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Transitioning from graduation to employment: Students' perceptions on finding employment in the context of Covid-19



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A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA by coursework and Research Report in the field of Organisational Psychology in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 15 February 2022

Plagiarism Declaration

I, Keolebogile Namane, declare that this report is my own, unaided work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree of examination at this or any other university

Signed: 

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Abstract

In South Africa unemployment continues to be one of the most persistent and important economic complexities. The situation is even more critical among young people. It is worrying that many of South Africa's graduates still struggle to find employment even after graduation. The transition from graduation to employment is commonly characterised by stressful and significant challenges. The challenges associated with this transition have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores the individual experience of exit-level students' perceptions of their transition from graduation to employment in the context of Covid-19. This was done through the application of Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory. The study focused on Schlossberg's 4S system (situation, self, support, and strategies), which is centred on the resources that the students use during a transition. The technique used to obtain participants in the study was purposive sampling. Interviews were conducted with eight participants from various universities in South Africa. Thematic Content Analysis was used for data analysis. The findings suggested the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the transition process. Concurrent stressors such as mental health, lack of work experience and a lack of finances further impacted the transition in the *situation*. Furthermore, *self* was often compromised due to lack of control and challenges to the mental wellbeing of students. In terms of *support*, participants shared the sources of support available to them and expressed their frustration in the absence of some of these support structures. Finally, s*trategies* highlighted the coping techniques that the students utilised to manage the situation. The results highlighted that psychological wellbeing of students was significantly impacted as they navigated through this transition during the global pandemic.

Table of Contents

Abstract 4
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 11
Rationale and Research Aims 11
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW 13
2.1 Youth Unemployment 13
2.2 Graduate Unemployment 14
2.3 General Labour Market 18
2.4 Barriers to the Labour Market when Finding Employment 19
2.5 Transitioning from University to Employment 21
2.6 Health and Wellbeing 23
2.7 Job Search Anxiety 24
2.8 Schlossberg's Model 26
2.9 The 4 S's 29
2.10 Conclusion 36
2.11 Research Questions 37
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY 38
3.1 Introduction 38
3.2 Qualitative Methodology 38
3.3 Sample and Sampling 39
3.4 Instruments 40
3.5 Procedure 41
3.6 Data Analyses 42
Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data. 43
Phase 2: Generating initial codes 43
Phase 3: Searching for themes 43
Phase 4: Reviewing themes 43
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes 43
Phase 6: Producing the report 44
3.7 Trustworthiness 44
Credibility 44
Transferability 44
Dependability 45
Conformability 45
3.8 Ethical Considerations 45
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION 47

4.1 Introduction 47
4.2 Situation 47
4.2.1 COVID-19 48
4.2.2 Initial Thoughts of COVID-19: 48
4.2.3 COVID-19 and Studying 49
4.2.4 COVID-19 and Employment 53
4.2.5 Work Experience 56
4.2.6 Financial Burden 59
4.2.7 Availability of Job Opportunities 60
4.3 Self 64
4.3.1 Entering the World of Work 64
4.3.2 Job Search Preparation in University 65
4.3.3 Personal Resources 68
4.3.4 Mental Health 69
4.4 Support 71
4.4.1 Self-Sufficient 71
4.4.2 Support from Friends and Community 72
4.4.3 Support from Lecturers/University 74
4.4.4 Family Support 76
4.4.5The Negative Side of Having “Support” 79
4.4.6 The Absence of Family and Social Support 79
4.5 Strategies 81
4.5.1 Coping 81
4.5.2 Overall Perceptions of Coping with the Situation 82
4.5.3 Planning 82
4.5.4 Alternative Routes 83
4.5.5 Turning to Religion 85
4.5.6 Mental Disengagement 86
4.5.7 Seeking Social Support 86
4.6 Summary of Themes 88
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE STUDY 89
5.1 Conclusion 89
5.2 Limitations 91
5.3 Implications for Future Research 92
References 93
APPENDICES 108

APPENDIX A: Participant Information Form 108
APPENDIX B: Interview Consent Form 110
APPENDIX C: Biographical Questionnaire 111
APPENDIX D: Interview Schedule 112
APPENDIX E: Ethical Clearance Certificate 113

List of Tables

Table 1: Biographical information of the participants…….40

List of Figures

Figure 1: Unemployment Rate by Education or Training in Youth……15

Figure 2: The Transition Framework: The Individual Transition……28

Figure 3: Coping Resources - the 4 S's……35

List of Appendices

APPENDIX A: Participant Information Form……..107

APPENDIX B: Interview Consent Form……..109

APPENDIX C: Biographical Questionnaire……110

APPENDIX D: Interview Schedule……..111

APPENDIX E: Ethical Clearance Certificate……..….112

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Rationale and Research Aims

"On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, China. 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2) was confirmed as the causative agent of what we now know as 'Coronavirus Disease 2019' (COVID-19). Since then, the virus has spread to more than 100 countries, including South Africa." (SA Coronavirus News, 2020). This extract from the Coronavirus News Portal of South Africa illustrates the current state in South Africa and all the world. COVID-19 has had a major impact on the economy which in turn has an influence on prospects of finding employment. Eyewitness News (04 May 2020) reported that according to the National Director of Treasury, Dondo Mogajane, South Africa's unemployment rate could reach 40% due to COVID-19.

This is in addition to the latest figures from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) which indicated that youth unemployment rate has increased where approximately 40.1% of South Africa's young people are not employed (Githahu, 2020). Furthermore, the announcement was made in March 2020 that the South African economy has slipped into a recession (StatsSA, 2020). All of this combined clearly may have an impact on the way individuals perceive their capacity to transition to employment. The consequences that may follow include that an individual may experience anxiety when looking for a job which may have an impact on their well-being. There is significant stress associated with finding a job especially amongst the youth and unemployed graduates, and given the context described above, that stress may be exacerbated in present South African context.

There are very minimal qualitative investigations into the experiences of students transitioning from graduation to employment. The experiences of students who have successfully navigated the transition from graduation to employment have been reported.

However, exploring the experiences of exit-level students who are searching for employment during the COVID-19 pandemic is not prevalent in literature. Thus, the benefit of conducting such a study is to understand the experiences of graduates who are searching for employment during the pandemic. Furthermore, the research may provide insight on what can be done to improve job search strategies and university training. Mncayi (2016) states that is important for organisations and higher educational institutions to cooperate in order to provide graduates with adequate career guidance. This is more important especially during the COVID-19 pandemic as we see the world of work changing. The novel application of Schlossberg's transition theory (2011) will help us gain in-depth insights of exit-level students transitioning from graduation to unemployment.

Therefore, the aim of the study, as such, is to determine the perceptions of exit-level students hold related to their ability to transition from university to employment in the context of COVID-19.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of the chapter is to present a review of how exit-level students experience and navigate the transition from graduation to employment. This will firstly be done by discussing the context of graduate unemployment in South Africa, followed by a discussion of the causes of graduate unemployment and consequences thereof. This initial section provides aims to provide a motivation for the study as well highlighting the challenges that graduates face. Finally, I will present Schlossberg's Transition Theory to show how this framework can be used to explore graduates' experiences of transitioning out of university in the context of COVID-19.

2.1 Youth Unemployment

Statistics in 2012 indicated that unemployment among individuals with a tertiary education grew faster than those with a lower education level (Baldry, 2014) and there is evidence of this trend continuing. According to the Labour Market Dynamics report by Stats SA (2017) young South African's unemployment rate for all education levels increased between 2012 and 2017 however, the highest increase was for those with tertiary education (Cronje, 2018). The unemployment rate for this group increased from 17.5% to 22.4% between 2012 and 2017 (Cronje, 2018), which means that 'one in five youth with tertiary qualifications are actively seeking for work' (Cronje, 2018). These statistics raise questions surrounding the relationship between higher education and employment.

Given that South Africa spends a lot of money on education as compared to other countries in the world (Baldry, 2016), the rate of employment post-university appears a cause for concern. Some authors believe that graduates do not have access to jobs because they do not have the right qualifications that are required by employers (Baldry, 2016). These authors (Development Policy Research Unit, 2006, as cited in Baldry 2016) believe that improved career guidance can be helpful in addressing graduate unemployment. Regardless of the

causes, there is still the existing problem of Youth unemployment in South Africa and previous research has demonstrated the negative impact that such unemployment can have upon the wellbeing and later career success of the youth (Yu, 2013). The negative consequences of unemployment and the health and wellbeing of an individual are all likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19 and it is important to explore the perceptions of students who will be transitioning to employment.

2.2 Graduate Unemployment

Graduate unemployment is a topical subject and many studies have been conducted around the issue of graduate unemployment as it continues to grow in many countries. The structural or systemic factors of graduate unemployment internationally are well documented (Graham, Williams & Chisoro, 2019). According to Jonck (2014) the global issue of graduate unemployment can be credited to the global economic recession in 2008. Jonck (2014) states that the global economic recession has created an expansion in the demand for higher education. It is argued that due to the rapid expansion of higher education there are higher graduate unemployment rates due to there being more supply of skilled labour that is not met by an increase in demand (Graham et al., 2019). The literature suggests that there is also a systemic skills mismatch between the education system and the economy which then contributes to the graduate unemployment (Livanos, 2010; Joshua, Biao, Azuh & Olanrewaju, 2015; Mogomotsi & Madigele, 2017). It is argued that the education system is not preparing graduates sufficiently for the kind of jobs that will survive in the future market and therefore employers are more reluctant to hire young people due to the costs that they may incur with upskilling them (Graham et al., 2019).

According to Statistics South Africa (2021) the unemployment rate increased from 30,8% in quarter 3 of 2020 to 32,5% in quarter 4 of 2020. This is said to be the highest unemployment rate recorded since the start of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey in 2008 (StatsSA, 2021).

Unemployment is still concentrated among the youth and black Africans (Omarjee, 2021). According to Statistics South Africa (2021) more than half (52.3%) of the 7.2 million unemployed people had education levels below matric. In comparison, only 1.8% of the unemployed were graduates and 7.5% had tertiary qualifications (Omarjee, 2021).

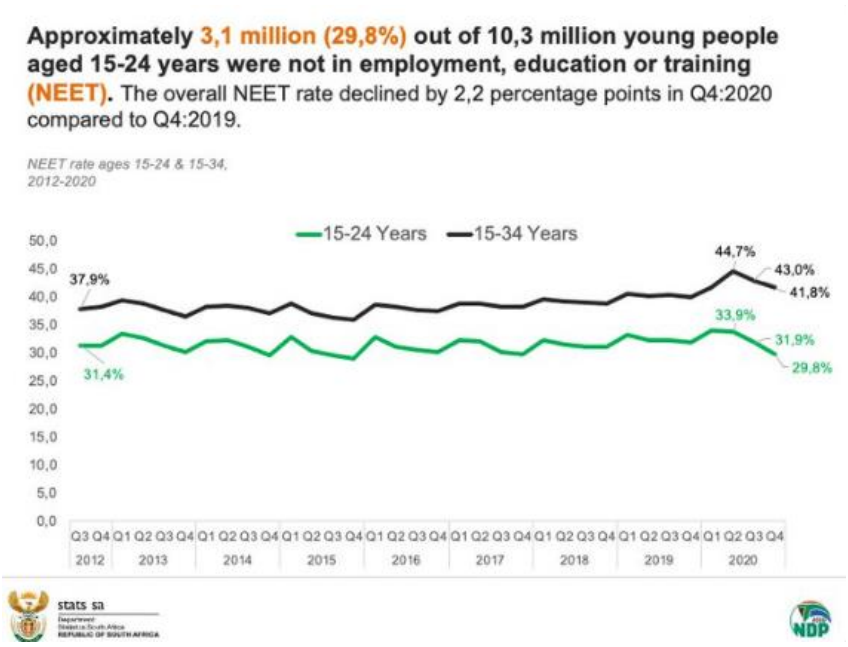


Figure 1: Unemployment rate by education or training in youth (*From Statistics South Africa, 2021*)

Graham et al., (2019) argues that there are various factors that contribute to the disproportionate high levels of unemployment among the youth in South Africa however, the one major feature is the skills mismatch in the labour market. Factors that are driven by demand arise from the increase in technology which followed in the post-apartheid era, which thus gives more preference to people who have high level skills (Seekings and Nattrasss, 2005; Banerjee, Galiani, Levinsohn, McLaren, & Woolard 2007; Graham et al., 2019). Those sectors that have a demand for high level skills, e.g., the financial services sector, have more employment growth, whereas sectors that favor entry level skills have been decreasing

(Banerjeree et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2019). Ironically, in the context of South Africa, this is an oversupply of entry level skills (Reddy, 2016).

Due to the skills mismatch in the South African labour market, there is a premium on obtaining qualifications, thus explaining why graduates in South Africa have better employment opportunities than those who have no secondary education and training (Graham et al., 2019). Despite the government's investment in post-secondary education, there are still low participation rates in universities when compared to other middle-income countries (Graham et al., 2019), which in turn explains the relatively low graduate unemployment rates when compared to other countries. In many other countries, “high levels of unemployment are attributed to the massification of higher education” (Baai, 2006; Wu, 2011; Li, Whalley & Xing, 2014; Samaranayake, 2016; Mok & Neubauer, 2016 as cited in Graham et al., 2019, p. 3).

Oluwajodu, Blaauw, Greyling &Kleynhans (2015) add further on the issue of unemployed graduates in South Africa due to skills shortages. In their research a graduate is rereferred to as an individual who holds a degree, which is inclusive of postgraduate degrees. In the context of the literature, unemployed graduates are usually denoted as recently graduated youths without employment (15-34 years). Obtaining work experience is very important for young graduates as the failure to do so may lead to unwanted outcomes (Oluwajodu, 2015). Having a high rate of graduate unemployment is also potentially damaging the economy (Banerjee et al., 2007; Oluwajodu, 2015).

Lie (2007) argues that the graduate unemployment rate should not be blamed on graduates. Graduates, employers, universities, and government all play a major role in the condition of unemployment. There are conflicting perspectives of workplace readiness from graduates, employers and universities. Graduates believe that their education level and skills are

sufficient, and universities are in the belief that their graduates are well prepared for the workplace (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Furthermore, there seems to be a misalignment between theory and knowledge applications through practical work (Walker, 2015; Mncayi 2016), where employers perceive graduates to be more academically oriented and to lack the necessary work skills. Oluwajodu et al., (2015) argues that there is a need for these conflicting perspectives to be addressed to enhance employability.

Differences in the quality of education also have an impact on the graduate unemployment. Oluwajodu et al. (2015) group the different tertiary institutions as historical white institutions (HWIs) and historically black institutions (HBIs). There are greater working opportunities for those individuals who studied through HWIs than those individuals who studied through HBIs. Bhorat & Visser (2010) highlight that those from HWIs get absorbed into the labour market quicker than those who attended HBIs. A contributing factor to this phenomenon is that the HBIs enroll their students into programmes that have low employment prospects (Oluwajodu, 2015). Furthermore, it was found that employers prefer to hire students from certain universities due to the confidence they have in the education provided by those institutions (Walker, 2015; Mncayi, 2016). This highlights the thoughts of Graham et al. (2015) that the education system is not preparing graduates adequately for the kind of jobs that will survive the future labour market.

Luan (2012, as cited in Sirat & Shuab, 2012) brings forth another perspective stating that graduate unemployment may be due to the unrealistic salary expectations held by graduates. A study conducted by Sirat and Shuib (2012) found that high salary expectations is one of the reasons that graduates struggle to find jobs. Often graduates are in the view that their first jobs will be higher paying with a good position, only to find that many entry level positions do not come close to their expectations (Mncayi, 2016). Oluwajodu et al., (2015) argue that there is lack of understanding by graduates of the importance of gaining work experience

overtime. Thus, graduates become very selective in the jobs that they would like and thus remain unemployed until they get their 'dream employment' (Pauw, Bhorat & Goga 2006; Olwajodu et al., 2015, p. 3).

Moleke (2010) states another reason that is related to graduate unemployment is the nature of job search activities undertaken. Job search is defined as a 'normal occurrence which work seekers use as a form of investment to enhance their position in the labor market' (Moleke, 2010, p. 3). Looking for a job is an activity requires a lot of time and effort. Thus, the process for finding employment for graduates takes much longer as they are seen as new entrants into the job market and therefore have to go through completing applications, writing psychometric tests and attend interviews before an offer is made (Luan, 2012, as cited in Sirat & Shuab, 2012). This can be seen as a daunting process and therefore it can take much longer for graduates to find employment.

In addition to the dauting job search process, there is the debated issue that employability is seen as an individual problem. (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; McGrath and Powell, 2015). It can be argued that governments are using the employability discourse to fix market failures (Ndlovu & Ndebele, 2019). The employability discourse downplays the role of the labour and responsibilities of employers in influencing employment opportunities. It is therefore important to look at the labour market and its influences in understanding graduate unemployment.

2.3 General Labour Market

Given the general description of graduate employment, it is then important to look at the dynamics of the labour market in South Africa in order to interrogate factors promoting graduate employment (Altman, 2007). Relevant questions posed here include whether the South African economy is creating low skilled jobs, whether the education helps labour

market changes, and whether graduate employment is a problem because the youth are studying incorrect subjects. (Altman, 2007). Looking into the dynamics of the labor market and the barriers that come thereof, will be useful in the gaining insight on what the future of work looks like for most young South Africans.

2.4 Barriers to the Labour Market when Finding Employment

In the study conducted by Graham et al. (2019) the findings indicated that graduate unemployment was not a result of the lack of work seeking on the part of the graduates but rather key barriers that limit the ability young graduates to enter into the labor market despite what their profile and job search activity looks like. Amongst the barriers identified is a lack of relevant experience. In the sample that the study used, the unemployed graduates had prior work experience however that work experience was not necessarily related to the jobs that they were looking for after they had completed their training (Graham et al., 2019). The study highlighted that there was essentially a difference between a having qualification and having the skills that is necessary for the job.

Youth unemployment levels are greater than those of adult unemployment levels due to the limited experience element of youth unemployment globally (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2015, as cited in Graham et al. 2019). The youth will age into the labor market once they gain experience but unfortunately due to the fact that there is limited information about work search and the process involved thereof, they still face barriers in the labour market Graham et al., 2019). Limited information is often a result of their socioeconomic backgrounds where unemployed graduates face barriers on the best way to search for work (Graham et al., 2019). South Africa prides itself in being a diverse nation, however majority of the nation is lives in poverty and does not necessarily have access to information.

Unemployed graduates who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are competing with a pool of candidates who do not incur the same costs as they do when searching for employment. Rogan, Reynolds, Du Plessis, Bally and Whitfield (2015) found that graduates who come from wealthier backgrounds used far more effective job search strategies such as applying through agencies or utilizing social media. The study conducted by Graham et al. (2015) in contrast noted that graduates who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds only used two job search strategies, indicating that they were not expanding on their job-search efforts. Additionally, the lack of information is intensified by the fact that most graduates have a few people in their social network to whom they could turn to for advice and support on employment (Graham et al., 2019).

This in turn extends to unemployed graduates limited social capital. Social capital is an important resource for finding employment in South Africa Bridging social capital is described as 'networks of acquaintances that connect the individual with people outside of their bonding networks' (Graham et al., 2019, p. 11). When one accesses their bridging social capital, it is often viewed as being more productive in terms accessing opportunities (Putnam, 2001). An individual who lacks bridging social networks that include people who are in employment find themselves facing a barrier to work opportunities. This experience is in contrast to graduates who quickly find employment through their parents' social networks (Seekings, 2012).

The last barrier that is found in the study by Graham et al. (2019) is the cost of work-seeking. The survey showed that the costs to look for a job exceed the average per capita household income of graduates, and this emerged as a critical barrier into the labor market (Graham et al., 2019). Thus, job search is a hard process on those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and significantly constraining them to access the labour market.

2.5 Transitioning from University to Employment

Transitioning from graduation is a topic that has been receiving attention. Not only has it been studied in the context of securing employment, but the topic of transition has also been studied by scholars investigating how students transition from high school into the university (Gutnick, 2018). Some researchers have studied the duration between graduation and securing employment as well as the characteristics that arise from this transition (Betts, Ferral & Finnie, 2000; Cassidy & Wright, 2008; Salvas-Velasco, 2007; Kunene, 2018), whilst other researchers have also investigated the experiences of students who are differently abled in transitioning to university (Bonnani, 2018).

Although these studies focused on individuals' experiences in transitioning, there are notable differences in transition to employment that should be considered. There is often an expectation of graduates that once they have left the education system, they will automatically move into the labour market and the process of that transition will be one that is swift (Ama, 2008; SalalsVelasco, 2008; Van Schalkwyk & Surujul, 2012). With that in mind, the transition from graduation to unemployment can be described as the time one leaves university to the moment that they receive permanent employment (Kunene, 2018). A graduate has fully transitioned once they have held a full-time permanent job for at least six months after their graduation (Betts et al., 2000).

The time spent or the period of the transition and what students engage in to navigate this transition period become important factors to consider when examining graduates transition from graduation to employment (Kunene, 2018). Moleke (2006) conducted research on finding work in South Africa as a graduate. Despite the unemployment rate during the time, in that particular study it emerged that 60 percent found employment immediately, another 28 percent found employment between a month and six months after qualifying, 6 percent did the same in between 7 and 12 months and 6 percent took more than a year after obtaining

their qualification. In the context of that study, immediately refers to finding employment directly after obtaining their qualification (Moleke, 2006).

Moleke (2006) reports that the graduates who were in more 'professional' fields, such as medicine and engineering found employment more swiftly than those than those who were qualified in fields that are more general in nature. Moleke's report on the employability of graduates in science and engineering fields is further supported by Acquah (2009) and Walker (2015).

A study conducted by Kunene (2018) reports that graduates from the university of the Witwatersrand experienced a much shorter time of unemployment. The university of the Witwatersrand is considered as a Historically White Institution (WHI), emphasizing that there more working opportunities for those individuals who studied through HWIs in South Africa. According to the Analytics and Institutional Research Unit Business Intelligent Services (2017), eighty percent of graduates between 2014 and 2015 found employment within the first month of graduation, ninety 93 percent secured employment within six months of graduation and 14 percent secured employment within seven to 12 months of graduation. Furthermore, the Analytics and Institutional Research Unit Business Intelligent Services (2017) reports that 80 percent report securing employment in fields that are directly related to their fields (Kunene, 2018).

With these statistics in mind, Van Schalkwyk et al. (2012) highlight that during the transition from graduation to employment, the individual may not immediately transition into employment. It becomes apparent that the South African economy is unable to absorb all graduates. Given that the unemployment recorded for the fourth quarter of was the highest recorded since the start of the labour surveys, this becomes an even harsher reality for unemployed graduates.

This emphasizes the importance of investigating the transition of graduation to employment in the context of COVID-19. The lockdown period had a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of many lives, and this is further exacerbated by the anxiety that comes with finding employment. In the next section, a review of the effect of finding employment has on the health and wellbeing of unemployed youth.

2.6 Health and Wellbeing

Yu (2013) states that the persistent high rate of youth unemployment in South Africa is one of the most pressing socio-economic problems of South Africa. There are not enough network opportunities among the youth to obtain job opportunities (Yu, 2013), especially among those in poorer backgrounds. However, today we have seen that social media has become a very powerful tool in society and thus there has been an improvement in allowing networking of job opportunities. Unfortunately, not all youth come from well-resourced homes and are not able to access information through social media.

Finding employment (or not) can have an impact on the psychological well-being of individuals as feelings of inadequacy, uncertainty and poor health can be experienced (Rusu, Chiriac, Salagean & Hojbota, 2013). Studies indicate that an individual's unemployment status can generate a cycle of distress. A person may have anxiety in conducting a search for work as their perceptions of their ability to find a job is uncertain. Borkjuland (1995, as cited in Rusu, Chiriac, Salagean 2013) indicated that the unemployed showed poorer mental health than those who had jobs (Borkjuland 1985; Rusu, Chiriac, Salagean & Hojbota, 2013). The uncertainty of not knowing what employers are looking for (Yu, 2013) may exacerbate this anxiety of conducting a job search.

Job search success is important for one's confidence as job search success can lead to optimism. People with higher optimism believe that good things will happen to them (Georgiou, Nikolaou & Turban, 2019) and when bad things happen, they perceive them as

temporary. Gergiou, Nikolaou and Turban (2019) state that it is important to maintain morale in order to preserve an individual from the negative effects of unemployment and its impact on well-being. Anxiety over long-term unemployment may influence one's mental and physical health (Bejakovic & Mrnjavac, 2018). Knabe, Ratziel, Schob and Wiemann (2010) compared employed and unemployed people in their appraisal of emotional affects and the results indicated that people who were employed were more content with their lives than those who were not employed. Long term unemployment especially has an impact on the wellbeing of the younger population because it can decrease their overall life satisfaction and become less optimistic about the future (Bejakovic &Mrnjavac, 2018).

2.7 Job Search Anxiety

Searching for a job leads to multiple forms of distress. Saks & Ashford (2000) describe the characteristics of job search anxiety as those associated with feelings of nervousness towards finding employment and feeling uncomfortable in finding a job. If individuals who experience lower levels of levels of anxiety when looking for employment, they are deemed to be more calm, relaxed and content with the process of finding employment (Saks & Ashford, 2000; Britton, 2018). Often the tasks that are involved with finding employment can lead to emotional anxiety within an individual (Lin, 2008). This can be due to a number of factors, but it is commonly attributed to the fact that marketing oneself to a prospective employer and knowing the relevant information of a field builds up anxiety (Lin, 2008). Finding employment is not the only characteristic that causes an individual to experience anxiety however, as the success of finding employment is dependent on additional factors. O'regan (2010) states that employability for an individual dependant on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, and how they use those assets to present to present themselves to potential employers and the context. If an individual does not believe they fully attain one of

those assets, this can create doubt in their minds. Once the doubt has been created, it has an impact on their self-confidence and in turn makes an individual more anxious in finding employment. Other characteristics such as age has an impact on the job search anxiety. In the context of this study, age can have a factor on whether an exit-level student experiences anxiety or not.

Employer's often associate an individual's age with the amount of experience that they have. According to the Higher Education and Training republic of South Africa (2011), student graduates are between the ages of 21-27. If an individual falls within this age range, they may perceive themselves as lacking experience. Another factor that contributes to job search anxiety is unfavourable economic conditions which may have a negative effect on how a person feels about finding a job (Fielden & Davidson, 1999). The COVID-19 pandemic is a prime example of recent unfavourable economic conditions. A prospective job seeker may also find themselves experiencing anxiety when they have personally witnessed family or friends struggle with the process of finding employment (Fielden & Davidson, 1999).

A study was conducted by Cassidy and Wright (2007) that explored levels of employment, unemployment and underemployment in recent graduates. The study considered the differing effects that these levels have on psychological distress, achievement motivation, optimism, perceived support, and health behaviours during the transition from student to graduate. The study found that both unemployment and underemployment have a significant impact on psychological and physical health, social support, optimism and achievement motivation (Cassidy & Wright, 2007).

In the context of COVID-19, Fin 24 News (2020) states that the youth during the pandemic want to stay employable and that some are starting to find alternative ways of making an income. Britton (2018) highlights that the return on investment for students attending university and obtaining a degree is starting to change. Although obtaining a degree may be a

good starting point there are still additional challenges that students are faced with in finding employment. Exit-level students are still faced with reality of the increasingly high unemployment rate in South Africa which has further been exacerbated by the global pandemic. Furthermore, students are faced with additional barriers to enter the labour market such as workplace experience, lack of access to information and employer perceptions of their workplace readiness. This may have an impact on how students manage their transition from university to employment as well their health and wellbeing during their job search. The effectiveness of their job search activities is, in part, related to their capacity to successfully negotiate the transition from university to employment. Schlossberg's transition model provides a means by which this transition can be conceptualised.

2.8 Schlossberg's Model

Thus far there have been minimal studies using Schlossberg's Transition Model as a theoretical framework to explore student's transition from graduation to employment (and none that have considered such a transition within the particularly unique context of a global pandemic such as COVID-19). We live in a society where we constantly experience complexity, unpredictability, and change. (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Bright & Pryor, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic is evidence of the unpredictable world that we live in. There are different factors that may force adults to face a transition including demographic, cultural, technological, and social changes (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg's transition model can help gain insights into how adults experience these transitions and most importantly how they cope with life's transitions (Kunene, 2018).

Nancy K Schlossberg developed her transition theory because she believed that there needed to exist a framework that would assist with understanding an adult's transition and direct them to help that they needed with coping the "ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010, p. 213). Although Schlossberg's theory is often

considered as an adult development theory, it is also relevant to traditionally aged university students (Evans, et al., 2010). The theory has received great attention by theorists and researchers in social sciences and has grown as a complex framework that has been revised and expanded upon (Schlossberg, 2013). The theory has been used from the perspective of understanding the transition of students from high school to university (DeVilbiss,2014; Lazarowicz, 2015; Gutnick, 2018). Much of the literature seen on Schlossberg's theory has been used in the context of young adults who are undergoing a transition in their lives (Coccarelli, 2010; Bonani, 2015; Griffen & Gilbert. 2015). The theory is influenced by four key theoretical perspectives namely the developmental perspective, contextual perspective of adulthood, life-span perspective human development, and the transition perspective (Schlossberg, 1995; 2012).

The idea behind Schlossberg's transition theory is that changes in adult life bring about transitions that will often test one's ability to adapt (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg's transition framework is beneficial for researchers in identifying the transition, the process of that transition, the resources that are available to a person dealing with the transition and how these resources can be reinforced (Piela-Shuster, 2016; Schlossberg, 1999). Transformation, crisis and change can be used to refer to a transition by different scholars in diverse contexts (Schlossberg, 1995). A transition can be described as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Britton, 2018). To understand the meaning that a transition has for a certain individual one needs to consider the type, context, and impact of the transition (Goodman et al., 2006).



Figure 2: The Transition Framework: The Individual Transition (From Counseling Adults in Transition by Schlossberg et al., 1995 p.27).

The first phase in approaching a transition is to identify the transition and where one is in the transition process so as to frame a suitable perspective to successfully manage the transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1995).When identifying a transition that an individual is faced with or one that has happened, there is a need to explore the type of transition , the context in which the transition is taking place, and the impact the transition has on the individual's life (Kunene, 2018; Schlossberg, 1995).

Schlossberg (1995) describes three types of transitions namely, anticipated, unanticipated and non-events. Anticipated transitions are major events that people are likely to expect, for example finding employment. Unanticipated transitions are those transitions that have been disrupted by something that had unexpectedly occurred such car accidents or illness (Schlossberg, 2011). The last type of transition is non-event transitions. These are the transitions that are expected but fail to occur such as not getting the promotion you wanted (Schlossberg, 2011). This research will be looking at anticipated transitions as students are transitioning from university to employment. These transitions change people's lives in terms of their roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 2011). The extent to

which an individual can successfully negotiate these changes, according to Schlossberg, is defined by the degree to which they possess certain transition resources. Schlossberg identifies such transition resources as the self, the situation, the coping strategies available to individuals and the support to which they have access.

2.9 The 4 S's

This research is centred particularly on the 4 S system namely the situation, self, support and strategies as the several resources that an individual uses to cope with a transition (Goodman et al., 2006). An individual's success in coping with transition is dependent their resources in these four areas. Individuals have assets and liabilities as they encounter transitions (Schlossberg, 2004). There may be times during a transition where the assets may outweigh liabilities, which makes the transition relatively easy or the liabilities may outweigh the transition, making it more difficult to manage the transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2004). This explaining why people react differently to the same transition, as one individual may have more available resources than another. These resources may include a reliable support system or a great sense of oneself. In exploring the 4 S's below and demonstrating the utility of the theory, previous research that utilised Schlossberg's theory will be highlighted.

The **Situation** refers to the broader context that a person faces during the time of the transition (Schlossberg, 2011). The situation will differ according to what trigged the transition, its timing and the amount of control that a person has over the situation (Goodman et al. 2006; Schlossberg, 2011). This means that one needs to look at whether there are any additional stressors present. In the context of applied research, Bonnani (2015) notes students who are transitioning into college without any additional stressors should have a simpler time with coping than those students who are differently abled and are facing the same transition. The students who are differently abled will have to cope with the transition while facing

additional stressors (Bonnani, 2015). An individual's situation will also vary based on the role change and experience with a similar transition. In the context of the current research, everyone has the unique stressor related to the COVID-19 pandemic which suggests that all transitions are likely to be a challenge.

When transitioning, every person will experience a trigger that sets the whole process into action and stimulates the person experiencing the transition to look at their lives in a whole new perspective (Gutnick, 2018). The individual will also go through a role change which will involve moving away from something old and embracing something new (Gutnick, 2018). According to Schlossberg (2004) if an individual has a sense of the time frame and duration of the transition, it may more successfully negotiated. A study was conducted by Lindstrom (2019) that looked at members of faculty who have transitioned into the academic role of Dean roles on two-year college campuses. Seven participants in the college were included in the study in trying to determine how one perceives the transition into a faculty administrator in the community college settings (Lindstrom, 2019). Moving into leadership roles for these faculty members happened over time as a measure of succession planning and an acknowledgement of needing a change in their career. The study found that there were many motivations that that prompted faculty to move into an administrative role. However, two major themes emerged and that is the fast-paced nature of change and the second was the changing relationship with faculty members (Lindstrom, 2019). The study highlighted that the participants were able to make use of their assets in the situation in overcoming the liabilities of moving into their new role.

An import aspect in the situation is control, where a person assesses the source of transition. Here, there is an evaluation by the induvial which assesses whether the transition was a deliberate decision or were there external factors that were imposed. Essentially this refers to the amount of control and individual has over a situation. The final feature of the situation is

the *previous experience with a similar transition* (Anderson et al., 2012). This means that an individual who has gone through a similar type of transition will have a higher chance if negotiating their transition successfully. A study conducted by Reburiano (2019) who used Schlossberg's transition theory to assess the transition of veterans from the military, demonstrates the final aspect of the situation. According to Rein (2015, as cited in Reburiano, 2019) veterans who found employment in civil service often leave their jobs within two years of being hired. Schafer, Swick, Kidder & Carter (2016, as cited in Reburiano, 2019) believe that it is connected to a number of veterans who are struggling to transition into their new workplace. The findings of the study highlight the aspect of previous experience with a similar transition. Although finding employment may not be an unfamiliar process for the military veterans, working for the federal government may be an unfamiliar experience. Reburiano (2019) suggests that these veterans need to learn about the new organisation, as well as adapt to the new culture by "changing their military identity" (p. 110). The situation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is important as it will shed some light on how students perceive their situation in the transition to employment.

The **Self** refers to an individual's ability to cope with in a transition and their personal attributes (Chickering, 2011; Schlossberg, 2002). The self is what characterizes an individual and includes, for example, traits such as optimism, resilience and their ability to navigate ambiguity (Schlossberg, 2002). The self refers to the behavior that is particular to an individual and acknowledges that each person will experience a transition differently (Schlossberg, 2002)**.** According to Schlossberg and Chickering (2011; 2002) individuals who have a strong sense of self competence will negotiate the transition more successfully. Self-confidence is important factor and is based on past successes or failures. For example, if someone who faces continuous difficulties or faces failure, they would generally translate

those feelings into the transition and struggle with the transition (Chickering, 2011; Schlossberg 2002).

Schlossberg (2002) highlights that within this quadrant of the self, every person will have a variety of personal and demographic characteristics, as well as psychological resources, that can assist with their managing the transition more effectively. Personal and demographic characteristics include aspects such as a person's social economic status, gender, age and their physical health and ethnicity and culture (Britton, 2018). The Psychological resources that Schlossberg (2002) refers to are those that arise from one's personality and that are useful in assisting one with the transition (Gutnick, 2018). Personal factors such as ego development, the amount of optimism that you hold as well as the level of self-efficacy, commitment, motivation values and resilience are influential in the transition (Schlossberg et al. 2006).

Self-efficacy is important as it impacts the degree to which an individual believes in their own ability (Bandura, 1986; Gutnick 2018). The self and self-efficacy are important constructs as they need to be considered when students transition into finding employment. If an individual does not feel confident enough that they will find employment, that will have an impact on the way they perceive employability prospects. Alexander (2016) explains that there are often barriers which have an impact on one's development of their self-efficacy such as feelings of little control over their ability. Considering the South African context, people come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and thus experience having access to resources differently. This can have an impact on their self-efficacy (Gutnick, 2018). Due to these differing backgrounds students may find it harder to find employment, especially in the context of COVID-19, as their living situations have an impact on themselves, and which is further reinforced by the national lockdown.

Research conducted by Wheeler in (2012) established that veterans who were optimistic and lighthearted managed a transition better than those who were flooded by anger. Research demonstrated by Koerin, Harrigan & Reeves (1990) highlighted that student that were faced with insufficient psychological resources, such as sense of control over one' s life, were overwhelmed by the idea of having to work full time and did not negotiate that transition well. It was further identified that students would thus find ways to avoid the transition by taking on additional courses (Gutnick, 2018). This example is evidence of how depleted resources of the self can act as liability creating hurdles in the transition.

Support refers to the support that is available to an individual at the time of a transition (Schlossberg, 2011). This support can be from the environment in which the individual is based. Support forms an important role in shaping a person's sense of well-being. In terms of support there are vital aspects to consider which are the types, functions and measurement of support (Evans, 2010). Evans (2010) suggests that when putting together a plan of support one needs to consider what type of support an individual needs, for example family support, friendship, network or institution as well as the function that that support serves to fulfil

Considerable literature can be found that argues that social support is important for dealing with stressful situations. Research suggests that social support can mitigate strain resulting from stress and have a positive impact on the psychological health of a person (Zimet, Dahlem, & Farley, 1998; Schlossberg et al., 2006, de Carvalho, 2015; Britton, 2019). Overall, having social support during a transition is important as it provides a buffer against adverse life events.

Essentially support networks serve two functions in an individual's transition (Gutnick, 2018). Firstly, support networks can help an individual with their overall sense of self (the value they see in themselves) and secondly, support networks can act as a resource in

providing money, guidance and support for the person facing the transition (Gutnick, 2018). When an individual experiences support, they are more likely to gather all their psychological resources together and make the best use of them. The purpose of support is to affect and affirm an individual. Affection will involve validating the person and showing respect for the person in transition (Anderson et al., 2012), and affirmation is the level of agreement with the person's actions and providing aid, whether it be money or time. A study was conducted by Sturman, Tan & Turner (2017) on the transition from being a medical student to being a hospital-based first year. Sturman et al., highlighted that this transition is known to be challenging and can thus have an impact on the graduate's level of readiness to be an intern in the workplace.

The study revealed that the transition was one that was physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. The participants reported a drop in self-confidence, and difficulty maintaining self-care and social relationships (Sturman et al., 2017). Although participants highlighted the importance of escalating concerns and seeking help to manage patients, they appeared more hesitant to seek help for personal issues and reported a number of barriers to doing so (Sturnman et al., 2017). The findings of this study are indicative of the importance of social support during a transition, as it has shown to have an impact oneself. Support is an important criterion to look at as it will assist in gaining insights whether exit-level students have sufficient support when they are managing the transition.

Strategies refers to the coping mechanisms that an individual utilises to cope with the changes that are involved in a transition. Coping strategies are those activities that either try to change the situation or try to reframe the situation (Schlossberg, 2011). Dyson & Renk (2006) describe coping as the cognitive attempt to actively change a situation that is threatening. Schlossberg (2011) emphasises that there is no single coping strategy that works best. A person who is flexible and is able to use all the strategies will be better able to cope

with the events occurring in their lives. Every individual will choose a strategy that is better suited for them. Schlossberg's transition model was supported by Pearlin and Schloler (1978, as cited in Pendleton, 2007) who stated that coping falls into three categories. Firstly, it's the responses that control the meaning of the problem by naturalising the meaning to avoid stress (Pendleton, 2007).

The study by Sturnman et al. (2017) indicates how the participants did not effectively manage the stress as they did seek for help during their difficult transitions as interns. Secondly, responses that attempt to modify the situation by assisting the person to accommodate the stress without feeling overwhelmed by the event follow (Pendleton, 2007). Finally, it is important to consider how the actions assist to manage the stress after the feelings of stress have occurred (Pendleton, 2007). This response helps to down-play the importance of the stress by selectively ignoring the problem, denying its existence, or by passive acceptance (Pendleton, 2007). Dyson and Renk (2006) highlight that strategies that involve avoiding the stress often have negative consequences. Understanding how individuals approach transitions and the activates used to manage the experience of the transition therefore becomes central focal points for understanding how individuals negotiate their transitions.

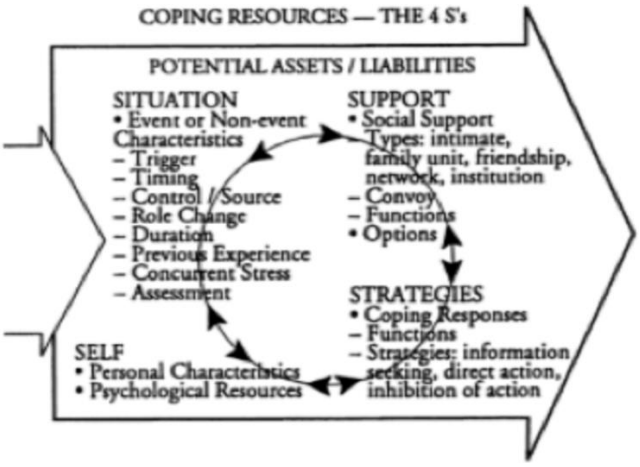


Figure 3: Coping Resources - the 4 S's. (From Counseling Adults in Transition by Schlossberg et al., 2012, p. 62).

2.10 Conclusion

The literature review has highlighted the difficulties of transitioning into the labour market for exit -level students. They are faced with multiple factors that can have an impact on them moving on swiftly under the COVID-19 pandemic. Exit-level students have to manage the transition under an economy that has faced hardships, especially during the nationwide lockdowns. As previously mentioned, there have been minimal studies conducted that are supported by Schlossberg's Transition Model as a theoretical framework to explore student's transition from graduation to employment (and none that have considered such a transition within the particularly unique context of a global pandemic such as COVID-19).

Schlossberg's transition theory may prove to be useful in understanding the individuals' transition during a global pandemic. Given that South Africa is a diverse nation and keeping in mind the diverse situations of the exit-level students, the theory us allows us to reflect upon the concerns that the students may have which cannot be generalised. Schlossberg's theory will provide a practical way of assessing exit-level students experience of transitioning from graduation to employment. The theory all provides a framework which highlights and explains the relevant coping mechanisms which are used by adults during their transition (Kunene, 2018). Based on the review and discussion of the Schlossberg theory, it is clear that an application of the theoretical framework will be useful in gaining insights into the experiences of the exit-levels students as they transition from graduation to employment.

2.11 Research Questions

The main question in this study is:

1.) How do students perceive the transition from graduate life to employment in the context of Covid-19?

Based on this, and in the context of Schlossberg's model, the following sub-questions emerge:

1) What resources are available to students when they are negotiating the transition?
2) What are the students' perceptions of their capacity to manage that situation?
3) How much support do students have in managing that situation?
4) What are the coping skills that they use during that transition?
5) What is their perception of their likelihood of obtaining employment?
    a. What are predominant factors that influence this perception?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the research design that was to address the research questions that underpin this study. It describes the methodology that was used to determine the experiences and coping strategies of exit-level students who participated in the study. This chapter will also describe the sampling procedure used in this study and a description of the sample will be provided. The qualitative research design that underpins the study and techniques utilised to analyse the results will also be discussed. Finally, ethical considerations of the study will also be provided.

3.2 Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is a research process which involves exploring the participant's personal experiences in a particular context (Fossey, Harvery, McDermott & Davidson, 2002; Maree, 2007). The purpose of qualitative research is to study human action from the perspective of the research participants (Babbie and Moutoun, 2001). The aim of quantitative research is producing results using a particular sample which can be generalised to the greater public by testing different hypotheses about a phenomenon (Marshall, 1996). In contrast, qualitative research involves collecting vital information on an individual's experience in a manner that will enhance and deepen the understanding of a topic (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Thomas & Maglivy, 2011). As such, the purpose of using qualitative methodology is to gain in-depth, thick descriptions and understand human actions.

According to Babbie & Mouton (2001), studies that are qualitative concern themselves with understanding social action within a particular context instead of generalising the study to a particular population. Qualitative studies are more interactive and intensive as the researcher is more likely to develop a social relationship with the members of the study and therefore gain more insight into their understanding and experiences (Babbie & Mounton, 2001).

Qualitative methodology was appropriate as this research aimed at exploring at students' individual experience of finding employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schlossberg's transition theory applies in this context as it speaks to concept that "no transition is exactly like another" (Schlossberg, 2004, p3). Schlossberg's theory has been used previously to examine individuals' experiences of similar transitions (Isa & Rasdi, 2015; Gutnick, 2018).

3.3 Sample and Sampling

The sampling technique that was utilised in this study is a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling means that there are non-random ways to ensure that categories of cases in a sample are represented in the final sample of a project (Robinson, 2014). The rationale of a purposive sampling techniques is that the researcher assumes, based on their theoretical understanding of a topic being studied, which participants will best inform the study. Based on the rationale of purposive sampling techniques, the exit-level students were better suited to inform the perceptions of finding employment in the context of covid-19. In terms of sourcing the sample, this research made use of a referral process, which is also known snowballing sampling. Snowball sampling was necessary as it was difficult to obtain participants in the university as a result of a the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, the researcher pursued the exit-level students from the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The sample expanded to students exit-level students from other universities in South Africa by means of a referral process. As the aim of qualitative research does not aim to cover the quantity of the research sample but rather focuses on quality and depth (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), this research included eight participants, all of whom were in their final year of studies. The sample comprised of three male students and five female students. The age of the participants ranged between 22-26, with a mean age of 23.2. Participants attended different university institutions in South Africa. All eight of the participants attended

different university institutions in South Africa namely the University of the Witwatersrand, University of South Africa, University of Limpopo, University of Pretoria, Vaal University of Technology, University of Johannesburg, Varsity College and Rhodes University. Three were LLB students, two were Accounting Sciences students, and the remaining three students were in LLM (Master of Laws), Engineering and Informatics. Details of the sample are provided in the table below.

Table 1

Biographical information of the participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Degree
1	23	Male	Accounting Sciences
2	26	Male	LLM
3	23	Female	Accounting Sciences
4	22	Female	LLB
5	23	Female	LLB
6	23	Male	LLB
7	23	Female	Informatics
8	23	Female	Engineering

3.4 Instruments

This research was done by conducting 45-minute qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are based on conversations where the emphasis is placed on the researcher asking questions and actively listening and the respondents answering the questions asked of them (Warren, 2011). The most common purpose of qualitative interviewing is deriving interpretations and meanings from people. In this research, qualitative interviews were a guided conversation where I listened to hear the meaning that was being conveyed (Warrren, 2011). The design of the qualitative interview was open ended, and the questions were guided by Schlossberg's transition theory.

This research was done by conducting semi-structured interviews. Semi structured interviews are useful in this study as it allows the researcher to follow a set of questions. In semi structured interviews researchers can ask the participants for clarification and probing, where necessary, to find information that the researcher may find useful. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not done to avoid the risk of infection. The researcher made use of Microsoft Teams (and similar available technology) as a method to conduct the interviews. I ensured that informed consent was obtained from the participants in this study by requesting participants sign a consent form that detailed the objectives of the study.

In exploring the perceptions of the respondents regarding transitioning to employment in the context of COVID-19, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011) was used to help gain access to these stories. As this research was be based on Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the interview questions were guided by this theory. In the process of the interviewing, the researcher made use of recordings. Recordings in qualitative interviews are helpful for ensuring that the respondents' experiences are accurately represented especially for analytic purposes (Warren, 2011).

3.5 Procedure

Once ethical clearance was received, the researcher emailed a letter of consent to the course coordinator of the Organisational Psychology honours programme at the University of the Witwatersrand requesting permission to post the information regarding the study on the relevant student information platform. With permission, the research invitation was posted on the student platform, requesting students to participate in the study. The researcher also made use of the snowballing technique from contacts provided by other students. Given that the research was conducted under the COVID-19 lockdown, the researcher additionally utilised social media to invite participants to the study. The researcher made use of contact networks

with tutors from different universities and relied on word of mouth to relevant contacts. The researcher provided the course coordinator, tutors and all those sharing the information about the research with an information sheet (Appendix A) with contact details for the interested parties. Once participants contacted the researcher, a date and time was arranged to meet via Microsoft Teams (and all other similar technologies) to conduct the interview. Before the meeting, each participant was emailed a consent form to read over and sign (Appendix B) as well as a biographical questionnaire to complete (Appendix C). The researcher then proceeded to explain how the research will work in terms of confidentiality and reiterated that participants were able to stop the interview at any point and withdraw from the research, up until the final write up of the research report. Each interview was recorded for the entire duration. Once interview was completed, participants were provided with details for following up with the research upon its completion. The data analysis process began after the interviews were conducted and all the interviews were transcribed word-for-word. The researcher began to look for common themes based on the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). The final stage of the researched was then reached where the themes found from the interviews were integrated into a discussion at the end of this report. This research report will be submitted to the faculty once completed.

3.6 Data Analyses

Once the qualitative based interviews were conducted, the data was assessed by making use of thematic content analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a method by which patterns within qualitative data can be analysed. Thematic content analysis is a suitable tool to explore the students' transition and explore their individual experience of the transition as it can provide "rich, detailed, yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). The aim of thematic content analysis is to go beyond organising and describing data (Gutnick,

2018). The researcher needs to ultimately interpret the meaning in the data. The essentialist/realist method is seen as having six phases through which the data is analysed.

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data. The researcher engages deeply with the data at the start of the analysis process and fully immerse themselves in the data. This can be done by reading and re-reading the data to look for meaning and patterns that are within the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Once the researcher has become familiar with the data, they will create codes which will indicate a feature of the data which seems to be most interesting or relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 3: Searching for themes

In this phase researcher will analyse the codes and search for themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the end of this phase the research will have prospect themes and sub-themes that they believe will are interesting and beneficial to the research. This can include the use of mind maps or tables.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

The researcher will then review the themes that were generated in the third phase. The researcher can decide whether to keep or discard other themes and whether some of these can be combined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher will also consider whether the themes are valid in relation to the study.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

In this phase research will define and further refine themes which will be presented in their analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This means that the researcher will explore what the fundamental qualities of the themes are and determine which of aspects of the data captures

the theme best. When a researcher goes through this process, they will refine themes and identify sub-themes which helps with simplifying large and complex themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest that the researcher thinks of relevant descriptors which will be matched to each theme.

Phase 6: Producing the report

The researcher will conduct a final analysis and write of the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher should write the report in a way that tells a story which can convince the readers that there account is one that is valid. In describing the data, the researcher needs to present a clear and consistent argument throughout. The report is not merely a description of the data but also needs to provide answers to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.7 Trustworthiness

To assess the quality of a qualitative research I have used the four criteria in trustworthiness.

Credibility

In credibility the researcher needs to make sure that the research is carried out to the "cannons of good practice" and submit the research findings to the participants who were studied to confirm that the researcher has correctly understood their social world (Bryman, 2015). I have used respondent validation to show that the findings are credible where possible.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the results can be applicable in different contexts (Bryman, 2015). Rich and thick descriptions are to be produced by the qualitative research to indicate that the research findings can be transferred to other contexts, circumstances, and situations (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Bryman, 2015). As the COVID-19 pandemic has been a global

issue and the national lockdown has affected many South African students, the results of the study can possibly be transferred to other similar contexts.

Dependability

Dependability refers to ensuring that complete records during all the phases of the research are easily accessible (Bryman, 2015). This involves keeping records on how problems were formulated, how participants were chosen, as well data analysis decisions (Bryman,2015). I have made use of a process of inquiry audit to establish dependability. This involved my research supervisor reviewing and examining the process and data analysis to make sure that the findings are consistent.

Conformability

Conformability refers to extent in which the research findings can be confirmed by others. This means that the researcher should act in good faith and not allow their personal values to have an impact on the conduct of the research (Bryman, 2015). In this research, I have provided a trail that highlighted every step of data analysis so as to provide reasons for the decisions that were made.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues need to be considered whenever there is an interaction with people. As this research involves analysing people's experiences, very serious ethical considerations were taken into account. In conducting this study, ethical clearance was obtained (MAORG/20/013) by following the protocol of University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Committee Non-Medical to conduct research on their students. Permission from the registrar and all the relevant gatekeepers (i.e., course coordinators) was also requested. Students were then invited to participate in the study and were provided with all the necessary information about the study (Appendix A). All of this information was

communicated prior to the start of each interview. Since the research is based on people's experiences, we asked for informed consent from the participants, where participants were required to read over and sign the form (Appendix B). At the start of the interview, I introduced myself to the participant s and told them what the study was about. Participants were not forced to participate in the study and were allowed withdraw from the study if they wished to do so. Additionally, before the interview started, the participants were informed that they did not have to answer questions that they were uncomfortable in answering. As qualitative interviews were conducted this means that there was no anonymity. However, confidentiality on all participants' information was ensured as there was no use of any identifying information in the study. The participants were given pseudonyms and only the researcher and their supervisor had access to the data. All raw data is stored on a password protected computer.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has outlined the research method that was used in conducting the study. This chapter will present and discuss the findings of the research. This chapter will also present the key findings based on the thematic content analysis. In accordance with the research aims and questions, the themes of this study will be presented according to the Schlossberg 4S Transition Framework.

In ensuring that the identities of the participants remain confidential, the names have been removed throughout the discussion and have been replaced with the format “P1” where “P” represents that’s the participants and the number denotes each participant. Schlossberg (2011) emphasizes two transitions will never be the same given that each individual will has their own unique experience. While all these students were exit-level and about to graduate and find employment, each experience differed as a result of coming from different backgrounds in and out of South Africa. Thus, the data in the discussion is complimentary and at other times it is contradictory.

4.2 Situation

In attempting to explore the ‘situation’ that the participants found themselves in, they were asked questions about the post-university context that they were facing as exit-level students. This primarily focused on the process of searching for employment and how they tried to navigate the transition from graduation to employment in the context of COVID-19. As a starting point, the participants were asked to describe their full experience of being an exit-level student in the pursuit of employment. Participants described similar experiences with minor differences in terminology and phrasing.

4.2.1 COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a significant and damaging impact on the global economy. The Institute of Student Employers (2020) reports that there is a concern that some of these changes are having a disproportionate impact on young people. Not only has COVID-19 had an impact on students finding employment, in this study, it has impacted exit-level student whom are in their final year of studies and thus has had an impact on the way that they conduct their studies. It can be argued that it is important to look at how COVID-19 impacted their studies as essentially students are experiencing two transitions. First, students are transitioning into the pandemic during their studies at the time of collecting the data. The second transition they are facing is the transition from graduation to (un)employment.

4.2.2 Initial Thoughts on COVID-19:

Participants were asked what their initial thoughts were when they heard about COVID-19 and the national lockdown. The general theme was panic and anxiety as this was something that was unfamiliar to them, and they did not know what to expect from this change.

> *"I think it was a moment of panic. The first thing was panic, because no one wants to repeat the year and I was just wondering how this was going to work. Especially since I'm in my final year, I was just wondering how this was all going to work out. And I was just worried about finishing because not finishing would mean like wasting so much money paying for another year or whatever, and so much time as well. It's not just about money, money and time. So initially it was panic."-P5*

Another participant described it as the worst thing that has ever happened to them as it really changed the dynamics at home and has subsequently forced them to think about themselves and what kind of contributions that they are making to the household.

"*COVID -19, was literally, is literally the worst thing that ever happened to me. My dad passed away, my mom is working alone…So she's working alone, I'm home doing absolutely nothing." – P3*

"But it just, it just like, didn't seem right. Because I recently graduated, I went to school, to have a better life, you know, and now I'm back home, literally not adding anything to it"- P3

Covid-19 has arguably had an impact on students' mental health and anxiety which in turn has an impact on job search activities. Oleson, Butterworth, Leach, Kelaher and Pirkis (2013) conducted a study which indicated that mental health affects future employment as job loss affects mental health. The study examined and contrasted the relative effects of unemployment on mental health and mental health on employment (Oleson et al., 2013). The results revealed that mental health was shown to be both a consequence and a risk factor for unemployment (Oleson, 2013). Thus, poorer mental health among people who are not working is attributable to both the impact of unemployment and mental health problems (Oleson, 2013). This demonstrating mental health and workforce participation may have concurrent effects and therefore may have an impact on the individual experiences the transition.

4.2.3 COVID-19 and Studying

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted teaching in a variety of learning institutions. Learning electronically (e-learning) has become a fundamental method of teaching the curriculum in the pandemic. A study was conducted on students' perception of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bączek, Zagańczyk-Bączek, Szpringer, Jaroszyński, & Wożakowska-Kapłon2, 2021). The results indicated that e-learning is a powerful tool for teaching students. However, successful execution of online learning into the

course requires a well-thought-out plan and a more active approach. In the current study, when students were asked whether the national lockdown had significantly impacted their studies a few students agreed with the findings of the e-learning study by Bączek et al. (2021). They expressed that going the distance learning route may be ideal for them as they would be able to focus on their schoolwork while finding employment.

> *"It has a significantly impacted me because now I'm getting accustomed to this whole online learning thing, you know, in the absence of face-to-face lectures. Maybe, it might be ideal for me to go for, you know, to the distance learning course and also try to find your job somewhere and see how it can balance things out."-P1*

> *"It has opened up my mentality... I have become a person who is more hands on, reading and looking materials for myself, as well as doing the actual research myself, to a point where it's got me even more interested in my studies."-P2*

> *"It did have a positive impact. it had a positive impact on how I handled my studies. I think if anything, because I'm doing the same thing over and over again, I looked to my books to find the change. So, I'm basically like keeping myself busy by studying which is something I would never have done if it not been for COVID."-P4*

While the majority of the participants found that e-learning had positive impact on their studies, other students found that studying from home was not easy as they did not have access to resources. In addition to lack of access to resources, another participant felt that because lecturers were not well prepared to start e-learning, they were faced with a heavier burden.

> *"Due to the whole Corona, we were not allowed on campus for a long time. The study setup was kinda messed up, because sometimes it's kinda hard to study from home or wherever you are, and also, most content is accessible via the internet. When you're*

at home, sometimes you don't always have data to be looking for such articles. Whereas with when you're on campus, you have access to Wi-Fi." -P2

"There's so much more that lecturers could do to alleviate the burden, but they're not doing that. Instead, they still applying the same kind of pressure that they would if there was no COVID-19, which is a problem for me, because they should just read the room like, it's not okay"-P5

Participant five believes that due to their field being held in such a high regard, the standard of the profession needs to be maintained.

"I think it's a, it's a thing of, 'we need to maintain the standard of the profession' or whatever. I don't know what it is with lawyers, but they have these high standards, to point where… to the point where they don't want to compromise, you know, but in this situation, it is a situation where you actually need to compromise. And I feel like they're not doing that, because they still want to maintain the standards of the profession." -P5

According to Larcombe, Tumbaga, Malkin, Nicholson and Tokatlidis (2013) law students in Australia experience high rates of depression and anxiety. The study found that students who were in the full-time graduate course experience more stresses and challenges due to the stage that they are in their lives. The added pressure of students having to learn online after in this new era puts a lot of pressure on them.

"Sometimes the pressure gets to you like you get you get. I feel like a lot of people have been complaining about mental health issues, right. So, I feel like they're triggered by a lot of things. And obviously, the amount of schoolwork you have, or the amount of work you have will impact your mental health, things like anxiety, because you think that you won't meet the deadline, things like just depression, because you

think you're going to fail. You know, so I feel like I've gone through that, where I've just sat down and cried, because you honestly don't know what's going to happen"-P5

As higher education institutions adjust to distance learning, the workload and learning load of implementing a new delivery method is taking a huge toll on those in higher education institutions. The toll of the virus has increased the workload and threatens mental health (Schroeder, 2019). Depression and psychological distress among students have come to be understood as a 'teaching and learning' (Larcombe et al., 2013) issue, rather than only the affected person's problem, because both depression and high levels of stress are known to have an impact one ability to concentrate, which in turn negatively affects an individual's ability to learn and retain information. Schroeder (2019) states that supporting mental health needs of students learning online is a critical mission for universities especially during COVID-19.

In this study, a participant highlights that in managing their situation, they often neglect their mental health because finishing their work would give them more peace and happiness.

"*We have the factors on the skill, and you need to realise what your priorities are. I mean, mental health is a priority, but also finishing would give you so much peace and happiness. So, you just rather get it over and done with" -P5*

When asked whether their mental health was ignored to successfully complete their degree, the participant responded:

"Yes, definitely. I feel like I've felt that so much. Because I think there are moments where you just have to numb everything down… It was very intensified by COVID, because you're isolated in the sense that if you're living in res, you're probably in res by yourself. If you're at home, you're at home with people who don't understand what you're going through. So, you're isolated from your classmates, you're isolated from

your lectures, you're isolated from just human contact, you know that. That is very important."-P5

Therefore, COVID-19 induced anxiety and depression has had an impact on how students handle their studies. Although online learning is seen as a powerful tool for learning for some students, this is not the case for other students. There are students who would much rather prefer human contact as this helps in knowing that they are not facing the situation alone.

Overall, it appears that Covid-19 had the impact of reducing some students sense of control over their studies. As control over one's situation and the process of transition have been shown to be significant determinants of the success of a transition, student's perceived lack of control, and resultant anxiety and depression, could negatively impact their capacity to successfully navigate the transition to employment.

4.2.4 COVID-19 and Employment

Research by Uddin & Uddin (2013) indicates that students who are enrolled in higher learning institutions have a greater chance of finding employment and these graduates are deemed more employable in the labour market. Yet, according to Olwajodu et al. (2015) graduation does not necessarily mean that students will secure employment. In this study, participants experience of finding employment was generally demanding as there were characteristics of finding employment that they had not anticipated.

"My experience in looking for employment has been very traumatic." -P3

"*That experience was a bit daunting."-P6*

"For me, mostly because I am a foreigner, finding a job in South Africa, is a bit hard because by law I am supposed to have a work permit for me to work in South Africa. So, the procedure for getting a work permit is at least I need to have a job offer and then you apply for a work permit. But now when you are applying for jobs, you find

that on their requirements, employers already write that they want somebody with a work permit, which is now contradictory, because for me to get a work permit, I need to get a job offer. But these guys are telling me, for them to give me a job offer, I have to have a work permit." - P2

"I'm from Zimbabwe. So, I've been applying here in South Africa and there's always that barrier of, if you're not a permanent resident, it is hard to get a job" -P5

Participants two and five had had to face additional barriers of finding employment as they are not South African born, however they do have permits to study in South Africa. Although having this permit allows them schooling opportunities in South Africa, it does not afford them working opportunities. Often South African companies prioritize providing employment to their residents. Additionally, it was announced in December 2020 that leader, Liezel van der Merwe, of the Inkatha Freedom Party, intends to introduce the Employment Services Amendment Bill ('draft Bill'), in Parliament. The draft Bill aims to amend the Employment Services Act, 2014 (Act No 4 of 2014), with the purpose of regulating the recruitment of foreign nationals in particular economic sectors and to reinforce the current regulatory framework regarding the recruitment of foreign nationals in South Africa (Government of South Africa, 2020). With the introduction of Bills such as these, non-South African participants are likely to face even greater hardships in their search of employment

Additionally, some participants felt that in their search of employment they did not understand what they were doing wrong as the companies in which they have been applying to, often do not provide feedback. Receiving feedback is considered an integral part of the jobs search process as it can help guide candidates. A study by Chawla, Gabriel da Motta Veiga and Slaughter (2018) demonstrate that high quality feedback is crucial for job search and is prompts effective reactions, which increases meta cognitive strategies, and both the

number of CVs job seekers send, and the amount of time spent looking for a job. Whether an individual perceives this feedback to be useful is based on its informational value as recipients are more likely to accept feedback that is clear rather than that which is vague in nature (Ilgen, Fischer & Taylor, 1979). Thus, detailed feedback can be valuable as it can help improve the graduates' job search performance and achieve the ultimate goal of securing employment (Brett & Atwater, 2001).

> *"So, you realise that sometimes, there's things that you do in your job application that you're not supposed to do, and you don't know them. And the problem with most job applications, they don't respond, nobody tells you what you've done wrong. They just told you the only that the successful candidates have been contacted."-P2*

Furthermore, a graduate's understanding of the job search process is important part as it can provide insights on the job search strategies that they use. Ng and Burke (2006) suggest in their study of 'the next generation at work', that many graduates find employment based on perseverance and developing the required skills as they go, rather than having good career management. McKeown and Lindorff (2011) conducted a study on the job search expectations of Australian graduates, and they suggest it is important that university career counseling centers provide training on how to apply for jobs, preparation for interviews and explain the realities of the job search process to students as they go through it.

Therefore, not only is the activity of finding employment one that is exhausting for the participants, but they are also faced with the additional barrier of entering into the labour market due to citizenship. Furthermore, students feel that they are left in the dark during their search of employment as they do not receive any feedback from the companies in which they have applied. This somewhat diminishes the confidence of exit-level students in their job search activities.

4.2.5 Work Experience

This theme emerged as one that is significant across more than half of the sample. The participants expressed that they are faced with needing work experience as a requirement of the jobs for which they were applying.

> *"And the most annoying thing when applying for a job, you know when you're starting off, as opposed to being a student, you still don't have experience in this whole formal work setting…." -P3*

> *"Even if you'll even get the job, you know, and also take into account the experience that is required on almost anything, it becomes a question as to whether where exactly are you supposed to get this experience. That's, that's, that's the pickle that I'm sitting with, with regards to the whole employment system of South Africa. And it requires so much experience where you suppose to get it."-P1*

Participant one highlights their shock in terms of how far work experience extends to in finding employment in South Africa.

> *"I was shocked today when I found out that even when you are applying to be a petrol attendant you need experience or even applying, I think, maybe at their car washes or petrol being a petrol attendant, I was shocked to realise that you also need experience there as well." (p1)*

Graham at al. (2019) highlights that one of the barriers of entry to the labour market that graduates experience is the limited experience. Feedback from the participants support this suggestion. In South Africa, there have been various attempts to remove this requirement especially among the youth. In 2019, the deputy president of South Africa, David Mabuza, announced that work experience would no longer be a requirement for entry level jobs in the public sector (The South African, 2019). The deputy president announced in the national

assembly that this decision would assist in decreasing the high unemployment rate of young, qualified individuals. Although there have been efforts to remove the work experience requirement from entry level jobs, this still poses an issue today. Minister Maite Nkoana published National Youth Policy which proposed basic income grant and the removal of work experience for people under 35 in South Africa (BusinessTech,2021). The minister argues that by abolishing the requirement for experience for entry level jobs, more youth will be able to enter the labour market and gain experience (BusinessTech,2021). The various attempts in removing the work experience requirement imposed on youth, demonstrates the constraining effect of labour market entry of graduates.

Participants highlight that they have the theory to do the job however they do not have the practical skills and knowledge to apply to their jobs.

> "*We have the theory, we do not have the practical application of the theory. And because of that, not only that, but we're also denied the opportunity to apply that theory. And I believe that is a very significant tap in, a way, that is a very significant channel that keeps on pumping, you know, into the unemployment pool." P1*

This supporting the research by Oluwajodu et al., (2015) that employers perceive the graduates to lack skills and are more academically oriented. This is further emphasized by the thoughts of Walker (2015) and Mncayi (2016) that there seems to be a misalignment between theory and knowledge application through practical work. Not only do they participants face the requirement of having work experience, but they are also faced with additional requirements such as having a car or other required criteria.

> *"That experience was a bit daunting, because some of them wanting you to speak to fluent Afrikaans. I mean I don't speak fluent Afrikaans so I took a chance. Some of the*

some of them wanted a car, but then that rule has been outlawed. And then they keep setting the bar up high"- p6

"In the law field, the most difficult thing in regard to employment is that most firms when you're looking for a job, they write on the requirements that they want somebody who has got their own vehicle and a valid driver's license. The driver's license part might not be an issue. But look, look at how it is here in South Africa, you are expecting students, who some of these people are being funded by NSFAS, you are expecting this type of person to have their own car?"-P2

"We apply for jobs, and they ask for five years' experience. How can you expect me to have five years' experience…? If it is not experience, then they ask you for a driver's license? Okay, cool. Got my license. Now they ask if I have my own vehicle? Where am I going to get my own car?" P3

"I realised that with most firms, when you have an interview, the moment they find out that you don't have your own car, or they say it is advisable to have your own transport, the moment you don't have that, the interview begins to go down from there" P2

As previously mentioned by Graham et al., (2019) the lack of relevant experience is one the barriers to enter the labour market in South Africa. In this study, this barrier seems to be reinforced by the additional requirement of having a license or a car. South Africa is a country that prides itself in its diverse nation and one that acknowledges the different socioeconomic backgrounds. However, that image does not seem to be reflected in many of the companies' job requirements. It is interesting that some of the participants believe that work requirements are a manner of setting the bar high so that they are not able to reach it, where one participant states that it is a significant way of adding to the unemployment pool.

Unfortunately, some exit-level students are not able to meet these additional requirements, and this reduces their opportunity of securing employment.

4.2.6 Financial Burden

In their search for employment, students are faced with financial burdens. Searching for employment is a process that requires money. Participants who come from a low socioeconomic background incur more costs when looking for employment. In a case study published by The Conversation (2019) young job hunters spend R938 a month searching for employment. In addition, R380 is spent on internet access, printing, application fees and in some instances bribes (The Conversation, 2019). The findings of that study draw attention to the costs incurred on the young job seeker. Furthermore, this supports the results by Graham et al. (2019) that one of the barriers that graduates of entering the labour market is the cost of work seeking.

> *"It's challenging, actually. I mean, if you take out the financial part of it, you have to go out and speak to people you've never met. Some of them are rude. Some of them don't take into consideration that you've been losing money; you don't necessarily have its money you borrowed. Some of them keep rescheduling…by the time, they've set an actual debut, you've ran out of money, or assignments, or here or exams, so it's a bit tough"-P6*

Additionally, participant highlights that while searching for employment, of which is costly to them, they are faced with having to ensure that they get work experience during their time of studies and the work experience gained does not benefit them financially.

> *"...another requirement that I just don't understand is that most of them want you to have at least, for example, at least three months' vacation work, like during your degree, you have been volunteering your services to different law firms and stuff. And*

then that is something that I did not, I didn't have the luxury of doing because you literally have to get off from home, in the midst of assignments and exams, and then go to law firms and stuff and offer your services. And then it's something I couldn't afford" -P6

Thus, some participants felt that the companies who are offering jobs often do not realize how repressive the requirements of the job are, especially considering the South African demographic at large and their way of living. This may have negative impacts on young job seekers as they may be discouraged to continue to search for employment. This view is supported by the job search model in a study by Kingdon and Knight (2000). The model suggests that the search for employment is hampered by poverty, cost of job search from remote areas and high local unemployment (Kingdom & Knight, 2000). This discourages unemployed persons and subsequently negatively impacts active job search activities.

4.2.7 Availability of Job Opportunities

Participants provided their perceptions on whether they believe that there are job opportunities available for them or not in the context of COVID-19. The pandemic has had severe economic consequences including an increased unemployment rate (StatsSA, 2021) and loss of income. As previously indicated, the participants are facing multiple shocks with one of them being a disruption in their education. Additionally, they have witnessed retrenchments happening in their local economy which can have an impact on their perceptions of employability.

"A lot of people have been retrenched, which in a way, is a significant indicator that maybe there aren't a lot of job opportunities out there to begin with, you know, so I would say, due to the impact of COVID-19, the unemployment pool has actually increased. And given that, you know, there are more people looking for jobs now,

which decreases your own probability of landing one, you know, which in a way makes them very scarce"-P1

"We're already in a difficult position as law students because finding these articles are difficult. But then now with COVID-19, a lot of firms are financially strapped. That makes it even harder than it was."-P6

Given the high rate of unemployment there may be greater difficulties in finding good quality jobs (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2021). According to ITU (2021) the youth is more vulnerable due the high youth working poverty rates and because they are overrepresented in less protected forms of work and in sectors most at risk of disruption due COVID-19. Another participant added that they were not confident that there are job opportunities available for them due to them not being a South African and the added disruption of COVID-19 to the economy.

"I have no idea hey. The thing is I did not have much hope anyway. Because, because people always say that if you want to get a job in South Africa, like it's just harder for a foreigner to get a job in South Africa. So now I can imagine with COVID-19, where people are losing jobs, and we, there are people who say, you should put South Africans first, especially in this economy, where things are not stable at all, you know, like, it just got worse "-P5

One participant highlighted that given the state of the economy and the things that are happening on a global scale, they have completely stopped applying for jobs and have opted to further their studies as a safety option. This is supported by the research conducted by Koerin, Harrigan & Reeves (1990) about students who were faced with low psychological resources, particularly a sense of control over one' s life, were overwhelmed by the idea of having to work full time and did not negotiate that transition well. Furthermore, research

conducted by Gutnick (2018), and Kunene (2019) show that this is a common response as students would thus find ways to avoid the transition by taking on additional courses. In this study, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some students had worried so much of this concern that they registered to do an additional year of study as the prospects of finding employment was not evident.

> *"With everything that's happening right now in this world with the COVID, and stuff… I stopped applying for jobs. And I started applying for another opportunity to study.... So, I applied for this taxation course, because I had no other way to add no other direction to lean on to because the job thing was scraped off of the COVID things and people getting retrenched."-P3*

While some participants indicated that they were uncertain that they would be job opportunities available given the state of the country and the pandemic, other participants were in the belief that there are job opportunities available for them.

> *"In my field, my labour law field particularly, now there's more opportunity because the pandemic caused a lot of people to be retrenched, A lot of people were unfairly dismissed. There's a lot of work-related issues that are in dispute."-P2*

Despite the economic turmoil that the country was faced with, participant two realized that there are more opportunities available for them during this crisis as it is related to their career. Although Graham et al., (2019) state that there are more graduate unemployment rates due to there being supply in skilled labour which is not met by an increase in demand. In this case, it can be argued that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increase in demand for some skilled labour, for example those such as participant two.

Furthermore, participant four found that in their job search there are more firms that are availing themselves in accepting prospective employees in their field and despite the

economic disruptions, they have not personally seen firms restrict the intake of prospective employees.

> *"Personally, yes…when I look at the jobs online, I look at the job opportunities, I'm seeing that there are firms that are actually availing themselves to accepting candidate attorneys. So, I don't I don't see so much a change in with regards to job opportunities. I mean, you do hear people saying that law firms are now restricting the intake because of COVID-19 the effect that it has had on the businesses, but I haven't personally seen."-P4*

The findings in relation to job opportunities are contradictory to one another which supports Schlossberg's theory (2002) that no one transition will be exactly the same as another. Based on the themes discussed in the above situation, it would seem that that there is a presence of a strain amongst the exit-level students, which is Covid induced anxiety and depression. Mental health seems to be a major issue during this period of transition. The mental health of the exit-level students is further impacted by daunting process of searching for employment. Furthermore, during this process of finding employment, exit-level students are faced with barriers of entering the labour market such unfair work requirements and the financial burden of seeking employment. Finally, the perception of availability of jobs is two sided as some students are in the view that there are no job opportunities available to them, especially not during the pandemic. On the other hand, some students are in the view that despite the economic turmoil, there are still job opportunities available for them. These contradictory views may, in part, be explained by personal attributes that impact upon an individual's negotiation of their situation.

4.3 Self

The variables that characterize a person are important to consider to understand the nature and experience of a transition taken (Schlossberg, 1999). In this study, participants' psychological resources in the search of employment during the COVID-19 pandemic were explored by trying to gain insights on individuals' self-perceptions. In exploring how individuals perceived themselves in the search of employment, participants were asked how they felt about the entering the world of work, whether they have begun to apply for jobs and how they managed the job-seeking process.

4.3.1 Entering the World of Work

Entering the workplace may be a first-time experience for most of the participants and, as indicated earlier, they do not necessarily have any sort of work experience due to being full-time students. In the interviews many participants highlighted that they were not anxious about entering the workspace as they were confident in their capabilities.

> *"I do feel like I am actually equipped to take care of myself, even without any job 'opportunities"-P1*

Participant one highlights that even without any job opportunities available, they believe that they are well equipped enough to take care of themselves. It can be argued that this participant has a high level of self-efficacy, as they believe in their own abilities. This supports Schlossberg's (2002) theory that personal factors such as the level of self-efficacy one has are useful in assisting individuals with a transition.

Some participants indicated that they were not anxious about entering the world of work and remain confident that they have the skills to do the job as required.

> *"In the workplace, I'm particularly not afraid of, it doesn't bother me a lot. I just know, I'll make it. I have that level of complacency or level of assurance that no, I'm*

going to get there, eventually. all in due time and give given the fact that I'm studying business." -P1

"I feel a bit skeptical and excited at the same time. I'm getting the opportunity to now apply all the knowledge that I've acquired through the years and expand on it and work on it in a professional setting"-P8

"After spending five years of being a trainee and finally getting out there and practicing law is something that I've been looking forward to"-P6

This is an important theme as the results have revealed that there's a level of confidence among the participants that they will be capable to do the job that is required of them should they be afforded the opportunity to them. This supports the thoughts of Chickering (2011) and Schlossberg that self-confidence is important factor when transitioning. Although students continuously face difficulties in their search of employment, those feelings are not necessarily translated into their ability to do the work.

4.3.2 Job Search Preparation in University

An interesting theme that emerged is that participants felt that the universities are not equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge in preparation for finding a job. An important part of the process of finding employment is putting your Curriculum Vitae (CV) together. The participants recognise that the first impression that the recruiting companies make is based on how well you have presented your CV. Thus, ensuring that your CV is correct is of a great deal of importance in determining your early career success. Having a good, detailed CV puts the job applicants one step close to being called for an interview.

"I've just thought maybe, maybe it's the way my CV set up."-P5

"I had a situation whereby in my very first application, when they said, 'send your CV', I would send my CV and my attachments all at once. Only two find out that most

people want you to send your CV, and then later on, when they've looked through your CV, they ask you to send the rest of your particulars. So, the moment I've sent my CV and everything, I already look clumsy" -P2

"I feel like varsities should have a two-week course on CV drafting, job applications and stuff like that"-P2

CVs and the presentation thereof, are essential as it is the first thing that recruiters notice about an applicant. Cole and Rubin (2007) conducted a study based on recruiters' perceptions and use of applicant resume information in the screening of recent graduates. Their findings suggest that a recruiter's perceptions of an applicant's employability is based on the content information, such as qualifications, experience, and extracurricular activities, of a CV. Recruiters do not only look item present on a CV, but they also consider how important CV items are for successful job performance (Cole & Rubin, 2007). Additionally, Jansen (2012) highlights that graduates should take extra steps when preparing their CVs in order to avoid presenting a 'Sloppy CV'.

Participant two shares their experience on how important it is to be aware of recruitment processes, as they need to make a good impression on the hiring companies. The participant does not feel that they are well versed in the recruitment process, and it would be helpful if institutions supported them by creating awareness, for example recruitment workshops, on how to draft CVs and how to adequately prepare yourself in their job search journey. McKeown and Lindorff (2011) suggest that universities should assist students by training them on the job search process. Such training can assist students prepare for career realities which they did not foresee.

Furthermore, participant two felt that the university does not help them enough in terms of preparing for job search. Supporting students to be adequately prepared in finding

employment can help alleviate significant stress experienced. This would help students have the confidence that not only are they well equipped with the knowledge that they have to do the work, but also have the skills to find jobs successfully.

> *"I'm a bit skeptical because you realise that we equipped with all the knowledge that we need to work, to be an employee, but you will never actually, I feel like varsities don't have, well my varsity in particular, doesn't have that aspect whereby they train you to actually look for employment."-P2*

Additionally, participant eight felt that they do not feel as confident as they thought they would be as there was not enough knowledge imparted on them on a particular subject that was important for the workplace. This being contradictory to the statement by Oluwajodu et al. (2015) that graduates believe their education level and skills are sufficient in being prepared for the workplace.

> *"I don't feel good as I thought I would. Because I feel like we're supposed to, like get a little bit more knowledge this year, for everything, like preparing us for the next year, because usually they'll have people from the work like, work field, come and talk to you come and guide you and all of that. So, we didn't have that this year. And then to make it worse, we're not really studying in depth because of the whole pandemic, and everything. I don't feel like I'm going to be prepared."* ***- p8***

Job search preparedness is seemingly an issue that students believe that the university should have had a helping hand in. This emphasizing the point argued by Mncayi (2016) that there is a need for organisations and universities to cooperate in providing career guidance to students. Furthermore, career guidance provided to students should be compiled in a manner that bridges the gap between the graduates and potential employers through regular recruitment drives (Mncayi, 2016).

4.3.3 Personal Resources

Literature suggests that personal resources such as self-efficacy, how much control an individual believes they hold in the transition, play a significant role in the transition process (Anderson et al., 2012). Control in the context of this study refers to how the individual manages their situation in producing a particular outcome (Anderson et al., 2012). An individual who is able to manage themselves during the transition is less likely to struggle during the transition.

While most participants had highlighted strategies used in the process of the applying for jobs, three participants spoke of how they have stopped applying for jobs so as to look after their mental health.

> *"I haven't been applying for jobs. I stopped, because it was messing with me, I stopped applying for jobs..."-P3*

As previously mentioned in the review of the literature, job search success is important for one's confidence as job search success can lead to optimism. Individuals who remain optimistic in their job search perceive the stumbling blocks as temporary (Georgiou, Nikolaou & Turban, 2019). The health and wellbeing of an individual will be negatively impacted due to low morale as a result of job search activities that yield undesirable results. Anxiety over long-term unemployment may influence one's mental and physical health (Bejakovic & Mrnjavac, 2018).

When participant three was asked whether they stopped applying for due to covid-19 or whether it was for personal reasons they responded:

> *"Both actually, but mostly because I chose peace, I wanted peace in my life. It's actually both"-P3*

Participant three highlights how they were not able to manage to effectively exert control of the job search process and instead engaged in avoidance to manage with the stress that comes with applying for jobs. Additionally, participant four and five stated that they were not applying for job currently because they did not want the added stress of looking for employment and being a student. Both participants wanted to manage one situation, their studies, well.

> *"Personally…I am looking at the job options but I'm not so much applying, in the sense where I know I can't manage school and work. So, I don't want to find myself in situation where I am getting an interview this month…" -P4*

> *"After applying for so many months, I just decided to give myself a break because and focus on finishing school because that was also time consuming, like job applications are time consuming especially if you have a lot of schoolwork" -P5*

Finding employment is a time-consuming process and is seen as another barrier to enter the labour market (Graham et al., 2019). Unfortunately exit-level students are forced to balance time between completing their studies in a situation that is unfamiliar to them while searching for employment in a country that is facing economic turmoil. This is an extremely exhausting process and has an impact on their health and wellbeing. Under such conditions, it may be of no surprise that students would be forced to make a decision about focusing on their schoolwork rather than applying for jobs.

4.3.4 Mental Health

The burden of having to apply for jobs in the context of COVID-19 has had an impact on some participant's mental health and confidence. This highlights Schlossberg's assertions (2002) that self-confidence is an important factor when dealing with a transition. In this study, it can be argued some participants struggled with the transition as they were

continuously faced with difficulties. Participants have shared their experiences in applying for jobs and the impact that it has had on their mental health.

> *"Having to apply for jobs that was just like one of the most exhausting tasks… after COVID-19, it was the worst thing, literally…. Because now you start applying for jobs and then you get 'we sorry to inform you' emails coming in. They come in, they come in, they come in. And it really messes up with your confidence, well not necessarily confidence, but mental health in general."-P3*

> *"It is very hard to wake up each and every morning after having gotten maybe five 'sorry to regret you' emails and then have the having to apply for more jobs again, only to get more… no ways..." P3*

> *"Yes, definitely. I feel like I've felt that so much. Because I think there are moments where you just have to numb everything down… It was very intensified by COVID, because you're isolated in the sense that if you're living in res, you're probably in res by yourself. If you're at home, you're at home with people who don't understand what you're going through. So, you're isolated from your classmates, you're isolated from your lectures, you're isolated from just human contact, you know that. That is very important."-P5*

The process of finding employment has not only been a daunting task but it has been that has had an impact on participants' resilience as they continuously received rejection emails. This point is emphasized by Rusu, Chiriac, Salagean and Hojbota (2013) who highlight that finding employment is a process that can have an impact on the psychological wellbeing of individuals and poor health can be experienced. The uncertainty of not knowing what employers are expecting from students can create anxiety during the process of job search. This anxiety my further be exacerbated by the experience of isolation that was characteristic

of many individuals' lockdown experience. It is evident that the process of finding employment has had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of some exit level students.

It is evident that the self in this study is impacted by an individual's personal and psychological characteristics. The personal resources that can assist the students during the transition has been greatly impacted as they are seen to have low levels of optimism and self-efficacy. Mental health is one of one of the biggest psychological factors that has had an influence on the self of the exit-level students during the job search process. The COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted mental health as 'normal' way of life has completely been changed. In order for the exit-level students to experience a 'swift' transition process, adequate support is something that may be required during the job search process

4.4 Support

Lorenzini and Giugni (2012) describe social support as a coping mechanism that individuals may use when they are faced stressful events. People can draw on support systems such as the family unit or social relationships. In this study participants responded to questions regarding sources of support that they have which help them in their search of employment.

4.4.1 Self-Sufficient

Most participants highlighted that when they are faced with a difficult situation, they relied on dealing with the situation themselves before asking for help. This could be a result of the level of studies which has taught them how to think independently.

> *"I first deal with it on my own. That that that's the first option. Try it on my own. And if I failed, only then will I actually ask for help."-P1*

> *"To me, if I meet, call it an opportunity if I meet an opportunity to actually do something that I'm unfamiliar with I take it as a learning opportunity that it is*

something that I'm unfamiliar with. But I'm willing to try, I'm willing to learn. And if I do fail, then our last mile, but I can't, while standing, you know, before the start line and say, guys, I can't run, can you please come and help me know, I need to first try to learn and see how far I can go" – P1

A study by Labouliere, Kleinman and Gould (2015) have suggested adolescents often reduce help-seeking behaviour from informal sources traditionally favoured by adolescents, such as parents and friends. Although, being reliant on yourself may be of useful as it shows self-confidence, Wheeler (2012) suggests that individuals who successfully negotiated their transition were both self-reliant and able to ask professors.

4.4.2 Support from Friends and Community

Participants highlighted that they can rely on their friends when they are faced with this transition. Some participants have indicated that they ask their friends who have been in similar situations, or who are well versed about the employment process, for help in their hunt for employment**.**

"I have friends who studied HR, who are employed. Whenever I needed the help with applying for jobs, I'd ask them how things go, what they look for, what kind of what they expect to see in a CV, the structure. And obviously also have friends who I studied with, who are now employed, I would ask them about the types of interviews that was expected of them."-P2

Furthermore, participants highlight that they would not be able to cope with this transition alone and that support from their friends and individuals who have studied the same course as them, are where support can be drawn from

"I can't do it alone. I'd be a mess if I did alone… I am fortunate enough to have as a lawyer and to my brothers, as a close friend, or best friend, even as a lawyer, like for

instance, now, for the case work, I had a question. And I was able to call both of them and they were very instrumental in helping me assignment. And also my friend, I think, even though she's not reading law, I mean, I mean, the workspace won't even go I'm studying, even though I'm going to be a lawyer, the workspace will only be problems with regards to law itself, I may be facing troubles with my colleague or something like that. So, she's definitely someone I will definitely reach out to, she'll probably be one of the first people to know when I get a job and, and stuff like that. So, she, she, she and the other people that I can turn to will, I'll definitely be turning to them for a while."-P4

In spite of the fact that multiple studies have shown the negative impact of unemployment on one's self-esteem, social support during unemployment has been demonstrated to mitigate some of these negative effects. It has been argued that it is an important aspect in coping with transitions that are stressful, such as finding employment (Water & Moore, 2002, as cited in Petterson, 2012). A study by Slebarska, Moser & Gunnesch-Luca (2009) indicated that social support seemed to be a resource with complex and surprising effects on job search behaviour. The findings indicated that the effect of social support on job search behaviour was influenced by optimistic expectations and resilience. Thus, higher levels of social support can be associated with higher levels of resilience and a better view of one's occupational future (Slebarska et al., 2009). When one experiences higher levels of resilience this is transformed in their job search behaviours. The findings of the study emphasize Schlossberg's theory (2011) that support is essential for one's wellbeing.

Additionally, participants indicated that they relied on religious communities, such as their church, in the finding employment process.

"What I like about the church that I have now, for instance, it's, it's a safe place we are able to talk about, like I said, in my own securities, without ever feeling like we're being judged."-P4

Hammer (1988) defines coping resources as those psychological capacities inherent in people that allow them to manage stressors, such as those experienced during unemployment and career transitions, more effectively (Coetzee & Estherhuizen, 2010). One of Hammer's coping resources are spiritual or philosophical resources, which involves the extent to which an individual's actions are led by stable and consistent values which derived from their religious philosophy. Hammer (1998) argues that these religious values can prescribe individuals strategies that enable them to respond effectively. Furthermore, research by Coetzee & Esteruizen (2010) found significant relationships between psychological career resources and the coping resources available to an individual during unemployment. The findings suggest that participants' strong sense of self-esteem, self-management and relationship skills contribute significantly to their cognitive and spiritual/philosophical coping resources. In addition, it seems that their adaptive responses are mostly led by stable and consistent values derived from religious philosophy (Coetzee & Esteruizen, 2010). These findings are relevant as the participants have highlighted that having communities of support have had a positive impact as during their transition in seeking for employment.

4.4.3 Support from Lecturers/University

The participants indicated that they may need additional support from the lecturers and the university institution itself during their transition. Participant two highlights that the universities make promises about assisting them with support in their career management, however that is something that did not materialise over time. The support in place refers to the career workshops or career days, where companies would go to institutions and provide students with all the necessary information before applying for jobs. McKeown and Lindorff

(2011) emphasise the importance of training that needs to be provided by universities that can assist individuals in their job search preparation

> *"These are things that have been suggested, but you know, with institutions, things take time They might tell you that there's a not enough resources enough to deal with students at a particular time, or they might not deem it as necessary. It is something that used to happen at my varsity where they used to invite law firms… but it is something that got abandoned over time" P2*

Furthermore, participants highlighted that there were lecturers who were actively assisting them during this transition, however there were some lecturers that did not offer proper support during this transition in their lives.

> *"I think it depends on the lecturer. We do have some lectures, we're really trying. And we're making sure that like, you understand as much as possible when they're giving you as many resources as they can. And stuff like that. And when you have some lectures, who just don't care. Because I have like a subject called market analysis. And it's very, very important. We need that for next year. But then, once the pandemic started, the lecture went, he disappeared. And this is like a first semester course" – P8*

Furthermore, the participant highlights that they have not found a way to manage unsupportive lecturers during this time, however they found it helpful to know that they were not the only individual experiencing the situation.

> *"I haven't really found a way to cope with it. I think what just makes me feel a little better is the fact that I know it's not only me, going through it, like it's a whole lot of people. And so, you just kind of hope for leniency and hope that they do understand that the situation was difficult"*- P8

The participant highlights that there are some lecturers in their departments who are willing to provide support in finding employment by using their knowledge from working in the field and are open to help the students.

> "*I think because a lot of our lectures are like, like, our department has a lot of lecturers who, like lecture part time, and then they also working in the field. So, they are willing to help you if you ask them for help, like, and we also have like a lot of case lecturers who come in as well, we'll also be open to helping. So, if you really do need something that you don't understand that you need to do with the industry that you need help with, they are willing to help"* – P8

A study was conducted by Su and Wood (2012) on students' perceptions of what makes a good university lecturer. The findings indicated that being supportive and providing a safe space for students was important. In the view of the students, it is important that lecturers appreciate the difficulties that students are facing when learning and offer as much support as possible (Su & Wood, 2012). Another view is that the lecturers need to be able to provide expert knowledge and skills in their respective course that students can apply in real life scenarios (Su & Wood, 2012). This finding is also supported by other research, such as that by Orackci (2020). In this study, postgraduate students highlight that it is important their lecturers to be considered experts in their fields. This kind of support can encourage students that their lectures are competent and will be able to support them sufficiently during the transition of looking for employment.

4.4.4 Family Support

Participants highlighted that they could rely on their family for support during the transition to finding employment. Interestingly it was highlighted that due to COVID-19, parents are more understanding of the difficulties of finding employment and were thus not applying a

lot of pressure upon participants. Schlossberg (2011) highlights that having support from your family unit is important as it can have a positive impact on one's wellbeing.

> *"My dad… I think, maybe even COVID has helped parents come down on the kids because they are aware of the pressures that it may bring. I don't know. But my family has been very calm" p4*

Interestingly a few participants shared the thoughts of participant five that they were not necessarily facing pressure to find employment from their families directly, however it was the circumstances at home which put pressure on them finding employment.

> *"They're not like pressuring me to find a job. I'm sure they know things are hard. Yeah. But it's just a pressure from myself, knowing that I'm the case, I'm the firstborn, and my other two siblings are still in school. The other one is finishing primary school, and then the other one is in second year of university. So just the pressure of our help out, because I know ready things are tough for them. And if like, after spending so much time in school and spending so much money on my tuition and my everything, my fees, are the ones to help out afterwards. So, it's just the pressure from myself really not from anyone else." – P5*

One of the most common pressures to find employment among the graduated youth, especially in the context of South Africa, is that of Black Tax. In the context of this study, 'black tax' relates to the financial responsibility carried by black South Africans who have to pay or transfer money and other goods to support their direct and indirect family (Carpenter & Phaswana, 2021). This is an important concept because of the level of the support required, given the large size of black households (Gradín, 2013) and the extent of poverty experienced by these individuals (Carpenter & Phaswana, 2021)**.**

"Well, I don't want to generalize or anything but as a black person, if you have a black child, you have to go to university and after university you have to contribute to household expenses and stuff" P6

While some participants indicated that they have to contribute to household expenses, other participants found that black tax is something that willingly wanted to participate in due to them feeling like they had a responsibility to give back to their families who have supported them throughout their university career.

"I also have a lot of family pressure because, you know, black tax… My brother, when he started working, he took over the payments, because my father passed on a month before I started classes. So, I feel like I am indebted to him because of what he did… So, there is no active a positive pressure from my family, but it's something that I feel on my own"–P2

"I think in in it's like, because of like, how do I say this? Because of the environment that I also grew up in. It's not like it's, you know, the, it's like, it's like, I also want to do it. It's not, it's like, okay, we've all heard about black tax. It's a thing we know. I think. I also understand it. It's not like it's, you know, like, you know, like, I don't want to do it. It's like, okay, I understand the concept. And it's, it's fine. Like, I'm keen."- P7

According to Carpenter & Phaswana (2020), although South Africa has an extensive welfare system in place, there is a large gap in the support for able-bodied, working age adults who are unemployed (Seekings & Moore, 2013). South Africa's high youth unemployment rate is skewed toward black African individuals (StatsSA, 2021). The outcome is that unemployed persons receive financial assistance from their nearest family as dependents, with neither relatives nor dependent receiving any support from a taxation or social welfare standpoint (Klasen & Woolard, 2009). Due to these circumstances' individuals, such as the participants

in our study, are faced with the pressure of finding employment so that they are able to contribute to their households, to alleviate the financial burden that may be faced by their families.

4.4.5The Negative Side of Having "Support"

While having support is researched to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of an individual, there can also be a downside to having support. In this study, some participants shared negative experiences of having support

4.4.6 The Absence of Family and Social Support

Participants highlight that there are often expectations that once you have graduated you should have a job, however that is not the case in this context. A study by Linn, Sandifer and Stein (1985) indicated that people who have low levels of family and social support suffered from ill health and reported lower levels of self-esteem (Maddy, Cannon and Lichtenberger, 2015). When an individual experiences low levels of family support that that can have an impact on the self-confidence of the unemployed individual (Maddy et al., 2015)

> *" I do. I just feel like everyone thinks straight after you finish, get a job. They tell you that everyone is applying and everyone is sending you links to apply. And you feel the pressure, everyone is talking about, 'what are you going to do next year?' Your parents keep asking you, 'what are you going to do next year?' ' Are you coming back home?' And it's just stressful." -P8*

Additionally, not only are participants faced with pressure to find employment from their families, but there is also additional pressure to find employment from their peer and classmates as they have noticed that most are returning to complete their studies.

> *"I used to feel pressured by the job, you know how society, puts pressure on you to say that at you get to a certain age you have to achieve this and this? I used to feel*

that pressure immensely. But I realised that in my, in my class life from last year, I'm still in contact with a lot of people, we're still in the same WhatsApp groups. I've come to realise that a lot of people are not just employed, they're struggling to find employment, and most of them are considering going back to school to do their masters."-P2

Furthermore, some participants highlighted that the support that they received from their friends was not necessarily useful, as it created pressure for the individual to find employment.

"My friend, like one friend, is the only person who's putting so much pressure on my, my parents, my dad, my siblings, none of them are, we hardly even speak about it."-P4 "The pressure she's putting on me, I think mirrors the pressure she's putting on herself, because she's doing her final year, and she's looking for jobs."-P4

As previously highlighted, the absence of social support may have negative implications. Slebasker et al., (2009) state that research on helping as it is perceived from the recipient's point of view has advanced the notion that offered help is often rejected because it is experienced as a threat to self-esteem. Thus, social support received from one's social network may be effective however, this is only so when the support is kind and is the amount of support is perceived as appropriate (Seblasker et al., 2009). This research is consistent with the findings that social support and self-esteem are correlated with job search behaviour (Maddy et al., 2015).

Exit-level students in this study have seemingly experienced different sides of support. From one perspective, students have mentioned that they may not necessarily require the support of others as they are self-reliant and are capable to go through the transition themselves. Some participants have highlighted that they receive the necessary support during their transition

from friends, family, and their communities. However, the majority of the findings have painted support in a negative light. There seems to be a lack of support from the universities for the exit-level students during transition to find employment. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even harder for some participants as there is more pressure than ever from their families to find employment due to the economic turmoil. Exit-level students are experiencing the negative side of support. This kind of support have negative implications on the students in job seeking as this may have negative impacts on their self-esteem. Exit-level students will then need to develop a number of strategies in overcoming these hurdles during job search.

4.5 Strategies

Schlossberg (2011) refers to strategies to those coping mechanisms that a person draws on in order to cope with a transition that they are faced with. Strategies that an individual uses can either try to change the situation or reframe the situation. In this study, participants responded to questions about what they do when they faced with challenges and how they help themselves manage those challenges. Coping strategies varied from participant to participant; while some participants shared the similar coping strategies, most participants had different views on their coping mechanisms.

4.5.1 Coping

Coping can be described as the intentional and conscious responses to stress. According to Schlossberg, strategies are those activities that either try to change the situation or try to reframe the situation (Schlossberg, 2011). In this study, these are the behaviours that exit-level students will use to help themselves control the situation. The following themes emerged in exploring the coping strategies that participants used in responding to the stressful situation of finding employment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.5.2 Overall Perceptions of Coping with the Situation

Participants responded to questions regarding how they are coping with the situation. Some participants highlighted that they were coping well with the situation due to them being students and thus being more resilient and having the ability to cope.

> *"I'm coping very well. I think for me, it's mostly because I've always been a student who's focused, who's not afraid of doing a lot of work, even though law might be demanding that I'm also passionate about it. I'm not afraid to do a lot of work. I cope very well." -P2*

Additionally, students highlighted that when faced with a difficult situation it is best to calm down and complete the task at hand.

> *"Always stay calm. You have to stay calm so that you can think, and you can think clearly" -P3*

4.5.3 Planning

The term active coping is similar to what Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Stanisławski, 2019) termed as problem focused coping. Planning is a thought process that involves thinking about how to cope with a stressor (Carver & Scheier, 1989). When an individual plans, they are thinking about what steps take and how to best handle the problem.

> *"I overanalyze a lot of things., but only after having planned how I'm going to deal with it. because I will be taking that experience that okay, I've tried dealing with the challenge before I failed, or rather it was too challenging. So, when I decided to cut off from it, what I would do would be a lot of self -reflection, introspection really, to define what exactly is going on here. Just to think about it and then after that, make a plan, come back, execute the plan, see what happens. analyse any variances between*

actual and the plan and then try to fix them if they need fixing or learn from them." - P1

Participants highlighted that they take a problem focused approach when coping with challenging situations. Problem-focused coping is a direct approach to solving problems without making use of any support apart from the learned skills required to solve the problem (Shen, 2009). People with high self-efficacy believe they have the appropriate skills needed to successfully execute a task or perform well with little or no assistance (Pajares, 2005; Hsieh, 2012, as cited in Taiwo, 2015).

In addition to planning, some students indicated they tend not to focus on the difficulty of the situation.

"How I manage challenges is that whenever I'm faced with a difficult situation, I tend not to focus on how things are bad or how difficult this thing is, I tend to focus more on finding a way out of it. I start brainstorming and how to get out of bed to try to get out of that situation." P2

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) coping cannot be either regarded as effective or ineffective independently of the situation in which it is employed. Rather there should be the idea of "goodness of fit" referring to a match between appraisal and the recommended coping strategy. There is a larger preference for problem focused situations in controllable situations and a more widespread use of emotion focused efforts in uncontrollable situations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1884). It can be argued that those participants who do not fixate on the issue at hand are more likely to actively engage in employment seeking activities.

4.5.4 Alternative Routes

Given the state of the South African economy in the current climate, participants have shared that it may perhaps be of better use for them to embark on a different journey, where some

participants found that it is better to be business focused rather than actively seeking for employment.

> *"I'm not really a guy that's really concerned about job opportunities. I'm more concerned about business opportunities, in a way. There will always be business around with what we need to survive and what we need to sustain ourselves and therefore if there's business, then my services will definitely be required one way or another"-P1*

> *"My degree doesn't depend on other people. I don't have to depend on other people providing a job for me, like what I know is what I do. So, I can literally go and do what I know for people because I can provide that service" – P7*

> *"I don't feel the pressure that much because of that, and mostly because my mindset has shifted from seeking employment to being in a stage whereby, I should be able to create employment for myself."-P1*

Furthermore, other participants have found themselves thinking about alternate careers that they would go into, should they not be afforded the opportunity to secure employment in their prospective fields.

> *"For instance, I have been thinking that maybe, just maybe I might be a police officer. Because that is something I have been thinking of applying for. especially with COVID-19". -P6*

Some students have adopted problem focused strategies which mainly involves managing the problem behind the stress and is action oriented. According to Mastrioanni (2011, as cited in Zaman & Ali, 2019) problem focused coping uses problem solving actions to find alternative solutions of a problem through cost benefit analysis. Furthermore, these strategies are intended for individuals in find alternative forms of fulfilment and lowering an individual's

ambitions (Zaman & Ali, 2019). People who engage in problem focused coping pay attention to the resources that they have available to them and come up with a solution and therefore the aim of this strategy being to manage the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zaman & Ali, 2019). This is evident as the participants in this study have thought about alternative measures to be part of the workforce.

4.5.5 Turning to Religion

Another interesting theme that emerged relating to participants' coping mechanisms during the pandemic is turning to religion.

> *"Not to say that the people that I speak to invalidate how I'm feeling based on malice or being unkind, but I, a human being can never fully always understand all that you're going through. And we lack in being fully empathetic to all everyone's building. So, prayer is always my first source. And now in COVID, there's some things where I don't even tell my friend or my friends, my friends or my family, I just pray about it. And I leave it at that. And that has helped me." -p4*

For this participant, turning to religion helps reduce the negative emotion that they are experiencing. Pargament (1990, as cited in Hammer, 1998) states that an individual who uses any religious act, such as praying, is engaging in religious coping. Hammer (1998) argues that these religious values can prescribe individuals strategies that enable them to respond effectively.

In some other research, Toburen and Meiew (2010) found out that priming individuals with God related words increased participants' persistence at performing a task, regardless of their level of religiousness. As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, some students have found that their beliefs are an effective coping strategy which helps them alleviate the negative impacts of the job search process.

4.5.6 Mental Disengagement

Some participants have found that being mentally disengaged from their problems to be an effective coping strategy.

> *"I sleep, that's not good response but I usually like to take time away from school. I feel like the thing that stresses me out the most is school. So, what I have to do is take time away from school and do something that doesn't fall within school. So, because I like to draw a lot. That is the thing that I usually will do need to do and move completely away from school until I feel like mentally able to think about it again." P8*

Mental disengagement is behavioural disengagement that occurs through a variety of activities to distract an individual from thinking about the domains in which the stressor is present (Carver & Scheier, 1983). Individuals will find alternative activities that will take their mind off a problem, escaping through or immersion in TV (Carver & Scheier, 1983). Mental disengagement in this study appears to be an adaptive coping mechanism for the participant as it helps with the overall anxiety experienced during this transition.

4.5.7 Seeking Social Support

Seeking social support can be seen as a coping mechanism as one individual may want to feel as they are understood and that the challenges that they are facing can be overcome.

> *"Yeah, so what did help was talking to my friends… Because I think around that time, I couldn't actually take time off to like de-stress and everything like I would normally do, because the work was a lot like I couldn't even take time to de-stress because the work needed to be done. So, I'll just do like simple things like video call my friends while I'm doing the work so that at least you know, like someone else is going through the same thing. And it's definitely helped me"-p8*

> *"And also, speaking about getting pressure from my family. I remember telling my dad about this whole job-hunting situation. And he was like, don't stress, don't stress about that yet. Just focus on finishing. And I feel like that's something that actually kept me going. And that's when I decided, you know, what, I should actually focus on finishing rather than focusing on something else. So yeah, there's been support that way, you know, that's been really helpful to know that there's no pressure from my parents or anything. They are just supportive of where I am right now." (p5)*

In a recent study on student resilience during COVID-19 (Mai, Wu & Huang, 2021) it was found that the degree of social support perceived by students is directly proportional to the coping capacity. This means that as the degree of perceived social support increases, the proportion of students adopting active coping strategies increases while that of students adopting negative coping strategies decreases (Mai et al., 2021). Therefore, students who experience high levels of emotional support from either family or friends adopt more positive coping strategies when dealing with difficulties. This positive coping strategies in turn have positive impact on exit-level students with regard to finding employment.

4.6 Summary of Themes

This chapter presented and discussed the finding of the study that was guided by Schlossberg's Transition Framework (2011). The themes of the study were based on the 4S framework. The following themes were developed under 'situation', Covid-19, initial thoughts of Covid-19, Covid-19 and studying, Covid-19 and employment, work experience, financial burden, and availability of job opportunities. Under 'self', entering the world of work, job search preparation in university, personal resources and mental health. Under 'support', the following themes emerged, self-sufficient, support from friends and community, support from lecturers/university, family support, the negative side of having support and the absence of family and social support. Finally, under 'strategies', the following themes emerged, coping, overall perceptions of coping with the situation, planning, alternative routes, turning to religion, mental disengagement and seeking social support.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE STUDY

The final chapter of this research report comprises of the study's conclusion, the limitations of the study, implication for future research and reflections on the research.

5.1 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore the individual experience of exit-level students' perceptions of employability in the context of Covid-19. The research made use of Schlossberg's Transition Theory to explore the transition from university to employment from the perspective of exit-level students during the global pandemic. Based on the themes that have emerged from the study, it is evident that the transition from graduation to employment for exit-level students during COVID-19 is one that is stressful. In this research it can be argued that the students are experiencing two transitions where the first is the transition into the pandemic and remote learning. While some participants were of the view that learning remotely has positively impacted their studies, the majority were also of the view that this had still significantly impacted their psychological wellbeing.

The second transition they are facing is the transition from graduation to (un)employment. The transition for these students is taxing on the mental health and wellbeing of the students as they had not anticipated that they would be learning remotely while searching for employment during a pandemic. Furthermore, the frustration of finding employment is exacerbated by the additional barriers to entry in the labour market in an already fraught economy where exit-level students are not able to meet the minimum requirements of the job. Given many companies in South African have gone through retrenchments and citizens have experienced a loss of income, this has further tainted the perception of the availability of jobs. This is in addition to an economy where job opportunities for graduates are extremely low.

Although the exit-level students are confident in their capabilities to perform jobs, they are of the belief that they are not adequately equipped to search for employment. There is a general sense that students believe that the university does not prepare them enough for the process of finding employment. The universities supply the theoretical knowledge to students, but not enough practical skills are supplied. Therefore, students are not able to effectively conduct job search or experience job search success. All of this takes place while students are managing their schoolwork. Due to these stumbling blocks, some students have found that it would be beneficial for them to not participate in job search activities to preserve their mental health.

Exit-level students cope with the transition by drawing on the support that they have available to them, such as friends, family, people in their immediate communities. However, there has been a downside of a support where students felt that they are not given enough support from their lecturers in their search of employment. Exit-level students also experience the absence of support from family, as they experience pressure to find employment as soon as they graduate. For those students who do experience the positive side of support, these support structures have provided them with emotional support and guidance during their transition. As a result, these students are able to actively engage in job search activities.

Seeking social support is reflected in the coping strategies that exit level students employ in navigating the transition from graduation to employment. Furthermore, the exit-level students in this study adopted coping strategies that include planning effectively, finding alternative routes to remain employable and even mentally disengaging from the situation. Due to the economic climate of the country during the pandemic exit-level students are adopting creative strategies in securing some form of employment.

Based on the analysis of the data and the themes that have emerged, it can be argued that Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory was useful in exploring the experiences of exit-level students during their transition from graduation to employment in the context of COVID-19. The variables of 'situation' and 'self' have shed light on the experiences of being exit-level student searching for employment during the global pandemic; whilst 'support' and 'strategies' have shed light on coping mechanisms used for the experience of being a student whilst searching for employment.

The model has assisted in describing in detail the difficulties and challenges experienced by exit-level students during this transition. Furthermore, the model has allowed us to capture the process and actions undertaken by exit-level students in managing their situation. Thus, the research was able to display the agency and action of individuals actively negotiating their transitions.

5.2 Limitations

There are some limitations with the research method used in this study that need to be taken into consideration. Although the inclusion of eight participants has allowed the research to engage in a rich analysis of the data, there are issues with the transferability of the data. The results of the study may not be generalised as the sample of students was very specific. This research made use of snowballing sampling, and thus the researcher was not able to include participants from the same faculty in the universities in South Africa and poses an issue for transferability.

Furthermore, as interviews are a self-report method, and this can pose problems. Although the information remained confidential, it was not possible for anonymity to be achieved thus leading to possible socially desirable answered. As the interviews were semi-structured, the interviewer added additional points of clarity where questions seemed to be misleading. Due

to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews could not be conducted face-to-face and were conducted on the available online platforms. Participants were all situated in different areas, and some had connectivity issues. As result, some interviews had to be conducted through alternative measures such as phone calls and as coverage was lost, questions had to be asked again, impacting the way participants respond to the question.

Due to the sensitivity and impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the personal lives of the participants, the researcher was unable to probe on questions where participants felt they were not comfortable to answer the questionnaire. This poses an issue of credibility as the researcher may have failed to accurately represent the personal reality of the participant.

5.3 Implications for Future Research

Schlossberg's transition framework has shown to be useful theoretical framework for gaining insights on the experiences of exit-level students as they transition from university to employment. Further research is however warranted based on the following recommendations. Given the time constraints and the relatively small sample in the study, future research should aim to include a larger sample. A larger sample would be more representative of the student population and thus a greater chance for transferability potential. Furthermore, the study had more female participants. It would be beneficial for future research to have a balanced gender ratio to assess whether gender plays a role in the transition.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Participant Information Form

Psychology
School of Human & Community Development
University of the Witwatersrand
Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050
Tel: (011) 717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559

Participant information form

Dear prospective participant

My name is Keolebogile Namane and I am currently studying for my Master's degree in Organisational Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. In order to complete my degree, I am required to conduct research. My topic focuses on students' perception of finding employment in the context of COVID-19. This research aims to explore the subjective experience of each student's transition to employment. I am conducting the research under the supervision of Mr. Ian Siemers. I would like to invite you to participate in the research.

If you consent to participate in the study, I will conduct an interview online at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes. In order to accurately incorporate the interview into my research, it will be recorded with your consent. I would like to emphasise that participation in this research is entirely voluntary and if at any time, you wish to withdraw from the study you can do so without any consequences. Further, you do not have to answer any questions which make you feel uncomfortable. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study and no penalties if you choose not to participate. While you will not be anonymous because I know who you are, confidentiality is a guarantee as your identity will be kept confidential. This means that neither you nor any identifier will be used in the report and pseudonyms will be used if necessary. Myself and my supervisor will be the only people to process both the recordings and the transcripts. After the transcription of the interviews the recordings will be destroyed. Anonymous transcriptions will be kept in a password locked computer and accessible only to my supervisor and myself.

If you choose to participate in the research, kindly fill in your details in the consent form below. For further information please feel free to contact me on the details below. Your participation will be sincerely appreciated. If you require, a summary of the results will be made available on request. Should you require this, you can contact me telephonically or via e-mail. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you. If you have an concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of the study, you

are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone: +27 (0) 11 717 1408, email: hrec-medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za.

Kind regards,

Keolebogile Namane
Email: keolebz02@gmail.com

Supervisor:
Mr Ian Siemers
Lecturer in the Psychology Department
Email: ian.siemers@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX B: Interview Consent Form

Psychology
School of Human & Community Development
University of the Witwatersrand
Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050
Tel: (011) 717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559

Interview Consent Form

I (the participant) have been given the participant information sheet for the study being conducted by Keolebogile Namane and supervised by Mr. Ian Siemers. I have read this information sheet and I understand its contents.

I understand that:

☐ My participation in this research is entirely voluntary, as I am free to choose to participate or not to participate.

☐ I may decide to stop participating at any time during the interview, since there is no penalty for withdrawing or refusing to participate.

☐ I may choose not to answer specific questions and there is no penalty for refusing to address these questions.

☐ All identifying information will be treated with utmost confidentiality.

☐ No names will be recorded on the interview transcription.

☐ If I agree to participate, I need to sign this form as proof of my acceptance.

I understand the conditions and accept to participate in this study voluntarily.

Participant signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C: Biographical Questionnaire

BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

(**For describing sample only**)

Please fill in the form and tick where appropriate

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Race: _____

Faculty: _____

Year of Study: _____

Degree: _____

Major: _____

APPENDIX D: Interview Schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

General questions

1. Tell me about your current university life?

2. What are you are currently studying?

3. How are you finding being an exit-level student?

4. What kind of study routine do you follow?

5. Do you generally have a big workload?

Exploring the situation

6. What are your thoughts about the current COVID-19 pandemic and your studies?

7.Has the national lockdown had an impact on the way you tackle your studies?

8.Are the ways you feel you can change your situation?

9. Do you feel confident that there are job opportunities available?

10. Do you find that COVID-19 may have an impact on finding employment?

Exploring the Self

11. How do you feel about entering the world of work?

12. Have you started applying for jobs/internships?

13. How do you cope with dealing with things that you are not familiar with?

14. Do you feel like you are managing?

Exploring form of support drawn on.

15. Do you have good relationship with your family?

16. Did you feel pressured by your family to find a job?

17. Who do you speak to when things feel difficult?

18. Are there friends that you discuss things with?

19. Did you feel comfortable to ask for help from your lecturers?

Understanding Strategies

20.When faced with challenges, what do you do to help yourself manage challenges?

21. Are there situations where you feel that you cannot manage?

22. Were there situations where you think you did well? If so, what makes you think that they went well?

APPENDIX E: Ethical Clearance Certificate

Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MAORG/20/013**
PROJECT TITLE:	Transitioning from graduation to employment: students' perceptions on finding employment in the context of covid-19.
INVESTIGATOR	Namane Keolebogile (1405551)
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	SHCD/Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	12 July 2020
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Minimal Risk
EXPIRY DATE	31 December 2022

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 25 July 2020 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Dr Colleen Bernstein)

cc: Mr Ian Siemers (Supervisor)

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.