult to receive money from home, especially when their parents were not working anymore due to the lockdown or due to their country's economic instability. Some efforts were made to assist students with costs such as rent. Some of the organisations key informants were from sought help from embassies. Help came in the form of organised repatriation flights for some students after they had written a letter requesting repatriation. Tamia shared that the majority of the international students who lived in her residence, and also those who were left behind during the lockdown, came from Zimbabwe and Zambia. She reached out to these two countries' embassies and got help from them, however, she struggled with other embassies such as the Nigerian embassy.

The key informants said Covid-19 exposed the vulnerabilities that African international students face. For example, many financial schemes that supported international students broke down and this left students without support and finance. Some key informants believe that South African universities should improve on how they cater to the mental and emotional

wellbeing of their students. Aldor mentions that the pandemic also revealed the limited level of preparedness in terms of digital learning at institutions, which should become a key aspect of teaching and learning. He gives an example, using the University of South Africa (Unisa), stating that since Unisa mainly uses online learning as a mode of teaching, the pandemic did not cause a big shift for the institution, whereas it was a big shift for other universities in the country. Using this example, he refers to universities in the country being poorly prepared in terms of digital learning.

(vi) Key informant reflections

When these key informants were asked whether or not they thought that the actions they took to assist international students during the lockdown were satisfactory or not or if they thought more could have been done, the question was met with mixed reviews. The answers from the three respondents can be put into three basic categories. The first is that Aldor was very passive about the question, if not reluctant to answer. He gave very vague answers, coming across as if he was attempting to be as general and neutral as possible. The impression was that he thought the support was there and had been effective.

Secondly, Olaf deemed the actions that he and his team took to help international students during that period to be successful because for them, there was not much that they could do in terms of help in the first place. Because of that, the little that they did was deemed to be successful. They also did not find it hard to assist because again, there was not much that they could do to begin with. Essentially, they think they did their job but acknowledge that they did not meet anywhere near the overall needs. The work was done but the response to it was not good. Olaf said, "I didn't find it difficult to assist them because, there was not much we could do for them."

Olaf further stated that:

“There was nothing that we were asked to do or uumm, we noticed that we should do and therefore, yeah, it was not really a challenge for us with helping them with anything”.

Lastly, Tamia believes that more could have been done. She believes that their institution and others should realize that a community of international students can be very diverse and that there are a lot of factors that need to be taken into consideration particularly for people who come from different countries. International students need someone to hold their hand through their journey instead of the relationship being a transactional one whereby they are helped to either get into the country or get into university and then, after that, they must fend for themselves.

The group of outside key informants was divided and gave three different responses for the above question, however, they responded similarly when asked what they thought could have been done better, in general, to help international students. The common word that was present in all of their answers was the word “more”. They mentioned that institutions should be involved more in providing for the students mental and emotional wellbeing, institutions must ask international students more with regards to what they need, and what they are going through. Aldor gave an example of the added support international students need with the story of when one of his international students was scheduled to present during online class during the lockdown. Unfortunately, they could not do so due to connectivity issues. Aldor, the lecturer, then went on to present his student’s work on his behalf. In addition, it was said by key informants that there must be a safe space created where international students can feel comfortable to speak about what they are going through.

As with the key informants from the UitGP, the key informants from other institutions also went through a lot during the pandemic. Tamia became emotional and was deeply touched when she shared with me that she went through a lot during the pandemic. She said that she was not an essential worker but somehow, she became one for the students that stayed in the residence she is responsible for. She became their mother as the lockdown required her to go beyond being just a student life manager. Aldor found the change to online learning challenging and said it “was just too intense and fast.” He further mentioned that he had to relearn and retool himself very fast in order to be able to manage and keep up and that gave him anxiety. For others, the pandemic caused a negative workflow or an environment that was not productive within the workplace. People were not able to go to work as much anymore and for those, like Olaf, who were fairly new in their positions, it proved troublesome as they could not learn more about their position or the company which they worked for, nor did they get to know their work mates better.

4.4 CONCLUSION

It is clear that the majority of international students involved in this study felt they required more than they received from their universities during the lockdown. The chapter also shows that there were challenges that international students faced before Covid-19 that were exacerbated by the crisis, such as their financial struggles, their mental and emotional wellbeing, visa renewal complications and feelings of being home sick and lonely. The 30 percent increase in demand for counselling services confirms the poor state of student mental health and may have contributed to the counselling staff shortages during the pandemic.

Information from key informants within the UitGP reveals the level of unpreparedness that existed not only in a few branches of the UitGP, but the UitGP in its entirety, with regards to

the support for African international students. Problems such as the lack of communication, lack of clarity on how the university was responding to Covid-19, lack of initial inclusion in decision making, lack of financial support, and lack of relief aid in the form of visa, financial, and psychological assistance undeniably made the lockdown experience even more difficult. The information from the students and key informants from other institutions shows that the challenges experiences at the UitGP, both before and during Covid-19, were not at all unique to the UitGP.

The chapter reveals that the South African Government is primarily responsible for the problems with visa applications as it is largely out of the control of universities. After analysing existing literature pertaining to the Covid-19 experiences of international students globally, it can be seen that the issues relating to the application and renewal of visas is a more severe and frequently mentioned problem in South Africa as compared to in other countries. The overall perception of the African international students is that more effort goes into attracting them to the country and its universities to receive the benefits they bring, but not enough is being done to support them in crisis situations.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study was to increase the knowledge and understanding of the challenges and experiences African international students faced during Covid-19. Through a review of the literature and interviews with African international students and key informants, the challenges that African international students faced both before and during Covid-19 were identified. The limitations as well as some successes of student support services were also scrutinised and out of this, ways in which support structures could be improved for the future were discovered.

Through this dissertation, it is discovered that the UitGP was not fully prepared for a state of emergency, nor did some of their contingency plans work out in terms of assisting international students during that period. Though this was not surprising, it is worth learning from in order to try to be better prepared in future. This conclusion is supported not only by the grievances of the African international students themselves, as most of them felt that they were not supported enough but is also confirmed by most key informants who admitted that they did not see the efforts made by the university to assist international students during the pandemic as satisfactory. The university's pre-existing support structures proved to be ineffective in assisting African international students during the crisis situation brought about by the pandemic.

What was discovered at the UitGP does not appear, from the literature and inputs by research participants from other institutions, to be any worse or different from experiences at other universities in South Africa and even some internationally. Therefore, lessons from this can also be relevant elsewhere, not just at the UitGP.

This chapter is divided into four sections: the first is this introduction; the second section addresses the research questions that were first set out early in the beginning of the dissertation; third is the discussion, lessons, and recommendations section; and last is the conclusion which brings the study to an end with closing remarks.

5.2 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This section recaps the main findings in relation to the research questions that I started this study with, although it is structured a bit differently in response to what was found. I start off by engaging with and reiterating the value of international students. I then engage with the first three sub-questions, summarised as: experiences before and during Covid-19; student support services; and responses from the UitGP and other institutions. The fifth sub section below captures the findings in relation to the sub questions four and five on what students suggest should be done and what would appear to be feasible.

(i). The value of African international students

The value of African international students is a topic that has been touched on throughout this dissertation. Existing literature has revealed that international students are a developmental benefit not only to a host country's institutions of higher learning, but to the host country itself both financially and socially. African international students bring in foreign currency which benefits both the host country and its institutions. Existing literature reveals

that international students on average spend more than their local counterparts, contributing to the host countries tourism and other sectors. Both existing literature and information gathered from the interviews shows that international students pay more tuition than their local counterparts, which is a financial benefit to the institution which they attend.

African international students aid in the international recognition of the universities where they attend through increasing the university's rankings and enabling the production of better research as time goes on. As mentioned by some of the key informants, the likelihood of an international student taking their studies to higher postgraduate levels is more than that of their local counterparts. Students furthering their education results in a university having more postgraduate students, which translates to better research being produced, which existing literature has also revealed to be a benefit of international students.

Upon analysis of the interview information, it is mentioned that international students bring with them diversity and an array of cultures. It is this diversity and culture that translates to the benefits to universities of international students that are mentioned in existing literature. Such diversity mimics the kind of life students need to be prepared to handle beyond their tertiary experiences. It is also this diversity that enables both local and international students to learn from each other, build bonds, and develop an internationalized view of the world. Such bonds can also directly translate to international students becoming ambassadors of that particular tertiary institution and host country, which is advantageous to the host university and country as it in turn, increases the likelihood of more students having that country as a desired tertiary education destination.

(ii) Challenges before and during Covid-19

Upon analysis, it is discovered that both existing literature and data gathered from the interviews revealed that before Covid-19, African international students faced challenges relating to finances, xenophobia, and relocation such as making friends, language barriers, and visa renewal obstacles.

With regards to finances, international students battled with the need to send money back home, which strained their financial situation further even if they had scholarships or were working. Finding a job or scholarship to begin with was already difficult, as international students explained how they were not prioritized with regards to such opportunities. International students coming from countries with an unstable economy and currency also struggled financially once they arrived at university and matters were only made worse as they had to pay more than their local counterparts.

Xenophobia plagues international students in South Africa, with violent attacks such as those in 2008 and reoccurring throughout the years as existing literature and news stories reveals. Acts such as a Zimbabwean man being burned alive in Diepsloot in 2022 strikes fear into the minds of African international students as they wonder if they will be the next victim. While the presence of security and denouncing of violence on campuses largely protects students from violence, African international students experience verbal xenophobia quite often within university grounds. Discrimination is also experienced by African international students as they are labelled with misconceptions such as being seen as people who need to go back to their home countries before they take the jobs of local South Africans, as one student shared from their experience. Students mention constantly receiving negative feedback due to not being South African and not being able to speak any of the South African languages.

Challenges of relocation branch out into problems regarding making friends which also coincides with language barriers. International students have expressed that they find it difficult to fit in and prefer being friends with their own country people as they are more comfortable that way. Language barriers make it difficult to make friends as it is not easy when one is constantly being judged for speaking English or not understanding any of the local languages. This adds to feelings of isolation, loneliness and homesickness and leads to emotional strain. With regards to visa troubles, existing literature reveals that international students receive their visas after long waiting periods. It is known that the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa has a large backlog that directly affects international students. Many students expressed in their interviews that they were negatively impacted by long delays in getting their study visas. Poor communication from VFS did not make their situation any better. They also shared that the process of visa renewal itself tended to be confusing with extensive documentation that they were often not aware of being required.

During Covid-19, new challenges emerged due to the crisis situations and some of the same problems that existed before Covid-19 were still prevalent and were made worse. The important challenges identified by research participants included food insecurity, limited academic assistance, financial instability, travel costs and logistics, and visa delays.

Due to dining halls being closed, international students who remained in South Africa could not gain access to stable supplies of food. This was made worse due to the lockdown as shops were closed as well along with delivery services such as uber eats.

The pandemic caused many students who had jobs to lose them, meaning that they did not have the financial security they had established to buy as much food as they needed. To make matters worse, some of the students who remained in university residences pointed out that

they did not have the facilities to cook food and therefore had to rely on more expensive pre-cooked food or unhealthy processed food that they could heat up with a microwave. In one case this was later rectified, not by an institutional intervention, but through the individual action of one residence staff sharing their own equipment.

Students not having the equipment that they needed, such as books and laptops, undermined their academic performance. This lack of access to learning equipment occurred due to the loss of access to campus resources and for some due to leaving student accommodations in a rush and leaving things behind believing they would be returning soon. For those who travelled out of South Africa, their academic journey was at risk due to them not being able to travel back into South Africa when the academic year continued and some face-to-face lectures resumed. In addition, those who needed to do field research, including most who travelled out of South Africa, could not perform practical assignments required by their studies due to the lockdown and other restrictions on movements. Data gathered from interviews also revealed that academic concerns stemmed from the struggle to adjust to online learning due to factors such as poor connectivity, data expenses, and load shedding. The shutdown of campuses resulted in the closure of libraries, meaning student could not gain access to materials that they needed. Other materials they could not gain access to on campus include good free Wi-Fi, laboratory equipment and computers.

Some students said that the lockdown actually helped them excel in their academic work as they had nothing better to do but to focus on their studies. The majority of the student participants, however, struggled with academic performance with the main reasons being the isolation of the lockdown; they reported being under immense mental and emotional strain and were concerned about the safety of their family members. In addition, they preferred

face-to-face learning, therefore online learning did not work in their favour. The research participants, as well as some existing literature, pointed out that the situation caused students to relax and not participate in their academic work as much.

Due to the loss of jobs during the pandemic, international students did not have a stable income to maintain them. Their families in their home countries had a similar experience of losing income, meaning that the money coming in from families also became limited. In addition, further financial strain was caused by paying rent for the duration of the lockdown when they could have gone home. Furthermore, money had to be used for their maintenance whilst they were still in the country as they had to buy supplies in bulk to ensure they were able to manage, however the continued extension of the lockdown did not help.

Some international students could not travel back home due to having pending visa renewal applications. If they had decided to leave, they would essentially give up on renewing their visas and be at risk of being deemed undesirable as they would have overstayed in South Africa. Other students found it difficult to apply for visas and could not get assistance because not only was VFS closed, but many Department of Home Affairs offices shutdown as well. This closure also resulted in students missing out on their academics as students' courses began whilst they were still stuck in their home countries awaiting visas.

The experiences shared above and in most parts of this dissertation reflect what the overwhelming majority of African international students interviewed went through. There were, as shared briefly in chapter 4, a few students who were financially secure, either due to family background or generous scholarships. This resulted in these students enduring less challenges compared to others. They did not, for example, face food insecurity or have problems with accommodation. They also did not struggle academically as they had access to

data, good connectivity and equipment to study online. Given the high levels of socio-economic inequality in South Africa, and elsewhere on the continent, we can see how this crisis probably exacerbated these inequalities as the more privileged did not suffer the setbacks of the majority.

Despite the different experiences international students had due to the Covid-19 pandemic and in the face of institutional failings, some agency was shown by students in an attempt to get through difficult times. Examples, some more and some less constructive, of such agency include the coping mechanisms they implemented for themselves as mentioned in chapter 4. This included exercise, turning to religion, drinking, spending time with family and friends, and focusing on studying since there was not much to do for some. The organising to raise concerns about having to leave accommodation, even when the structures that should have spoken for them - such as the SRC - had failed, shows considerable agency and it brought about positive results.

(iii) Student Support Services

Before the pandemic, there were a number of student support services available to international students that were of benefit to them despite the services having some weaknesses. An example of the services that were of benefit to all students, including international students, were the 24 hour security services. The security services received great praise from students both before and during the pandemic. Despite the existence of violent acts of xenophobia in the country, and some incidences such as muggings that did affect students, the high level of security available around the campus and student residences kept students relatively safe. Similarly, various university staff members, mostly from the

university run student residences and some lecturers, received praise both before and during the pandemic because of their individual efforts to assist international students.

The counselling services offered by universities before the pandemic provided students with some form of relief and guidance from the troubles they faced. However, the two week waiting period that occurred before they actually got any assistance, and other limitations on the services, proved to be detrimental not only for the reputation of the services but for the mental and emotional health of the students. By the end of the two week waiting period, as mentioned in chapter 4, a student may be in far worse a situation regarding their mental and emotional health. This was made worse by the shortage of counsellors available and the increased demand for counselling during the pandemic. The move to online counselling sessions did accommodate the change the pandemic brought and enabled people to gain access to the services, evident in the 30 percent increase in participation, however, the move did not consider students who experienced load shedding, had no data or access to Wi-Fi, and those who left their devices in university residences. Those who had access to the services online were also not that satisfied with the length, quality and regularity of the sessions, and preferred of face-to-face sessions. These issues were a result of the global crisis caused by Covid-19, so not all the blame goes to the counselling services, but it still had a negative impact on the quality of the service and the experience of students.

International student societies received special mention from students as they enabled international students to build a community amongst themselves and interact with each other before Covid-19. During the pandemic, however, these services were rendered ineffective as there was very little social interaction occurring. Online learning, something that was introduced suddenly as a response to the pandemic, allowed the continuation of the

academic year but caused a decrease in student participation and a lower quality of engagement by students and some lecturers. Online lectures, like online counselling services, did not work well for students who struggled with data, Wi-Fi, load shedding and not having the necessary academic equipment.

Financial assistance for international students before the pandemic was scarce and become even worse during the pandemic. Both existing literature and data from interviews reveal that before the pandemic, it was a difficult task for international students to secure some form of financial aid. The pandemic made this matter worse as some financial schemes crumbled during the pandemic, as mentioned in chapter 4. At the same time the need for financial support increased as students and their families lost incomes, as mentioned above. The UitGP did reimburse a certain small percentage (as low as 3 percent) of students' tuition as a form of aid, however, this was not sufficient nor was it to the satisfaction of students. There was no communication from the UitGP on any other form of financial aid available, and none was discovered in the course of this research, thereby leading to the conclusion that financial services to help international students during the pandemic were ultimately non-existent.

Similarly, visa assistance services became worse during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, UitGP offered a mobile VFS station where students could apply for their visas on campus and receive assistance with the application. The international student office also assisted in following up with regards to the status of visa applications if they were delayed. During the pandemic, however, the VFS mobile service and multiple Home Affairs offices closed and the international student office could not do much to assist. Delays became longer as students went for months and some for years without valid visas as mentioned in the interview data.

Overall, given the information gathered in this study, it is clear that student services that existed before the pandemic, did not sufficiently support students during the pandemic. Despite slight spells of success for some, support services that existed before the pandemic, generally, were made for just that, before the pandemic, and even then had not been ideal and were subject to negative feedback from many of the students. Services that were either modified for or created to accommodate the pandemic had some success in enabling the continuation of the academic year, however, did not fulfil the needs of international students.

(iv) Responses from the UitGP and other institutions

Forms of assistance offered by the UitGP include them allowing international students to remain in residences after initially declaring that everyone including international students should move out. International students said they were happy about the decision to vacate being reversed and that they felt that the university realized how difficult it would be for them. The decision came late, however, with most international students already having left. It is notable thought that the UitGP did respond more quickly in the reversal of the decision to vacate residences than some other universities, as identified by one of the student research participants from another institutions. The UitGP also partnered with NGO's who provided food parcels for students who were stuck in residences. Though this is commendable, from the interview data gathered, the international student experience of this was that it was not much and it only happened once. The UitGP also allowed students to access the food money that was available on their student cards to use to buy food during the lockdown. The initiative taken by the UitGP to deliver laptops and other learning equipment to students around South Africa was highly commended and appreciated by international students during their interviews as they felt considered. The UitGP also partnered up with service providers in the

country to provide free data to students could participate in online learning. International students who were interviewed that received this free data found it useful and were grateful to the university. All these initiatives, however, were only beneficial for international students who were in South Africa. They did not benefit those who were outside of the country and those outside the country said that they felt left out.

It is to be appreciated that the UitGP did make changes in response to the crisis students found themselves in due to measures such as vacating residences and the impact of the closing of the only places students could use the food allowance on their cards. But it is clear that in the Covid-19 crisis, and possible future crises, it would be far better to have thought through the impacts such decisions were going to have before implementing them. The stress and material impacts of having to leave the residences and of not being able to buy food could have been avoided in the first place.

The Minister of Education, Blade Nzimande mentioned laptops and other devices were going to be delivered to students in order to assist them in continuing with their studies during the lockdown as most courses were being delivered online. This initiative was similar to that of the UitGP, both of which were commended and appreciated by international students, but again this was only to the benefit of those who were still in the country. The South African Government also implemented the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant of R350 per month to aid people during the lockdown. Unfortunately, this was not available to any international students.

With regards to international embassies, the only form assistance that was discovered was from key informants revealing that some international embassies assisted with the repatriation of a small number of international students back to their home countries. I did

not find or hear of any students from the UitGP who benefitted from such repatriation. Most international embassies, however, were also closed due to the pandemic and it was therefore difficult to get a hold of them as one of the key informants mentioned. Other forms of assistance from establishments outside the UitGP came from one of the external key informants whose establishments opened their doors to allow international students access to use their office spaces so that they could work.

(v) Research participant suggestions

Suggestions from both African international students and key informants with regards to what they thought would help ameliorate the challenges of students during the pandemic consisted of: 1) better communication from the UitGP; 2) financial assistance; and 3) the need for more proactive engagement by the university with the students, both academically and in terms of student wellbeing.

African international students suggested that UitGP improve their communication towards them and provide more clarity at all times. During the pandemic, international students expected some form of communication and guidance from the UitGP with regards to how they were going to operate and structure the continuation of the academic year, however very little information was provided. There was especially little information that was specifically for international students. Students would appreciate not being made to feel as though they are left in the dark and would appreciate prompt and clear guidance from the institution at all times to avoid panic and confusion. Key informants shared the same sentiment stating that universities must communicate better for the sake of their students.

With regards to financial assistance, the suggestion was that some form of financial compensation would have been appreciated given that students no longer received the full

services and benefits for which they were paying. Such a compensation would have greatly assisted them during such a difficult period when many international students had experienced some form of financial strain.

Lastly, both Key informants and African international students suggested that universities and their various staff and services could be a bit more proactive and interact and participate with international students more, not only academically, but also in terms of their mental and emotional wellbeing. Students and key informants suggest that universities need to reach out to students instead of the students having to go to their university for assistance. It would be appreciated if the university checked up on its students to create a sense of being cared for. Academically speaking, students would have liked to have seen a helping hand to guide them through the learning process, instead of being given notes and being left to their own devices. This goes along with what one of the external key informants mentioned, that international students need their hand held at some point in time and must be guided. Key informants also suggested that universities must create a safe space for international students where they can comfortably express their struggles and speak about what they are going through. This relates to the inadequacy of the counselling services that universities provide.

5.3 DISCUSSION, LESSONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are seven main areas of lessons from this study. I have put the lessons and recommendations together in this sections as the recommendations flow from the lessons that have come out of this study. These lessons are in relation to: 1) international student representation; 2) the challenges of visa applications and renewal; 3) international student support services; 4) improvement of counselling services; 5) furthering of technological

advancement and its use in education; 6) assimilation of international students in a new environment; and 7) issue of financial assistance for African international students.

Firstly, the issue of representation was mentioned by many of the research participants during the research. The lack of representation is shown by decisions that clearly did not consider the particular situation of international students. The first incident was the initial decision to evacuate all students from student accommodations. International students were only considered and allowed to stay after the students shared their grievances when it came to travelling back to their home countries in such an abrupt manner without warning. Better interaction and representation could have helped the university see how problematic the decision was before it was implemented. The second was the lack of any provision for data and computers for students who went home. While it might be unrealistic to expect the university to provide this, it seemed, as far as I could see, that they did not even consider it and they did not communicate any of it to the students. It is also mentioned above that international students were told to contact their department heads, but according to a key informant in the UitGP, there was no communication within the department about them needing to accommodate such. Therefore, referring students to departments, which were in no way prepared for such, was essentially dodging the issue.

There is also a lack of representation for international students at a high level in the university management and this continues to affect international students till this day. It was revealed that at the UitGP, there are 19 students who sit on the SRC and only two were international students in 2021, of which none of them had the international student portfolio. Though the 10.5 percent representation in the SRC is more than the nine percent representation international students have in the entire university, it still does not favour the voice of

international students in the SRC because they are a minority. And because of this, international student interests are unlikely to come through or be prioritized as issues to be addressed, including in discussions within the SRC and any situation where a decision goes to a vote.

In addition, the staff of the international student office at the UitGP are mainly South Africans, which does not create an atmosphere of relatability for international students. This is confirmed by students in chapter 4 who shared their feelings of alienation and being unable to relate when it comes to the international student office, which they partly attributed to the office being mainly made up of South African workers. The argument here is not that the office should only have non-South African employees or that the office should have more non-South African workers than South Africans. An international student is bound to interact with mostly South African workers when attending a South African university. However, the university and its staff could be made aware of and sensitised to the impact it has on international students. Being mindful of this, the staff, regardless of nationality, could do more to make international students feel understood and welcome. It is also important to state and be aware of small details that contribute to the discomfort of an international student, such as students experiencing negative treatment due to staff at times communicating in a language that international students do not understand.

A recommendation to tackle these coinciding issues is to hire more employees from other African countries in addition to the few that are already there to cater for the particular needs of African international students. This solution will help solve the problem of capacity within the office, thereby allowing for more services to be offered, thus increasing international student satisfaction. It will also create a sense of relatability for students thus creating a more

welcoming and diverse environment. If hiring non South Africans as part of the permanent staff proves to be difficult, another solution can be to temporarily hire international students themselves. International students can be hired by a university to assist new or incoming students with issues of navigation regarding the UitGP and its systems, such as where they need to go when they need help with their visas. These international students can also be in a better position to help more readily as compared to university employees. Employees follow a work schedule of 9am-5pm, whereas international students may actually be living in the same residence as other international students and can therefore be more readily available and help at any time.

There must also be an adequate sensitization of all staff to understand and be more responsive to the experiences of African international students. This could make staff aware of ways to be more welcoming and that they should avoid some of the alienating actions like speaking languages international students do not understand. The positive experience of treatment from residence house parents shows that the right approach overcomes national and ethnic divisions. It is important to point out that South African staff with the right approach can do fine and have been much appreciated and praised by African international students in the study. This can still be combined with looking for opportunities to appoint appropriately skilled staff who come from other African countries so that they may have an advantage when dealing with African international students. It is to be noted also that having international academic staff will have a positive impact on the university's ranking.

Secondly, students have stated that some of the problems they encounter whilst applying for a visa, or a renewal of one, include not being able to get assistance with regards to the entire process, not being aware of which paperwork is needed, and at times not knowing where to

even go. Other problems include receiving certain documents, especially confirmation of enrolment from the university late, which hinders them from applying and getting their visa on time. Even after the submission process is complete, the tracking of the visa's progress can be slow and at times students are unaware of what is happening. And because they do not have a valid visa issued yet, they are hindered from registering as stated before. While the visa problems are the responsibility of the Department of Home Affairs, universities cannot sit back as they and their students are severely affected. Universities need to act on this, as I shall elaborate below.

The importance of a visa for an international student, and getting it on time, is clear and there are many elements that go into getting one that are beyond the control of the student. To rectify the visa problems, it is recommended that the issue is taken to a higher and wider level. All the Vice Chancellors of universities in South Africa need to be involved and engage with the Department of Home Affairs to find solutions. In this way, the challenges that international students face will be heard on a higher and more public platform which creates a sense of accountability if solutions are not implemented. Additionally, action can be taken by the SRCs of all universities, working with university management, by joining together and linking to make up a united front with a common goal to take these issues to the Department of Home Affairs. Ways have to be found to simplify the process, rectify the backlog, and ensure the timeous issuing of visas.

In addition, the Department of Home Affairs, VFS, and South African universities need to work together to communicate clearly the requirements that are needed when an international student applies for a visa or decides to renew one. It is evident from the experiences of some international students in this study that the application process can be different for different

students. To avoid confusion, clarity should be given and given early to enable international students to apply for their visas on time, with less confusion and stress. Whilst on the issue of communication, the Department of Home Affairs itself should deliver regular updates to applicants with regards to the status and progress of the visa applications.

Thirdly, as mentioned in the dissertation, many of the benefits that existed in South Africa during the lockdown period were not available to students outside the country. Not much could be done for them. A key informant even mentioned that because students are with family, it is assumed that they are catered for. That however cannot be a valid assumption or conclusion because it is unclear the kind of situation that exists for some of the international students when they go back home. Many suffered financial and other strains. Being in South Africa and also at university is better for some than being at home either because they have access to funds or they have a job in the South Africa which they depend on to cater for themselves and send money back home, as previously mentioned. In terms of campus resources, others depended on computer labs, the library, and/or Wi-Fi that are on campus. With them being away from these and not having good alternatives, it became detrimental to their studies and academic performance.

It appears that students outside South Africa were not well represented or did not have the required influence as most measures put in place to help students deal with the impact of Covid-19 were not available to them. While international students still in South Africa did manage to get some of their issues addressed, such as access to accommodation and food as mentioned above, the ones outside did not achieve such successes. Here, perhaps, we are seeing the limited agency of international students who are dispersed across their home

countries and not onsite to confront a university management faced with many other demands.

The unique situation which the pandemic created revealed that to a degree, students who are outside of South Africa depend on the services and benefits their universities offer just as much as those within the country and in close proximity to their universities. It cannot be definitely concluded or assumed that an international student is catered for or has what they need to comfortably continue with their academics, merely because they are at home. It has been said throughout this study that some international students make their new university environment their home because it is not easy for them to go home as often, let alone have all the equipment they need to perform academically at home. These international students deserve to be catered for in some way because they are registered students of the university and not only do they pay tuition, just like every other student, but they pay double.

To resolve this issue, a recommendation worth exploring, perhaps through a pilot programme, is the provision by universities of specific services for students that are outside the country but are registered with their respective universities. As students outside the country do not use the campus facilities, but pay the same fees, it would seem reasonable to put some resources into ensuring the same high quality university experience for them. To further facilitate this pilot programme, universities can build relationships with international embassies. Such a relationship will help such an exchange. Deeper country bonds can also be established this way which may further benefit not only institutions in all countries involved, but the countries themselves from an international relations perspective. This can also be fruitful for when there is possibly another state of emergency situation as aid can then be provided in the form of emergency repatriation flights and visa documentation assistance.

Next is the improvement of counselling services. It is important to seek inputs from the people being served in order to understand what weaknesses are present and need to be resolved. Before the pandemic, students were already dissatisfied with the counselling unit of the UitGP due to the two week waiting period that seems to be caused by the lack of readily available counsellors. During the pandemic, students were not happy with online counselling as they preferred face-to-face counselling and had little confidence in the service due to past disappointment. Furthermore, an increase in participation and decrease in complaint rate does not necessarily indicate customer satisfaction. More specifically in this case where students pulled back and decided to not interact with the university due to there being a history of dissatisfaction, lower complaint rates could indicate students have given up rather than indicating improved satisfaction. In addition, the combined effect of poor connectivity along with high data costs can result in limited access for those students who needed their services. The 30 percent increase in use of the counselling services shows the high level of stress students were under as well.

Furthermore, it is discovered that individuals who deal with international students also suffer from mental and emotional strain either from sympathizing with what the students are going through as they help them, or from the strain that they endure whilst they help the students, as mentioned by key informants in chapter 4. From residential house parents and student life managers, to immigration consultants and scholarship managers, these individuals shared that they have gone through their own struggles as well. Through this, a wider question regarding international student support is created. Assistance does not just start and end with international students, but also includes those who aid international students and cater for them, not only in their professional but in some instances in their personal lives.

To rectify such issues, an increase in staff and/or counsellors to combat and manage the increasing demand of counselling services would be beneficial and should be factored into disaster response planning. Seeing that the conclusion of this dissertation was written at a time where restrictions were lifted and student life continued more or less as before, the use of strictly online counselling as the only method of service no longer applies. The increase in staff will assist in lessening the waiting period and improving the service. It will also position the university better to deal with future crises.

In response to a specific issue that arose from the experience of one student who had their access to counselling services cut due to student debts, I would appeal to the university to amend this policy. As long as a student is registered, and trying to complete their studies, they should be able to access counselling services. The increased stress that often goes with financial problems that are reflected in student debts is only likely to increase the need such students have for support.

Consultation and other means for regular client feedback on the counselling services could help to improve the services. It needs to be remembered that improving the counselling services will not just be of direct benefit to the students but will also contribute to the university achieving better results and higher student throughput, with all the related reputational and financial benefits of that.

In addition, more psychological help should be provided to university employees and any other employee, especially in crisis situations, who works with or assists international students. The responsibility for this lies with university management, university stakeholders, and the South African Government. In order to ensure that international students are better assisted in the future, psychological help and emotional support must be regularly offered to

those who deal with them. Those who assist international students cannot cater to them when they are unable to cater to themselves. Providing counselling, sabbaticals and other forms of professional assistance to relieve their mental and emotional strain increases their likelihood of better performing their duties of catering to international students, thereby increasing satisfaction on both sides.

For the fifth finding, it was mentioned that if online interactions were made available before Covid-19, the transition to online learning would not have been as difficult. Students expressed that the transition made them less inclined to interact academically, and this sentiment was shared by key informants who not only struggled to offer certain services to students but also struggled to adapt to the new way of interacting. Evidence of the benefit of being technologically savvy is shown by a student who already underwent online counselling before Covid-19 and, therefore found it easy to continue during the pandemic. Another example is a key informant referencing UNISA, stating that the students and staff from that institution, which was already doing online teaching and learning, did not struggle with online learning as much as others did from other institutions in the country.

The Covid-19 experience has made us aware of the importance of diversifying the manner in which education is provided and the benefit technology brings. With this in mind, a recommendation is that universities must continue on the journey of becoming more technologically advanced and further create an environment where students can be taught online and assisted to be more technology savvy. This will of course also better equip students for our increasingly digitally connected work environments. Such technological advancements can come in the form of hybrid learning where learning is run both face-to-face and online. At the time that this dissertation was completed, the university had returned to full face-to-

face learning and experimentation with online options seemed to have almost completely stopped. Day to day living and learning continued as if nothing had occurred with little change in use of online technology. The implementation of this programme will not only make online learning easier but can also be the solution for many international students when it comes to funds for travel and accommodation as they can be able to participate and attend lectures from anywhere in the world.

Sixth, being in a different environment, trying to fit in and being away from home, can be mentally and emotionally straining. African international students go through feelings of loneliness when they are in another country. During the lockdown, students felt extremely lonely and home sick as they were stuck in South Africa and could not go home. Similarly, before the pandemic, students would experience feelings of loneliness, alienation and a lack of being included as mentioned in the literature review and by many of the research participants. Several factors that students identified which exacerbate these challenges are xenophobia, language barriers, and negative treatment from some university staff. The university cannot change the distance from home, but it can address these points to reduce the negative impacts.

The manner in which an international student is welcomed into a new environment is crucial for how they thrive in it. Existing literature and interview data has shown that a negative relationship with one's environment, especially for an international student, can have negative effects on their academic performance, the bond with their university, and overall assimilation into the new environment. A sense of belonging must be present at all times, even during crisis situations. Such a sense can help build bonds and friendship that will prove

useful in future during difficult situations. With this in mind, the following recommendations are made.

To create a sense of belonging and tackle the feelings of loneliness and alienation, a welfare committee can be established by the international student office at the UitGP, and at other universities. This should be dedicated to international students from the time they are accepted so that they are asked what their needs and challenges are and advised on ways to address these. This structure can also be a means of gathering and channelling feedback on international student experiences to university management so that there is a better understanding of what international students are going through. The committee can also establish a buddy system to connect new international students with other international students from the same country who have been in South Africa longer so that they may show their new buddies around and assist with issues that come with relocation. Furthermore, because international students bring with them different cultures and backgrounds, these must be recognized and celebrated so that a purpose designed living space or an international student residence can be created for them to induce a sense of community at the UitGP. Counter arguments regarding this recommendation are that it will possibly entrench the differences and deepen the separation between local and international students. It could possibly also reduce a benefit of and for international students, which include interactions with and learning about other people. A pilot of programme on a small scale can therefore be implemented by the university and feedback can be recorded with regards to its effectiveness and satisfaction from both the perspective of international and local students.

Lastly, the issue of financial assistance for African international students whether direct or indirect, is one that has been touched on extensively in this dissertation. Literature reveals

that not only do international students already pay more in tuition fees than their local counterparts, but there are also many other factors that worsen their financial standing, such as having to pay higher percentages of their tuition fees and rent up front. African international students have also spoken of their limited access to financial aid and assistance in South Africa due to many funds being reserved for South African citizens. Additionally, on more than one occasion, key informants from the UitGP mentioned financial constraints were one of the reasons less was done for international student during the pandemic. In this regard, a recommendation to tackle this is the establishment of an emergency relief fund to cover essentials for international students in future crises. A way to finance such an emergency fund could be to use part of the international student levy.

5.4 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

This study started as an exploratory study without a clear conceptual framework. As part of my lessons and conclusions I now offer a simple framework (Figure 1) that summarises key findings and may be useful for others studying the topic to help them visualise the issues and the links. Figure 1 summarises the potential benefits of having international students and also expresses the importance of effective student support services and how they can overcome the inevitable challenges faced in order to maximise those benefits. This is offered as a framework for assessing international student challenges, support services and outcomes. International students always go through adversity when they have moved to a new host country to begin their tertiary educational journeys. Examples of these adversities or challenges are listed at the bottom right of the diagram, such as difficulties obtaining adequate finances and having to deal with visa processes. During times of crisis, some of the same challenges tend to be exacerbated and new challenges can be introduced, such as having to

leave one's accommodation and losing access to campus facilities, as mentioned in the bottom left of the diagram. Moving to the second tier of the diagram, these challenges can either be effectively addressed with appropriate support service, as per the green path leading to positive outcomes, or be addressed by poor services that do not consider the situation of international students, as per the red path, leading to very negative outcomes.



Figure 1: Framework for international student challenges, support and outcomes (source: Author)

In the real world, services and outcomes will be somewhere on a continuum between perfect services and fantastic outcomes and very poor services and disastrous outcomes. South African universities, and relevant government services including the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Home Affairs have to decide which path they are choosing. It is hoped that they will strive to ensure services that make African international students feel welcome and supported. This can help ensure that South African universities are world class

places of higher education that contribute to wider development in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This study found that African international students at the UitGP were not adequately supported or accommodated by the university during the Covid-19 lockdown. The international student support services which existed before the pandemic did not assist as much, if at all, during the pandemic. Although there were some positive experiences, the contingency plans that were made to adapt to crisis situations were also deemed unsatisfactory and unsuccessful, not only by the students who received the services, but also by key informants working with universities.

The running theme throughout the data analysis was that “more could have been done”. Unfortunately, some improvements in services came a bit too late as the damage had already been done. International students end up relying more on friends and see their companions as more dependable in terms of assistance than their own university. Some international students would rather fight through mental and emotional discomfort than seek help from their university due to a history of unsatisfactory services delivery.

African international students felt let down in their time of need by the very institution whose rankings, foreign currency income, and marketing, depend on the same individuals. African international students made it clear that they felt like an afterthought by their university, despite the university priding itself on the diversity that exists within its student body. The same valued diversity is also not found in the offices of the university that deal with international students. Not only did many international students not feel welcome before the

pandemic, but they also felt forgotten during the pandemic due to the lack of communication and their particular needs being overlooked. The contingency plans clearly did not consider the specific situation of international students as exemplified by the initial closing of all student accommodation despite some international students having nowhere to go, and the restarting of some face-to-face lectures while some international students were still not allowed to travel back to South Africa.

Very little literature regarding the experiences of African international students in other African countries exists in comparison to the more extensive literature that concentrates on international students in European and Western countries, including African international students in countries outside the African continent. This study makes an addition to the literature, filling in that gap and concludes that the experiences of African international students in the African university focused on in this study during the pandemic, are generally similar, despite differences in a minority of cases where the students had a higher economic standing. Notably there is a particularly large visa problem that students attempting to study in South Africa face in comparison to other countries.

African international students can build up not only African countries but build up the entire African continent. Part of the process of turning that vision into reality starts with ensuring that as Africans, we accommodate each other first, including effectively accommodating African international students in African universities. We are well aware of what African international students offer, therefore we must ensure that what they offer remains within reach and is not lost to other parts of the world, far away from the African continent due to a failure to recognize their differences and struggles and being unable to effectively assist and sufficiently accommodate them. If the pandemic taught us one thing, it is that in more ways

than anyone can imagine, we all need each other to get through, and that is inclusive of giving assistance to and receiving it from international students.

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Faculty of Humanities

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ANNEX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

Research Participant Details.

Basic information regarding the research participant - such as age, gender, origin - will provide an understanding of the type of person they are to enable analysis of the impact on different kinds of students. Typical questions will include:

- What course of study are you pursuing currently?
- What is your country of origin?
- How old are you?

Pre Covid experiences

In this section, information regarding the challenges and the type of experiences African international students had before Covid-19 will be gathered. This will create a timeline for comparison and perspective on changes. The type of questions are:

- What positive and negative experiences did you face as an African international student before Covid-19?
- What have been some of your coping mechanisms during these challenges?

During Covid experiences

The students' experiences and challenges during Covid-19 will be gathered. Specific information with regards to what they dealt with, how their studies and livelihoods were affected and what they felt they needed to help them through the difficult period will be sought after. Example questions include:

- How did Covid-19 and the lockdown affect your studies?
- How were your living circumstances affected?
- What did you as an African international student struggle the most with during the Covid-19 lockdown?

Institutional assistance

Students share and describe their opinions with regards to how universities and others helped them. They also share if they feel it was enough or more could have been done or considered to alleviate their challenges during the difficult time. Below are example questions.

- What assistance if any did you receive and from who since the outbreak of Covid-19?
- What do you think your university can do better or implement to improve international student experience at the university?
- What positive feedback can you give with regards to the manner in which your university has responded to some of your challenges before and during Covid-19?

Questions and answers session

At the end of the interviews, participants will be given the opportunity to ask me questions that they might have regarding the study, the interview itself or my general experience as an African international student. Once completed, participants will then be thanked for their time and for sharing.



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ANNEX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR KEY INFORMANTS

Information on the interviewee.

Information regarding the interviewees will be gathered. Questions will include:

- What is your role in relation to international students?
- For how long have you been performing this role?
- What is your level of education?

Pre Covid experiences.

Information gathered from these questions will comprise of the kinds of services provided as well as any concerns and challenges key informants dealt with regarding international students before the Covid-19 lockdown. Examples question below.

- What services have you and your institution provided and seen provided to international students?
- What challenges did you experience or do you know about in relations to dealing with international students?

During Covid experiences.

Information gathered from these questions will comprise of the kinds of concerns and challenges key informants dealt with during the Covid-19 lockdown regarding international students. This will create a timeline for comparison with the pre Covid experience. Examples question below:

- What were some of the issues/ problems and difficulties expressed by international students that you had to deal with during the lockdown?
- What are some of the concerns you face today more than a year later?

University based questions.

Information gathered from this section include the actions that were taking in consideration of international students, along with what feasible action could have and still can be taken by the university for the betterment of international student support for the duration of Covid-19 and for future crises and normal university life. Example questions include:

- What are some of the initiatives and actions your university took to help international students during the Covid-19 lockdown?
- What can be implemented by your university that will be feasible and beneficial to the institution and its African international students?

Key informant reflections.

Opinions of key informants with regards to what they think or feel about the challenges and experiences African international students face will be gained in this section.

- What did you find to be most difficult in your attempts to assist?
- Do you think that the actions that were taken were satisfactory for African international students?
- What do you think could have been done more to assist international students?

Questions and answering session.

At the end of the interviews, participants will be giving the opportunity to ask me questions that they might have regarding the study, the interview itself or my general experience as an African international student. Once completed, participants will then be thanked for their time and for sharing.

2021-11-29

ANNEX C

Mr M Mpofu
Department of Anthropology and Archaeology
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
Email: mufarom5@gmail.com

Dear Mr Mpofu

APPROVAL OF RESEARCH STUDY

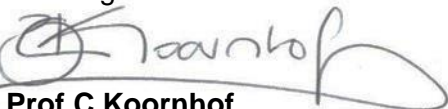
The UP Survey Coordinating Committee has granted approval for the research study titled “Experiences of African international students during Covid-19: A study at a University in the Gauteng Province”.

The proposed research study has to strictly adhere to the associated study protocol, as well as the UP Survey Policy and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities instructions.

Please liaise with the Market Research Office in the Department of Institutional Planning (carlien.nell@up.ac.za) to officially register the study and to finalise the survey regulations, procedures and the fieldwork dates. In order to register the study, the Market Research Office has to receive the formal ethical approval letter from the Faculty of Humanities.

A final electronic copy of the research outcomes must be submitted to the Survey Coordinating Committee as soon as possible after the completion of the study.

Kind regards



Prof C Koornhof
ACTING REGISTRAR
ACTING CHAIRPERSON: SURVEY COORDINATING COMMITTEE

ANNEX D



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo



02 December 2021

Dear Mr M Mpofu

Project Title: Experiences of African international students during Covid 19: A study at a University in the Gauteng Province
Researcher: Mr M Mpofu
Supervisor(s): Dr MCA Wegerif
Department: Anthropology, Archaeology and Development Studies
Reference number: 17019827 (HUM023/0821)
Degree: Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 02 December 2021. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Harris'.

Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

ANNEX E

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS²

African international students from the UitGP

NAME	GENDER	AGE	COUNTRY	COURSE
1. Zelda	F	23	Zimbabwe	LLB Law
2. Danai	F	24	Zimbabwe	Social Work
3. Munashe	M	21	Zimbabwe	Bsc Architecture
4. Takanai	M	25	Zimbabwe	Drama
5. Anelle	F	21	Zimbabwe	Financial Management Honor's
6. Mangoma	M	23	Zimbabwe	Master's in pharmacology
7. Tsego	F	25	Zimbabwe/Botswana	Honor's
8. Nelson	F	23	Zimbabwe	BA Law
9. Amara	F	22	Cameroon	Master's in Business Management
10. Funke	F	24	Malawi	Masters in Development Studies
11. Myself	M	25	Zimbabwe	Masters in Development Studies
12. Mutendera	M	23	Zimbabwe	Mechanical Engineering
13. Mazondo	F	21	Zimbabwe	LLB Law
14. Idris	M	23	Malawi	Masters in Marketing Management
15. Aadil	F	23	Tanzania	Masters in Economics
16. Bakam	M	22	Ghana	Economics
17. Aluna	M	34	Kenya	PhD
18. Daniel	M	24	Zimbabwe	LLB Law
19. Kevin	M	37	Zimbabwe	PhD
20. Ibo	M	26	Nigeria	Anthropology
21. Anelda	F	22	Zimbabwe	Honor's in International relations

² All names used here and in the dissertation are pseudonyms

22. Tarisai	F	22	Zimbabwe	BA Law
23. Leroy	M	21	Eswatini/ Swaziland	Industrial Engineering
24. Chipso	F	21	Zimbabwe	Honours in Public Administration
25. Clementine	F	21	Congo	Honors in Public Administration
26. Panashe	F	21	Zimbabwe	Honors in international relations

African international students from other universities

NAME	GENDER	AGE	COUNTRY	COURSE
1. Rufaro	F	23	Zimbabwe	Law
2. William	M	23	Zimbabwe	Computer Science Honor's

Key informants from the UitGP

NAME	GENDER	AGE	PROFESSION	QUALIFICATION
1. Melissa	F	46	Snr Student Advisor	Development and industrial Psychology degree
2. Ingrid	F	58	Manager of Student Support	Psychology Degree
3. David	M	46	Head of Residence (House Father)	Bachelor of Arts in Social Science
4. Maxwell	M	34	International student manager	Masters in Governance
5. Margret	F	51	Immigration Consultant	Psychology Diploma
6. Emily	F	56	Head of Academic Life	PhD

Informants from other institutions or establishments

NAME	GENDER	AGE	PROFESSION	QUALIFICATION
1. Aldor	M	52	Lecturer	PhD
2. Olaf	M	25	Project Manager	Masters in international management
3. Tamia	F	39	Student life manager	Postgraduate Degree

ANNEX F

INFORMED CONSENT OF INDIVIDUAL BEING INTERVIEWED

Student: Mufaro Mpofu

Student number: 17019827

Name of institution: University of Pretoria

Name of Individual: _____

Master's research title: Experiences of African international students during Covid-19: a study at a University in the Gauteng Province (UitGP)

The purpose of this study is aimed towards the completion of my master's in development studies. It seeks to investigate and explore the challenges African international students experienced, as well as the support they received, at a University in the Gauteng Province (UitGP) during the 2020/21 Covid-19 lockdown. The intention is to gain an in depth understanding of what African international students experience along with what universities have done and can do, with the hope to assist in the betterment and development of student support towards international students in general, during Covid-19, and in other potential future crises.

Data gained from this interview and others will be analysed to evaluate what were the most common challenges, along with new challenges that were not addressed and recommendations will arise with regards to how they could have been addressed or addressed better. Making international student support more efficient will be the end goal.

1. Purpose of the interview:

The purpose of this interview is to gain an understanding of African international student support and experiences during the Covid 19 lockdown, including any of your own views and experiences with regards to international student support during the Covid-19 lockdown.

2. Procedures:

You and I will decide on a time and venue for the interview. The interview will not be more than 40 minutes. Both online/virtual/telephonic interviews and face-to-face interviews may

be used. In the occurrence or need for face-to-face interviews, Covid-19 protocols such as social distancing, sanitization and wearing of masks will be implemented.

3. Benefits:

There is no direct benefit to you. Benefits to the research include in depth and detailed information from your experience and of your opinion.

4. Compensation:

You will not gain anything financially or in any other way from these interviews.

5. Confidentiality:

All information obtained will be confidential. Your identity and that of your institution will not be revealed in the report. In addition, your occupational title will not be revealed and you shall be referred to as 'respondent'. Alternative names can be used to protect your identity. All data will be kept in password protected files. It will be retained by the university for 15 years, shall only be used for non-profit research and academic purposes. You can have the information pertaining to your interview if you wish. The information will not be shared with anyone outside the project and results will not be reported in a way that could identify you. Only the researcher and the supervisor have access to the information.

6. Uncertainties:

Should there be any concern or questions, the supervisor for this study can be called.

7. Withdrawal:

You may withdraw from the study at any given point should you feel uncomfortable, uncertain or have no interest in participating anymore. Upon your withdrawal, all information you would have given towards the study up until that point will be erased and will not be used in the study.

For further information or in case of any concerns you can contact me at:

u17019827@tuks.co.za, cell number: 0630961507

Or my Supervisor: Marc Wegerif, email: marc.wegerif@up.ac.za, cell number: 076 373 4115.

I hereby give my consent to participate in this study and interview. I declare that I am fully aware of the purpose of it and what it will be used for. I am willing to share my perspective.

Are you comfortable with the interview being recorded: YES or No

This document was signed at _____ on the _____ day of _____ 2021

.....

.....

Interviewee's signature

Interviewer's signature

ANNEX G

INFORMED CONSENT OF INDIVIDUAL BEING INTERVIEWED

Student: Mufaro Mpofu

Student number: 17019827

Name of institution: University of Pretoria

Name of Individual: _____

Master's research title: Experiences of African international students during Covid-19: a study at a University in the Gauteng Province (UitGP)

The purpose of this study is aimed towards the completion of my master's in development studies. It seeks to investigate and explore the challenges African international students experienced, as well as the support they received at a University in the Gauteng Province (UitGP) during the 2020/21 Covid-19 lockdown. The intention is to gain an in depth understanding of what African international students experience along with what universities have done and can do, with the hope to assist in the betterment and development of student support towards international students in general, during Covid-19, and in other potential future crises.

Data gained from this interview and others will be analysed to evaluate what were the most common challenges, along with new challenges that were not addressed and recommendations will arise with regards to how they could have been addressed or addressed better. Making international student support more efficient will be the end goal.

1. Purpose of the interview:

The purpose of this interview is to gain an in-depth account of your experience during the Covid-19 lockdown and your opinion with regards to international student support during the Covid-19 lockdown.

2. Procedures:

You and I will decide on a time and venue for the interview. The interview will not be more than 40 minutes. Both online/virtual/telephonic interviews and face-to face interviews may

be used. In the occurrence or need for face-to-face interviews, Covid-19 protocols such as social distancing, sanitization and wearing of masks will be implemented.

3. Benefits:

There is no direct benefit to you. Benefits to the research include in depth and detailed information from your experience and of your opinion.

4. Compensation:

You will not gain anything financially or in any other way from these interviews.

5. Confidentiality:

All information obtained will be confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in the report. Alternative names will be used to protect your identity. All data will be kept in password protected files. It will be retained by the university for 15 years, shall only be used for non-profit research and academic purposes. You can have the information pertaining to your interview if you wish. The information will not be shared with anyone outside the project and the results will not be reported in a way that could identify you. Only the researcher and the supervisor have access to the information.

6. Uncertainties:

Should there be any concern or questions, the supervisor for this study can be called.

7. Withdrawal:

You may withdraw from the study at any given point should you feel uncomfortable, uncertain or have no interest in participating anymore. Upon your withdrawal, all information you would have given towards the study up until that point will be erased and will not be used in the study.

For further information or in case of any concerns you can contact me at:

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I hereby give my consent to participate in this study and interview. I declare that I am fully aware of the purpose of it and what it will be used for. I am willing to share my perspective.

Are you comfortable with the interview being recorded: YES or No

This document was signed at _____ on the _____ day of _____ 2021

.....

.....

Interviewee's signature

Interviewer's signature