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# A Narrative Inquiry into the Sense of Belonging, Alienation and Exclusion of Immigrant Students

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**SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

# A Narrative Inquiry into the Sense of Belonging, Alienation and Exclusion of Immigrant Students

Research submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements of a Masters in Social and Psychological Research in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, March 2023.

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**DECLARATION**

I declare this research proposal is my unaided work submitted in partial fulfilment for a Master in Social and Psychological Research at the University of Witwatersrand.

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Signature: 

Date: 15th March, 2023

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| ACMS | African Centre for Migration and Society |
| AOD | Acknowledgement of Debt |
| CRT | Critical Race Theory |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of Congo |
| DHA | Department of Home Affairs |
| DHET | Department of Higher Education and Training |
| IELTS | International English Language Testing System |
| IOM | International Organisation for Migration |
| NI | Narrative Inquiry |
| NSMSTE | National Strategy for Mathematics, Science and Technology Education |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| QDA | Qualitative Data Analysis |
| SAB | South African Breweries |
| SADC | Southern African Development Community |
| TOEFEL | Test of English as a Foreign Language |
| TIMSS | The International Mathematics and Science Study |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| VFS | Visa Facilitation Services |
| WCCO | Wits Citizenship and Community Outreach |
| WHO | World Health Organisation |
| ZIMSOC | Zimbabwean Students Association |

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background of the study

South Africa, especially Johannesburg, appears to be an emerging education destination for most African university students, based on the influx of student migration post-apartheid. Many scholars have supported this trend as it is a pool of intellectual capital and talent much needed for economic growth and development (Hiralal, 2015). Statistics from South Africa show that 74 000 immigrant students enrolled in both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, accounting for an 8% increase in the overall student population registered in South African institutions of higher learning at the start of 2013. (Mokhothu & Callaghan 2018). Of this, students from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region comprise 5.5 % of South Africa's higher education enrolment, with the largest group coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Lee et al. (2015) posed that these students usually come to seek asylum, refuge, and education opportunities (Lee & Sehoole, 2020). Despite this increase, university students worldwide face higher mental health and psychological challenges than those reported in most other studies on the student population in South Africa (Mutinta, 2022).

According to the WHO Global Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project study, One-third of university students had experienced mental health issues in the past (Auerbach et al., 2018). Despite this, the sector appears to be one of the most underserviced in the country, with one-third of its university student population having experienced mental distress (Mutinta, 2022). Thus, greater emphasis should be placed on indications of mental distress in Black immigrant students from low-income countries as they face a multitude of psychosocial stressors and other psychological issues. Research by Rousseau et al. (2020), for example, suggests that students in low- and middle-income countries are more vulnerable to crime and trauma, have less access to mental health care, and may be at a higher risk of developing mood disorders compared to those in high-income countries.

Acculturation to the social norms of a different country is one of the main challenges that immigrant students encounter whilst pursuing their higher education, which can impact their mental health. Immigrant students in higher education face sociocultural and discriminatory challenges, such as negative stereotypes, confrontations, and threats to physical safety (Lee et al., 2015). Vandeyar (2012) argues that sustaining social roles and social relationships for prescribed cultural notions may help students to cope with

acculturative stress. However, immigrant students face cultural differences in South Africa and encounter issues arising from discrimination, social exclusion, threats to their safety, and xenophobia affecting how they experience a sense of belonging. A global study by Lee and Sehoole (2020) demonstrated that neo-nationalism and discrimination experienced by students from neighbouring countries subjected them to victimisation by local students due to fears of competing for already scarce resources.

Noting continued debates about differentiating 'international students' and 'migrant students', Lee and Sehoole (2020) emphasised the need to make clear distinctions between the two, as some fall under the definition of 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees', not international students. The current study focused on immigrant students from the Southern African region. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), (OECD, 2015), international students are a subgroup of students who relocate from their home country to study. As defined by UNESCO (2017), immigrant students are individuals who choose to study abroad rather than being forcibly uprooted from their home countries by warfare, religious intolerance, or political unrest, like refugees are.

This distinction draws from the literature that suggests that students' experiences from Europe and North America have been more favourable than those of a more expansive geopolitical space (Lee & Sehoole, 2020). Similarly, global studies found that discrimination against African immigrants negatively impacted their sociocultural integration in southern Europe, such as students from Ghana and Egypt in Italy and Senegalese and Moroccan students in Spanish universities (Iwara et al., 2017). Moreover, immigrant students from African countries experience profound discrimination in Europe and America but experience even more discrimination than other students across the globe, even in South Africa. While higher education in South Africa has seen a considerably positive transformation since the apartheid regime, which prioritised white elite students attending top-tier universities, currently, these institutions are more accessible and cost-effective for African students than those in the global north (Sing, 2016).

Despite efforts to accommodate immigrant students, there are still enormous tensions between Black South African students and those from neighbouring countries, the deprivation of scarce resources being the centre of the pressure. Ramphele (1999) highlighted the importance of South African institutions in recognising the financial, cultural, and academic contributions gained by internationally recognised institutions from international students. However, internationalisation must be balanced and focused on compensating for

the legacy left by apartheid education by actively including more black South African students.

Since apartheid's end in 1994, South Africa has undergone a structural upheaval and systemic transformation that has placed simultaneous demands on national reform and global integration of the country's higher education institutions. Consequently, manifestations of numerous post-apartheid exchange and cooperation agreements signed, among others, academics and research visits related to societies in the transition of postgraduate students development funded by international partners for students from other African countries to study in South Africa rather than abroad for higher education and training (Rouhani, 2007).

To facilitate regional collaboration and integration in the education sector and to encourage regional internationalisation of higher education, SADC member states signed the SADC Protocol on Education and Training in 1997. As a result, all member states agreed that 5% of all available study places were reserved for SADC member students (Kwaramba, 2012). In addition, Kwaramba (2012) observed that the Protocol also stipulates a commitment by member states for SADC member state students to be treated similarly to local students regarding tuition fees and accommodation. South Africa has made strides in implementing this strategy, with most universities setting different tuition fees for students from within SADC and outside the region. However, other member states are yet to implement this Protocol (Kwaramba, 2012).

The University of the Witwatersrand, located in the burgeoning metropolitan centre of Johannesburg, is a key destination for immigrant students seeking to further their higher education studies in South Africa. At this institution, students from SADC member countries pay annual local tuition fees, international registration fees and related costs, which are also different for refugee status and asylum-seekers stationed in South Africa. In contrast, international students outside SADC pay double the local tuition fees. In recent years, the significant financial cost of higher education in South Africa has gained more public attention. However, the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa focused predominantly on the financial struggles of historically disadvantaged black South African students, not considering the financial situations of immigrant students. In addition, Raghuram et al. (2020) noted that the term' international students' contributes to the perception that these students are already privileged individuals seeking to replicate their advantage through international study, often considered a ‘monetised export’ category to the institution and not a person.

## 1.2 Conceptual definitions

The theoretical foundation for this research is a narrative inquiry into the experiences of immigrant students. The empirical study draws from narrative theory, which continues to gain interest among research psychologists (Herman et al., 2012) for a deepened understanding of immigrant students in higher education. The research draws from an interpretive paradigm in many narrative studies, an underpinning paradigm concerned with understanding the lived experience and takes human interpretation as a starting point, which Herman (2001) suggested as free and direct speech.

The multidimensional narrative theory approach has seen direct relevance in many disciplines, for example, in the cultural and social construction of gender and gender and expanded into narrative texts that include social class, race, nationality, and ethnicity, which feminist narratologies try to dismantle as they form identities and categories of oppression (Herman et al., 2012). Bradbury (2020) stated that narrative in terms of storytelling enables researchers to conduct themselves naturally, not only in the capacity of telling stories per se but through our narration of life. In Bradbury's (2020) view, social subjects are established in the form of language and meaning and stay completely natural, expressed in the material naturally intrinsic to humans, like sign language and storytelling.

For this study, the terms' international' and 'foreign students', commonly used interchangeably, were replaced with 'immigrant students' based on the premise that they travelled to study in the country, not necessarily displaced from their countries of origin due to conflict, religious, political conflict tension or war. Moreover, their migration status is stable as they can afford to pay their fees, healthcare, and others are on scholarships with their well-being not unnerved by forced movement or human rights abuses (Lee & Sehoole, 2020).

This research was built on the psychosocial issues identified in the literature, mainly focusing on experiences of alienation, exclusion and belonging. It utilised the conceptual underpinnings of 'belonging' and 'alienation' to understand how a sense of belonging may be associated with an individual's immigrant status and sociocultural background. Other literature from South African studies cites many psychosocial issues preventing immigrant students from fully contributing to the knowledge production of South Africa. Iwara et al. (2017) found insufficient empirical evidence in some of the studies conducted within the South African context to inform further studies on sociocultural factors based on studies from the University of Zululand and the University of Venda. Immigrant students experience specific emotional and psychosocial issues due to preconceived notions of crime, rape and

xenophobia in South Africa (Iwara et al., 2017). Based on a broader context, Johannesburg hosts many foreign nationals, including illegal immigrants, from all SADC nations.

## 1.3 Problem statement

Wits University is situated within the heart of Johannesburg and exposed to the many direct and indirect effects of anti-immigrant activism, such as Operation Dudula, a controversial group campaigning against the growing numbers of undocumented foreign nationals in South Africa, which continues to build across the city of Johannesburg (Wits News, 2022). Stopping violence against immigrants may be done by acknowledging the risks of South Africa's collapsing system of indirect control and that this requires action at the constitutional level (Wits News, 2022). Other multidimensional complexities of immigrants are not generalised among migrant groups (Prilleltensky, 2008; Raghuram et al., 2020; Sharp & Theiler, 2018). Knowledge and debates about the sociocultural experiences and discriminatory challenges immigrant students face in South Africa continue to emerge. Another area evident in the literature is that an absence of research still looks into the students' insights through a narrative inquiry approach. There is also continued growth of students from the DRC, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe into South African public universities.

My observations have led me to believe that immigrant students' experiences with belonging, alienation, and exclusion offer valuable insights for future immigrant studies, and this research contributes to our understanding of those experiences. Furthermore, identifying the psychosocial factors is critical for developing intervention policies and strategies to manage mental distress among this group to benefit South African professionals and policymakers significantly.

## 1.4 Research Rationale

This background demonstrates a considerable need to explore further emerging issues affecting immigrant students in South Africa. For example, Iwara et al. (2017) noted that designating foreign or immigrant students in separate accommodations on campus may deny them opportunities to exchange cultural beliefs with the locals. Understanding the experiences of belonging, exclusion, and alienation concerning immigrant students in South Africa and how these impact developing a sense of identity is integral to improving the experiences of these students at universities in South Africa. Through a narrative inquiry theoretical lens, the complex nature of the psychosocial issues that affect immigrant students

at the University was unpacked. Exploring students' experiences and challenges helped to understand how they formulate a sense of belonging and identity as university students to "fit in" their new environment. This narrative inquiry explored the in-depth meanings of these complex issues and identified the effects of alienation and exclusion on the psychosocial well-being of migrant students from the DRC, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe at the University of Witwatersrand. The research objectives focused on the complex relationships and experience the researcher had experienced as a Malawian immigrant student staying and studying in South Africa.

In the African context, issues of psychological nature are usually not spoken about openly. Recruiting the right participants that fit into the specific categories to tell their stories posed a significant challenge. Therefore, the researcher used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling to recruit eight postgraduate students currently registered at Wits University based on participants' similar traits. Only those willing and available to share their opinions and experiences will be part of the study (Etikan, 2016). Unlike random sampling, this research only focused on those in the immigrant student category. Participants came from different faculties and programmes from the specific SADC member state countries of Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and DRC. As a result, eight immigrant students between 30 and 45 years old were interviewed, representing a much better terrain of experiences.

Focusing the study on these specific countries was based on the premise that out of the current 15 SADC member states (Kwaramba, 2012)[1], previous studies reveal that DRC and Zimbabwe comprise the largest group of migrant students, followed by Malawi and Mozambique, most of them are marginalised (Lee et al., 2015). Therefore, this study needed to investigate the students' experiences of belonging, alienation and exclusion that affect them, as many students feel that South Africa has not made deliberate efforts in their immigration policies to protect them from xenophobia (Ramphele,1999). The narrative theoretical framework draws from Yuval-Davis's (2016) concept of belonging and points to social and political constructs such as social locations, individual identities, and emotional attachments to groups. This is used as a paradox to investigate experiences of the complexities of black South Africans' attitudes towards other black African through forms of social alienation and exclusion such as Afrophobia, xenophobia and racism that can hinder social integration and a sense of belonging.

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[1] The current 15 Member States are: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

## 1.5 Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to discover insights into the psychosocial experiences related to belonging, alienation and exclusion among immigrant students at Wits University and explore how these experiences could be significant in shaping their identities. The study's first objective is to understand the concepts of a sense of belonging and alienation concerning Afro-phobia, xenophobia, and issues of race and racism in South Africa more generally (Landau et al., 2005). The second objective is to bring forth the narrative theoretical framework through storytelling to form detailed accounts of immigrants who predominantly perceive themselves as conventionally excluded and may use their will to support and shape the narrative, making it a powerful tool for knowledge (Bradbury, 2020). Finally, exploring how immigrant students in South Africa's universities experience a sense of belonging, alienation, and exclusion will help them identify and understand their challenges when adapting to their new environments. Thus, the research will address (i) immigrant students' sense of belonging, exclusion, and alienation and (ii) the narrative experiences of sense of belonging, alienation and feeling of exclusion of immigrant students in South African universities.

## 1.6 Chapter Organisation

This research report contains six chapters; Chapter 1 provides an introductory background summary of the study and its location within the current South African context and provides a brief overview of the narrative inquiry, which forms the study's theoretical basis. Furthermore, the chapter briefly defines immigrant students and their psychosocial issues relative to the research. Chapter 2 explores the literature on the working definitions of immigrants and the implications of SADC education migration in South Africa. Third, the common forms of exclusion in South African universities. Fourth, fourth, psychosocial issues affecting immigrant students. Fifth, the concepts of a sense of belonging and alienation. Sixth, narratives of racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia. Chapter 3 draws on narrative theory and closely examines past research on South Africa and its direct relevance to narrative notions and storytelling of immigrants' experiences of racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia drawn from Critical Race Theory. Chapter 4 discusses the methodological approach grounded on phenomenological assumptions of storytelling experiences. It will also outline the research design of a qualitative Narrative Inquiry grounded within the broader qualitative research, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, and conclude by examining the

researcher's reflexivity and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the key findings of the research and interpretations of this study, looking into the different aspects of a sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion through the lens of narratives of racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia in South Africa. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a conclusion, researchers' reflections on the key findings, notable strengths and weaknesses and recommendations for future research.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides literature on immigrant students' feelings of belonging, alienation, and exclusion at South African higher education institutions. First, the chapter starts by providing definitions that differentiate the different categories of immigrant students before delving into the policy framework of South Africa's higher education to highlight the current status of immigrant students. In addition, the implications of SADC policies on education immigration are investigated. Central to this are common forms of exclusion immigrant students face and psychosocial issues affecting their sense of belonging and alienation. The location of this study in the larger South African higher education sector provides the context for understanding the importance of narratives of racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia within student experiences. More information on how immigrant students cope in their host countries can potentially assist governments and universities in serving this population better.

## 2.2 Immigrant students, international students, refugees and asylum seekers

Since 2006, student mobility data have sought to standardise words and concepts associated with gathering academic mobility information for international, foreign, and immigrant students (Clark, 2009). In order to better understand the complexities and diverse backgrounds of immigrant students, it was essential to grasp a general sense of the different definitions encompassing the term 'international student'. Globally, the terms' asylum seeker', 'refugee', and 'immigrant' are often used synonymously. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD (2015) stresses the need for differentiation between the two groups, with "international students" defined as a subset of "foreign students" who relocate from their home country for educational purposes. According to a study conducted by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS), "worldwide mobile students" are those who travel internationally to attend school (UNESCO, 2017). According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), a migrant is any person who has crossed an international border from their country of origin, regardless of that person's legal status, the motivation for the migration, the length of time the migrant plans to remain in the destination country, or the length of time the migrant has been there (UN, 2020).

Through the lens of student immigrants, this definition matches those provided by other authors who distinguished 'international' and 'foreign' students as those who travel to

other countries specifically to continue with formal education after completing high school and 'immigrant students' as those that travel to other countries from their country of origin before finishing secondary school education in their country of origin (Clark, 2009; Stegemoller, 2004; Taborda, 2017).

Because not everyone will seek asylum or refugee status upon entering other nations, the phrase migrant or immigrant is used as a general term to represent a scenario where mobility is mixed (OECD, 2015). There is no unilateral consensus on who foreign students are. Still, in most situations, they are classified as aliens, as 'others,' and 'other' is generally a short step from being regarded as 'unknown' and even 'dangerous,' a notion that leaves international students feeling powerless and defenceless (Taborda, 2017).

Subsequently, there have been many debates around the definition and understanding of 'foreigners', a source of tension mainly among black Africans towards students from neighbouring countries. Ramphele (1999) defined a 'foreign student' as anyone without a South African permanent residence status, a diplomatic exemption or citizenship. For Nwokedi (2020), these comprise a diversity of students studying in a country that is not their country of birth to gain global-level knowledge and skills while bringing in different world-views, opinions and cultural understandings. Lee and Sehoole (2020) differentiate 'migrants and international' students from 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'.

This study adopted the OECD (2015) and UNESCO (2017) conventions of 'international' and 'foreign students', used to refer to 'immigrant students' based on the premise that they travelled to study in the country, not necessarily that they were forced out of their countries of origin due to conflict, religious, political tension or war. Their migration status is stable as they can afford to pay their fees, healthcare, and others are on scholarships with their well-being not unnerved by forced movement or human rights abuses (Clark, 2009; Lee & Sehoole, 2020). The OECD (2015) report defines 'asylum seekers' as those who formally applied for asylum and are required to complete the asylum seeker procedures, after which a humanitarian migrant status is granted to them, even though only a fraction of them obtain humanitarian migrant status and the others who do not are obliged to leave the country. Refugees are people who have fled their home country because they fear for their safety due to war or their religion, ethnicity or membership in a certain social group, or political ideas, and who are unable or unwilling to apply for asylum in their home country (OECD, 2015; UNESCO; 2017).

## 2.3 Implications of SADC education immigration in South Africa

Despite the gains in the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa, the implications this has for immigrant students still cause significant debates. David (2015) noted some challenges with the agreed-upon 5% admission reserve for students from SADC countries, singling out opponents who believe that expanding the admission of foreign students may limit the admission options for South African students as the country is grappling not only with internationalisation but also regionalisation and Africanisation. Riaño and Piguet (2016) established that international students are the fastest-growing migrant population globally, a point that other studies have also supported. In South Africa, this group has an increasing presence in public universities, and their plight continues to attract more academic research, making significant financial contributions to institutions. Many studies have referred to education immigration as a traditional 'push-pull' model that occurs when there is a push-out of students from their countries and pull-into other countries to look for better, quality education and resources deemed inadequate in their countries (Lee et al., 2015; Yu, 2022).

The focus on immigrant students from SADC countries draws from 2009 global statistics that have ranked South Africa as one of the top 10 destinations for international students. According to Tati (2010), this forms nearly 8 per cent of the international students' population, and South Africa is the eighth most preferred study destination for African foreigners. Based on data published by Tella (2016), documented SADC immigrants account for 32.7 per cent of all African foreigners with temporary resident permits. Of all the universities, students from the SADC region outnumber those from other regions across different universities (Tati, 2010). This research focused on immigrant students who come from three selected SADC countries, DRC, Malawi and Zimbabwe because they fall within the top ten sending countries of international students to South Africa; even so, Zimbabwe is a particular case as it is one country whose citizens gets granted special permits that expired in December 2021 (Kwaramba, 2012; Yu, 2022). These countries were found by Kwaramba (2012; Yu (2022) to have compromised higher education systems because of conflicts and economic downfalls.

This influx resulted in the demand for quality education for enthusiastic students, coupled with the SADC protocol agreement to reserve five per cent of university places for SADC students (Kwaramba, 2012; Mlambo, 2018). Even though this potentially bridges the skills gap and provides a lifeline for knowledge production and education expertise for a country suffering from brain drain left by skilled academics and professionals who have left

the country and the implications of this cannot be ignored (Mlambo, 2018; Yu, 2022). As suggested by Pineteh et al. (2016), the social capital that comes with international student mobility has significant implications for higher education pedagogy. Cross-border migration has impeded the development of regional cooperation (Mlambo, 2018). For Ramphele (1999), this includes compounding social, economic, cultural, and psychosocial issues due to fears of being deported by the government. South African immigration policies require repatriation arrangements to ensure the students return to their countries of origin (Ramphele, 1999).

Lee (2017) noted that negative labels and safety risks sometimes physically heighten students' anxieties about safety in South Africa. In contrast, white international students from North America or Europe generally encountered more positive experiences (Lee & Sehoole, 2020). Tagliabue (2022) suggested that the 2015/16 #FeesMustFall student protests that started at Rhodes University and spread across South African universities magnified persistent inequalities, especially for SADC students who felt excluded. Other debates around the protests emanated from access to resources that excluded immigrant students, even though local students were entitled to more economic resources such as bursaries, grants, scholarships, and access to government loans (Hungwe, 2018).

Other scholars like Langa (2017) observed similar examples from a focus group with international students from the SADC region. These students disapproved of the protests as they felt the burden of fees could not entirely be carried by the government (Langa, 2017). Moreover, compared to other studies, SADC students were concerned about being mistakenly identified as more privileged than they thought and felt marginalised based on their position in the political identity that came with the #FeesMustFall protests (Tagliabue, 2022).

### 2.4 Common forms of exclusion faced by immigrant students

Prioritising the retention of immigrant students in public universities has drawn much interest since post-apartheid. The country still revels in being considered a sophisticated centre of learning that draws many African international students (DHET, 2017). However, this growth has consequences for immigrant students' adaptation, academic success and well-being when they arrive in the country. For example, stringent immigration policies considered discriminatory and slow turnaround of visa applications compound students' anxiety (Chinyamurindi 2018; Ramphele 1999; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi 2021; Yu 2022). The OECD (2010) reports that immigrant students usually experience more significant challenges in achieving good education outcomes than their local peers and have diverse

needs. Immigrants are disproportionately vulnerable to discrimination and marginalisation, forcing them to operate underground, scared to protest for fear of being victimised (United Nations, 2020).

Yu (2022) posed that this hostility is met with pique, resulting in immigrant communities forming to support each other. Kasese-Hara and Mugambi (2021) argued that the alienation felt by African immigrant students is traced back to a lack of social and structural assistance. Students in South Africa still have difficulty obtaining help with study visa applications and on-campus administrative support and advice regarding registration, housing, academic support, counselling, and social and cultural activities. However, this is required by the internationalisation of the higher education policy framework (DHET, 2017).

Certain university policies have been criticised as retaliatory, including exclusion from opportunities inside the institution that are only open to local students, premium international students fees, drawn-out visa application processes, and up-front repatriation charges (Ramphele, 1999). Kasese-Hara and Mugambi (2021) viewed these conditions as promoting exclusion rather than inclusion and impacting immigrant students' socio-emotional functioning. Many scholars have urged host university institutions to look beyond academics and focus on prioritising the well-being and health of migrant students. (Sing, 2016). The cross-cultural and psychological implications that include restrictive labels and negative connotations of exclusion, such as 'refugee' and 'immigrant', are considered exclusionary (Brislin,1992).

According to other research by Kasese-Hara and Mugambi (2021) and Sing (2016), international university students must employ an array of support systems to cope with academic and social pressures and adjustment difficulties. For instance, many African students may not have the same financial resources as their foreign colleagues from North America and Europe (Sing, 2016; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021). Similar studies identify issues around Afrophobia, racial discrimination, ideological tensions, challenges associated with cross-border mobility, cultural adaption, feelings of isolation, violence, homesickness, discrimination, and prejudices (Hungwe, 2018; Pineteh et al., 2016; Sing, 2016). Many immigrant students also require financial support to cover recurring food, accommodation, and transportation expenses (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Nwokedi, 2020). However, this area remains under-researched as widespread anti-immigrant sentiments remain prominent.

Pineteh et al. (2016) conducted a similar investigation with a cohort of students from Gabon and DRC at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, drawing on theoretical ideas of

"transnationalism," social isolation, and migrant adaption. According to the research, the ability of non-native English speakers to interact and communicate in English with their peers and staff is crucial for reducing the effects of discrimination and negotiating new social relations with local students at universities where English is the official language of instruction (Pineteh et al., 2016; Sonn, 2002).

## 2.5 Conceptual understanding of sense of belonging and alienation

This research builds on the psychosocial issues identified in the literature and seeks to understand how immigrant students may experience a sense of belonging and alienation interrelated with an individual's immigrant status and socio-cultural background.

### 2.5.1 Sense of Belonging

While arguing the importance of 'belonging' to educational research, educational psychologists frequently cite the perspective presented by Allen et al. (2022). It is important to note that a sense of 'belonging' in a university context might be associated with psychological adjustment and motivation, even if school belonging can appear differently across different groups and situations (Slaten et al., 2016). Subsequently, anxiety and depression are two mental health conditions linked to a lack of belonging and may contribute to poor levels of belonging at school (Rousseau et al., 2020). (Slaten et al., 2016). The psychological and social dynamics are essential in understanding how a 'sense of belonging' develops, and how this can be rehabilitated once lost is an area worth paying attention to (Blatner, 2008).

Many scholars have theorised belonging within Maslow's hierarchy of essential human needs (Allen et al., 2022; Blatner, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Slaten et al., 2016). According to Slaten et al. (2016), this requirement is a potent concept and evidence of human motivation that would develop after the physiological and safety demands are met. Several critical elements are linked to the concept of "school belonging," studies have demonstrated favourable links between belonging in the school environment and things like academic success, positive mental health outcomes, and the avoidance of risky behaviours (Slaten et al., 2016). Belonging research, pioneered by Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary in 1995, is described as feeling accepted, liked and connected to and by a group of others and like a community member (Allen et al., 2022). Scholars like Yuval-Davis have done Decades of groundwork and research to understand a 'sense of belonging' (2016). They provided a conceptual framework of belonging and pinned it on social and political constructs such as

social locations, individual identities and emotional attachments to groups. People get emotionally attached to the construction of their self-identities and may be insecure and willing to risk their lives and those of others when narratives about their attachment and identities are threatened (Yuval-Davis, 2016). Of particular importance is how this relates to alienation.

### 2.5.2 Alienation

Characterised as a sense of self-estrangement, a lack of social support, or genuine social connectivity, alienation includes feelings like social isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness and is a key indicator of psychological health (Chen et al., 2022). Alienation is defined as the "condition of being detached from a group or an activity to which one should belong or be part," according to the Oxford Lexicon cited by Mann (2001). To comprehend alienation and the coping mechanisms put in place to maintain a sense of identity, Mann (2001) presented seven distinct theoretical vantage points. To better understand student alienation in the context of higher education, this research drew from Mann's thinking that conditions that promote students' experiences of alienation be critically examined and eliminated. Within the socio-cultural context, Mann (2001) viewed the experience of alienation as inevitable due to the complexities of prescribed norms of institutionalised academic life, which still needs to be balanced with the students having to achieve a meaningful personal purpose while they still engage in higher education, linked to the issues of institutional support.

From the lens of discursive practices, structural features that position immigrant students based on race, language and culture resulting in reducing their position as a mere 'type' such as 'immigrant student' rather than just an individual, may evoke feelings of alienation and confusion, of being unable to make a difference because of one's status as an alien in a strange place (Mann, (2001), and may be associated with language barriers and immigration status. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's (1986) theories, 'alienation' is a lack of "sense of belonging", and alienation is defined as "a state of being cut off from one's social network, whether it family, friends, or school." It has been proposed that a good way to combat alienation is by establishing linkages or ties across our culture through schools. More recent work by Blatner (2008) cautioned today's problematic post-modernism culture, which has exacerbated estrangement for the last several decades, rendering life fundamentally different from fifty years ago. Alienated people do not feel adequately connected, and this state, known as a loss of belongingness, is one of the important but frequently neglected

causes of a wide range of psychological and societal dysfunctions (Blatner, 2008), finding links to Mann's (2001) argument that, those who feel alienated live in a society where those who feel powerful may force their values and worldviews on everyone. In our context, Tagliabue (2022) explained why many disadvantaged and immigrant students seek a sense of belonging in South Africa's formerly white universities. This sentiment was also echoed in a study by Amoateng (2016), which concluded that South Africa's society is not as unified as terminology like 'ubuntu' and 'rainbow nation' would lead us to believe. For example, Tagliabue (2022) established that the post-white academic environment narrows their identity options for immigrant students, particularly from SADC, as was the case during the #feesmustfall protests. Furthermore, Mann (2001) posed that unequal social and power relationships and consistent features of learning in universities do not allow the development of an autonomous sense of self for students, resulting in them developing a 'false-self' as a survival strategy for the lack of a good enough relationship and a good enough learning space, which could be related to discouraging administrative processes and lack of adequate supervision.

Another body of literature by Kiguwa and Carolissen (2018) drew on narratives of belonging and alienation among South African higher education students to understand information transmission through storytelling. Other researchers found Allen et al. (2022) 's concept to be beneficial for student's mental health and emotional well-being when applied in educational settings. For example, Chinyamurindi (2018) emphasised perceived institutional failures within and outside the universities contributing to immigrant students' hardships. This author suggests some practical ways of adjusting to the experience of being an immigrant student to attain a sense of belonging by finding ways to manage the realities around their daily lives, which can result in feeling alienated. Often, students may find strategies to counter alienation for self-preservation, like the notion of 'leave me alone' and self-alienate to resist the before mentioned incursions as a survival tactic (Mann, 2001).

### 2.6 Psychosocial issues affecting immigrant students in South African universities

In recent decades, university students' interest in mental health and well-being has expanded enormously, attracting the attention of mental health practitioners who have provided an in-depth understanding of the mental health issues faced by migrant students and the suitability of mental health services offered by academic institutions to address those issues. Most recent studies suggest an increase and the severity of mental problems among

university students, such as anxiety and depression (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2020), experiences of stress, trauma, and adjustment (Vandeyar, 2012). Despite evidence that institutions of higher learning have made commitments to provide unique opportunities that promote students' mental health and well-being, there are growing concerns that most university students experiencing mental health challenges and low levels of well-being do not receive treatment and support (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). These issues are even more compounded among immigrant students who are confronted with even more significant multitudes of psychological factors (Paloma et al., 2016), the complexities of which have drawn the attention of many scholars.

It has also been identified in the literature that there is a dearth of culturally appropriate mental health services offered by academic institutions specifically tailored to immigrant students, such as counselling services and campus health. This research has questioned whether these services are suited to the needs of immigrant students. For example, cultural sensitivity training has been recommended for campus mental health professionals to help ensure that professionals are aware of and sensitive to the unique cultural backgrounds and needs of migrating students (Whaley & Davis, 2007). Again, addressing acculturation stress for immigrants to adapt to a new culture through counselling can be significant to the well-being of immigrants.

Prilleltensky (2008) argued that host countries evaluate their commitments and see immigration as a chance to reflect on their objectives for a just society, not simply beyond borders. However, identifying specific psychosocial issues has not been very well researched. Despite the constant expansion of the immigrant student population, even in global studies, they remain one of the quietest, most invisible, and most underserved groups. More focus must focus on xenophobia, prejudice and discrimination, language barriers and financial challenges. Several scholars have suggested extensive research on institutional support to alleviate immigrant students' academic and non-academic challenges (Hungwe, 2018; Sing, 2016; Vandeyar, 2012; Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). Mori (2000) demonstrated social and academic adjustment problems and the need for culturally relevant psychological assessments as some of the areas where institutions can support immigrant students, as Koo and Nyunt (2020) pointed out.

### 2.6.1 Institutional Support

This study drew from broader issues that affect immigrant students as identified by scholars who found compelling evidence in North American universities of innumerable psychological, social support and academic adjustment problems coupled with drastically underutilised counselling facilities and services in high-learning institutions (Mori, 2000; Yeh et al. 2008). In similar studies, Koo and Nyunt (2020) revealed a lack of culturally sensitive psychological assessments to support immigrant students' mental health in the host institutions. In addition, Sharp and Theiler (2018) also found student-related dynamics such as personal characteristics, institutional influences such as access to support, governmental policies, and access to funding, contributing factors to student psychosocial distress, which may also affect their academic performance.

In most South African studies, there is not much evidence in the literature about the specific institutional support available to immigrant students. Still, there is little research on the forms of institutional assistance available to alleviate these issues. However, there is compelling evidence pointing to how academic staff and fellow students go to great lengths in their personal capacities to extend support to destitute immigrant students (Sing, 2016). Related to this, structural support necessary for adapting immigrant students within institutions and the role of the international students' offices has come under scrutiny for having inadequate and incompetent personnel, well versed with their unique needs, and usually serving an unnecessarily redundant function that delays the orientation process but plays a vital role in issuing visa letters (Sing, 2016; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Mann, 2001). Similarly, the little known about the immigrant students' dispositions, expectations, needs, and weak institutional structures meant for an inclusive environment creates unequal incorporation of immigrant students (Salas et al., 2021) and a lack of institutional measures that provide a reception for immigrant students such as the construction of/or improved social support networks and systems (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Bukhari, 2015).

### 2.6.2 Prejudice and Discrimination

An extensive body of international and South African research has investigated the experiences of prejudice and discrimination among immigrant students as a leading contributor to diminished psychological well-being as they encounter different cultures, languages, and the challenges of navigating their new surroundings (Paloma et al., 2016). Two studies demonstrated distinct types of discrimination that immigrant students experience

from various sources. These studies reveal that students often feel discriminated against due to differences in their physical appearance, race or ethnicity and skin colour, often facing stereotypical slurs and stigma (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Mahoney et al., 2022). The projection of this stigma is so solid and hostile that black students are often called 'slum dogs' and 'thieves'. As a result, students may end up feeling isolated and not belonging, as well as experiencing a negative impact on self-efficacy and self-worth (Mahoney et al., 2022).

Initiatives that help immigrant students experience when they try to 'fit in' and find social networks (Raaper et al., 2022) and groups on campus are inadequate, resulting in them feeling alienated. Furthermore, they discriminated against (Hungwe, 2018). Vandeyar (2012) pointed out feelings of isolation, fear of racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia. This research helps to identify areas where immigrant students negotiate their identities when adjusting to and navigating a new environment and the vulnerabilities that affect their well-being.

According to Landau et al. (2005), while negative experiences towards black foreigners differ across socioeconomic and ethnicities, evidence points to the high numbers of discrimination faced by non-South African citizens by officials working in government institutions such as the hospitals and police and private organisations running deportation detention centres. In addition to locals' fear of foreigners taking their jobs, draining public resources, and engaging in criminal activities, foreigners are scapegoats for poor political leadership (Landau et al., 2005). Comparable to this, black African students in Bezerra and Alves (2022) recognise the need for social transformation through the knowledge of human rights to reflect the effective inclusion of immigrant students. In the South African context, the concepts of racism bear close links to xenophobia and Afrophobia, which are discussed further in the following section.

### 2.6.3 Racism, Xenophobia and Afrophobia

Foster (1991) described racism as an ideology, a negative evaluative representation of the "other" and differentiated this term from institutional racism to refer to specific practices of inclusion and exclusion expressed in past and present discourses. Racism in South Africa has a long history dating back to the Dutch settlers who brought the idea of racial superiority to justify the enslavement and oppression of indigenous people, further entrenched by British colonialism with the systematic discrimination of black South Africans becoming institutionalised under the system of apartheid (Dubow, 2015; O'Malley, 1999). Even though racism is still dominant in South Africa, the social situation has changed since apartheid. The post-apartheid era in 1994 marked the beginning of a new era in South Africa. The country

has since made significant progress in addressing the legacy of racism and discrimination (Durrheim et al., 2011; O'Malley, 1999).

Despite the many challenges that remain and existing racism in various forms in the country today (Baldwin, 2017) the transition into democracy when the African National Congress (ANC) got into power in 1994 brought hope to immigration policies. As a result, South Africa has strategically positioned itself as an international educational hub resulting in an improved academic reputation, addressing historical injustices of racism and economic gains (Kwaramba, 2012; O'Malley, 1999). It is critical to manage potential problems systematically and maximise potential rewards while recognising that this process has positive and negative repercussions. For example, while we acknowledge that universities are critical to economic and social development in South Africa, the institutions are crippled by inefficiencies and high demand for access, surpassing their capacity to provide quality education and support for both local and international students (Sing, 2016). Other implications of having high numbers of immigrant students bring about social inclusion and exclusion issues, academic success, adaptation and well-being (Sing, 2016; Hungwe, 2018; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 202; Sonn, 2002). Ultimately, these issues clear the deck for heightened racism, xenophobia, and many other forms of discrimination (Sing, 2016).

Harris (2002) provided a critique of how the term xenophobia has been socially constructed and argued against the dictions that frame it around negative attitudes of "hatred", "dislike" or "fear" of foreigners, suggesting that xenophobia must not be looked at it isolation from physical abuse and violence. Instead, definitions of xenophobia include specific acts of violent practices whose consequences are bodily harm and damage, particularly to black African foreigners, as they form part of most victims. For example, the #FeesMustFall Movement brought glaring racial tension within South African universities, exacerbated by cuts in student funding and unfair treatment from staff members (Langa, 2017).

Apart from that, media coverage of racialised attacks on students continues, such as the recent racist incident at Stellenbosch University, in which a white student broke into a black first-year student's residence and urinated on his personal items (McCain, 2022). The same is true of Rhodes University, which has benefited from a more Africanized curriculum to some extent, but the institutional ethos remains primarily white and, ultimately, foreign (Tagliabue, 2022). Furthermore, black immigrant students are subjected to the repercussions of racism through xenophobia and Afrophobia.

A more recent study by Addae and Quan-Baffour (2022) places Afrophobia, "black on black" violence, as the new form of racism in the new South Africa, post-apartheid, when

they hypothesised some of the causes of xenophobia. There has been a shift in the identification of immigrant students, which compounds the current stressors that scholars like Vandeyar (2012) contextualised stemming from their denied social roles and relationships, which would generally be a source of culturally scripted notions of how they fit in. Furthermore, the ripple effect of Afrophobia, even in its subtle form, spreads outside the university environment exposing migrant students to distinct types of xenophobia, which is more hostile, feelings of discomfort, fear, discrimination, and extreme levels of violence threaten higher education internationalisation process (Hungwe, 2018).

Two studies by Addae and Quan-Baffour (2022) and Ochonu (2020) firmly positioned Afrophobia as "black-on-black" racism and somewhat a consequence of intra-racial anger and retribution. Despite the lack of evidence pointing at South Africa's racial-political context, they claim that foreign nationals bring diseases such as HIV/AIDS to the country. This form of discrimination is rooted in political fragmentation, racial categorisation, and isolation effects of the apartheid era (Landau et al., 2005). This hostile response against the presence of "black foreigners" is labelled to be a toxic form of black nationalism that has replaced White apartheid but is constantly targeting black people perceived to be foreigners (Ochonu, 2020).

Again, Harris (2002) hypothesised that violence targeting black foreigners' positions of xenophobia in South Africa could be attributed to the transition from a past of racism to a prospect of nationalism and uses the foreigner as a scapegoat for the social-economic inequalities. For example, Tagliabue's (2022) research on SADC students at Rhodes University described classist, racist and xenophobic altercations. When universities settle for Africanisation rather than striving for genuine transformation, it makes room for the transfer of unfair advantages, like in the case of the Rhodes University study where SADC immigrant students revealed the persisting pain of race, class and xenophobia and a sense of entitlement by local students who assume the concept of "Africanisation" implies "South" Africanisation (Tagliabue, 2022).

### 2.6.4 Financial Support

There are assumptions among some South African students that all international students come from privileged backgrounds. For example, Tagliabue (2022) cited that during the #FessMustFall protests, some protestors were riled by SADC immigrant students' non-participation in the protests. They felt that SADC students were too financially privileged to understand the challenges impoverished local students face, let alone be concerned about

rising tuition fees. SADC students took offence to these accusations as they believed their reasons for not participating had been misconstrued. As a result, they withdrew from any protest, claiming their opinions landed on deaf ears, and the reasons for their absence were unacknowledged (Tagliabue, 2022). However, other literature on the financial hardships of immigrant students clears this misconception (Hungwe, 2018; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Tagliabue, 2022; Zheng, 2010).

While the foreign student market is profitable, academics have warned of the dangers of considering students as a source of generating income for universities (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Sing, 2016). For instance, Sing (2016) argues that this diminishes the importance of the cross-social-cultural and academic experience and creates an inaccurate impression of immigrant students as being well-equipped to fund their studies. Immigrant students cannot be categorised as homogeneous, as they come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The view that immigrant or international students have a high socioeconomic status in their home country and are financially secure is a dangerous misconception, as many reported serious financial challenges (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Sing, 2016; Zheng, 2010). Specific challenges include the struggle to access funding opportunities, work-related income and adequate health care, and government grant applications due to the financial burden, affecting the adaptation process (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021).

### 2.6.5 Language Barriers

Despite English being the official language for learning and teaching in South Africa since democracy, some historically Afrikaans universities like Stellenbosch, Pretoria and North-West still have Afrikaans options in some courses (Madadzhe, 2019). However, few existing studies of immigrants in South Africa have extensively addressed language barriers in higher learning institutions. Findings by Vandeyar and Catalano (2020) demonstrated that language is a robust hermeneutic marker of in-group and out-group membership when all other features are the same. For example, immigrant students have benefitted from language skills offered by local South African students to help them mask their actual identities and shield themselves from xenophobia (Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). Pineteh et al. (2016) demonstrated that feelings of prejudice also posed linguistic and cultural adaptation challenges, led to more significant psychological and sociocultural discomfort, and were determinants of the quality of their social life and academic performance. Iwara et al. (2017)

noted that language barriers and culture shock experiences contribute to psychosocial difficulties.

Furthermore, immigrant students were found to experience language exclusion from trans-language pedagogy (Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). For instance, free fluidity in language movement outside classrooms gives learners some form of connection and identity (Madadzhe, 2019). Even though trans-language pedagogy is a strategy to assist local learners in making sense of learning concepts, immigrant students experience exclusion and alienation (Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). Most international studies identified that proficient use of the English language was a vital indicator of their level of acculturation and the most significant barrier in sojourner adjustment (Yeh et al. 2008). Therefore, advocating for strict admission policies on internationally recognised English proficiency tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, before admitting immigrant students into universities is critical (Bukhari, 2015).

## 2.7 Theoretical Framework

This section describes the narrative theory approach and discusses the interpretive research paradigm used to understand the research phenomenon and attempt to investigate the experiences that continue to gain research psychologists' interest. Interpretivism underpins many narrative studies of lived experiences and takes human interpretation as a starting point, which Herman (2001) suggested as free and direct speech. The multi-dimensional narrative theory approach has seen direct relevance in many disciplines, for example, in the cultural and social construction of gender and gender and expanded into narrative texts that include social class, race, nationality, and ethnicity, which feminist narratologies try to dismantle as they form identities and categories of oppression (Herman et al., 2012). The feelings of exclusion and the loss of sense of belonging embodied in the lived experiences of immigrant students is best explained using Narrative Theory, and Critical Race Theory provides a theoretical framework for analysing immigrant students' accounts of discrimination related to aspects of race, xenophobia and Afrophobia.

### 2.7.1 Narrative Inquiry Theory

According to Xu et al. (2007) and Phillion (2008), the main anchor of narrative theory in studying students' experiences derives from the general attributes of narrative inquiry, structured narratively through stories, requiring sufficient time with the participant. Researchers and participants collaborate in an intense discussion to explore past, present, and future events e on social-cultural relations in terms of places (Phillion, 2008). Overton (2017)

described narrative inquiry as a form of understanding narratives or stories in a "knowing" way. Bradbury (2020) stated that narrative in terms of storytelling enables researchers to conduct themselves naturally, not only in the capacity of telling stories per se but through the narration of life. Through this inquiry, a story is co-constructed because there is a teller and a listener, and as a research instrument, the researcher collects and makes inferences about the stories through personal involvement (Overton, 2017; Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007) and Mambrol (2019) employed narrative theory to draw on the idea of language as a "binary structural system".

The theoretical base for this research on the narrative inquiry of the experiences of immigrant students draws from Narrative Theory which continues to gain interest in contemporary research. An inspection of the literature traces the theory back to the 1970s when a radical approach to discovering "why people acted as they did: Why not ask them?" was found (Kirkman, 2002). The focus of this study is consistent with the approach proposed by Kirkman (2002) as a move away from positivist psychology to pay attention to the importance of language in human life because individual actions and how they explain accounts of those actions originate from the same basis. There are indications that cognitive psychologists and narrative theorists are cognisant of the mutual inclusivity of the two concepts. The work of Herman (2001) positions narrative theory in cognitive science and narrative inquiry perspective. It is essential to acknowledge the potential risk of assuming the power to explain the individual views of others when studying narrative theory; this is essentially an exercise in an implicit hierarchy and political control that should not be overlooked (Herman et al., 2012).

The narrative theory framework provided by Herman (2001) and Herman et al. (2012) helped me shape some critical elements for understanding and examining my subjective position by providing a framework for analysing how my personal experiences, perspectives, and biases as an immigrant student from Malawi, shape the data collection, interpretation and presentation. Recognising this role of the researcher's subjectivity ensured accurate and unbiased results while, at the same time, developing a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of participants. Acknowledging the benefits and limitations of being in a position of power was critical in minimising bias. It helped to minimise the impact of subjective places in the process using reflexivity. Building a rapport with the participant was easier because there was already a better understanding of their perspectives and experiences and how these shaped how immigrant students construct their narratives in different contexts (Herman, 2001; Herman et al., 2012). Subsequently, Kirkman (2002)

illustrated the application of narrative theory to research in psychology and referred to three research projects drawing the narrative perspective of women faced with infertility, adolescents' use of condoms in canonical romance novels, and teenage mothers. This application suggests the narrative theory is constructive for psychologists who want to keep the complexity of the lives they study and look into how different people and cultures interact with each other (Dawson & Mäkelä, 2022; Kirkman, 2002).

In recent work on narrative theory, Bradbury (2020) positioned Vygotsky's perspective of cognition and subject formation, proposing that humans are subjects through the stories they tell, enabling researchers to conduct themselves naturally, not only in their capacity to tell stories but also through the subject's narrations. Vygotsky stated that humans are socio-cultural beings that utilise tools connected by our past, society and culture to circumnavigate our way around the world (Bradbury, 2020). In Bradbury's (2020) viewpoint, social subjects are constituted in the world of language, and meaning is embodied in the material world and comes naturally and intrinsically to humans, like using signs and telling stories. The multi-dimensional approach of narrative theory has seen direct relevance in many disciplines. Its value also extends to studies of specific forms of social marginalisation, such as feminist studies (Herman et al., 2012), which focused on narratives of exclusion, belonging and alienation of immigrant students for this study.

Even though NI has been seen as a relatively easy method to get people to tell their stories and help researchers gain in-depth data with ease (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007), the approach does not come without setbacks. Savin-Baden and Niekerk (2007) allude to the presentation of data, how the participants in spoken language tell the stories, how the researcher presents themselves in the data and data management choices as some of the challenges inherent in this approach. Further, NI has been criticised for the complexity of its methodological approach due to its continuous and interactive levels and ongoing inquiring process of participants telling, re-living, and re-telling their experiences as they continue to reflect. It is within this complexity that personal stories are told. However, Squire (2008) claims it is a more practical and effective research method that gives participants the power and voice to 'speak out', especially relevant in the current study in allowing immigrant students to voice their experiences of alienation and social exclusion.

### 2.7.2 Critical Race Theory

The narrative notions and storytelling of immigrants' experiences of racism, xenophobia, and Afrophobia in South Africa draw from Critical Race Theory (CRT) within the liberation psychology tradition. The theory has been used extensively to understand social narratives (Chang, 1993; Su, 2007) relating to inequalities impacting the wellbeing of the immigrant students (Bell, 1992). This approach was also validated by other scholars such as Chang (1993), Vandeyar (2010) and Rolón-Dow and Bailey (2022) to understand how black immigrants living in South Africa are racialised. In addition, Ochonu (2020) applied the theory to understand aspects of Afrophobia as 'black–on–black racism' and Salter and Adams (2013) applied CRT to study migrant wellbeing based on liberation and cultural psychology theoretical traditions (Paloma, et al., 2016; Parker, 2019; Su, 2007) drawing on the epistemological post-colonial context to emphasise the need to prioritise marginalised peoples, utilise methodologies that align with different perspectives of the oppressed people while being conscious of own transformative power. For this reason, this approach is aligned with the aims of this study.

CRT has been very beneficial when applied to immigration studies. Romero (2008) and Parker (2019) acknowledged its continued use of immigration, race, and ethnicity studies from the early Chicago School of Sociology school of thought in the 1920s and 1930s. However, recent work on CRT has not intensely addressed more relevant issues about anti-immigration sentiments and racial profiling in immigration research. Recent research on social exclusion and social inequality have been developed by scholars who study immigration from a global perspective, however, studies of immigration in the United States have largely focused on issues of assimilation, acculturation, generational conflict, and social mobility (Romero, 2008).

CRT has been extensively used in educational research for over a decade (Parker, 2019; Rolón-Dow & Bailey, 2022; Su, 2007) and in most global studies as a theoretical and methodological framework to understand concepts through storytelling and narratives (Savas, 2014). CRT, developed initially as a legal study to challenge racism, was used by Rolón-Dow and Bailey (2022) to explain how race and racism interact in everyday life by emphasising the experiences and knowledge of racially minority groups, which was also crucial in understanding immigrant students in this study. The central ideas of CRT are racial inequality and oppression of many forms, its proponents work to dismantle white privilege and disprove the notion that universities are neutral and open to all students (Britannica, 2022). Researchers using CRT aim to openly draw on the lived experiences of people of colour via

knowing historical racial relations and understanding how inequities persist across time (Parker, 2019; Rolón-Dow & Bailey, 2022). It is against this background that CRT assists in understanding and elevating the voices of immigrant students through stories as it aligns with the research methodology of narrative inquiry.

Although narrative theory and CRT both emphasise the intersectional functionalities of studying experiences through narratives/storytelling, language usage and free speech and challenging unequal institutional systems (Bradbury, 2020; Kirkman, 2002; Herman, 2001; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Xu et al. 2007), the intersection of these approaches does not come without its challenges. For example, the works of Ledesma and Calderon (2015) acknowledge that CRT does not provide solutions to the criticisms of racism in large institutions (Su, 2007) but instead promotes grim ideas of future transformation and also lacks engagement with systemic structures (Miller et al., 2020). Furthermore, in terms of methodological approach, both NI and CRT have been heavily criticised for focusing on personal narratives. This progression has been followed by cautions from conventional academics about how these narratives must be conveyed, indicating that the attempt is problematic since the stories may not be accepted totally as factual evidence (Chang, 1993).

### 2.7.3 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of relevant literature on the experiences of immigrants in South Africa and touched on comparative global immigration student studies to understand some of the experiences that research has discovered. The previous studies highlight how narrative inquiry has benefited in uncovering how students from the SADC region fair in the host country and the psychological challenges they face when they try to fit into their new environment. The literature review identified areas where NI and CRT converge to address different forms of exclusion and other psychosocial issues that prevent immigrant students from finding a sense of belonging. More importantly, it identifies how the two theories use individual personal experiences and a source of data under investigation through narrative writing as a storytelling technique. Areas where the two theories diverge were also identified, such as NI views research participants as story-tellers. At the same time, CRT is used broadly as a theoretical and methodological framework to understand concepts through counter-storytelling and narratives.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter looked at some prominent psychosocial issues immigrant students experience, drawing on global and local studies. The studies reveal that a sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion are worthwhile areas of further exploration. Importantly, these studies also indicate that there has been little attention in prevailing research given to students from specific countries within the SADC region. This research attempted to understand the experiences of sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion of immigrant students at the University of the Witwatersrand using NI situated within the broader framework of qualitative interpretive research. This chapter outlines the components of the research methodology for the study.

## 3.2 Research Paradigm and Design

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method grounded in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology methods of study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Foxall, 2021). The approach has been intensely used in nursing research to gain a deeper understanding of nurses' experiences through an "insider view" and how the process allows for relationships between participant and researcher (Foxall, 2021; Wang & Geale, 2015). Many scholars adopted this approach from the early work of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), who first applied the technique to describe teachers' personal stories in ways that portrayed real-life experiences through detailed description and meaning explorations. This research was located within an interpretive paradigm, allowing the narratives' open-ended questions and free-speech nature to be flexibly interpreted.

Narrative analysis interprets stories (Figgou, 2015). Wang and Geale (2015) suggested "narrative frameworks" to access rich layers of information to comprehend participants and viewpoints better. Although narrative research literature is quiet, mainly regarding how to address extended lengths of discourse in the form of narrative reports, "narrative analysis" gathers descriptions of acts and occurrences, given as "data," to produce tales of personal experiences (Mccormack, 2004). The narrative analysis draws on experience-centred assumptions and the storytelling nature of the data collected (Figgou, 2015; Squire, 2005).

The research method utilised in this study produced factual data by eliciting research subjects' narratives, informed by a similar approach used by Iosifides (2012). This approach

seemed appropriate to gain a deeper understanding of how immigrant students describe their experiences and offered an opportunity for the researcher to interpret the impact this has on developing a sense of identity. According to Devers and Frankel (2000), a qualitative research design is a researcher's prototype for the research process. The synopsis draws a layout of research conducted after formulating preliminary questions and identifying participants' unique characteristics (Devers & Frankel, 2000).

By adopting an 'experience-centred' approach proposed by Squire (2008), the study grounds itself in phenomenological assumptions that experiences can be part of consciousness through the stories told and can be analysed using a hermeneutic approach which aims at fully understanding the accounts and offers a helpful conceptual framework which has been beneficial in narrative research in social sciences to complement the generic methodological guidelines (Squire, 2008). Furthermore, this design allowed a more practical and effective approach for participants to have the power and voice to speak out (Squire, 2008). Squire (2008) based on four assumptions; first, personal narratives are sequential and meaningful; second, stories are a means of human sense-making; third, reports involve a certain measure of reconstruction of stories across times and places; and the fourth assumption involves representing personal changes that address themes as opposed to clauses.

Data sources for the individual's lived experiences were collected using Clandinin and Connelly's (1990) NI storytelling approach. NI was chosen for this study because it elevates voices that would otherwise be unheard of and uses storytelling to communicate the realities of the people (Wang & Geale, 2015). Still, the approach is criticised for its complexities with its methodological approach. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) explicitly described the continuous and interactive multiple levels of the ongoing inquiring process of participants telling, reliving, and re-telling their stories as they reflect. Nevertheless, within this complexity, personal stories are disclosed.

### 3.3 Research Aims and Objectives

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa's higher education institutions have undergone structural changes and systemic transformation, which has seen some of its public universities internationalised. Despite efforts to accommodate immigrant students, there is still enormous tension between Black South African students and those from neighbouring countries, the deprivation of scarce resources being the centre of the pressure (Sing, 2016; Ramphele,1999). As such, this research presents two objectives; to discover insights into the

psychosocial experiences related to belonging, alienation and exclusion among immigrant students at Wits University and how these experiences could be significant in shaping their identities.

The first objective is to understand the concepts of a sense of belonging and alienation concerning Afro-phobia, xenophobia, and issues of race and racism in South Africa more generally (Landau et al., 2005). The second objective is to bring forth the narrative theoretical framework through storytelling to form detailed accounts of immigrants who predominantly perceive themselves as conventionally excluded and may use their will to support and shape the narrative, making it a powerful tool for knowledge (Bradbury, 2020). Exploring how immigrant students in South Africa's universities experience a sense of belonging, alienation, and exclusion will help them identify and understand their challenges when adapting to their new environments. The research addresses (i) immigrant students' sense of belonging, exclusion, and alienation and (ii) the narrative experiences of sense of belonging, alienation and feeling of exclusion of immigrant students in South African universities. Drawing on the past literature and the theoretical framework of the study, the following research questions were addressed;

- What are the immigrant students' experiences of sense of belonging and alienation in the South African environment of higher education?
- In what ways do institutions of higher learning change to make immigrant students feel like they belong to their new environments?

### 3.4 Research location

The University of Witwatersrand, chosen for this study, provides a fascinating setting because it is situated within the heart of Johannesburg. Historically, the institution was founded as an open university grounded on a non-discriminatory racial policy which passed several tests through the apartheid regime and its liberal traditions and commitment to social justice. Despite this, Landau and Misago (2022) indicated that the institution was exposed to some direct and indirect effects of anti-immigrant activism, such as Operation Dudula, which continued to build across the city. It was argued that the immigration crisis required agency and immediate action at a constitutional level, as ending violence against foreigners could be achieved by recognising the hazards of South Africa's crumbling system of indirect rule (Landau & Misago, 2022). To build a sense of immigrant integration, South Africa's higher learning institutions will have to negotiate and lend from Critical Race Theory (CRT) within

liberation psychology traditions to understand better social narratives (Chang, 1993) relating to inequalities impacting the well-being of the student immigrant students based on Bell's (1992) racial realism.

### 3.5 Participant Selection

This research collected exploratory data that could provide insight into the broader experiences of immigrant students. Sample consideration drew from Devers and Frankel's (2000) approach that provided guidelines to increase the likelihood of good research subjects participating in the study. Developing and maintaining good relationships were necessary for effecting sampling and credibility in this research, particularly the use of existing social networks through colleagues and friends assisted in obtaining information that facilitated entre (Devers & Frankel, 2000). The study comprised participants drawn from a pool of postgraduate immigrant students to include diverse experiences, ages ranging between 30 and 48 years, selected from existing immigrant students enrolled at the University of Witwatersrand, comprising of different faculties and SADC countries of focus - Malawi, Zimbabwe, and DRC.

### 3.6 Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilised instead of the convenience sampling technique commonly employed in most narrative research designs (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Pavlish, 2007) to better understand the selected participants' experiences. This technique aimed to select non-randomly participants with similar traits, and only those willing and available to share their experiences formed part of the study (Etikan, 2016). The purposive sampling strategy suggested by Devers and Frankel (2000) allowed revisions to the sampling technique and recruitment processes. More knowledge of the sample could emerge from accessing participants, such as by attending seminars and being added to mailing lists to help identify where potential participants could be located. This study only included participants selected through the Wits International Students Office, as they fell in the category of international students, and the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), a research and teaching unit on human mobility. Email advertisement flyers were sent to students through Wits International Students office administrators and electronic academic platforms were accessed through the Wits International Students Office database to recruit participants.

## 3.7 Data Collection Methods

Individual in-depth face-to-face interviews were used to collect data, influenced mainly by the most convenient time and location on campus. This study used The storytelling methodology as the significant data-gathering method to better understand participants' experiences. One-on-one in-depth interviews were used as part of the strategy. Although the duration of the interviews with each informant was between 45 and 60 minutes to obtain a valid and less forced interpretation of the narratives, the researcher had little effect on the questions asked. The study followed the practical guidelines Devers and Frankel (2000) provided for collecting and managing qualitative data to ensure rigour (Maher et al., 2018). This included factors to consider when deciding the structure of the data collection process and the advantages and disadvantages of audio recording and fieldnote taking.

### 3.6.1 Narrative Interviews

Interview sessions started with collecting demographic data to understand each participant's position, create a rapport, and settle into the conversations before asking the participants to tell their stories. The rules of engagement of the NI restrict the interviewer, avoid pre-structuring the interview, and uses specific everyday communication in the form of story-telling and listening (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Prompts were used to elicit more from the stories by adapting Jovchelovitch and Bauer's (2000) elicitation technique which encouraged a collaborative approach between the researcher and participant and broke down the interview process into three phases. In this process, the interview began with an initiation phase, to the narration and questioning phase, and ended with the concluding talk phase, each phase allowing a set of guiding rules that aided the interviewer in eliciting rich narration and avoided any pitfalls of the 'question-answer schema' of interviewing. These rules achieved an innocuous position, making the participant more willing to tell their story (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Similarly, Mccormack's (2004) located "storying stories" within the NI framework focusing on 'analysis of narrative' and 'narrative analysis'. This aligns with Pavlish's (2007) recommendations on establishing connections and examining the independent relevance of each story narrative since personal insights reveal something different about each person's experience, interpretations and perceptions.

Participants were asked to describe their first experiences at the university and in South Africa and any significant moments at the university. The intention was to understand participants in their terms and how they make meaning of their lived experiences, allowing a free flow and maintaining a whole open-ended structure. Squire (2008) suggested using semi-

structured 'free association narrative interviewing' as it allows the researcher to intervene less and lets the interviewee tell their own story. Written notes and reflective journals formed part of the data collection process to capture details of the information that needed following up and areas of reflection relating to the participants' stories. Interviews and immediately transcribed into written research texts (Pavlish, 2007) alongside electronic recordings to generate contextual materials.

An interview guide contained in Appendix A provided a primary research tool to gather the stories. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted 40 minutes on average field notes and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were essential as a tacit to observe non-verbal cues and determine clues worthy of annotation (Wolfinger, 2002) and identify overarching themes. Two ladies opted out during recruitment as they were uncomfortable sharing their experiences on second thought. As a result, six male participants were eager to participate in the interviews from Zimbabwe, Malawi and DRC. Although four participants preferred interviews to be virtual instead of in person using online platforms, only participants agreed to meet physically on campus.

Only participants accepted to participate in the study were checked and verified to ensure the credibility of the research results (Birt et al., 2016). The researcher's experience as an immigrant student drove the idea to explore the research topic using their own experiences as reflections to interpret immigrants' life experiences in South Africa using Wits University students as a benchmark. The data was transcribed from the recorded interviews using transcription conventions and checked for validity before analysis, using Bucholtz's (2000) transcription conventions, which proposes a reflexive transcription practice for researchers to acknowledge and be aware of their limitations when transcriptions.

### 3.8 Data Analysis

Narrative analysis is a cluster of analytic tools for reading texts with a storied form (Figgou, 2015) and "narrative formats" used to access extensive layers of information to comprehend participants and magnitudes of points of view (Wang & Geale, 2015). Thematic narrative analysis asks what a story is about, whereas structural analysis asks how it is structured to fulfil communication goals, according to Figgou & Pavlopoulos (2015). The nature of this study rendered me to use a thematic process of creating codes and themes within the stories. While this study remained a narrative analysis, thematic narrative analysis was used to develop themes and sub-themes from each narrative and interpret the interviews in a hermeneutic manner, as Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) suggested. Jovchelovitch and

Bauer (2000) present a step-by-step data reduction process starting with paraphrasing paragraphs and texts from transcripts into the first sentence reduction and then into keywords. Themes were constructed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) process, and a coding frame was considered a primary goal which involved the progressive reduction of texts (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2006) as demonstrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Theme development process**

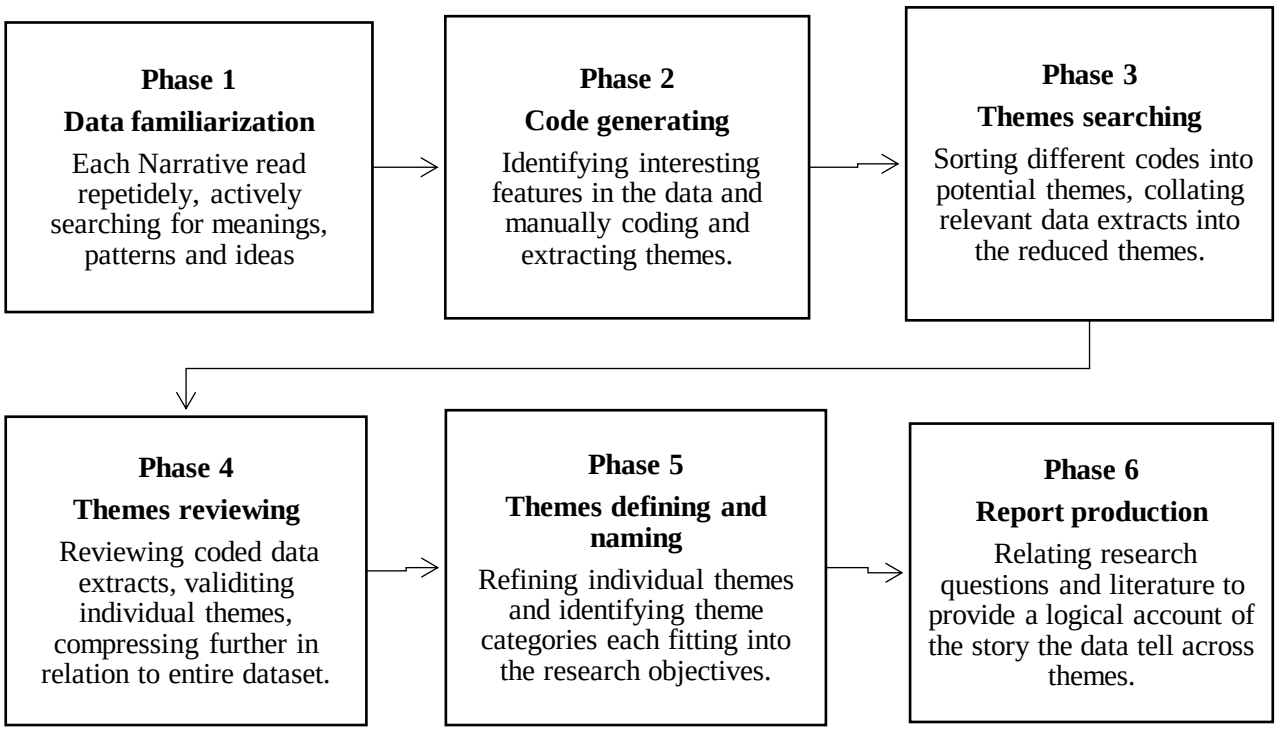



***Figure 1: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)***

Following the methodology of Parcell and Baker (2018), I first identified patterns and themes in the data by clustering and refining them thematically in a narrative form, reading through sections of an account that contained a cluster of related themes, and gaining an understanding of how these elements fit together to form a coherent narrative. Constructivist paradigms, which view experiences, meanings, and social structures as interrelated, presented a challenge for combining theme and narrative methods in this way, but the benefits outweighed the difficulties (Shukla et al., 2014). These can also be used in analysing textual materials and identifying recurring themes and patterns in how the agency is portrayed in narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Shukla et al., 2014; Squire, 2013). The conceptual themes generated emerging from the research are presented in Figure 2.

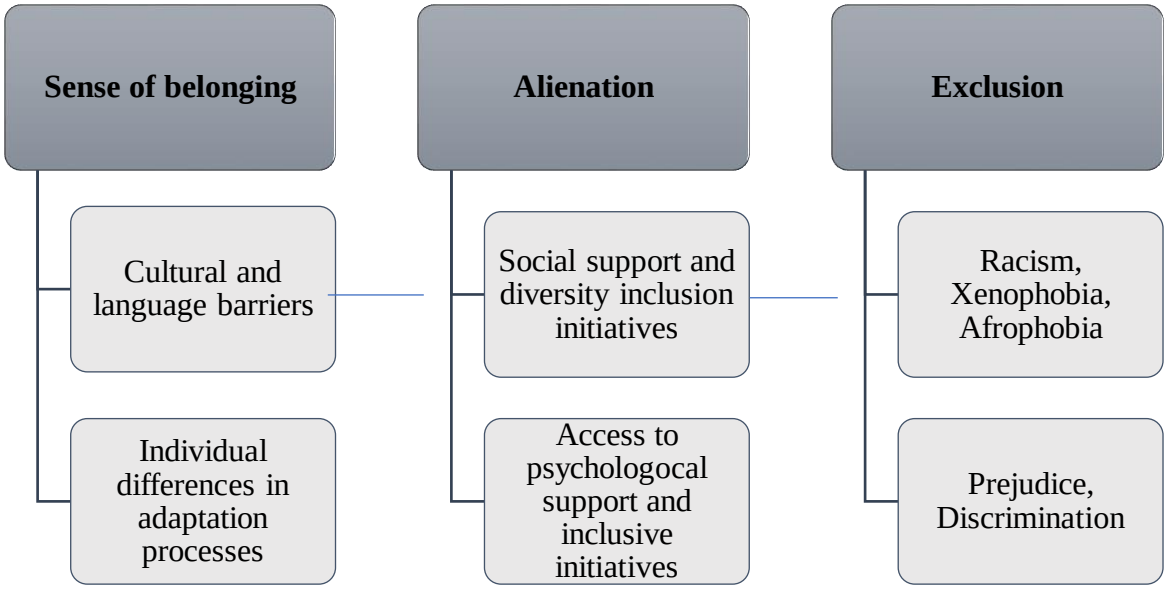



***Figure 2: Conceptual Themes***

Analysing the content of the story themes aided in determining specific moments of personal experiences immigrant students identified as story-worthy and meaningful to them (Parcell & Baker, 2018). Even though qualitative inquiry scholars highly recommend Nvivo Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software programme for narrative analysis for its essential features offered for coding, security features for dealing with sensitive personal data for methodological rigour (Robins & Eisen, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1982), the major limitation experienced during its acquisition for this research was its affordability for students. Data was organised manually in a Microsoft Word document using different colour highlighters, dividing different segments with labels collapsed into themes, and developing texts into sets of statements explaining the other parts of the data (Decaminada, 2022; Miller & McIntyre, 2022; Oguntegbe et al., 2022).

Then, McCormack's storying technique aided in including researchers' own relational, emotional, and intellectual comments to interpret the narratives and helped make sense of the data gleaned from each individual's account (McCormack, 2004). Since the nature of narrative inquiry requires negotiating relationships with participants while being mindful of the theoretical, methodological, and interpretive implications informed by ethical responsibilities for interviewing, writing and sharing the research using Clandinin & Connelly's (2000); Clandinin & Connelly (1990); (Connelly & Clandinin (2006) readings were critical. For "qualitative control" purposes, each interview was structured with a story title and subheadings to shift between stories and compare themes across different cases

without focusing on an individualistic approach, a strategy of constructing narratives which were found helpful by many narrative researchers (Kim, 2016, p. 215; Shukla et al., 2014).

### 3.8.1 Trustworthiness and Validity

The narrative approach emphasises the importance of evaluating naturalistic inquiry and urges researchers to establish truth in research findings to ensure that results are transferable to other contexts, consistent when repeated, and free from researcher bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Wang and Geale (2015) underscored the complexities of NI methodology and emphasised the need for researchers to continually negotiate the meanings of the stories through validation checks both at the point of data collection and analysis. For validity and trustworthiness rigour, all interview transcripts were sent back to participants after being edited for validation checks. Korstjens and Moser (2017) provided practical guidelines for credibility, transferability and confidentiality, which were helpful in this research. Participants were allowed to check the accuracy of the information in the transcripts to ensure credibility. In addition, a clear description and context of the research's setting were provided, including participants' demographic disposition and interview procedures for transferability.

### 3.8.2 Reflexivity

The interpretive paradigm approach gives room for relationships between participant and researcher to portray real-life experiences through detailed description and meaning explorations while allowing free speech (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Foxall, 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Wang & Geale, 2015). Throughout the study, I acknowledged that my position, involvement and subjectivities during theorisation, data collection and analysis were motivated by my identity as an immigrant student studying at Wits University during the research process. Macbeth's (2001) point at addressing one's social positioning through reflexivity when researching issues such as immigration, if a person has certain immigration status (Raaper et al., 2022), and race if you have been in a position of experiencing racism. I attempted to remain reflexive and aware of my positioning concerning the research and open to alternative narratives. I removed myself from a place of power to avoid adverse effects emerging from the research and to prevent any potential biases from guiding the research process. This helped me establish a good rapport with participants and alleviated entry difficulties during the first phase of the interviews. A good transition into this relationship made participants comfortable opening up and telling their

stories. Allowing this collaborative approach throughout the research process was a strength of the study.

Still, the nature of the experience-centred narrative inquiry meant I had to let the participants tell their own stories without much intervention. All the participants who were willing to participate in the study were males, and I acknowledge that the data lacked representation of female participants who withdrew from the study during the interview scheduling stage and did not sign the consent forms without stating specific reasons. Drawing from my experience working in a women's empowerment space, where advocacy mainly focused on the wellbeing of children, women and girls, there are concerns that while we look out for these groups, men may be left behind and their voices not sufficiently heard. This was an indication that maybe more research in this area needed to focus on the wellbeing of men.

Although there are very few studies in Africa on psychosocial issues affecting immigrant men, as an African woman, socio-cultural issues restrict men, especially those of that age. They do not usually open up about their experiences of inequality, being excluded or when they felt there was unfair treatment. Being able to personally know people who had shared their experiences at other universities many years ago was helpful in the conceptualisation of this research. For instance, I had previously heard about experiences of immigrant students who had felt excluded by classmates in group assignments, how it was a requirement for some immigrant students to take an Afrikaans course, how a group of young white male students had slurred racist remarks at immigrant students; and how these students were called a "makwerekwere" by their black African counterparts. Falling within the same demographic disposition as the participants in this study possibly gave me a feeling of having already experienced the interviewees' situation. Korstjens and Moser (2017) suggested the importance of a 'reflective diary', which I used to note descriptions of the interview setting and relationships that developed with the participants through other relatable elements.

### 3.8.3 Ethical Considerations

The initial procedural step involved the ethical clearance application process from the University of Witwatersrand Ethics Committee and the Faculty Registrar in getting approval to conduct interviews with Wits University students. Permission was granted by the Faculty Registrar contained in Appendix B. After that, ethics clearance was sought from the Ethics Committee at the University of Witwatersrand (Protocol Number MASPR/22/12, see Appendix C). In addition, ethics training was attended (see the certificate in Appendix D). After ethical permissions were granted, all moral considerations were acknowledged and

maintained in the research process as the recruitment process commenced. Participants' personal identifying information and details were kept confidential throughout the research process and reporting, as stipulated in Appendix E's Participant Information Sheet. The participants' identities were kept confidential and only known to the researcher. The actual names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms. The participants were given surety that all data collected would not be shared with third parties other than in the final report used entirely for academic purposes. All participants were given an Informed Consent Form to sign, contained in Appendix F, once they agreed to participate in the interviews, which were sent back to the researcher.

***Table 1 Participant Demographic information***

| Pseudonyms | Participants background information |
|---|---|
| Mbebe | 34 year old Doctoral Researcher, Migration Studies male from Zimbabwe |
| Makina | 35-year-old PhD scholar, Migration Studies male from Zimbabwe |
| Kanakangi | 29-year-old Masters, Engineering, male from DRC |
| Shanaya | 36-year-old Masters, School of Public Health male from DRC |
| Supuni | 51-year-old PhD scholar, School of Economics and Finance male from Malawi |
| Wesley | 43-year-old Masters, Quantity Surveying male from Malawi |

## 3.8 Conclusion

Even though knowledge and debates about the sociocultural experiences and discriminatory challenges that immigrant students face in South Africa continue to emerge, a dearth of research explicitly investigates students' insights through a Narrative Inquiry approach. There is also continued growth of students from DRC, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe into South African public universities, underscoring the importance of research in this area. This research provides a better understanding of the experiences of psychosocial issues related to belonging, alienation and exclusion faced by immigrant students. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge to improve the lives and well-being of students in culturally diverse communities. In addition, the methodology highlights critical areas that need to be considered when using narrative inquiry as a methodology, as this approach is not simply telling stories. Instead, it is a technique of investigation that employs narrative to unearth subtlety and provide space for stories that, when utilised effectively, may bring hope and courage to immigrant students. Moreover, storytelling is essential in narrative inquiry because it allows for discourse and reflection, both intertwined and iterative (Kim, 2016).

# CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

## 4.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, a collection of the participants' stories was reduced into themes to address the research question. This chapter presents findings from the narratives of a sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion of six immigrant students from the University of Witwatersrand. Interpretation of the findings was based on understanding how the immigrant students made sense of their experiences and perceptions in South Africa's higher institution of education, which were interjected as extracts of quotes and linked to data source codes. Participants' quotes and experiences are presented with pseudonyms; Mbebe and Makina were both from Zimbabwe, Kanakangi and Shanaya were both from the DRC, and Supuni and Wesley were from Malawi.

The following themes are presented for each participant: i) Sense of belonging, ii) Alienation and iii) Exclusion. i) Sense of belonging discusses the immigrant students' perception of adaptation and social integration about the access to support services, psychological support, English language assistance and an inclusive curriculum; ii) Alienation discusses language barriers, difficulties navigating spaces, struggles with navigating institutions' bureaucracy, access to information, discrimination and cultural insensitivity; and iii) Exclusion discusses the lack of access to financial aid, problems arising due to lack of understanding of immigration status, limited access to academic support and limited access to student accommodation and financial support. These themes are aligned with the research questions and objectives of the study.

## 4.2 Mbebe's academic journey in South Africa

Mbebe is a 34-year-old Zimbabwean Doctoral student born and raised in Harare. He considered himself a pan-African, having been born to generations of parents from many different places in the Southern African countries of Malawi and Mozambique. His higher education journey started in South Africa in 2012 at the University of Witwatersrand when he got a presidential scholarship to come and study for a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work that the Zimbabwean government funded. He found that his first experience in South Africa was enjoyable and easy because of the systems and relationships that were already in place between the Zimbabwean government and the university.

> Considering the government covered my fees, I did not have to worry about economic or financial exclusion. Also, academics was part of my most considerable responsibility to ensure that I performed well. So I always took it as my responsibility to work hard.

Given the government sponsorship he had received, Mbebe was not concerned about financial support and could prioritise the academic responsibilities of his studies at university. This claim is supported by research in South Africa which indicates that immigrant students who get financial aid from their governments may enjoy more academic benefits compared to those who self-fund because the financial burden to cover tuition, accommodation, and other expenses related to their studies is significantly reduced or entirely covered, allowing them to devote more of their time and energy to their studies (Wildschut et al., 2020). Furthermore, government-funded immigrant students may have access to other types of institutional support, such as academic advising, tutoring, and mentoring programs, which can assist them in navigating some challenges and providing them with additional resources for better academic outcomes (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021). Tati (2010) found that meeting some financial requirements was crucial to be granted a student visa, which lessens the pressure for government-funded immigrant students as it is not a requirement for them to provide proof of sufficient financial resources or bank statements.

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### 4.2.1 Finding a sense of belonging

Socially, arriving at Wits again was an auspicious moment for Mbebe, as he did not struggle to make friends and find social connections. On the contrary, this experience made him feel more of a sense of belonging and contributed to his integration within this context. He mentioned that being an immigration scholar and researcher, he had understood common migration issues in the country. He spoke confidently and credited Wits University for providing a protective shield, which was significant in his adaptation process and how he experienced a sense of belonging.

> Throughout the years, it had been great to be part of the institution, making money out of it to survive, tutoring and participating in those things, and research assistance. I think I have had more opportunities, social and academic connections, and my fees are covered by the government. All these things have made it possible for me to feel connected throughout the years.

This type of optimism is what most government-funded scholars experience (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Wildschut et al., 2020). It confirms many studies and literature that immigrant students' sense of belonging may be attributed to structural support offered to government-funded students and PhD students and economic status, as demonstrated by narratives that government, private sector funded or scholarship-sponsored immigrant students have more positive experiences and enjoy institutional support and social inclusion through education immigration policies (Lee et al., 2015; Yu, 2022) compared to self-funded immigrant students, asylum seekers and refugees.

### 4.2.2 Feelings of alienation

Stringent immigration policies on SADC immigrant students and other factors contributing to Mbebe's sense of belonging could be associated with stringent immigration issues that restrict immigrants from developing a sense of identity, "fit in", and being accepted. He mentioned how he believed the existence of borders was merely a colonial

structure, restricting the free movement of people, but emphasised that immigrants must respect, understand and respect immigration laws to make life relatively safe for everyone.

> I feel obligated to respect South Africa's laws as a Zimbabwean. So even if there are documentation issues, I still have to respect that since if I have to have my passport in place, I have to have my Visa in place, it takes a lot of time. So it is not easy sometimes to get these Visas. It's expensive, the requirements, and the medical insurance, medical reports, cardiology, and all those things.

Despite the strenuous process needed to acquire student visas, Mbebe maintained that these processes and documentation are there to make South Africa a safe place for everyone, as the South African government is still responsible for caring for citizens coming from the SADC region. However, these restrictions may contribute to feelings of alienation:

> Even if we say the SADC region is now borderless, we still need to have some control, to take care of people's safety. I think that is important. So I see it as an obligation, but I still have to respect the South African laws.

Entering a new world of academia has been viewed by many scholars as an experience of entering a new country as immigrant students still have to deal with the bureaucracy of checkpoints with limited knowledge of the cultures and customs of the host county. In this space, the immigrant student's position is akin, and the experience of alienation arises (Mann, 2001). However, what stood out the most for Mbebe is the issue of restrictions imposed on Zimbabweans' special skills permits and dispensation visas, which he says continue to change over time, tying this to strict eligibility criteria, long processing times sometimes taking several months and causing significant delays in the start of the academic year for some students. In addition, students struggled to understand the complex visa regulations, leading to confusion and frustration. The inconsistent application of regulations and policies, and the rules surrounding dispensation visas may not be consistently applied (Raaper et al. 2022), leading to unequal treatment:

> I am hearing that it is not going to be renewed. It is tough because too many challenges exist with the policy. And most of it being the changes that just happen overnight, like the special skills permit, that just changed. We thought we would apply for that Visa because we thought almost every PhD had access to the special skills permit…

Acknowledging that there were already high unemployment rates in South Africa, Mbebe had not considered applying for a full-time job and had relied mainly on opportunities offered by the institution to survive, even when he was doing his Master's degree, because he knew it was not going to be easy to find a feasible job with his immigration status and the strict visa policies:

> It makes people's movement difficult. I think that needs to be addressed. I think there should also be a way to show respect to people from this side of Africa…we are also people, we are also hustling, they are also hustling on the same grounds. So how do we get to an equitable level when it is unequal?

The SADC Protocol on Education and Training, which was drawn up and signed by regional governments in 1997, provided a policy framework for cooperation and integration of the region's education sector, and commitments were made for SADC member states students to be treated equally to local students regarding tuition fees and accommodation (Kwaramba, 2012). In this context, the governments must use their bargaining power to promote equitable access to resources for all students, including immigrants, ad demonstrated by Evans, Duckett, Lawthom and Kivell (2017). Mbebe's dialogues drew on the gaps in these commitments. He pointed out that governments across the Southern African region are responsible for ensuring they live better, improved lives with policies that make it easier for people to move quickly within the region. Mbebe gave an example of the Schengen visa, which allowed people in 27 Schengen countries to move around.

### 4.2.3 Sources of exclusion

Issues of 'othering' xenophobia and ignorance of accepting diversity were identified as areas where exclusion emerged during the conversation with Mbebe. Like most immigrants, he alluded to the social issues that cripple South Africa as a country, such as incidents of xenophobia and cultural conflicts and misunderstandings seen in a culturally diverse society due to the historical legacy of apartheid, particularly in terms of racial relations and inequality (Baldwin, 2017). However, he jokingly said he had given up worrying about those issues:

> I think South Africa as a society is just naturally xenophobic. And it is just too hard, I think, to get into every person and get them to understand the differences that we have

> in our similarities, and the notion the society has that almost every foreign national is a problem in South Africa. Yet you know we are documented…and we actually feed into the country's economy. But obviously, that is not what they see. So it is a whole different story for them.

Since arriving in the country in 2012, Mbebe has experienced the effects of xenophobia in and out every year, with his knowledge of immigrants being burnt alive or killed, as reported in the media (Patel & Essa, 2013). This experience did not come short of being traumatising and scary for him. Despite this, he decided to focus on his studies and relocate to another country if an opportunity arose. Even though South Africa is considered a great country economically and has built strong relationships, Mbebe found the social fabric and inbuilt xenophobia, crime, and pain challenging to deal with and looked at it as an attitude issue people had as a society:

> We have cried about it many times, that the South African government is always scapegoating. It always says it is the illegal immigrants. They are taking our resources… that is their responsibility. If we have a government that will agree in the region to open the borders, if you have a passport, then you can live anywhere, within the region, or maybe even just the ID is sufficient... we have been moving very slowly in terms of integration. I do not think we should expect that anytime soon.

This assertion aligns with other literature on poor political leadership (Landau et al., 2005), social transformation issues, and social-economic inequalities stemming from xenophobia (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Harris, 2002; Tagliabue, 2022).

### 4.3 Makina's academic journey in South Africa

Makina is a 35-year-old Zimbabwean PhD student who was born and grew up in Bulawayo Matabeleland North, where he also did his primary and secondary education and part of his tertiary education before, he dropped out to come to South Africa in 2005 with the hope of continuing his undergraduate degree. Still, he decided to return to Zimbabwe to complete his degree in 2007 as he failed to get a permit. His academic journey in South Africa started in 2008 when he eventually managed to get an asylum seeker permit. Makina explained the first experience that made him feel he did not belong to South Africa and not specifically at Wits University, as his academic journey in South Africa started some time before joining the university. He cited issues around discrimination and being denied applications in numerous institutions because of his asylum seeker status, which deterred him

from registering without enough funds, except for at the University of Cape Town, where he did his Honours degree in 2013:

> I went into Masters. They allowed me to register, hoping to get some funding, but that funding only gave me R25k out of R85k that was promised to me needed for that course, so I got excluded. When I came to Wits, I had gone through a frustrating process. I think the government had to revise and realise that students, many asylum seekers, and refugees are being excluded from the academic or education system because of the permits they are using. When I came to Wits, it was much easier because they allowed me to register even without funding. I just signed an acknowledgement of debt.

This suggests that recent measures at Wits University that allowed students to register with an Acknowledgement of Debt (AOD) benefitted students like Makina with uncertain financial situations and allowed them to continue their studies, albeit in a precarious financial situation state (University of Witwatersrand, 2017). However, several studies have revealed that the issue of funding instability is very uncertain and complex, making the student's academic path and the possibility of accumulating large amounts of debt appear overwhelming (Carnevale et al., 2022; Walker & Mathebula, 2020). Yet, education is a long-term investment (Marzi, 2022).

### 4.3.1 Finding a sense of belonging

From Makina's point of reference, he was accepted into the institution regardless of his immigration status. Some of the main areas where he felt a sense of belonging were having the advantage of blending in as he could speak the local languages. The conversation with Makina discovered some perceptions of developing a sense of belonging as a critical aspect of adaptation and social integration for many immigrant students. Also, lack of access to support services, psychological support, English language assistance from Faculty staff and an inclusive curriculum frequently emerged in the dialogue with him. Nevertheless, Makina found social integration easier and assimilated well into the university because of his ability to speak most of the local languages and adapt to environmental changes by developing his own identity to blend in:

> When you talk about a sense of belonging as a foreigner, remember we are coming into a new environment. So, environmental change in adaptation is essential for a foreigner. It is either they make it or they do not. For me, the advantage is language.

> We do not live in the city only, and you must go out there. This is how I navigate Soweto. Because of my language, I speak Ndebele, I can easily conversate in IsiXhosa and confidently in Zulu. But think of someone who comes from DRC and they don't have money to rent here in Braamfontein. How would they survive Soweto?

Immigrant students' perception of adaptation concerning cultural shock and environmental changes in developing a sense of identity was critical in the conversation with Makina. Many studies have shown immigrant students may experience a range of perceptions and emotions related to adapting to cultural and environmental changes through cultural shock, which may manifest as feelings of frustration, psychosocial difficulties, and struggle with developing a sense of identity as they navigate the differences between their home culture and the culture of their new country (Iwara et al., 2017; Liu & László, 2007). However, adapting and finding ways to integrate his cultural heritage with his new experiences ultimately enabled Makina to create a unique sense of self. Some factors that impact immigrant students' ability to adapt identified in this study included their level of local language proficiency, the level of support and resources that were available to them, their resilience, and factors related to their unique family and social situation, like in the case of Makina who found it easier to blend in because his name sounds similar to a South African name:

> I am balancing between being temporary and being permanent. So, I am different from some people here because their visas will expire then they go back. But for me, I am an employee, so I do not know whether I belong or not. My identity and belonging are ambiguous at the university. My attitude is ambiguous…for example, if you go to the Health Centre now, they treat South Africans and foreigners in certain ways. This attitude you are given by the health staff happens there, by Matrix here. My advantage is that my student card just says Makina*, which easily identifies as South African. I would be treated differently from someone who may come with a name like ‘Ntchayiro’, you understand? So now it has become a different thing, you know?

The issues of identity, cultural stereotypes, and ambiguity expressed by Makina confirm some of the challenges and difficulties immigrant students face in navigating and adapting to their new environment's cultural and social norms identified in the literature. While immigrant students face various experiences, categorising them based on identity and culture may lead to discrimination and prejudice (Hanna, 2022). Given that immigrant students are a varied collection of individuals with various experiences, talents, and

problems, Hanna (2022) observed that it is essential to recognise identity and cultural stereotypes that are frequently unjust and false. Using the borders of language as an example, Schultz (2020) emphasised how immigrants claim membership by behaviours, arguing that they are more likely to be "in" when they speak the majority language but "out" if they do not possess citizenship where they dwell.

### 4.3.2 Feelings of alienation

Makina asserts that lacking access to psychological support and counselling contributed to alienation. Makina found that not being able to access counselling and psychological support within the university made him feel he was not supported enough, which impacted these academic outcomes greatly as he persistently encountered mental health-related challenges. Similarly, he mentioned the lack of culturally sensitive psychological support to cater to immigrant students' needs. Studies have shown that in South Africa, immigrant students can access psychological support and counselling at universities through student wellness centres, international student offices that can help connect immigrant students with mental health services on and off campus, student health insurance and counselling services offered at the universities (Sing, 2016; Hungwe, 2018; Vandeyar, 2012; Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). Based on an overall impression of the interview with Makina, he had experienced severe mental health issues that affected his academic performance and required psychological support or counselling. These issues emanated from broader challenges he experienced on campus, including a lack of access to food, proper accommodation, the Covid-19 pandemic and other social factors, a lack of adequate sleep, inadequate support from counselling services, and the daunting administration processes that were required to access help and support systems which caused him anxiety attacks and depression:

> So, I will say I finished my degree lectures while sleeping in the computer labs before I registered for my PhD, so it was a painful journey which took me to the hospital several times, suffering from anxiety and acute depression. I stayed in the hospital for about three months in 2020. Then, I stayed in a hospital again for a month in 2021. And then this year, I have gone to a hospital for admission twice. These are the issues we always face as foreigners. So, you carry your borders with you wherever you go…

He elaborated at length on several negative experiences he encountered due to the rigid administrative processes of filling in forms when he went to seek psychological help and the attitudes of staff at the Counselling Centre:

> Remember, depression is ongoing, and anxiety can attack you anytime, and you have these health issues because you have not eaten for days. Just the process of filling out forms…you have not slept properly for days…depression is an emergency, and you need that urgent assistance.

Makina explained how it was hard for people to understand mental health issues, as this was not a physical disease:

> Something that is in your soul. It is your soul, depression, it is the soul that suffers, no one exactly sees that you are not feeling well. So, you will go to someone, they will tell you to book… do you understand?

The discouraging administrative processes that come with having to make advance bookings for mental health services and the waiting lists in Makinas' narration were attributed to the stigma surrounding mental health issues, limited resources and accessibility to mental health services, financial constraints faced by immigrant students to seek help outside the institution, and a lack of awareness about the importance of psychological support within the institutions when students are faced with an emotional crisis:

> You wait for a week or two until you are called in. So, I even find it useless to call them, because they will tell you to fill out forms and book you.

There was an emphasis on complicated administration processes required for one to access counselling support and a lack of urgency to help those suffering from symptoms of depression which discouraged immigrant students from seeking help. Makina mentioned that he had tried to use the university's counselling services twice previously, and therapy bookings were only scheduled once a month. Other scholars support this by highlighting existing challenges in institutions around accessibility to mental health for immigrant students (Koo & Nyunt, 2020; Laher, et al. 2021; Sharp & Theiler, 2018):

> I mean, the problem with what I go through when it comes to anxiety issues, is difficult to even describe to somebody, to say 'this is how I felt'. And am touched

> because I know some of my foreign brothers even failed to finish their degrees because they went into drugs, some became alcoholics, even now, some people I cannot mention functional alcoholics. Some committed suicide, these are issues we face as academics entirely, but it is much more pronounced and compounded to foreigners.

Makina mentioned the cultural barriers that come with seeking psychological support. His assertion is attributed to the stigma surrounding mental health and cultural beliefs that prioritise personal strength and self-resilience, fear of being perceived as weak, and a lack of understanding or knowledge about psychology by those in charge of the services. He referred to past experience of using the counselling support services at the university:

> There are specific issues where in our culture, you are told that as a man, you have to suck everything up. And it becomes a weakness now to call Wit's crisis line to speak to someone, and people do not understand. And that is the university again. The people that I am talking about are the people that are running the university. So how then do we decolonise or draw a disjuncture between the profession of psychology and some of the psychosocial support versus the cultural practices of our homes? How do you separate that? So, it is really bad for foreigners. I feel sorry for all of us.

Makina refers to the ideological tensions inherent between his traditional cultural conceptions of masculinity and attempts at seeking psychological support. African masculinity values strength, perseverance, and self-reliance, discouraging males from obtaining psychological help. When African males seek therapy or counselling, this might cause ideological conflict caused by the stigma associated with seeking mental health treatment, gender norms and expectations not to show vulnerabilities and lack of access to resources which make it hard for men to seek help (Levant et al. 2022; Meyer, 2020; Reeser, 2023). This disjuncture is reflected in the emphasis on psychology in expressing emotional distress, which seems to be at odds with his expectations of how men should manage emotions in their cultural background and home environment. He links this to historical colonial tensions and seems to feel hopeless about negotiating the co-existence of these imperatives.

### 4.3.3 Sources of exclusion

Makina expressed how a lack of institutional support impacted many immigrant students' academic outcomes and completion, just like himself. He referred to institutional

and structural discrimination against immigrant students accessing hardship funding bursaries, student accommodation, and other structures that promoted discrimination, such as immigration procedures. Getting visa letters approved on time was difficult due to the stringent immigration policies on student visas. He suggested that the government relax the visa rules:

> You know, because right now there are people who have been without visa since February, they are just using letters to come into campus. And what is that, you know, the system is broken. Even though they tried, the reason for having VFS was to facilitate from South Africa. It is unfortunate.

The Visa Facilitation Services (VFS) mentioned by Makina is a system designed to facilitate visa processes and simplify and streamline the visa application process. However, despite its intended benefits, the implementation of the contract by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) has met several challenges, including VFS accepting overwhelmingly large amounts of applications, which they would then forward to the DHA officials to process, resulting in applications stored in toilets, passages and warehouses, lack of training for who administer the visa process and assess risks and perform due diligence (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2018). On this point, Makina also pointed to an example of fellow immigrants who had applied for Visas last October. He still had not received them by the time we had the interview, making it a year's waiting period. This claim supports the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2018) investigation of the backlog in vis applications due to various challenges. In addition, Makina described a situation of the immense psychological distress that immigrant students experienced concerning inadequate support systems. Makina referred to the institutional deterrents and daunting bureaucracy required for attempts to access professional psychological support within the institution:

> Look, the problem with Wits is much more bureaucratic processes.

He also alluded to the tragic loss of a fellow immigrant student who had lost his life to suicide, because his visa papers took such a long time to be processed:

> I think Wits has to communicate effectively with students regarding scholarships and psychosocial support. You cannot hear important information like those in the corridors or because you know someone. You cannot hear of even fatalities because

> you know someone who was a victim. I hope you know that there is a guy called Philip Chuma, who committed suicide in May 2022 because of the payment issue that I am talking about, and in part, due to issues with his student Visa…

It was reported in the media that Chuma's study permit expired end of January 2022 and was not renewed despite him being in regular contact with DHA as the university could not register immigrant students without a valid study permit, and no policy changes have been made currently relating to international students (Charles, 2022). Regarding getting access to accommodation and hardship, Makina emphasised concerns about his experience of structural discrimination, which made navigating spaces within the institution challenging. Key to this was how these caused significant problems in his life as an immigrant student, pointing at daunting administrative processes required for almost anything he needed and making it impossible to get assistance when he applied for hardship funding:

> They would ask me questions like, why did you register to the institutions and then apply for hardship funding knowing fully well that you have no capacity or resources to proceed with your studies?

These discouraging sentiments from administrative staff is discriminatory, according to Makina, he said:

> This is when you begin to feel that you are a foreigner. Okay. So, if you do not have a South African identity number, every space you manoeuvre at Wits becomes problematic. Because now, the first thing that they ask given if you want to apply for funding is a South African, are you a refugee? …Then the rest they favour South Africans…

Upon examining his introspections of how else he felt excluded, Makina displayed some elements of adaptation and strategies that allowed him to find a sense of belonging to counter alienation and feelings of being excluded and found ways to survive. He said:

> As human beings, you exercise urgency and begin to think outside the box. So, in 2020, I began to look for part-time jobs, working in a call centre.

This strategy is consistent with what Mann (2001) suggested, that adopting an alienated stance as a means of survival protects the 'sense of self'; that way, safety is sustained, and unity is preserved. Makina also mentioned the importance of diversity

inclusion initiatives and the benefits of having social connections such as clubs, peer-student support, connections and networks, societies, church clubs/ sports, and social groups, with shared common interests had been found to help to overcome some challenges the many immigrant students face and help them successfully assimilate into South African culture at university (Mori, 2000; Yeh et al. 2008; Koo & Nyunt, 2020). All the participants found joining social and support groups and connecting with other immigrant students from the SADC region helpful and necessary. Cultural differences can also be a source of stress for students, as they may find it difficult to understand or navigate their new environment's customs and social norms. He expressed having solid relationships, connecting with peers, and having support in academia with supervisors and networking opportunities.

He felt the institution is doing well in terms of community connection. For example, there are associations that Makina relied on to get food assistance, mentioned that Wits Citizenship and Community Outreach (WCCO) provided food assistance, and Zimbabwean Students Association (ZIMSOC) offered support for immigrants. However, this information is not readily available, and only come to know about it through interaction with others. Makani accounts how joining a soccer club helped him find social connections and navigate areas where he could find additional resources like food and shower. Apart from this, other connections like friends help the immigrant students find support systems that are helped them find spaces to sleep, eat and shower:

> Guess what? No one will tell you about those issues in the first graduate. You do not have an advanced history as in the second, or third year, so you tend to know and navigate all the spaces you know, so I only discovered this thing last year. So, for the whole of 2020, I have been struggling, and no one cares... I had not known where the showers were until I was playing soccer, and then I realised that I could shower on the grounds early in the morning and then go back. Then we did not have food and all. But in terms of social spaces, people that I directly play soccer with, we have a mix there. It is a social club that I play here at Wits. It is just a group of students organising each other and playing soccer.

However, it was critical to note that, despite these challenges, the institution was responsive to Makina's academic support needs during the Covid-19 pandemic, as he received a laptop and internet data to continue his studies during the lockdown. However, he still struggled to find accommodation during that period, forced himself into campus to seek shelter, and slept in the computer labs.

### 4.4 Kanakangi's academic journey in South Africa

Kanakangi is a 29-year-old Master's student from the DRC who came to South Africa at the young age of 19, dreaming of studying and becoming a chemical engineer. His first experience in South Africa was blurry as he tried to remember much of what happened during his early years there. His academic journey started at the University of Johannesburg. However, despite his excitement, he was not accepted into his desired programmes of study due to his low marks in Mathematics and English according to South African minimum requirements to be accepted into tertiary education:

> My first choice was chemical engineering, and my second choice was Metallurgical Engineering, which was not accepted in any of them. When I went to the admission office international section at UJ to ask, 'why am I not accepted?' They just said my English and mathematics marks are not enough. I was shocked because, as an international student, as a foreigner from a country where we speak French, I had to write the IELTS Test, the International English for the British test. The equivalence of TOEFEL for the American is one of the requirements to register as a student, and I also had to go and study English, I went to ABC International in Braamfontein to study English.

Kanakangi positioned this as a discriminatory act as he had already achieved the IELTS score requirements for acceptance to University which is a 6.5 band (Wits, 2022) and already went for support language tuition that was required for that band which falls in the minimum range. According to IELTS experts, English proficiency is critical for student success (IELTS News, 2022).

#### 4.4.1 Finding a sense of belonging

Despite the challenging admission process, Kanakangi did not give up and decided to spend countless hours studying to pass all his modules with distinctions and get accepted into chemical engineering. He achieved this through unrelenting visits to the international student's admissions office to seek advice, and his determination to be part of the institution paid off when he took the advice to consider doing an extended programme for people who do not have the required level for a year to be able to go into the mainstream. He said,

> I decided to take that challenge, and every month for three months, I still went back to the chemical engineering department to ask 'what do I do to be part of the family.

Kanakangi started facing challenges in the first year of his chemical engineering degree. His claims may be related to institutionalised and structural discrimination in accepting diversity in curriculums. He took time to explain his experience with the process that he had to go through in the application process and lamented that his mathematics marks were below the minimum requirement for a chemical engineering course:

> That was also absurd because if you look at the curriculum in South Africa, mathematics is not the same. So I felt like people were already we were given criteria, according to South Africa, while the curriculum is not even the same.

He compared the Congo curriculum of some of the science subjects he did for biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics, which are at an advanced level of the South African Grade 12:

> We went very far in analytical geometry. We went very deep in calculus, and if you look at Grade 12 in South Africa, they do not even go to two derivatives. It is not even one derivative. In Congo, it is in Grade 11.

Over the last few decades, South Africa has undergone substantive changes within mathematics and science in the Grade 12 curriculum. Since 2001, the National Strategy for Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education (NSMSTE) The department has addressed issues that slowed the provision of high-quality secondary school mathematics, science, and technology education in response to concerns that learners who participated and passed mathematics and science in Grade 12 were persistently low and those who took these subjects in the Higher Grade (HG) had retaken them (Mhlolo, 2022). In addition, the Academy of Science of South Africa Forum report discussed the universal concern regarding performance in science and mathematics in South Africa, which ranked last in the International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1995, 1999, and 2003 and the low university graduation rates (ASSAf, 2010). These concerns were also echoed by other education sector specialists (Bernstein, 2013; Machisi, 2023; McCarthy & Oliphant, 2013). Kanakangi also expressed how he felt different and stood out because of his physical appearance and how he spoke and dressed. But nevertheless, he added,

> When I speak to a local person, they will look at me as somebody trying to get a space at UJ, because, remember, it is not everybody who is accepted…I felt like there were

> two groups of us. When you are in another country, you should blend right. But maybe because I was too new, I was not actually blending, my accent is different. My look is different. So, whenever I enter a room, I identify somebody who comes from somewhere else.

Despite his challenges, Kanakangi's story is inspiring. His determination and demonstration of hard work as an immigrant, believing in himself that he could overcome any obstacles, resulted in him getting an internship job and vocational employment with prestigious South African conglomerates:

> But I can guarantee you there is more in my professional life. I went to work for two companies in South Africa. I worked for the South African Breweries - SAB Miller in Pretoria. And I also worked for Anglo-American in Rustenburg after I graduated at UJ.

He positioned these opportunities as one of his biggest successes after he completed his undergraduate degree which gave him a great sense of belonging, confirming literature that has demonstrated immigrant students may feel a sense of belonging when they are provided with support and offered opportunities to participate in different spaces of their academic journey (Allen et al. 2022; Blatner, 2008; Landau et al. 2005; Mann, 2001; Tagliabue, 2022).

### 4.4.2 Feelings of alienation

When asked if this helped in his adaptation process, he said,

> No, I do not think it does. I just maybe became more tolerant and accepting of being treated different because I am used to it. Because to tell you the truth, if you see me in person, you will know I am from somewhere else. I look like Congolese.

The assertion made by Kanakangi above already positions him on how he developed a sense of identity to "fit in" and be accepted by first accepting himself through language, dress and physical appearance:

> When I open my mouth, you know I am Congolese, so people always have that thing. ‘Where are you from?’ Which is not a problem. But the problem starts when you are being disrespected…I haven't really felt that at Wits.

Bronfenbrenner's concept of alienation has been extensively explored in the context of immigrant students, as they sometimes struggle to develop a sense of identity that enables them to fit in. Kanakangi's alienation manifests in language, dress, and physical appearance. Blatner (2008) emphasises language, particularly for non-English speakers, way of dressing and physical appearance, linked to Bronfenbrenner's theory of alienation, which may subject immigrant students to discrimination, making them feel they need to "fit in" to be accepted (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Mahoney et al., 2022). Taking one's identity allowed Kanakangi to feel a sense of belonging and gave him a sense of security and confidence in who he was, making him very comfortable navigating spaces at the university. He said he felt very pleased and proud of his culture and did not have to mask it to fit in or be accepted and valued as he engaged with his peers, co-workers and official at the institution. Observing Kanakangi's assertions, it is assumed that his attitude significantly reduced feelings of alienation when he accepted his identity and increased their sense of connection and belonging. By embracing their identity, Kanakangi may have fostered a positive sense of self and built the resilience that enabled him to easily navigate the challenges he experienced in his new environment (Allen, 2020; Blatner, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Mann, 2001).

### 4.4.3 Sources of exclusion

It was also observed from the dialogue with Kanakangi were issues of "othering" racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia and ignorance of accepting diversity, themes that were prominent to his feelings of exclusion. He cites various reasons, such as language barriers and discrimination, that may stem from a lack of cultural understanding. These factors were also evident in the literature to create a sense of isolation and made it difficult for immigrant students to fully participate and succeed in the academic and social aspects of university life (Sing, 2016; Hungwe, 2018; Vandeyar, 2012; Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). Kanakangi did not struggle to recall incidents where he needed to understand how locals cannot embrace cultural diversity, and was unaware of the different elements of immigration statuses.

> I feel like people have to be informed. People do not have the right information. In South Africa, in general, every time there is this movement of xenophobia, people are told that all the issues the country faces are due to having a large number of foreigners, and some of them are not even illegal.

He emphasised the need for South African authorities to inform citizens about factual figures in the country on the differences in the statuses of immigration and illegal immigrants that occupy the county, as not all immigrants are illegal and not all work in corporate sectors:

> I think, for me, it is the information. The moment you see the other person as a threat, you will maltreat the person. But the moment you understand how Africa is…a lot of people I am talking to today do not even know that the borders were imposed on us. They have no idea that there was a conference in Berlin, where they were actually imposing borders within Africa.

Kanakangi expressed his love for Africa and how its cultures were embedded in him as a pan-African with big dreams for Africa. He said he wanted to explore and travel within Africa to find business opportunities and learn more about the benefits of an African economy. However, he claimed he struggled to understand the issues, and would like to know more about Africa's common interests or differences:

> That is why I do not understand when somebody automatically sees me as a different person just because I am coming from another country, while the country was the borders were imposed on us. Before, we were just a bunch of population people walking or maybe migrating from one place to another, going from one village to another. We lost that because somebody just decided to create borders, which creates countries, nationalities, passports, and things like that.

Kanakangi asserts that the lack of education and change of mindset about the borders creates problems and narratives of xenophobia, as locals have the impression that somebody from Zimbabwe or Zambia is fundamentally different, rather than having a common origin:

> You know, in South Africa, we need the right information, education, and knowledge to understand that Africa is not a bunch of countries, but the population that was there before, but borders were imposed on them.

To better understand Kanakangi's frame of reference on why he associated exclusion with border issues, he was asked to provide an example of respect. If he was treated differently and denied access to a particular service because he was from another country, taking a moment to respond and breathing in between many pauses, he said:

> I think I have one thing to say. It is valid for South Africa as a whole. It is not everyone, the staff or every student, that behaves this way, but I can guarantee you some of the students the moments that they know that you are a foreigner, and they know, for example, you cannot speak their language.

He elaborated how he sometimes feels he would deliberately be excluded from conversations by others speaking a local language, even during class group work and in his presence. He spoke about the numerous times he felt disrespected and the point that the local students, when they spoke in the language they knew he could not understand, did not realise the level at which it affected him, yet he could not ask them to stick to speaking English. He would feel it was their school. Kanakangi also spoke about how he experienced discrimination based on language even in the work environment time he worked as an intern in both Pretoria and Rustenburg:

> … when they want to make you uncomfortable, feel bad, and exclude you...not everyone...It is the minority. But one person is enough to make you feel terrible and excluded. This is not even only for blacks. Even when you are in a group of white people, sometimes this is the time they go for Afrikaans. They can see the colour of their skin. But then it's Afrikaans all the way. So I am like, okay. That is the one very disrespectful thing. It is disrespectful, and you feel excluded.

Upon examining how Kanakangi positions respect in terms of language barriers as a form of exclusion, which substantiates a claim made by Mahoney et al. (2022) that immigrant students often view language barriers as a form of exclusion and disrespect because it impedes their ability to communicate effectively and participate fully in their new educational setting, making them feel isolated and frustrated. The discrimination and prejudice based on local language abilities and culture further compound their experiences of exclusion and disrespect.

### 4.5 Shanaya's academic journey in South Africa

Shanaya is a 36-year-old Master's student who came to South Africa from the DRC. He came to South Africa with the understanding that his application for a scholarship was accepted and that the financial support he required was readily available. However, this was not the case. He experienced numerous challenges, such as financial difficulties, language barriers and discrimination, as he tried to find his way to navigate his student life as an immigrant in South Africa. At one point, he contemplated returning to his home country as

the alternative scholarship he eventually got would not cover all his living expenses and travel costs. Shanaya recounted how confusing his first week on campus was - from finding affordable accommodation closer to the university to seeking support from the institution. When all failed, he felt alone:

> I did everything on my own, but I did not give up. I continued with my studies. I was just coming from far. I could leave my sister's place, and come to the university. But, given the transport costs, sometimes I had to pay for two or three transport to get back. For the first year of the program, sometimes you finish at 7:00 pm or 7:30 pm and it was not easy even to go back home. So I would come and spend three days or four days at the university without going back home.

Other studies also found that immigrant students who do not have on-campus accommodation find long commutes to campus exhausting (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). This also imposes stress that may drain students' physical, emotional, financial, and temporal resources as they have to deal with long daily commutes to avoid expensive housing near the university. Laher et al. (2021) and Sarabia et al. (2021) found that this often-overlooked problem affects immigrant students' academic progress.

### 4.5.1 Finding a sense of belonging

Shanaya eventually found solace and a sense of belonging at the university despite feeling out of place initially. He met other students from different backgrounds who became his peers and helped him navigate his new life in South Africa. What was significant in his adaptation process during the first year of his Masters was peer student support. It was challenging during the first year of his Masters due to a lack of accommodation and transport money to go back home, but he continued to come to campus, relying on friends who offered a place for him to shower and eat:

> On days we finished earlier, I could leave and return to my sister's place again. It was not easy. It was difficult with everything they were telling us about our safety in Johannesburg.

The second year of his Masters was much more bearable because he was only doing research. However, peer support played a critical role in helping Shanaya navigate campus and find alternative accommodation and a sense of community and belonging as he found peers who understood the difficulties of being an immigrant student and provided practical

assistance. The results from this account demonstrate essential factors contributing to immigrant students' feeling of belonging to social support, confirming results from earlier studies by Chen et al. (2022) and Mann (2001). Shanaya also elaborated on how peers provided emotional and psychological support and encouragement, which helped him adjust and succeed academically:

> A friend of mine, a student South African lady, noticed I was suffering a lot with my studies, she asked 'what is happening? It's like you are not fine, its like you did not eat and all that? I can make a plan for you. Just tell me your problem, tell me how are you leaving?' I tried to explain to her that it was not easy for me. Sometimes I would just think of giving up and stop coming because it was not easy. She went with me to the school and showed me a particular office that would help me.

He also explained how these associations supported him in getting access to food even though the assistance was highly dependent on the availability of food parcels from donations and could go only if alerted via emails when he registered his name. This assertion led to a critical conversation around the orientation processes and effective communication, which could have provided him with a clear understanding of what resources and support systems were available to him and how he could have access to enable him to navigate his new environment. He mentioned how the lack of access to adequate information did not help him develop a sense of belonging. He said he would not have known where to go and register for the food parcels if his friend had not told him about it. He remembered how in the past, the university would provide new students with information booklets about where to access other support services besides non-academic support.

### 4.5.2 Feelings of alienation

Shanaya's experience of alienation was positioned around feeling disconnected due to not being able to access counselling and psychological support within the university, which made him feel he was not supported enough, and issues of safety and security within the institution. Most important to note was how the Covid-19 pandemic affected most immigrant students, including Shanaya, who could not afford to fly back home to his country when the country was on total lockdown. The university was closed, and students were told to go back home or find a family or place to go and stay. Shanaya explained that the pandemic affected students severely without speaking only for himself, as they lacked resources. Many did not have families in South Africa to go to when the university closed the accommodation, and he

described the unease they felt around the mandatory vaccination policy with the conspiracy theories that accompanied it:

> But if you do not have your family, what can you do in that case? So in the future, we will have those kinds of crises. So I think the university needs at least to think about international students. Not only about financial needs but also psychological support. In South Africa, even some local people are like foreigners because some come from different provinces and are new to Johannesburg.

Respect was also an important factor that Shanaya felt could impact his academic outcomes and completion. He linked this to how he adapted to his new environment. When asked how he felt the aspect of respect could make him not feel alienated, he went and reflected on what he heard in the news about the state of the country when he was still in DRC and what people around him back then would always speak about crime in South Africa:

> We need a certain sense of confidence when coming to South Africa because everything can affect our studies in the end. So when you are not respected, you lose confidence in yourself.

Shanaya plainly stated that already having a French background makes it hard to express himself, open up to others or even ask a question in class during lectures when he does not understand what is being taught. Having gone through many challenges to studying in South Africa, he emphasised that his life would be much easier if there were missing aspects of respect that may affect academic progress. Because they come from diverse cultures, immigrant students sometimes experience a lack of respect from their peers or teachers due to their differences, causing them to feel alienated and dismissed in the classroom. This ties in with a study by Vandeyar and Catalano (2020) that found trans-language pedagogy to have a detrimental effect on the academic performance of immigrant students.

### 4.5.3 Sources of exclusion

Shanaya's responses to the question of exclusion revealed the unequal playing field he faced when it came to safety and security, xenophobia, crime, and inadequate support services. This left him feeling unsafe in the academic environment when university authorities did not take steps to ensure that adequate safety measures were in place. He

remembered being a victim of theft and robbery on campus. He described how his laptop bag was stolen from a locked, highly secured computer lab when he briefly stepped out to the restroom.

> There are security cameras everywhere and guards outside the entrance point, and it can only be accessed using a student access card.

He said the case remained unsolved for two years despite being reported numerous times and moved to different departments. Shanaya stressed that he and many immigrant students do not feel safe in South Africa because anyone can pull a gun, compared to his country, where it is only the police and soldiers who have guns. Lee's (2017) safety risks support that this may heighten immigrant students' anxieties about safety in South Africa. Shanaya also raised issues of "othering" racism, xenophobia, Afrophobia, and ignorance of accepting diversity, particularly concerning language barriers. Shanaya expressed how it was not easy for him coming from DRC, a French-speaking country, to study in an English teaching system. He gave an example where he struggled with being allocated a supervisor for his research project:

> They gave me a certain supervisor who said he could also speak French, but in the end, I realised that it was a person just to delay me.

Shanaya felt unsupported and lacked proper guidance through his research project due to language barriers and cultural differences, which left him frustrated, especially when he sought guidance from the course coordinators, who would tell him to do whatever was asked of him. Nevertheless, he said he did not give up and changed the supervisors:

> Other South Africans told me 'you see us, we didn't choose white people.' We are doing our project with black people because you know that with black people, we understand each other they will help us to finish. Some white people are racist. And among us students under that supervisor, a certain South African went to complain to the board, saying that the supervisor is a racist. Now, she was forced to finish that project with that student because of that reason. For us, it was not easy. She would say, 'no, they have a problem with the language, that's why we are delaying.' Thank God I did not give up.

It is evident in Shanaya's assertion above that immigrant students in South African universities often experience discrimination based on not only their ethnic backgrounds but also race, which is seen here as stemming from micro-aggressions from faculty and staff, which made him feel excluded. Discrimination can be a harrowing experience for immigrant students (Iwara et al., 2017). However, Shanaya said the course coordinators were very helpful in coordinating the supervisors, and she was very understanding of his unique needs and tried her best to assist despite hearing about similar incidents about peers from French-speaking country who ended up not finishing the same programme due to lack of proper supervision:

> Someone called me saying that, 'who are you working with?' I told him that supervisor. He said no, you will never graduate. I was working with that supervisor, it has been four years now, I have not graduated, I decided to give up the programme and went back home. She used to say no, I can help you French-speaking people, but she is not doing that.

Shanaya's outlook on discrimination links to findings by the United Nations (2020) that stated how immigrants are forced to operate in the shadows, scared to protest for fear of being victimised. Another point raised in the interview with Shanaya was the issue of racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia, which aligns with other studies by Vandeyar (2012) and Landau et al. (2005) as one of the contributing factors to discrimination. He explained how South Africa is a divided country because he struggled to navigate power relations in the institution when he had a problem that required attention. He found that black staff members were conflicted about addressing race issues. As a result, he was asked to look for a white person willing to guide him to get assistance:

> And us, we do not know those kinds of things in our country, so when we come to South Africa, we find the new environment, we have 'black' with 'white' and there is a bit of problem between black and white. And as we are now trapped in between. You do not know how to deal with that, you know. For South Africans, they are saying no, you know, your supervisor is a racist. But what am I going to say? Because I do not know that?

Shanaya showed how confusing it was for him to identify experiences or actions of racism here in South Africa because he comes from a socio-cultural context where an

understanding of what constitutes racism may be different. He emphasised that racism was not expressed as openly in the DRC as it is in South Africa.

### 4.6 Supuni's academic journey in South Africa

The oldest student of the group interviewed was Supuni, a 52-year-old PhD student from Malawi, who came to South Africa to study under his government-sponsored programme. His academic journey was different from many immigrants interviewed. He says he did not struggle to adjust to South Africa, and his experience was extremely positive and enjoyable. As a government-sponsored student, Supuni's adaptation process differed from other immigrant students. He said he did not have any experiences of being alienated or feeling excluded at the university except that he came to South Africa to start his programmes a few weeks before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This was not a problem for him because, at that time, there was little interaction with peers, academic staff, and his supervisors. Supuni attitude towards the pandemic was also positive. He said it was because it was not anyone's fault that academic activities were disrupted:

> The Covid-19 lockdown at the university was not a significant psychological problem because it was not personalised to me. It was it was across the board, and the inconvenience that was caused was not just to me, it was also to some of my colleagues who were also international students.

#### 4.6.1 Finding a sense of belonging

Supuni asserted that he found it easier to integrate into his new environment because he clearly understands cultural diversity, as he has had experiences working with people from various cultures and practices in his line of work. He said he understands that people had different ways of doing things and differed in how they viewed the world. Coming in with this perspective made him adjust more easily to his environment and find a sense of belonging. He said he did not see signs of disrespect from colleagues, students or members of staff or administrative support:

> I think this is more of a very subjective assessment. People are different. I come from an environment where I network a lot. I interacted in my professional work with people of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and different personalities. So I understand that I understand diversity and that you could have differences. So to me, it is not an issue. I will not even perceive it as a sign of disrespect. I would look at it from the perspective that you were people of different people who look at issues differently.

> People perceive things differently, people with different interests and likes, I think in that kind of context to me, the approach is that I always have to adapt and understand that is the best way to do it, you can change it up in different settings.

Sopani expressed that he only came to South Africa with one goal - to study. From that academic perspective, he would however, like to see more interactions with international students through events that allow networking and interaction:

> Because of the diversity in programs, probably the postgraduate office and the international office could collaborate more with the different schools, offering different postgraduate programs, to create platforms where international students can network and know each other.

A lack of peer interaction was Supuni's only observation, as networking could be an essential aspect of getting peer support from each other outside academia. Other studies also confirm that immigrant students pursuing doctoral studies experience a stronger sense of belonging because they value their academic activities more than their local counterparts (Curtin et al., 2013).

### 4.6.2 Feelings of alienation

Feelings of being supported and impacting academic outcomes were only related to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic for Supuni. He expressed feeling anxious as his program was starting, and it ended up being delayed due to the lockdown, so he had to opt to join a later cohort:

> So it just happened that I came here in second week of March. Just after two weeks, it is when the pandemic broke and the school was closed.

Unlike other participants in the study, Supuni was fortunate to fly back home. His academic activities continued and his supervisors were in constant contact with him. He said,

> The exchange in terms of my work progress was not as active as it has been after the pandemic, but I think we still maintained to keep in touch, my supervisors still committed and said you can still work and push some work to us, they gave me feedback on two of my drafts.

Lee et al. (2015) and Yu (2022) confirmed that immigrant students' sense of belonging could be related to their socio-economic status, as demonstrated by narratives by Supuni. PhD international students with access to funding often have access to other resources and experience a greater sense of belonging due to their privileges. At the same time, those with more limited backgrounds and resources may find it more challenging to fit in and find a sense of belonging (Zheng, 2010). For example, Supuni demonstrated access to structural support and had a unique opportunity to find a sense of belonging without worrying about financial support, as the government covered all his needs. His only obligation was to focus his energy on settling in and finding a place to fit in.

> I felt quite welcome in my program in the School of Economics and Finance. I think I was inducted quite well. I think the support I have been getting from the department's administrative staff has been quite good. The academic support I have also been getting from my supervisors has been quite good. So overall, even if I'm an international student, I'm a foreign student, you know, as far as my experience in my academic programme is concerned, not had any adverse experience of feeling alienated or feeling excluded…

### 4.6.3 Sources of exclusion

Still contrary to what other participants in this study experienced, what was interesting in Supuni's narration of developing a sense of identity to "fit in" and be accepted was the issue of language use. He said his case is different because he only experienced discrimination outside academia, which has not been a big problem for him, he said:

> I think the language issue becomes an issue when you are outside the sphere of the academic environment. And then 'they' think there is nothing you can do about it when you are out in town.

Within academia, Supuni had not experienced any insinuations pertaining to language or peers deliberately conversing in a language he did not understand. This suggests that students and staff in the academic environment may be more accepting and tolerant of language differences among immigrant students. This suggests this may be a protective space for immigrants but may contrast with attempts to engage and integrate with South African society more broadly. However, the narrative also suggests that the university may not be sufficiently sensitive to the forms of exclusion due to language challenges that immigrant

students face outside of the university during their studies and assisting them in managing these challenges.

## 4.7 Wesley's academic journey in South Africa

Wesley is a 43-year-old Malawian immigrant student whose academic journey started when he moved to South Africa to live with his father 15 years ago. He mentioned his transition in academia and life in general as more accessible and different from anybody else's because he had the support of his father, who paid for his honours degree and made his first experience rewarding:

> I think my story will be different from anybody else if I start with how I ended up in South Africa because my father was already in South Africa. So he made things easier for me. When it comes to academics… I have done one degree with Wits, Honours in Quantity Surveying. Right now pursuing my Masters. The first time I felt belonging to Wits was when I got accepted. It was the most exciting time of my life has been one of the best universities in Africa or South Africa, one of the best recommended. Apart from that, orientation was excellent for my first degree.

Wesley had a great orientation experience when he first arrived at the university, along with the excitement of being accepted into a prestigious institution and beginning a new journey, which was incredibly uplifting. However, many studies have found that immigrant students face a lack of sustained support once the initial orientation period ends, leaving them feeling isolated and uncertain (Sing, 2016; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Mann, 2001).

### 4.7.1 Finding a sense of belonging

Wesley continued to adjust well in his academic and cultural environment because he had the support of his family, which was financially stable, which may have helped his sense of belonging. Strong family support can make the journey of an immigrant university student more accessible and meaningful (Curtin et al., 2013). However, even though his initial transition was easy, Wesley felt there was no valuable and adequate support from academic staff to help him cope with mental health-related challenges he continues to face due to the pressures of administrative processes about fee payment flexibility and grades, which has impacted his academic outcomes and completion. He wished there could be financial assistance for SADC immigrants to achieve the same academic goals as their local peers, "my

classmates ended up pursuing their Masters during my honours, I am still doing my Masters modules, but I am still struggling just because of financial issues." Wesley narratively constructed his sense of belonging and structural support for SADC immigrant students, which he viewed as critical. He mentioned the high number of immigrant students at the university because it is prestige, and he is proud to have a Wits qualification. Despite this, he still had an innate need to belong:

> I always tell my friends to come inside. Once you come inside, that is when you realise, what did I get myself into? The cumbersome administrative process of getting the education? It has nothing to do with the studies or the academic experience. It is psychological...you cannot sit in a class, an easy subject, but your mind is focused on finances and medical aid. Now you have to stop focusing on the lecture itself, Not that you are dumb, no, but because now your mind has to switch and start dealing with the administration of your life.

Wesley narrated that even though he was happy to be admitted to a prestigious institution, he felt discouraged by rigid administrative processes, structural support, and unequal power relationships, which caused him significant stress and made it hard for him to focus on his studies. In addition, he mentioned that this left him feeling resources and assistance were not made available for immigrant students like him, such as having an undistracted space to focus on studies without constant reminders about overdue fee notices and not having support to resolve issues. In contrast, his local peers have support at their fingertips because they can go to faculty and speak to someone in their local language and get help, leaving them with more time to focus on academics and less on administrative problems:

> It has many links to financials and groupings. If you are a foreigner, this is your route in the same class, you could have five people in a group, three foreigners and two locals, but the foreigners are struggling not to produce study work but because their time is spent busy trying to manage the administrative issues at Wits…So our friends have a good buffer. If you hold this Wits student card, regardless of race or nationality, you should get the same privileges because you are working towards the same academic outcome.

This claim by Wesley suggests that his time was increasingly being taken up with managing administrative matters, leaving him little time to focus on his academic work, which has caused a significant decrease in the quality of work he produces and an increase in

feelings of stress and frustration. However, it is also clear that immigrant students at the university are significantly impacted by the strain of managing administrative issues, as indicated in the literature (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Salas et al., 2021; Sharp & Theiler, 2018; Sing, 2016).

### 4.7.2 Feelings of alienation

Wesley narrated having experienced daunting obstacles when he tried to access resources. These institutional deterrents came in the form of complicated bureaucratic processes. For example, the long waiting time to get assignment grades updated on his profile or incorrect capturing of marks often delayed his moving to the subsequent modules when he had outstanding fees:

> What I would say about Wits is a good institution. However, the administration, especially from our department, I think a lot needs to be changed because as immigrant students, we come here already frustrated with many things like assignments, now you find that our assignments or marks are missing you cannot register into another course just because your previous marks have not been captured or captured wrong.

Additionally, he mentioned that financial needs prevented him from getting access to resources or help, which created feelings of anxiety and frustration:

> It is now upon you to run around each office to make it right, just to get that mark to go to your next level. I think they could put a system in place for proper capturing…I was charged for courses that I had already paid for. So I had to bring proof of payments to get my marks, and there are high-interest rates on unpaid fees. That also scares everybody to push forward if they want to continue your education.

He also pointed out the lack of proper administrative structures, especially in his department of the Construction Industry, which has numerous subdivisions such as civil engineering, quantity surveying, and land surveying, which he assumed to fall under the same umbrella. He said, "most of the time, when looking for a simple thing like your marks, you must go through many departments or offices, and sometimes your marks are not captured properly. It is a tedious process." He remembered that outstanding fees were the reason there was zero grade on his test or exams, reflecting that he did not write the test or exams:

> In fact, I did not fail, I passed. But my life should stop until I get the fees to move forward. For example, it means that if you owe R65,000, you have to get R55,000 for you to know whether you will proceed to another level in your academic life, which I find it challenging for students that are international who are actually paying even more money from their pockets, while our local friends in the same class… are even pursuing now.

Wesley asserted that he was significantly impacted by institutionalised and structural discrimination when he tried to access hardship funding and bursaries, even though he submitted the same applications as his local peers. As a result, he felt alienated. He spoke of eligibility for such bursaries often being limited due to his non-South African nationality, which prevented him from having the same access to other educational resources compared to local students:

> I am not saying that other students have not gotten bursaries, you have to be way above an average for you to be considered… but they are other local students who got, that you way better than them, but because they are South African then they deserve it.

In addition, he mentioned that applying for these bursaries can often be extremely confusing and difficult to navigate, leading to a further disadvantage for immigrant students, particularly from the SADC region.

> I have met many of my friends from the SADC member state, but none of them was on a bursary, but the locals, the rest, were on bursaries.

He linked this to the stringent immigration policies and student visa status:

> Wits, if you are a foreigner, there is no chance because the first thing they ask on the application form is an ID number or passport. Okay? If you have got a passport, the chances of you getting a bursary are very minimal. It starts from the application form, the first thing you have to put in there is either your passport or your South African ID number… others get extra benefits just because they are South African. So, they have abundant access to things and resources, while we are not privileged.

### 4.7.3 Sources of exclusion

Wesley expressed not having to experience significant issues of exclusion in terms of discrimination or xenophobia, and he credited this to the length of stay in South Africa as he

came when he was young and having an established support system through his family. However, he could relate to subtle forms of exclusion, which he elaborated,

> The channels of how the things are structured, it already excludes.

He gave an example of why there are separate lines for international students and local students when they queue to access the same resources,

> So if we queue on different lines, even when you are registering, they will say 'international students'. So you have your own queue, so even that, it starts from there, that we are different from them, we are secondary to them, so you are categorised.

This statement triggered a conversion which led Wesley to speak up on' othering' issues connected to xenophobia, Afrophobia and ignorance of accepting diversity.

> So even if you have to contribute in class, your contribution, even in a group, they will ask you questions like, 'how do you know that?' Moreover, they say no even if you tell them I read it. In South Africa, that's not how it's done. No but it's in the books! So, you have to convince your classmates that no, this is there, it's applied everywhere…So it even from the onset of registration, we have been doubted of our capabilities of doing some of these things. So first time, yes. It's great because of the excitement to be accepted, but there is less to be desired inside of Wits for some of us.

The assertion above confirms heightened discrimination against immigrant students found in the literature (Iwara et al., 2017; Sing, 2016; United Nations, 2020) drawing to the narration by Wesley that discrimination exists, even in its subtle forms,

> It is there, you understand? so they do not have to tell you that you are an international student or you are excluded, no, but it is right there. So it means that you don't belong to the other, so from the beginning, they are already telling you that you are not us. You have been accepted, but you are not us. So for me, the moment they issue you with a study permit, I think that is the beginning that you are part of Wits.

According to Wesley, the classification of students into international and local students is the first step in a process of differential treatment. Inequalities in treatment of immigrant students, such as in their access to resources and opportunities, might result from this process. Wesley is concerned that this sort of approach will have long-lasting effects on

immigrant students' feelings of belonging, involvement, and engagement on campus since it prohibits them from having equitable access to resources and generates an overall feeling of alienation and exclusion. This assertion aligns with the work of critical community psychologists whose work focus on promoting of equitable social and economic resources through research and social action (Evans, Duckett, Lawthom & Kivell,2017; Nelson & Evans, 2014).

## 4.8 Discussion of findings

The participant's experiences in South Africa were somehow complex and ambivalent. Their experiences of belonging, alienation and exclusion were diverse, and the reasons for coming to pursue their education in South Africa ranged from government-funded scholarships, bursaries and self-funding. The open dialogue with the immigrant students revealed different patterns in which immigrant students found a stronger sense of belonging to adaptation and social integration in South Africa. All participants had unique experiences in the individual adaptation process and perceived a certain level of discrimination when they first came to South Africa. The main factors that contributed to a lack of a sense of belonging were cultural barriers and lack of access to support services for the English language, the lack of an inclusive curriculum for non-English speaking students, individual differences in adaptation processes, inadequate psychological support for mental health-related challenges, safety and security concerns concerning personal belongings.

Almost all participants felt social support was essential in their experience of not feeling alienated as they found peer-student support, connections and networks, societies, sports and social groups as strategies to counter alienation. However, lack of institutional support, such as institutional deterrents and daunting bureaucratic processes when trying to access resources, discouraging administrative processes, unequal power relationships and inadequate supervision, caused alienation, even though immigrant students that came through government scholarships found adequate structural support. Other factors were institutionalised and structural discrimination to access hardship funding for immigrant students, such as bursaries and other opportunities, student accommodation and fee payment options. In addition, others felt the orientation process and effective communication was inadequate, making them struggle to navigate spaces and access adequate information for services during hardships and crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Factors contributing to feelings of exclusion were related to racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia, particularly subtle forms of exclusion, 'you are not us', which manifested in different forms, such as language use, ignorance in accepting diversity and feeling different, suggesting the need for anti-xenophobia education. In addition, the participants' experiences of prejudice and discrimination varied, with some pointing at respect and the issue of 'othering', financial exclusion to access resources and benefits, and stringent immigration policies.

### 4.8.1 Cultural and language barriers

Access to support for developing English language proficiency was essential for university immigrant students because it can significantly impact their academic success. Many academic materials, lectures, and university discussions are in English. Without adequate support for the language, immigrant students may struggle to understand, engage with the material, write academically to the required levels, and build connections with peers (Wunseh, 2023). Having access to support services such as English language assistance designed explicitly for immigrant students to help them improve their language skills and better integrate into university life was a challenge to most of the participants in this study. For example, two participants found social integration easier and assimilated well into the university because of language.

However, DRC participants had a different sense of belonging and described language as a critical element in their adaptation process, as evidenced in research by Yeh (2008) which extends beyond the classroom but how to navigate other spaces outside of campus and can also help immigrant students access other services such as counselling which is also primarily provided in English, shared with most of the participants from Zimbabwe and Malawi who did not find it challenging to understand and at least articulate some of the South African languages. Contrary to this revelation, French-speaking immigrant students from DRC may struggle to find a sense of belonging in English universities and workplaces.

They may have difficulty understanding lectures and participating in class discussions, making connecting with classmates and lecturers harder. As a result, they may miss their home country's cultural references and social norms and struggle to find like-minded individuals in the new environment (Madadzhe, 2019; Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020; Yeh et al., 2008). Cultural and language barriers, feeling disconnected from peers and lectures because of cultural and language barriers, differing social norms and beliefs and developing a sense of identity to "fit in" and be accepted were perceived differently by some

immigrant students depending on individual backgrounds and experiences. For some, being in a diverse university environment was a positive experience that provided an opportunity to interact with people from different cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, such as immigrants who came to study through government-funded scholarships.

The results from the narratives of participants demonstrated that immigrant students' sense of belonging may be linked to economic status and financial support. This confirms results from earlier studies that revealed that immigrant students who came under government scholarship programmes have more positive experiences and enjoy institutional support and social inclusion through education immigration policies (Lee et al., 2015; Yu, 2022) compared to self-funded immigrant students, asylum seekers and refugees. For instance, the two PhD participants felt a sense of belonging and connection with others, while the other participants felt that the university environment was overwhelming and challenging, and they struggled with language barriers. Having adequate financial resources may assist students in integrating with others, connecting positively and facilitating more opportunities for social engagement without the detrimental psychological effects of the isolation and desperation of living under extreme financial duress whilst studying for a higher degree.

Participants had contrary views of diversity; some attributed this to the lack of a diverse and inclusive curriculum. They felt that a more inclusive curriculum would benefit immigrant students that accommodated contributions and support for non-English speaking students, especially those from French-speaking countries. Bukhari (2015) and Samsari et al. (2023) found similar strict admission policies on internationally recognised English proficiency tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, before admitting immigrant students into universities. It is crucial to understand and acknowledge the country's historical, structural inequalities and social-cultural context within the South African unique context. For example, providing English language support for non-English speaking immigrants in universities could be a challenge due to the country's 11 official languages, English being one of the primary languages spoken in schools. In addition, South Africa has a history of social and economic inequality, which has led to a lack of access to education and language training for many people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, immigrant students who come to South African universities with limited English proficiency may require more intensive language support (Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020).

### 4.8.2 Individual differences in adaptation processes

Exploring how immigrant students adapted to Wits University uncovered a wealth of individual variations. For some participants, coming to South Africa was a challenging experience as they struggled to manoeuvre in the spaces due to social-cultural differences and not being financially prepared to accommodate their own needs. However, other participants integrated smoothly and were provided with adequate support. Hence, it was found that individual differences shaped their adaptation process. For example, the participants' perceptions of adaptation to environmental changes in developing a sense of identity came out strongly in the narratives. Many studies have shown that immigrant students may experience a range of perceptions and emotions related to adapting to cultural and environmental changes through cultural shock, which may manifest as frustration, psychosocial difficulties, and struggle with developing a sense of identity as they navigate the differences between their home culture and the culture of their new country (Iwara et al., 2017; Liu & László, 2007).

However, most participants adapted well and found ways to integrate their customs with their new experiences, ultimately creating a unique sense of self. Some factors that may have impacted some of the participants' ability to adapt identified in this study include their level of local language proficiency, the level of support and resources available to them, and their resilience, and social situation, like in the case of Makina, who found it easier to blend in because his name sounded similar to a South African name. Nonetheless, the adaptation and assimilation process differed for each participant, influenced mainly by other factors such as personal attitudes and the level of support the university and peers provided, even at the cost of masking their identities. For example, one participant explained how he was treated differently because his identity was ambiguous. This was because he spoke a local language, and his identity as an immigrant could not be easily picked up. Other studies have found that speaking local South African languages may greatly assist immigrant students' integration and ability to blend in well. This was a benefit, especially when navigating social spaces, interacting with staff, and engaging with local students and staff through class discussions, group projects, and informal conversations, which can all help build relationships and provide a sense of belonging (Wunseh & Charamba, 2023).

### 4.8.3 Social support and diversity inclusion initiatives

The importance of diversity inclusion initiatives and benefits of having social connections and networks, being part of a sports social group, peer-student support system,

and social organisations was helpful to all the participants in overcoming some of the challenges they faced, and ultimately assisting them in successfully assimilating into the South African culture at university (Mori, 2000; Yeh et al. 2008; Koo & Nyunt, 2020). All the participants found joining social support groups helpful and necessary, underlining the role of these clubs, societies and networks in providing social support. Cultural differences were stressful for most, as understanding and navigating the new social norms was initially challenging. However, most participants expressed having solid relationships, connecting with peers, having support in academia with supervisors, having exposure to networking opportunities, and feeling the institution was doing well in facilitating community connection. This was consistent with similar studies by Bezerra and Alves (2022) and Bukhari (2015). In addition, some participants expressed how associations offered support in times of need. This took the form of food assistance programmes and on-campus food donations, which they could access to alleviate food insecurity and help them focus on their studies.

The participants mentioned that Wits Citizenship and Community Outreach (WCCO) provided food assistance and Zimbabwean Students Association (ZIMSOC) offered support for the Zimbabwe immigrant students who had taken part in this study, even though this assistance was not easily accessible or readily available. They had only become aware of it through interaction with others. For example, one participant, Makani, accounted how joining a soccer club helped him not only to find social connections but through this club, he was able to navigate areas where he could find additional resources, such as where to get food parcels and a place to take a shower. Apart from this, other connections like friendships helped others find support systems to talk and be heard. Similarly, having friends on campus provided a place of refuge to rest, eat and shower for participants who did not have accommodation.

The participants' narratives' demonstrated essential factors contributing to immigrant students' not feeling alienated by having a social support system, confirming results from earlier studies by Chen et al. (2022) and Mann (2001). While some participants possessed a positive attitude and an ability to adapt to different situations with statements such as "I just have to work hard and get this paper", some experiences were short of motivation. For example, one participant described instances when he went to get assistance from the food bank but came back empty-handed. He ended these stories with statements like "I wanted to give up". This echoed his feelings of desperation and alienation. These food banks are under-resourced and heavily depend on donations from private organisations and well-wishers, and

thus may not always be able to assist students in dire need. Experiences like these may exacerbate students' sense of helplessness when they have been turned away with nothing.

### 4.8.4 Access to psychological support and counselling

Not being able to access counselling and psychological support within the institution made most participants feel that they were not supported enough, which impacted their academic outcomes and completion when they encountered mental health-related challenges, safety and security challenges. Similar studies revealed a lack of culturally sensitive psychological assessments to support immigrant students' mental health in host institutions (Koo & Nyunt, 2020; Sharp & Theiler, 2018). Although in South Africa, immigrant students can access psychological support and counselling services within institutions of higher learning. International student offices may also help connect immigrant students with mental health services on and off campus, student health insurance and counselling services offered at the universities (Hungwe, 2018; Sing, 2016; Vandeyar, 2012; Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). Based on an overall impression of each interview, two participants experienced severe mental health issues that affected their academic performance and required professional psychological support or counselling.

These issues appeared to be related to broader challenges they experienced on campus, such as a lack of access to food, proper accommodation, difficulties associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, and other social factors. Some attributes that characterised the participants with psychological issues included a lack of financial support for fees, accommodation and food, a lack of sleep, inadequate psychological support from counselling services, and reports of tiresome administration processes required to access help and support systems. These challenges may have contributed to high levels of distress and anxiety and depression among these participants.

### 4.8.5 Racism, Xenophobia and Afrophobia

In this study, participants reported that they often felt excluded by their peers due to their immigrant background. This exclusion was expressed in various forms, including language use. Participants noted that they were often excluded from conversations or were the target of derogatory language. This language was often used to create a sense of ‘othering’ and to distance immigrant students from their peers. This was mainly noticed even in academic-related group assignments and when trying to access resources, where processes of othering were more explicit. Language use was also seen as a form of power by locals, as

it was used to dominate, humiliate and silence the immigrant students, which significantly impacted the participants' self-esteem, as it was used to make them feel inferior and excluded. The findings of this study demonstrate the need for universities to reduce xenophobia, Afrophobia and racism to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for immigrant students. This aligns with what has already been established in previous academic work on representation and language by Foster (1991) and on prejudice-built-in language by Baldwin (2017).

Also worth noting was a suggestion made by some of the participants about anti-xenophobia education. These participants linked xenophobia in South Africa to ignorance in accepting diversity, contributing to immigrant students' feelings of being different. It was clear from the participants' stories that a lack of knowledge and understanding of variety contributed to the xenophobia they experienced. Several participants suggested that anti-xenophobia education should be implemented in South African universities (Kamakanga, pp. 58) mentioned, "understand how Africa is…a lot of people I am talking to today do not even know that the borders were imposed on us." to help foster a more accepting and inclusive environment. This may include, for example, a history of immigration in Africa and an understanding of the psychosocial and structural mechanisms and manifestations of colonisation and racism.

### 4.8.6 Prejudice and discrimination

The findings demonstrate the complexities of immigrant students' experiences in South Africa's higher education which the participants stated as concerning, given the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination that can impede their access to resources and opportunities. Systemic barriers and implicit biases were identified as possible causes of their inability to access resources, such as cheap accommodation, other student benefits and bursaries due to their limited financial status, mainly self-funded students. For example (Makina, pp. 52) narrated how he struggled to get accommodation and hardship funding and pinned this on structural discrimination when he was once asked, "why did you register… then apply for hardship funding knowing fully well that you have no capacity or resources to proceed…?".

The issue of discrimination through the denial of resources could adversely affect the student's success in their studies, thus underlining the importance of eliminating these barriers. These experiences highlight the need for universities to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all students, regardless of their background. In addition, the

findings underscore the need for universities to address the issue of prejudice and discrimination towards immigrant students. Even though this is a common experience for immigrant students, it is essential to underscore that it undermines the potential development of the intellectual and cultural capital and innovation in the knowledge that comes from attracting and nurturing diverse local talent that the country and continent could benefit from. The results of this research also highlight the need for further research in this area, as a deeper understanding of the experiences of immigrant students can help inform the development of more effective solutions to support their success in higher education as identified in the literature through other studies (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Kwaramba, 2012; Nwokedi, 2020). Overcoming the hardships of accessing funding and a dependable form of income, combined with the financial strain of applying for government grants, are significant challenges for those striving to adapt (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021).

The majority of the participants reported that stringent immigration policies created barriers to accessing job opportunities, which led to feelings of marginalisation. The participants identified areas where governments in the SADC region could come together to find ways to support immigrant students when making decisions about immigration policies so that they are fair, equal and inclusive (Kwaramba, 2012). This research also highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex visa regulations and dispensation of visas, leading to much frustration (Raaper et al., 2022). This significant challenge seems to create additional stressors for immigrant students that evoke anxiety, anger, depression, and helplessness. This detracts from their ability to cope with navigating higher education in a foreign country and could contribute to significant mental health strain.

## 4.9 Theoretical location of the findings

The interpretation of narrative notions and storytelling of immigrants' adaptation experiences, psychological barriers, social and institutional support, racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia, prejudice and discrimination drew from critical race theory (Chang, 1993; Rolón-Dow and Bailey, 2022; Vandeyar, 2010). Gaining a deeper understanding of the sense of belonging, alienation, and exclusion of immigrant students in South Africa requires a theoretical exploration of the nuances of structural inequalities and asymmetries that exist due to race and how they manifest in the stories of everyday life. Hence, the findings were consistent with Herman et al.'s (2012) narrative theory, which explores how stories are constructed, shared, and understood and examines narrative structures and conventions across

different forms of storytelling. Herman et al. (2012) recognised these as critical elements for understanding and examining the subjective positions of the researcher by providing a framework for analysing how participants' personal experiences, perspectives, and biases are structured.

Chang's (1993) CRT draws on understanding social narratives relating to inequalities and racial realism. Both theories provide invaluable knowledge in comprehending the struggles that immigrant students experience when trying to establish a sense of belonging at their new place of learning. Narrative theory allowed for an in-depth examination of how the research participants understood their circumstances at Wits University. CRT illuminated the systemic and structural obstacles of racism and discrimination, which the participants had to battle to achieve acceptance and connection in the institution.

# CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

## 5.1 Introduction

Conducting this research was motivated by the desire to understand better the experiences of immigrant students in South Africa, including their sense of belonging, alienation, and exclusion, and to shed light on their unique psychosocial experiences and challenges. In addition, to the lack of research on this topic in the literature, my connection to the issues as an immigrant student was another motivation to do this research so that I could provide immigrant students with a platform where they could share their experiences. Finally, the study highlighted the inequalities immigrant students face in South Africa. This chapter provides concluding methodological reflections, discusses the strengths and limitations of the study, and offers recommendations for future research.

## 5.2 Synopsis of the Findings

This research examined the sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion of immigrant students at Wits University. Through narrative theory and critical race theory, the study explored the psychosocial experiences of these students. In-depth narrative interviews were conducted with a narrative inquiry approach to gather the data. The key findings reveal a general impression of diverse backgrounds from immigrant students. For some, the sense of belonging was strong, while alienation and exclusion was an experience for others. However, many similarities were also identified in institutional discrimination, racism, xenophobia, Afrophobia, prejudice and discrimination, which may pose significant barriers to the success of immigrant students' integration in the host country.

These barriers primarily manifest through cultural and language barriers, individual differences in adaptation, lack of social or academic support, lack of diversity inclusion initiatives, and lack of access to psychological support and counselling services. The research also identified language barriers and challenges related to institutional support as critical issues impacting the sense of belonging of immigrant students. In addition, different admission processes and immigration statuses affected how individuals felt included or excluded significantly. These findings suggest that addressing the challenges and supporting immigrant students will increase their sense of belonging and help them feel welcomed and included in the university.

## 5.3 Methodological reflections

Even though self-reflexivity was a critical aspect of this research, upon my reflections, I acknowledge that my position, involvement and subjectivities during the theorisation, data collection and analysis of this study were influenced by my identity as a mature black immigrant female postgraduate student, originally from Malawi, that was also studying at Wits University during the time this research was conducted. Macbeth (2001) suggested examining one's social position through reflexivity when investigating immigration. As a researcher, I removed myself from a place of power over the participants, which helped prevent potential biases throughout the research. This improved participant rapport and reduced entry highlights in the first round of interviews. Participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences after a good transition into this relationship. As a result, the study benefited from this collaborative approach.

Still, the experience-centred narrative inquiry's nature meant I had to let the participants tell their stories without much intervention. However, it was noted that most of the participants willing to participate in the study were males. Drawing from my experiences of working in a women's empowerment space where advocacy mainly focuses on the well-being of children, women and girls, there are concerns that while we look out for these groups, men are usually left behind, and their voices are not heard as much. This suggested that more research may be needed to focus on the well-being of immigrant men, who may not have adequate platforms for voicing their experiences or distress. It would also be helpful to explore the narratives of female immigrant students, as it is notable that none volunteered to participate in this study.

CRT, as a framework for understanding the dynamics of racism, power, and privilege, has been used in various studies in the literature to explore how racial inequalities are perpetuated and experienced by immigrant students. This guided my thinking around how race and racism intersect with other forms of oppression and privilege and how these are experienced and exacerbated by the histories of colonisation in South Africa, particularly in the education sector. Using CRT in conjunction with a narrative lens allowed me to explore how the participants experienced and navigated social exclusion and marginalisation and helped me gain a deeper understanding of how they make sense of their experiences of racial exclusion and oppression and how they are constructing their narratives of resilience and resistance, and the complexities of colonisation and its effects on the lives of those affected by it.Given that the research was conducted with postgraduate Masters and PhD immigrant students aged between 30 and 50 years. I needed to consider the implications of this sample

size when interpreting the findings. In particular, the fact that the participants were more mature may have impacted the results. This raises questions about how age may have influenced the study results and what implications could be drawn that may impact participant responses, such as life experiences, personal values and beliefs, and other potentially influential factors that I realised were coming out when they tried to share their personal experiences, so it became a challenge to determine the validity of the responses in this sense, as this age group may experience unique psychological issues due to life pressures such as increased responsibilities, families at home, and the potential need to self-fund their studies. In comparable research, age and gender could be important determinants.

As all participants in this study were male, in this regard, gender might also be important in future research to compare male and female participants' experiences and give a more nuanced understanding of experiences. This might entail investigating why the women left the research and whether any hurdles hampered their participation. Feminism and the social construction of masculinity may also benefit from CRT, for example to reveal power imbalances or structural inequities that may affect the outcomes of the research. Feminism and masculinity may offer a more critical view of gender and may help to explore why men choose private settings like interviews when discussing men and masculinity as societal constructions, do women feel more empowered when they speak on public planforms?

### 5.4 Recommendations for further research

Further research on immigrant students' sense of belonging, alienation, and exclusion in South African universities by collecting institutional and individual data could provide further insights and mapping institutional policies at different institutions across the country could be beneficial in developing strategies to support their successful integration and inclusion. Even though the narrative inquiry nature of this research allowed me to gain valuable insights from the participants' experiences, it only tapped the tip of the iceberg. It is recommended that the findings from this research form a basis for a more robust quantitative study that can broadly assess the sense of belonging, alienation, and exclusion among immigrant students. A larger sample of students that cuts across all public institutions of higher learning would provide a solid evidence base for decision-making and policy development in immigrant student experiences. In addition to this, the following recommendations were identified as areas for further research:

- An evaluation of effective programmes to provide English language support for non-English speaking immigrants students in universities would be beneficial.

- An exploration of how different schools/faculties can optimise the International Student's Office to allow more networking and interaction of students from different cultural backgrounds.
- An investigation of the strategies that immigrant student associations can use to raise awareness and inform immigrant students about existing food assistance programs on campus, as well as how can these strategies be tailored to meet the specific needs of immigrant students.
- An exploration of the social-cultural issues that restrict younger African men from opening up about their experiences of inequality or being excluded, and feelings of unfair treatment in higher education.

## 5.5 Study strengths and limitations

This narrative inquiry was a powerful research tool that allowed me to explore in-depth and uncover underlying meanings of the psychosocial issues affecting immigrant students' sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion. Because it centred on the participant's experiences, the narrative inquiry approach proved an effective study tool for delving deeper into the significance of their real-world experiences. It also allowed us to delve further into the problems at hand by hearing the participants' personal accounts and incorporating their insights into our analysis, thereby shedding light on the tangled web of factors at play in the psychological experiences of immigrant students. However, it did not come without limitations.

From the onset, the research required much planning and attention to ethical considerations, a sensitivity to the experiences and perspectives of the participants and framing the research questions in a manner that would not harm the participants, as they were sharing susceptible information. Another limitation that made it difficult to conduct this research was participant recruitment. The study participants were not easily accessible due to many factors. Many immigrant students that were approached declined to take part in the study stating their busy schedules. Some were busy with exams, and many were busy with their research. Most of the individuals who indicated they were interested in participating in the study withdrew at the last minute after being sent the participant information sheet, stating that they were uncomfortable taking part.

This was primarily seen in potential female participants. This could be because of the sensitive nature of the topic of belonging, alienation, and exclusion, and it may have made

them hesitant to share their experiences and feelings. As a result, obtaining a sample of male and female immigrant students was difficult. Another significant limitation was the difficulty I encountered when looking for Mozambican participants, as I could not locate any within the university's surroundings. The International Students' Office was unwilling to share contacts from their data. However, they assisted in distributing the email to the international student database. Being approached, this way may have limited students' willingness to engage in the study and consequently limited the findings.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This project has provided an in-depth understanding of the experiences of immigrant students in South Africa using narrative inquiry underpinned by a critical race theoretical orientation. Overall, there was a general impression that South African universities remained world-class in Africa and were preferred education destinations in the region. There were also similarities in the findings with other studies cited in the literature review. The study confirmed that factors such as the experience of institutional discrimination, xenophobia and Afrophobia remained significant barriers to the success of immigrant students developing a sense of belonging during their studies. However, it primarily concerns individual differences in the adaptation processes, language barriers and institutional support based on how the immigrant student came into the country or was admitted into the institution. That is, vis-a-vis self-sponsorship, government-sponsored, or university scholarship and immigration status.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

## Interview Schedule

A Narrative Inquiry into the Sense of Belonging, Alienation and Exclusion of Immigrant Students

**Interviewer:** _____
**Interviewee:** _____
**Date:** _____
**Duration:** _____

### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study, as previously mentioned, I am collecting stories and narratives of immigrant students to understand their different concepts of sense of belonging and alienation.

First, I am curious about your academic journey from the moment you left your country to come to South Africa for your studies, how was that experience like for you?

I would also like to hear more about how you have experienced exclusion here at the university.
Could you please take your time to share your experiences?
How did that make you feel?
Do you think there are differences in how the institution treat immigrant students and local students?
Please share those ways.

Can you tell me more about a time when you felt a real sense that you belonged at Wits University or you felt alienated or excluded?
What was that like for you?
Can you describe it?
Please share any examples or situations that you have encountered that you felt you did not belong

Are there any ways that Wits University or South Africa, in general, could change to make you feel like you belong even more?
Tell me about those ways.

Before we conclude, I have a follow up question that I think will help me gauge the level of respect received from the locals as an immigrant student, what disrespectful actions do you consider make it challenging for you to adjust or find a sense of belonging or feel excluded/alienated?
Can you share a specific incident?

# Appendix B

## Faculty Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG | FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Ms Sarah Mungoni Mpata
19 Campitello
14 Evans Road
Olivedale
Johannesburg 2188
Gauteng
South Africa

Student Number: 883153

12 August 2022

CC. Prof Tanya Graham

Dear Ms Sarah Mungoni Mpata

**DECISION ON RESEARCH PROPOSAL SUBMITTED FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS BY COURSEWORK AND RESEARCH REPORT**

I am pleased to advise you of the decision reached by the reader/readers of the Graduate Studies Committee on your proposal entitled: ***"A Narrative Inquiry into the Sense of Belonging, Alienation and Exclusion of Immigrant Students"***

**Reader's decision on proposal**:

Revised proposal accepted.

I confirm that Prof Tanya Graham has been appointed as your supervisor.

Please take note of the information on the Criteria for submitting research for examination which is attached and ensure that the Faculty is informed of any changes of address during the year.

**Kindly note** that all MA and PhD candidates who would like to graduate as soon as possible must ensure that they meet the ETD requirements within six (6) weeks of receipt of the examiners' reports by the supervisor. **A student is required to remain registered in the Faculty until his/her graduation.**

Yours Sincerely

*M Ntseare*

Mpho Ntseare (Ms)
Faculty of Humanities
Private Bag X 3
Wits, 2050

# Appendix C

## Ethics Clearance

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: MASPR/22/12** |
| **PROJECT TITLE:** | A Narrative Inquiry into the Sense of Belonging, Alienation and Exclusion of Immigrant Students. |
| **INVESTIGATOR** | Mpata Sarah (883153) |
| **SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR** | SHCD/Psychology |
| **DATE CONSIDERED** | 12 August 2022 |
| **DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE** | Approved unconditionally |
| **RISK LEVEL** | Low Risk |
| **EXPIRY DATE** | 31 December 2024 |

**ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE** 24 August 2022 **CHAIRPERSON** ____ (Dr Sahba Besharati)

cc: Prof. Tanya Graham (Supervisor)

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**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.

**Signature** **Date** 24 / 08 / 2022

**PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES**

# Appendix D

## Ethics Training Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

**SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**
PSYCHOLOGY

This is to certify that

Sarah Mpata
Student number:883153

Participated in Research and Ethics Training as part of the Masters research module PSYC7024A for the Masters in Social and Psychological Research

Held between the 21st and the 25th of February 2022 at the Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand

Areas of training included:

- Writing a Research Proposal
- Writing a Literature Review
- Data Collection and Instrument Design
- Qualitative Methods of Data Collection
- Quantitative Methods of Data Collection
- Research Ethics
- Plagiarism
- Library and Zotero Training
- Research Presentation

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Departmental Research Ethics Chair
Prof Zaytoon Amod

---
Head of the Psychology Department
Prof Carol Long

Umthombo Building – 2nd Floor, Room U211, Braamfontein East Campus, Private Bag 3, WITS 2050
T +27 11 717 4503/53 | E psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za | www.wits.ac.za/shcd/psychology/

# Appendix E

**Participant Information Sheet**

Good day Sir / Madam,

My name is Sarah Mpata. I am a Master's student in Social and Psychological Research at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Professor Tanya Graham is my supervisor. I am researching immigrant students' experiences on belonging, alienation and exclusion titled "a narrative inquiry into the sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion of immigrant students." This research is fundamental as it will inform future research in immigrant studies at the university, contributing to policy recommendations that will improve the well-being of immigrant students.

I am inviting you to take part in an interview. If you decide to participate, your participation in this research study will last about 45 to 60 minutes. The discussion will occur at the University of Witwatersrand at a time convenient to you.

Given your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. Be assured that data will be stored in a password-secure laptop to be accessed only by the researcher and supervisor.

The interview will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the research study results, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. Other researchers may use the data collected from this research study with your permission. However, your name and personal information will not be used or passed on.

Suppose you decide to participate in the research study. In that case, it should be because you want to volunteer and may withdraw from the study. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you participate in the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you usually have if you decide not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life. The research will be written into a research report available in the University library. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will send it.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. Suppose you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study. In that case, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,



Researcher:
Sarah Mpata,
Email: 883153@students.wits.ac.za Tel: (079) 299 -9787

Supervisor:
Professor Tanya Graham
Email: Tanya.Graham@wits.ac.za Tel: (011) 717-833

# Appendix F

## Participant Consent Form

**Title of project:** A Narrative Inquiry into the Sense of Belonging, Alienation and Exclusion of Immigrant Students

**Name of researcher:** Sarah Mpata

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about. | YES | NO |
| I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study | YES | NO |
| I agree that the interview/focus group/other activity may be audio recorded | YES | NO |
| I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report | YES | NO |
| I agree that my participation will remain anonymous, and my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report | YES | NO |
| I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on | YES | NO |

…… (signature)
…… (name of participant)
…… (date)

…… (signature)
…… (name of researcher/person seeking consent)
…… (date)