

**Becoming a [COVID] student? Assessing the impact of COVID-19
on first-year students' experiences of higher education in the
Eastern Cape, South Africa**

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MASTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCE IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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By

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Declaration

I, Kelsey Ann Nebbe, declare that this thesis has not been submitted for a degree in any other university and is my original work.

Signature: 

Date: 18 August 2024

Abstract

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted South African higher education which forced the shift to emergency distance learning to save the academic years of 2020-2022. The repercussions of this are still emerging, but current literature focuses on understanding the impact of first-year students is focused on the impact of academics caused by the emergency shift to online, the “double transition” as Nyar (2021) termed the adjustment to university and then again to the online emergency academics. There is also a niche for holistic research to be done regarding the student experience - pandemic times and elsewhere. My thesis focuses on the journey of studenthood of three cohorts at a residential university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, through the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022. This research utilises ethnographic iterative mixed methods (questionnaire, interviews, focus groups and participant observation) and the theoretical lens of *Rites of Passage* to understand my research participant’s experiences. My findings are that due to the circumstances of an incomplete student experience of just online academics provided an continuous liminal period for first-year students of 2020-2021, with little to no opportunity for them to develop a connection to the university community. The opportunity for them to holistically become students arises at the end of the pandemic in 2022, with the restrictions lifting and the return to on-campus and in-person academic activities allowing them to have a first-year experienced that COVID-19 prohibited.

Key words: *Rites of Passage*; First-Year Experience; Liminality, *Communitas*

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Glossary, Acronyms and Abbreviations

CHE: Council on Higher Education

Dawnie: First lecture slot of the day starting at 07:45

DH: Abbreviation of Dinning Hall, place where residential students take all their meals. All dining halls are shared by three or more residences and the house comms and students within the dining hall will come together for special events and community engagement outreach.

DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training

Digs: Colloquialism referring to rental properties off-campus (Oppidan) student inhabit

DP: Abbreviation of Due Performance Certificate, which proves that student qualifies to sit the examination of a subject.

DSA: Division of Student Affairs. In 2023, name changed to Division of Student Services and Development.

f-2-f: Face-to-face

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institute

House Comm: Shortened version of House Committee. Comprised of elected students in various portfolios in charge of organising and participating in residential events.

G7 warning: Academic warning issued after June exams if student is failing 2 or more of their credits.

G20: Beginning of student numbers of student registered at Rhodes University in 2020. G in front refers to students registered at the Grahamstown Campus.

G21: Beginning of student numbers of student registered at Rhodes University in 2021.

G22: Beginning of student numbers of student registered at Rhodes University in 2022.

NMU: Nelson Mandela University

NWU: North-West University

Online T&L: Abbreviation of Online Teaching and Learning

Oppidan: Colloquialism for the students who live in off-campus accommodations referred to as digs. Abbreviated and commonly referred to as 'oppies'.

O-Week: Abbreviated and more commonly used term for Orientation Week.

Res: Abbreviated for residences, the accommodation for students who choose to live on-campus. Most residences at Rhodes University are for undergraduate students,

but there are also residences exclusively for postgraduate students.

Rhodent: Colloquial term used to refer to currently registered Rhodes University students. Alumni are referred to as Rhodians.

RU: Rhodes University.

RUCE: Rhodes University Community Engagement Office

SA: South Africa

SAn: South African

SAHE: South African Higher Education

SRC: Student Representative Council:

Sub-warden: Students employed by the university to assist with the administration

and discipline in residences. Commonly referred to as ‘subbies’.

UCT: University of Cape Town

UFH: University of Fort Hare

UJ: University of Johannesburg

UK: United Kingdom

UN: United Nations

USA: United States of America

Warden: Employee that directly oversees the administration and discipline of their residence, as a House Warden. A Dining Hall Warden oversee the administration and discipline of their own residence as well as all the residences in their Dining Hall.

WITS: University of the Witwatersrand

Preface: higher education, the 'student journey' and COVID-19 disruptions

This study has been in the making for over a decade. My first 'taste of university life' and exposure to higher education (HE) happened when I was selected to participate in the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) (2023) Targeting Talent Programme/Development in June 2014 with other learners from my school in East London. This programme aimed to provide learners from disadvantaged schools across the county with opportunities to prepare them for university. During the June/July vacation, we ran around for two weeks at the WITS, attending advanced classes in STEM¹ subjects, Social Sciences (incidentally my first exposure to Anthropology) and academic English. This experience proved to be a pivotal moment in my personal and educational development. I still maintain that nothing I subsequently faced during my studies has been more challenging than those two weeks. Consequently, my enrolment in the programme sparked my interest in the 'student journey'. When I was in Grade 11 and 12, a significant concern was attending higher education in the current environment, considering the media coverage of the 2015 #MustFall movement and the 2016 Rhodes University's (RU) Reference List movement. In 2018, as part of a second-year research methodology course, I conducted a small research project whereby I interviewed five first-year students on their perceptions and experiences of 'university life'. My interest continued when I became a tutor in the Anthropology Department in 2019; I worked directly with first-year students and provided hands-on support to improve their academic skills. Outside the classroom, I have been actively involved in student societies since 2018, and I became a committee member of the

¹ Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

Inkwenkwezi Society in July 2018. This position involved working and collaborating with other students to ensure that incoming first-years would receive a well-rounded experience.

Fast forward to 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. As a student and tutor, I was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions, which prompted the shift to online teaching and learning (T&L). In 2020 I began my journey as a postgraduate student at Honours level. Having started our seminars in mid-February, we met in person for the last time as a cohort on 17 March 2020, after which the decision to suspend all in-person academic activities was communicated to the university community. During this time, it was unclear how Honours students were meant to proceed, which further impacted my 'student journey' as a postgraduate student and a researcher. Specifically, as Honours students, we were unprepared for the drastic changes that had occurred, and it was not easy to navigate because academics were navigating a new situation. Being away from the academic space and having to re-orientate to the new, online curriculum in a year that would be challenging, with the adjustment from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, was daunting. In addition to this, I also had tutoring responsibilities and, like many tutors at RU, I had to learn how to tutor online and keep up to date with the university's protocol for cumulative assessments and therefore marking assignments multiple times and during the exam periods, which was not standard procedure. The year 2020 was a very jarring year for me before the pandemic due to changes in my personal life and the transition into becoming a postgraduate student. COVID-19 compounded my difficulties as a new postgraduate student and online tutor.

As a student who had completed an undergraduate degree in the 'usual' face-to-face format, the unexpected changes to my academic activities and responsibilities were frustrating and disorientating. COVID-19 compounded this. The general emotional distress of the pandemic and having loved ones come into contact, contracting, and even dying of COVID-19 also

weighed heavily on my mind and many others, especially in the first few months of the initial lockdown. As a graduate, I learned to navigate university systems and structures. Additionally, I created a solid social support network consisting of peers, friends, and staff members. I forged these relationships due to the in-person contact which characterised my undergraduate years at the university. The shift to online was jarring and took a considerable amount of adjustment on my part. I could only imagine how new first-year, and more likely first-time, students felt.

During this time, talking to my peers or running in the back of my mind during tutorials was the sentiment of 'these poor first-years'. It seemed to me that they had missed out on so much. For nearly a year, we were essentially in limbo regarding the student experience, with residences and campuses empty, chaos in the shift online. There was nothing offered for the student experience outside the classroom. All these occurrences led me to think about how, in 2020, first-year students did not have the same opportunity to develop institutional knowledge or to forge connections with their peers. As a tutor, I observed T&L processes unfold in real-time in my department and faculty. In conversations with fellow postgraduate students/tutors in other faculties, the transformation of the undergraduate experience was apparent. Of how different and how quickly this new and unfamiliar undergraduate experience replaced our own. These shifts were so profoundly different to my first-year experience and undergraduate student journey' that they prompted this study.

Chapter 1: Overview of the Study

1.1. Introduction

This chapter provides the background and context of the study. It discusses the role of universities in the 21st century as sites where young adolescents transition into adulthood (Montgomery and Cote, 2006). For many young people, enrolling into a university is a time to learn about themselves, develop their identity, form lifelong friendships and meet people who will impact their lives (Pittman and Richmond, 2008). However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this essential life experience has been interrupted and disrupted (Worsley et al, 2021). This chapter will first go into the research question and aims, followed by background information surrounding the shaping and challenges faced in the contemporary global higher education (HE) and South African Higher Education (SAHE) landscape, including student identity, prior to and during the pandemic. Context into the study site, Rhodes University (RU), and its response to the pandemic as an institution will round off this chapter.

1.2. The Contemporary Higher Education Landscape in South Africa

In South Africa (SA), the University of the Cape of Good Hope was created in the nineteenth century with the "purpose of training young white men to take responsibility of leading the country" (Soudien, 2022: 136). The notion that HE was for elite young white men remained the status quo until after World War II (WWII), when universities became the site for scientific and technological innovations (Englund and Bergh, 2020). Since the 1990s, SAHE has transformed alongside much of SA in redressing past discrimination and segregation of apartheid for inclusivity. Specifically, transformation attempts to readdress the institutional culture of SAHE with its entrenched structural racism that hinders the ability of any student who is not a white male to succeed while also turning the universities into progressive 'think

tanks' to understand and potentially solve societal problems in SA (Soudien, 2010a; Soudien, 2014). During apartheid, like other spheres of public life, public HE institutions were segregated legislatively based on race² (Pearson and Reddy, 2022). Segregation was done through legislation, namely the 1959 Extension of University Act³ (Act 45 of 1959), which created black-only, coloured-only and Indian-only universities (or separate campuses), often in rural areas⁴ without the funding support and resources that the white universities received (Mdepa and Tshiwulu, 2012). While white Afrikaner medium universities in SA, up until 1959, had traditionally restricted admission to their institutes to whites only, the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) had remained open to all races (The Ratcatcher, 2012). The former University of Natal had also admitted students from all race groups; however, the classes were segregated, while the University of Fort Hare was a predominantly black institution (The Ratcatcher, 2012). Participation in HE by non-white SAns was significantly less than that of white SAns, especially for black SAns during apartheid (Soudien, 2022). Permission sought by non-white SAns to attend White universities from 1980-

2 Prior to post-1994 HE redresses, 21 public universities were under the administration of 8 different government departments (Bunting, 2006: 39). The number of departments involved was due to the 1984 Tricameral Parliament that offered limited representation to Coloured and Indian SA in the apartheid government as well as the performative independence given to 4 of the Bantustans. 11 universities for White SA students reported to the House of Assembly, 1 for Coloureds that reported to the House of Representatives and 1 for Indians that reported to the House of Delegates (Bunting, 2006). The remaining 8 universities were for Black SA students and 4 reported to the Department of Education and Training, and 1 each to the Republics of Transkei, Ciskei, Venda and Bophuthatswana (Bunting, 2006).

3 The Extension of University Act, Act 45 of 1959: The Act criminalised the registration of non-white students at formerly open universities without formal written permission from the Minister of Internal Affairs (Moulder, 1975).

4 As noted in footnote 2, rural, in this case, refers to the former Bantustans, underdeveloped areas designated for Black SAns by the apartheid government through legislation (Kepe et al., 2008).

1983 was more likely to be granted to coloured and Indian Sans than Black SAns (The Ratcatcher, 2012).

In the second half of the 20th century, there was a global call for transforming HE to achieve social justice (Vargas, 2017). The post-WWII world also brought more significant changes to universities regarding who could enrol as a student thus allowing previously barred populations access to HE. Diversity in the student population began with first-wave feminism, resulting in upper-class white women⁵ gaining access to HE from the 19th century and in more significant numbers since the beginning of the 20th century⁶ (Robinson-Neal, 2009). Historically Black Institutions⁷ (HBIs) have existed since the 19th century in the United States of America (USA). However, it was in the 1960s that the desegregation of Historically White Institutions (HWIs) in the USA started to address the prejudiced exclusion of minorities at the more prestigious and well-resourced HWIs (Cleeton, 2012). Over the last two decades, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education has more than doubled globally, with over two hundred million students worldwide enrolled in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022). According to MacGregor (2022), since 2018, Global South countries have made up three-quarters of student enrolments. In 2022, SA public universities had just over a million students enrolled, and 916 774 of these were in

⁵ Sporadically throughout European history's late Middle Ages, there were a few females of noble background able to attend universities as female students, with other female students disguising themselves as males to graduate, which in large part is an anomaly (Calvo, 2018). Greater access to HE for women began in the USA, in co-education universities like Oberlin College in 1837 and women's colleges such as Wesleyan College in 1836 (Carlton, 2023).

⁶ Post World War I, however, there was a general stagnation in the progress of equality for women, including women entering HE, which is attributed to how society focused on a return to tradition and familiarity after a period of significant collective trauma from the war and then the Spanish Influenza pandemic (Graham, 1978). Kahn (2020) argues that fewer women went into HE because there were not many career options deemed society-approved for women.

⁷ Cheyney University of Pennsylvania in 1837 was the first HBI in the USA.

undergraduate programmes of study (Chawula, 2022). This is the result of the cumulative and ongoing work to transform SAHE.

Post-1994, significant work was needed to transform the SA education system including HE. This was carried out through the 1997 Education White Paper Three, which was developed as a guide to ensure that universities would be "transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities" (DoE, 1997:2). As such, SAHE became one of the critical sites for the political project of transformation. Massification, meaning more university students of non-white backgrounds to attend university, was seen as a critical aspect in the redress (Mdepa and Tshiwulu, 2012). To define, massification of HE is the idea that if one, regardless of socio-economic background or means to access HE, meets the qualification for entry to a HE institution, one should be allowed to enrol and obtain a tertiary qualification (Noui, 2020). The aim of redress has attempted to make accessing HE more equal and ensure more accurate representation of the SA population, providing opportunities for all that only a few had prior to 1994 (Soudien, 2022). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2021a) report on post-school education highlighted that black Africans comprised the majority of the student population in 2019, with 77.3% or 830 797 black students aligning with the country's demographics, something which would not have been possible during the apartheid era. Also aligned to the national demographics, white students accounted for 11.8% (126 755 students), coloured students 5.8% (62 362 students) and Indian/Asian 4% (43 330) (DHET, 2021a). National programmes such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), established in 1999 through Act 56⁸ of the same name, aim to provide access to HE for students

⁸ This was the formal establishment of a pre-existing scheme, the Tertiary Education Fund of SA, contracted by the Minister of Education in 1991, and the first awards from the scheme occurred in 2005 (de Villiers, 2023).

through financial assistance⁹ (Pillay et al., 2022). NSFAS provides financial assistance to students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds who cannot afford to go to university independently. Pillay et al. (2022) note that between 2000 and 2012, there has been a 260% increase in the number of NSFAS students, with 20% of undergraduate students enrolled in university being on NSFAS. In 2022, 691 432 students were funded through NSFAS; 462 983 were female, and 227 072 were male (Nzimande, 2022).

The transformation of SAHE is still in progress nearly thirty years post-democracy, with the university questioning its role in the 21st century while still addressing the lingering apartheid structural racism hindering black students' success at university now instead of denying them entrance. Twenty percent of the SA 18- to 23-year-old population is in university, with 70% of university students being black African, however, most of these students attended a small number of former Model C¹⁰ schools (Case et al., 2018). The Council on Higher Education (CHE) noted in 2013 that there were poor throughput and retention rates of university students, with 30% of three-year degrees completed in three years and 56% completed in five years (Case et al., 2018). Despite HE being massified and there being more significant access to obtaining a degree, Walker (2018: 557) argues that it is also "stratified across cleavages of historically white and historically black universities, with some evidence of lower economic returns to students (mostly poorer and all black) who graduated later". Mdepa and Tshiwulu (2012) state that a lack of student support funding for tuition and, more importantly, for living

⁹ Either as a bursary or a loan depending on the student's academic performance.

¹⁰ A former white public school under the apartheid system which chose to be semi-private by receiving less funding from the government to have a greater say in the school's administration, normally by an elected school board, (Dictionary of South African English, 2022).

costs hinders the ability of students from low-income households. The majority of the students who do not have adequate financial support are black, first-generation students, whose socio-economic background already places them at a disadvantage against the students from an increasingly racially diverse middle- and upper-class background (Mdepa and Tshiwulu, 2012).

Beyond the curriculum and the number of students enrolled, there have also been challenges surrounding the holistic student life. Kerr and Luescher (2018) did a 10-year systematic review of journal articles about student life beyond academics (so-called 'second curriculum'). They noted that prior to the student protest movement in 2015/2016, numerous concerns had a detrimental impact on students, including experiencing discrimination, institutional alienation, and financial hardships (Kerr and Luescher, 2018). As such, they argue that SA "university life is a source of anxiety and struggle for students and a highly racialised one at that" (Kerr and Luescher, 2018: 216).

In recent years, an emerging friction point has formed between the misalignment of who is attending the universities compared to the institutional culture - barely transformed from the prior *status quo* before 1994. Naiker (2016: 57) notes that universities still have firm attachments to their colonial roots, stating that "institutional culture and practice of the university remained decidedly white" regarding curriculum and culture. Azania (2020) notes the mental health struggles faced by black African students, who constitute the majority the student population at HWIs. Thus, the increasingly racially and economically diverse student body population in SA conflicts with a university culture that does not represent them (Naiker, 2016). These conflicts have a physical manifestation; for example, the student protest movements of #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall in 2015 which highlighted the need for free education, the lack of student housing and colonial iconography on university campuses as indications of the slowness of transformation in university structure post-apartheid SA

(Hodes, 2016). At the core of these movements is the experience of alienation by Black student in HWIs, which still hold Eurocentric culture and curriculum as the standard of excellence and, in some cases, still celebrate parts of colonial history marred in human suffering and subjugation (Nyamnjoh, 2017).

As such, researchers who seek understanding into student-hood need to ensure that they note and understand the incredibly complex context on campus that students are situated in, both being formed and forming their university experience.

1.3. Student identity

Student identity formation begins with admittance to university, but socialisation and a sense of belonging are vital in cementing belonging. Student identity is classified as a social identity, which means it is through membership in the group and interaction with group members that an individual takes on the group's identity, values, beliefs, and normative behaviour (Dean and Jolly, 2012; McKinnie, 2021). Kaufman (2014) notes that frequent socialising and communication between peers and staff influences the individual student in claiming membership in the university community by seeing the value in doing so. Kaufman (2014) used symbolic interactionism as a theory for his work with USA college students, to understand how students and staff construct the student identity of their university. The value of becoming a university community member comes with economic privilege (e.g., the economic and social leveraging that comes from a degree) and social capital of a close-by support network with good insight into your situation (Kaufman, 2014). Weidman et al. (2014) emphasise that student identity is formed in the formal, academic spaces led by staff and the non-formal, non-academic peer-lead spaces. As such, many actors are involved in creating, reimagining, and maintaining consistency in the image of the student's identity through enforcing normative behaviour (Weidman et al., 2014).

However, calling it a student *identity* does not do justice to the nuanced everyday life and diversity of university experiences a diverse student population faces. In their edited book, *Reimagining the Higher Education Student*, Brooks and O'Shea (2021) argue that when researching student identities, literature tends to focus on one of the four main archetypes of student identity. These are the academic learner student (the most dominant type of student identity researched), the student consumer of commodified education, the future (or current) workforce, and the hedonist, alcohol-consuming, party-animal student (Brooks and O'Shea, 2021). There is a need to move beyond working within these narrow identities, especially in the contemporary complex world of HE that a diverse student population inhabits. Understanding that being a student is not a person's sole identity and how the student's other identities interplay with their membership to a university is critical in understanding how each of their identities will shape their experience, such as the experience of first-generation students (Baltakmens, n.d.).

The interplay between the university as a social and historical institution and the student is vital in understanding student identity formation and how it affects how students navigate university life. The commodification and massification of universities globally results in diverse student populations where a traditional student identity is no longer prevalent. One such issue is with the commodification of HE in that privatisation has resulted in shallower students belonging to the university, with a focus on obtaining a degree rather than an education (Bunce, 2021). A student's sense of belonging, feeling accepted in a university community to self-identify, is crucial to their success at university. However, this connection has been affected by global challenges (Dost and Smith, 2023). A lack of belonging, not seeing yourself reflected or represented in the university and its community, has negative implications academically when there is a disengagement among the student, the university, and the course content, whereby the student learning experience is affected negatively (Dean and Jolly, 2012; McKinnie, 2021).

Considering the increasing numbers of first-generation students in SA who are predominately black Africans, in addition to being alienated, there is no support system from their family to assist in navigating the university system, including accessing financial aid, which is a negative factor in considering student persistence (Motsabi et al., 2020). They do not have the advantage that comes from having family members who are graduates, which provides a shortcut to learning the 'hidden curriculum', the norms and knowledge needed to navigate the university before academic success can occur, is an advantage that first-generation students do not have coming into university (Zhao et al., 2023). This is something to consider when exploring how COVID-19 disrupted the initiation process for university students - how can a pandemic disrupt the process of making the social/emotional/physical connection to a university that for some people who felt that they did not feel welcomed in the space, to begin. Institutional alienation, the lack of emotional connection felt by students to the university they are enrolled in, existed at RU prior to COVID-19. Azania (2010) writes of the experience of being a black undergraduate first-generation student at RU in the 2010s and the micro-aggressions faced (e.g. traditional European food in the dining hall being labelled as the 'normal' option while traditional African food was labelled 'African'). While Azania (2010) notes that white staff members tried to make her and others who complained more welcome, she still felt unwelcome. It becomes important to note how universities, including RU, attempt to welcome first-year students, including first-generation students, into the brave new world of university and generate a sense of belonging to the larger student population.

1.3.1. The significance of Orientation and the First-Year Experience

The orientation process for a university student marks a key aspect of the transition into being a university student. Moving into the university space, new students are "disorientated for many reasons and have to adapt domestically, administratively, socially and intellectually" (Billing,

1997: 125). Brooker et al. (2017) outline the difficulties that first-year students face that can affect their studies even if they are not directly linked to the curriculum. These difficulties include financial strain, well-being and health, meeting family commitments and expectations, meeting course expectations and workload, developing the internal resources to become a self-directed student with good time management, and navigating the unfamiliar university environment, system, and culture (Brooker et al., 2017). Laing et al. (2005) also argue that previous skill sets and educational training in pre-university preparation, coupled with the expectations of university and life experiences, are inadequate to meet the demands of university students. These difficulties may affect students' ability or willingness to continue their studies. The year with the highest attrition rate is the first year of study (Farrell et al., 2020; Naylor et al., 2018; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1980). Orientation processes aim to address some of the above difficulties in providing a quick insight into university life, with presentations on degree and course structure, how to use the library and Information Technology (IT) systems, and the role of the student associations and services (Laing et al., 2005). Brooker et al. (2020: 866-867) put forth that there is an academic readiness, which helps students construct reasonable expectations of their workload, academic support systems, and prompt awareness of "university level study skills and independent learning habits", and social readiness, to foster a sense of belonging to the community through social interactions with peers in the form of other new students and older students, and staff.

The importance of orientation programmes, what goes into such programmes, the experience of first-year students, and the short- and long-term outcome of said programmes has been increasingly noted within the SA context (Young, 2016; Nyar, 2020). The SAn National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) (n.d.) is part of the larger international FYE movement in researching the first-year experience at university, which they put down as a "pivotal point in the life of a student and their overall HE

journey". FYE is the brainchild of John Gardner that was born out of necessity to create unity and humanise the university in the eyes of USA students in the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s (Freer, 2016). The students, who were involved with the Civil Rights Movement and the peace protests against USA involvement in the Vietnam War, had been continuously dragged into friction with the university over their protests, cumulating with the tragic death of four students in the Kent State Massacre in 1970 by the hands of the Ohio National Guard (Freer, 2016). The task posed to Gardner was monumental, but eventually he was successful as demonstrated by how the FYE movement has turned global, focused on improving student-student and student-staff relations, linking curriculum and co-curriculum, increasing academic engagement and improving academic literacy interventions. While being described as a pivotal process, Nyar (2019) bemoans the lack of appreciation and research into understanding the importance of orientation in SAHE. This lack of foreground is revealed in times of crisis, such as the 'double transition' that Nyar (2021) argues negatively impacted the ability for student success for first years who first had to adapt to the unfamiliar work of HE and then to the even more strange of emergency online learning and teaching (will be discussed further in Chapter 2).

Entrance to university has generally been accompanied by multiple forms of initiation rituals, often addressing the academic and social aspects of university life, generally perceived as positive processes of becoming a student. While they are not formally referred to as that, orientation processes are akin to initiation through their purpose (Jacobs, 2010; Nyar, 2020). Orientation processes and programmes are rituals that are performed at the start of every first-time student's academic year, and the aim is to induct new students into the university community and foster a sense of belonging. I argue and conceptualise perceiving orientation programmes as an initiation ritual in becoming a student. Jansen van Rensberg (1990) disagrees that SA universities have initiation rituals. Initiation rituals, as he perceives, are a means of assimilation and preparation for the individual into their new social group or position whereas

he perceives orientations as knowledge dissemination (Jansen van Rensburg, 1990). The act of attending university is meant to be a transitional one. The intent is to come through the process a different person. This is not only through obtaining education and qualifications but also through socialisation, networking, and enculturation. Grimes (2002) notes that major transitions become ritualised in response to the lack of rites in the modern Western world and the concerns of the consequences of maturing and age-appropriate societal roles. As such, and especially in the case of the USA, going to university/college¹¹ is the rite of passage for teenagers into adulthood (Kinneavy, 1997; Wardley and Bélanger, 2013; Blumenkrantz and Goldstein, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the 'normal' way of conducting academics from almost the beginning 2020 to 5 May 2023 - when the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the end of the Global Health Emergency (United Nations, 2023). The full extent of the impact on first-year students is yet to be known. Literature is being created on how the pandemic is affecting those who work at and attend institutes of HE, especially longitudinal research. Brammer and Clark (2020) investigated the effect of COVID-19 on Business Schools from universities in Asia, Australia, and the United Kingdom (UK) and the 'teething problems' with the shift to emergency online learning. What they noted was shared by many tertiary education institutions, including SA, in the shift to emergency efforts to save the academic year (Govender and Jacobs, 2022). Both Brammer and Clark (2020) and Govender and Jacobs (2022) noted the struggle of academic staff to adapt their teaching and assessment to the new normal of off-campus teaching, learning, and engagement. They also noted that both students

¹¹ The differences between a college and a university are that while universities have both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and qualifications, colleges only have undergraduate programmes and qualifications (Elmhurst University, 2020).

and staff experienced stress from the increased workload (both academic and household work), the new online platform for doing work, the uncertainty of the future, subsequent changes in the examination timetable, and personal health and well-being of themselves and their loved ones (Brammer and Clark, 2020).

1.4. The South African Higher Education sector's response to COVID-19

The SAn National Institute of Communicable Disease (NICD) confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in SA on 5 March 2020 (Staunton et al., 2020). The SA government created a five-level lockdown¹² system to cope with the threat the pandemic posed to health and the economy, with a staggered restriction on human activity and movement depending on current severity of the COVID-19 threat (Nicolson, 2020). Level Five¹³ was the most stringent, and Level One was the most minor measures. The formal end to the National State of Disaster that the country was plunged into ended 750 days later, on 4 April 2022. On Monday, 16 March 2020, the DHET released a statement in response to COVID-19 (Nzimande, 2020a). The following guidelines were enforced: alert authorities and isolate if staff and students had travelled internationally in the last three weeks, keep travelling and physical meetings to essential only and consider using alternative online meetings, cancel large gatherings (including lectures over 100 people and graduations), prepare for the adaptation of teaching and learning (T&L) from physical to remote online T&L, Health Clinics to ensure readiness for COVID-19, and for staff and students to observe social distancing protocols (Nzimande, 2020a). Following these

¹² Please see Appendix A of the Lockdown levels

¹³ For an overview of Level Five restrictions, please refer to Appendix A

pronouncements, all 26 public universities in SA closed to staff and students, with most suspending academic activity mid-March (van Schalkwyk, 2021: 47).

Like the rest of SA, SAHE institutions with their staff and students were plunged into Alert Level 5 lockdown on 26 March 2020. Initially, to last 21 days, the reality was stringent social distancing measures prevent face-to-face learning from occurring, considering government restrictions on venue capacity and social distancing (Landa et al., 2021). The safest way to achieve the DHET (2020) theme of "Save the academic year, save lives" was to move to online T&L. In SA, research focusing on the impact of COVID-19 has mainly focused on the survival of universities and how they will function in the future. The lockdown emphasises socio-economic issues faced by students and institutions and the lack of or poor infrastructure, human resources and/or willingness by universities to transition to online and hybrid teaching, the perceived future direction of education (Kupe & Wangenge-Ouma, 2020; Phakeng et al, 2020). Much research and numerous publications have emerged regarding the experiences of staff and students of the pandemic, as demonstrated by a special edition on African universities and COVID-19 by the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (Luescher et al., 2021). Halsall (2020) discussed the challenges academic staff faced adapting to the academic environment and distance learning simultaneously. Academic staff struggled to adjust to the distance from their students, the increased workload, and the rise in communication administration (Halsall, 2020). The long-term effects of COVID-19 on the education systems at all levels in Sa are still emerging. Alternatively, Soudien and Harvey (2021) argue in their article highlighting the importance of cognition-based learning practices that COVID-19 exposed the flaws and failures of the SA education system and hence provides the opportunity to readdress the approach to education.

Each public university was able to create its own programme for COVID-19 operations surrounding the resumption of the 2020 academic year, pending DHET approval (van Schalkwyk, 2021: 49). Mtshweni (2022) puts forth that the legacy of apartheid's underfunding and under-resourcing of HBIs added to the difficulties they faced in completing the 2020 academic year. In comparison, HWIs had the infrastructure and the funds in place to help their staff and students with the shift to online learning, the best solution in 2020 for continuing academic activities (Mtshweni, 2022). Historically, structural inequalities meant a difference in how each Higher Education Institute (HEI) was affected by the pandemic and how they could react. The DHET (2020) also worked to ensure "no student is left behind" by working on zero-rated educational sites while helping NSFAS students by providing data and devices. Some universities were already doing so, such as RU, which had negotiated arrangements with cellular network providers Cell-C, Vodacom, MTN and Telkom¹⁴ to provide students with 10 GB anytime data and 20 GB night owl data per month for their studies, in addition to purchasing laptops on behalf of students (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2020b). A study by the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) and Higher Health (2021) on the impact of the initial transition of SAHE students to the emergence of online education showed a disparity in institutional support (DHET, 2021b). Over 80% of university student participants received assistance from their university in moving to online learning (DHET, 2021b). In comparison, only 38% of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) students reported that their colleges offered online learning (DHET, 2021b).

Despite the measures in place to move education online (where it would stay for most of 2020 and 2021), there was the necessity for students who had practical components to their degree

¹⁴ Talks with Telkom would fall through and the students who used them were encouraged to change their service providers to one of the aforementioned to have access to the internet.

to return. As such, the DHET created an incremental system of who and how many students would be allowed to return to campus and residences. The return to campus was announced on 1 May 2020, when the nation shifted down to Alert Level 4 (DHET, 2020). During each level, different students were permitted to return within the venue capacity as determined by the government, with the focus given to students who had nearly completed their degree, required specialised equipment or whose home environments were inhospitable learning environments (DHET, 2020).¹⁵ Despite reconfiguring the academic year to adjust for the challenges of online and distance learning, RU completed the 2020 academic year in January 2021 (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2020c).

While the alert level system aided in limiting the impact of COVID-19, only the introduction of vaccinations against the virus allowed for 'normal' life to resume. In SA, the vaccine rollout was to take place in three stages. The first people to receive the vaccine would be 1.25 million healthcare workers. Essential workers, people over 60 years old, and those over 18 with co-morbidities would be in the second stage, totalling 16.6 million people (Department: Government Communication and Information System (GCIS), 2021). Most traditional-aged would fall into phase three, which made individuals aged 18-34 eligible for the vaccination from 1 September 2021 (Evans, 2021). Before this, universities and TVETs assisted the government with the vaccination drive by having public vaccination sites on campus and information campaigns in local areas (National Council of Provinces (NCOP), 2021). RU participated in the call to vaccinate through general education, information and awareness of vaccines on the university's website, social media accounts, and the #vaccinationfriday yellow t-shirt campaigns, in addition to having an on-site campus vaccination site at the Gavin Relly

¹⁵ Please see the COVID-19 alert table for when which students were allowed to return to campus – Annexure

Postgraduate Village for the university and Makhanda community (RU, 2021a). RU and many public SAHE institutions encouraged staff and students to get vaccinated to return to the classrooms (NCOP, 2021). Many SA universities, including RU, enforced controversial vaccine mandates that required staff and students to be vaccinated in return for access to campus (Khan and Hagglund, 2023). Vaccine mandates were also required for some universities in the USA and European Union (Khand and Hagglund, 2023). By the end of 2021, 70% or 41 million SA citizens were meant to be vaccinated according to the government's initial targets (Merten, 2021). As of the beginning of December 2022, just over 38 million SA citizens had been vaccinated (Department of Health, 2022a).

Life returned to 'normal' in 2022 through the vaccination drive, including in SAHE. At the end of 2021, the VC Imbizo was held to have an end-of-year address and to host a platform to discuss the full return to campus in 2022. The RU website's tab "Return to Campus Plan 2022" is not descriptive but instead announces that the University is "committed to a full and safe return of students and staff to campus" (RU, 2022a). With the return to campus, data bundles for distance learning were cancelled, and due to the restrictions on venue capacity, hybrid learning of both online and in-person T&L became the basis for lectures in 2022 (RU, 2022b). Normality also seemed to be returning to the country with the end of the National State of Disaster and the Corona Alert Levels after 750 days on 4 April 2022 (Ramaphosa, 2022). While the measures to limit the spread of the disease were still in place, with the legislation coming under the National Health Act (Ramaphosa, 2022), this marked a remarkable change in how the country viewed the threat of COVID-19 to public health and the appropriate measures to address the matter.

As of 23 June 2022, wearing face masks and restrictions on gatherings and movement was repealed (Department of Health, 2022b). Venues returned to 100% capacity, allowing for the

complete return of face-to-face academic activity (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2022). Students and staff did not have to wear masks in public spaces (but were encouraged if they were comfortable to continue wearing them), and students living in the residence system had restrictions on the number guests removed (Mrwetyana, 2022). As such, for the first time since February 2020, 'normal'¹⁶ life in SA and on SAHE campus could resume. The consequences, however, of unprecedented times would remain for longer.

1.5. Research objectives and research questions

There is currently limited understanding of the implications of the national and institutional COVID-19 responses for first-year students' ability to integrate effectively into university life. Therefore, this study is interested in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the orientation process for incoming first-year students and assesses the students' abilities to integrate into university processes, structures and communities during this period. Namely, this study:

- Assesses the ways that university orientation processes for first-year students have been impacted by COVID-19
- Determines the extent to which students have been able to integrate into university structures following the onset of COVID-19 and related measures
- Investigates the impact of COVID-19 on student identity and student life

Related to these objectives, the study was framed by the following questions:

¹⁶ The word 'normal' has, since the March 2020, as ubiquitously come to refer to life before the pandemic and social distancing measures abruptly and completely changed the routine and rhythm of everyday life – and in all aspects, from social, work, education, and home life. In the context of this thesis, 'normal' refers to the in-person, contact HE experience in place before mid-March 2020.

- How were university orientation processes for first-year students impacted by COVID-19?
- How has students' ability to integrate into university structures been impacted by COVID-19?
- How has student life (defined as student culture, community and identity) been shaped by the onset of COVID-19?

The main research question of this research project is the following:

What has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the orientation process for incoming first-year students, and how has the student's integration into the university community been affected?

1.6. Dissertation Outline

The dissertation has seven chapters in total. Chapter One focused on the background context of the dissertation. Chapter Two aims to bring the strings of literature from anthropologists in the HE space, research into orientation, FYE and hazing practices from the USA, Portugal and SA, as well as current research into the effect of COVID-19 on first-years together. In doing so, the contribution of this qualitative research project will be made more evident in this narrative. Chapter Three covers anthropological theory surrounding ritual and *Rites of Passage*, paying homage to van Gennep and Turner and, in turn, how their theories have been applied to understand liminality in higher education spaces and the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter Four which goes into the mixed-methodology approach to the research and introduces the research site and participants. Chapter Five and Six are data chapters, with Chapter using van Gennep ([1909] 2004) *Rites of Passage* as a framework in discussing the disruption COVID-19 caused to HE and student experience. Chapter Six focuses on the need for *communitas* and connections

between students, staff and institution. Chapter seven will conclude by revisiting the research questions and objectives.

1.7. Conclusion

This chapter has provided the broad strokes of how I have arrived at the contemporary HE context and this dissertation's research questions. In the last two centuries, globally, HE has seen a change in who has been allowed to become a student in the prestigious halls of universities. Since the 1990s, the SAHE has become a site of a social justice experiment in how the HE spaces have been used as a vehicle of societal transformation towards inclusivity and redress. In terms of greater access to HE, this could be noted as a success towards inclusivity. However, the lack of institutional culture transformation at HWIs has proved to be an inhospitable context for previously discriminated groups. Add into the conversation the disruption of 'normal' activities at university due to COVID-19 – from the emergency shift to online learning and the complete stoppage of campus life – the scene is set into picturing what it was like to become a university student at a small residential university between 2020-2022.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature on Higher Education: Ritual, Initiation, and Identity Formation

2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter provided the background of this research. Specifically, it discussed unpacking SAHE, its contemporary challenges before the pandemic, and how SAHE responded to the pandemic threat. In this chapter, I will discuss the relevant literature related to the significance of anthropological research. In HE regarding first-years, research is primarily done on orientation and hazing by HE researchers but draws on anthropological theories and concepts. Research regarding the impact of COVID-19 on first-year students regarding the shift to emergency online academic activity, researchers both globally and South Africa have noted difficulties in the transition online, as well as the difficulties students faced while being online.

2.2. Ethnographies of Universities

The current anthropological perspective on HE is limited, outdated literature from the USA (Gusterson, 2017: 435). The two relevant for this thesis are by Moffat¹⁷(1989), which focused on Rutgers University in the 1970s to 1980s and Nathan/Smalls¹⁸(2006) on AnyU¹⁹ and the 2003-2004 academic year. Despite being outdated, their research approach to understanding first-year student life and culture as holistically part of the student experience shows the benefit of conducting ethnographic research in HE spaces. As such, rather than focusing on one aspect

¹⁷ Micheal Moffatt (1989) *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture*.

¹⁸ *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learnt by Becoming a Student*, published under the pseudonym Rebekah Nathan, real name Cathy Smalls. This dissertation will hereafter cite the author by the pseudonym.

¹⁹ Pseudonym used as it was the same university she was employed at.

of the student experience, Moffat (1989) and Nathan (2006) covered many aspects of (first-year) student life, from academics, student expectations, relationships, and friendships, considering the world after graduation, institutional knowledge, popular culture and student culture, and living away from home.

Based on their experience as lecturers, Moffat (1989) and Nathan (2006) wanted to understand undergraduate students attending their lectures better. Moffatt (1989: 1) remarked that "by the age of thirty-three, I no longer understood my students" and how disconcerting this was. Similarly, Nathan (2006:13) noted that "[a]fter more than fifteen years of university teaching, I found students increasingly confusing to me". Moffatt's (1989) research is from a decade of observation in the lecture halls as well as from living in the undergraduate dorms at Rutgers University (USA) (Moffatt, 1989). Nathan's (2006) fieldwork is a snapshot of the 2002 - 2003 academic year through her immersion into the daily life of a freshman²⁰ student, i.e., living in dorms, attending classes, and submitting assignments.

Moffat (1989) found that students attended university for various reasons, including the challenge to aid in obtaining entry to a promising career and life experience. Initiation into university life was a custom carried out by senior students to induct first-year students into university studenthood, including that of 'drinking' and 'partying' (Moffatt, 1989). The 'Dean's ritual' orientation presented the university as a caring, organised structure that looks after the student on an individual and personal level (Moffatt, 1989). Moffatt (1989), as a professor, expressed the irony of the Dean's presentation because the reality was very different. This sentiment was echoed by senior students and over a decade later by Nathan (2006), who stated

²⁰ Term used to describe a person in their first year at an educational institution, normal in universities but also in USA high schools.

that the orientation process was not a true reflection of student life, which existed behind closed doors and in small, homogenous circles of friends.

Nathan (2006) argued that in the USA, although there is a multitude of universities and universities with diverse student bodies, there is, however, a singular student culture which comprises waking up in the early afternoon after long nights, avoiding the front row of lecture halls, secretive underage drinking, and students who go against these university norms. Both authors noted that student culture exists as a mechanism for students to deal with the demands of being a university student. In the dorms (residences), the resident assistants (RAs) were the initiators into both universities and student life and reluctant authority figures who enforced the laws of the university when students blatantly disregarded the university law in public spaces (Nathan, 2006).

Nathan (2006) aimed to understand student life and found that students' time was divided between part-time employment, acquiring skills to build their résumé, extramural activities and academics. She noted that the American culture of individualism and a distrusting view of the concept of community plays a key role in the development and perception of community at university (Nathan, 2006). Eaton (2007) states that universities advertise themselves as communities and have made attempts to create community. Nathan ([2005] 2006: 47), however argues that "seen from the level of the institution, "community" is a lofty ideal but with few common activities, ritual, or even symbols to bind together diverse inhabitants". Instead, the only ties to create a community were perceived sharing of popular culture, youth culture and attending the same institution together to obtain a degree (Nathan, 2006). University culture and its importance to the individual student was with the peer social circle, connected by shared interests and activities made through attending the university (Nathan, 2006). This peer social circle was usually a personal circle of friends, often very homogenous groups (ethnically,

racially, and interest-wise), who made up their community (Nathan, 2006). Overall, Moffat (1989) and Nathan's (2006) work contributed toward creating a holistic representation of first-year student life in the USA. Their work considers the academic and social aspects first-year student would have to adjust to in their new role. As such, they prove the benefit of ethnographic research in the first-year student experience and the emerging rich qualitative data.

2.3. Orientation Programmes as Initiation Rituals into University

Orientation programmes, as conceptualised as initiation rituals into academia, profoundly affect one's sense of self, and organisations have created ways to transition first-year students into their studenthood and enculturate them into the fold of the university community and culture. As discussed in Chapter One, student identities are social identities, meaning they are bestowed upon through and by the connections to others. This section will explore the intuitional mandated and peer-organised activities and ceremonies that welcome students to their universities, and to student life, in the USA, Portugal and SA.

2.3.1. Orientation programmes and hazing in the USA – who welcomes you to university?

The aims of an orientation programme are numerous. Firstly, to disseminate information to help students acculturate and to reduce costly errors in administration and course registration, which helps with student retention rates (Jacobs, 2010). Secondly, it aims to build a framework for academic success for students (Jacobs, 2010). Thirdly, to build communities to create a sense of belonging for students by creating peers through organised events; and fourthly, to define what campus culture is to emphasise and align values, morals, and responsibilities between students and institute (Jacobs, 2010).

Bronner's (2012: XIV) folklore analysis of USA HEIs (1980s – 2010s mapping the changes caused by commodification and increased enrolment sizes) notes that despite the differences between the small campus colleges and the sprawl of the mega-universities²¹, both have "a need for social and psychological adaptation of students in the transition from one stage to another". This transition is also generally believed to be the most significant time of a young adult's life, and folklore, traditions, humour, and speech are created by students to cope with the stress of the transition (Bronner, 2012). For many students, it marks their first time away from home, becoming responsible for themselves and a period to set life goals and explore their self-identification²² (Bronner, 2012). In this space of "betweenness," the university years are present in self-development before entering the "real world" as a fully-fledged (educated and degreed) adult (Bronner, 2012). Tradition and folklore, two aspects of institutional knowledge and culture that are transferred down to first-years often during the orientation programme, became the mechanism to frame the concerns and roles of students in a space where they are free to experience and experiment with their identities whilst also paradoxically having the heavy burden of academic work (Bronner, 2012). Alternatively, as Bronner (2012: xvii) puts it, "rituals or traditions to dissolve and then reorder reality" for students in this liminal period.

An individual's socio-economic background plays a significant role in the orientation programme and its design in the transition to HE. Harper et al.'s (2018) work show the significance of orientation programmes was not only for new first-generation students but also

²¹ These are distance-learning universities that have the capacity to register one hundred thousand active students or more (IGI Global, n.d.)

²² Process of constructing one's personal identity through claiming membership to a group, category, trait, or attribute (American Psychological Association, 2023)

their family and friends. Including family and friends was noted to affect student transition positively (Harper et al., 2018). Soria (2012) noted that students who identified as working-class felt unwelcome and disengaged from campus life academic activity when compared to middle- and upper-class students. Soria's (2012) research resulted in the creation of programmes by institutions to assist with student belonging. Soria et al. (2013) found that it was beneficial for students to participate in orientation programmes to enhance their identity and increase their sense of belonging, overall academic performance, and retention. The researchers also emphasised that one approach to orientation would not be appropriate in meeting the needs of a diverse student population and encouraged institutions to take note when designing their programmes and putting in place discussion and reflection periods during the process for students to reflect on their journey into the transition to be a student (Soria et al., 2013).

Hazing is an infamous and informal form of initiation ritual, precisely, the hazing of initiates into fraternities and sororities²³. Hazing is the illegal set of practices targeted at individuals who aspire to gain membership to a group and has been found to serve as an informal rite of passage at universities and colleges across the USA (Allan et al., 2019; Cimino, 2011; Tingley et al., 2018). Hazing practices include binge drinking, sleep deprivation, deviant sexual acts, vandalism, social isolation, performing feats of physical endurance, undergoing tests to see if initiates understand the values and history of the fraternity and chapter, and submissive and obedient activity and behaviour (Alexander, 2020; Cimino, 2018; Tingley et al., 2018). Hazing

²³ With over two hundred years of existence in American HEIs, the fraternity and sorority have become a symbol of the American college (Banks and Archibald, 2020: 25). Social organisations found in the USA of brotherhood or sisterhood, sometimes referred to as the Greek Letter System due to most fraternities/sororities using the Greek alphabet in their name, are based on a shared aspiration that individuals pledge a commitment for life to the members of their fraternity/sorority to share knowledge, efforts, and social connections (Britannica, 2023).

has been known to cause physical, mental, and psychological harm and, in extreme cases, death (Bamberski, 2021). Alexander (2020) noted the prevalence of hazing during recruitment periods of fraternities for exclusive membership, linking hazing and initiation into these groups. Allan et al. (2019) and Alexander (2020) found that those who had been hazed previously perceived the activities, such as excessive consumption of alcohol, as harmless and emphasised normalcy, and acceptance. Alexander and Opscal (2021) found a prevalence of neutralisation, of dismissing as harmless, of the hazing the fraternity members have experienced as well as perpetrated.

Anthropologist Cimino (2011) proposed that the purposes behind hazing in fraternities included solidarity, expressions of dominance, and selection of committed group members. Cimino and Thomas (2022: 409) argue that "hazing increases social harmony, cohesion, coordination" through psychological changes in the pledges. When undergoing hazing, the pledges increase solidarity-relevant cognition, such as dedication, identification, and trust, to their self-identity to the group, fellow pledges, and veterans (Cimino and Thomas, 2022). Hazing has been noted to bind a multi-generational group, cultivate group alliances, and maintain traditions and group features (McCreary and Schutts, 2019). Social dominance emerges in the ritualised and ceremonial act of the hazing, with the pledges being initiates undergoing the process and activities chosen by the active members of the fraternity (Cimino, 2011). This enforces the hierarchy within the organisation and links the roots of hazing to the English "fagging"²⁴, whereby older students could order younger students to run their errands (McCreary and Schutts, 2019). Hazing also ensures members are committed, self-identified with, and loyal to the fraternity to prevent 'freeloading' members from joining the group

²⁴ The origins of the word is from the seventeenth century with the word meaning 'to toil' (Time, 1980).

(McCreary and Schutts, 2019). Diamond et al. (2015) posits that the benefits to initiates are acceptance and affiliation to the group, protection, and possible life-long networks that may significantly improve one's prospects after graduating. Non-participation or failure to complete the hazing activity may result in the individual being ostracised (de Klerk, 2013). Ultimately, hazing does not cater to the entire student body and creates 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. In contrast, orientation programmes seek to involve the entire student body and foster a sense of belonging for all.

US academics have put considerable thought into the HEI-approved way students are welcomed through orientation programmes and the peer-led institution disapproved hazing. Both roles are rooted in self-identification as students take the opportunity to create their personas along the lines of their perceived membership to a university, a fraternity, or other social groups. Regardless of who arranged the activity or what the activity was, to welcome first-year students and have the planned event to participate, it was primarily considered a positive experience for the incoming students.

2.3.2. The Portuguese Praxe

Portuguese students participate in *praxe*²⁵, a series of rituals introducing new incoming students to the cultural norms and references of the academic institution (Silva et al., 2021). These rituals may continue for several weeks or throughout the academic year (Silva et al., 2021). The history of *praxe* can be traced back to the 14th century, with its roots being as university police, composed of older students, formed to enforce curfew and study hours (Dias and Sá, 2014b). Records of *praxe* from the 1800s reflect older students' cruel and belittling behaviour toward

²⁵ Singular

newer students (Dias and Sá, 2014b). *Praxe* has, additionally, had a political protest role (kept as part of the anti-regime protests in response to the Estado Novo regime (1933-1974)), and ironically, banned with the shift to democracy in the 1970s (Dias and Sá, 2014b). In the late 1970s, the practice was revived, with many universities creating new traditions (Dias and Sá, 2014b). In 1983, the only official reference of *praxe*²⁶, "Code of the Praxe of a Portuguese Academy", was published. In it, the Code notes that *praxe* "enriches the Portuguese culture with traditions created and developed by former students" with the purpose being to "initiate the freshman into academic life and encourage the loss of social inhibitions" to help the students' integration into HE (Dias and Sá, 2014b: 4). From this description of *praxe*, the parallels can be drawn to the concept of liminality where the norms of every day suspended for an extraordinary event of a change in the individual's life. Not much is known or written about *praxe* in academia, which HE researchers Dias and Sá (2014b) attribute to both the secretive nature and public acceptance of *praxe*.

Praxe can thus be viewed as "rituals of consecration and legitimisation" of student identity, entrenching the socialisation and incorporation of first-year students and enforcing the social hierarchy, with those choosing not to undergo the process being 'othered' and perceived as outsiders (Silva et al., 2021). Silva et al.'s (2021) concluded that there were two kinds of *praxe*. The first type of *praxe*, disciplinary *praxe*, instilled discipline into first-years by senior students through mocking and placing first-years in emotionally and physically uncomfortable situations (Silva et al., 2014). The second type of *praxe*, hedonistic *praxe*, focused on comradeship in festive and alcohol-fuelled situations accompanied by chants taught to first-year

²⁶ There are many students drawn up codes at various institutions mostly unofficial.

students by senior students (Silva et al., 2021). An example is the *latadas*, a celebratory parade in the streets for spectators to hear the students' noise and see the university students dressed in academic gowns or alternative university-identifying attire with tin cans tied to their backs (Silva et al., 2021). The use of symbols is key to *praxe* - the distinct leader of the *praxe* carries around a mace²⁷ or wooden spoon as a symbol of authority, and through undergoing the *praxe*, participants are imparted with symbols such as chants, watchwords, and outfits that make their affiliation to their institution instantly recognisable (Silva et al., 2021). The nature of *praxe* is a dual one, teaching both discipline and obedience and being punitive while also being fun and fostering group loyalties and solidarity among new students and between them and the university community (Silva et al., 2021). Silva et al. (2021) concluded that *praxe* was important in situating the newcomer into the social hierarchy. Hence *praxe* is a socialisation tool.

Dias and Sá (2012; 2014a; 2014b) found that *praxe* had a diverse role in investigating aspects of the transition process from secondary to tertiary education. *Praxe* assisted in the acquisition of a student craft (the skills and attributes required to navigate the tasks involved in being a student), hazing (a means to social cohesion), and the role of initiation practices in the transition to HE (Dias and Sá, 2012; 2014a; 2014b). Dias and Sá (2012: 279) describe the process of acquiring a student craft as "[t]he changes affect students' entire psychological development, as well as their way of life as they acquire skills of a more academic nature". The ability of the student to face the challenges of the transition to HE is determined by how well the student

²⁷ A rod of wood with an ornamental head, a mace goes back to medieval Europe to mark authority and power for kings and dignitaries and to this day it is used by governments and university to mark the official sanction of proceedings (Michigan State University, n.d.; University of Washington, 2022).

acquires a student craft (Dias and Sá, 2012). Dias and Sá (2012) argue that HEIs need to create support structures for the transference of student craft skills to support first-years. First-year university students adapt to a new academic space and a transitional period of their personal lives. They must develop the skills to help them live as independent emerging adults (Dias and Sá, 2012). Coulon (1997, in Dias and Sá, 2012: 282-283) noted that in his adaptation of van Gennep's stages in *Rites of Passage*, the liminal stage, or the "time to learn" stage, is where the student craft skills begin to create in the in-between of past and present in a painful and anxiogenic stage of the student's life. For the student craft to be learned, Dias and Sá (2012) argue that new codes that mark intellectual and social life as distinctive need to be learned and provide a space for others to acknowledge that students have mastered the student craft through demonstration. This brand of intellectual and social life whereby student craft mastery status is confirmed is the space of academic culture, a culture not determined mainly by the HEIs administration but rather in academic work and extracurricular spaces (Dias and Sá, 2012). Dias and Sá (2014a; 2014b) considered how the *praxe* process could affect first-year students' perceptions of the transition into HE and the cohesion of the group. In applying van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* to *praxe*, Dias and Sá (2014b) understood students' social order and role at each phase of their HE journey. At the separation stage, first-years undergoing *praxe* assume subordinate roles to senior students; in the liminal stage, second-year students cannot partake in *praxe*; and in the post-liminal stage, third-year students become the *intiatro* who enacts *praxe* (Dias and Sá, 2014b).

Dias and Sá (2014b) found that first-years' experience of *praxe* varied. Positive experiences left first-years with a sense of pride and belonging. Negative experiences resulted in embarrassment and fear of the unknown (particularly for first-generation students who did not know what to expect and had no guidance) (Dias and Sá, 2014b). For many students, undergoing *praxe* became a turning point in their lives, as they experience these practices as

significant in informing and shaping their identities. Marking them as enrolled university students regardless of gender, geographical location, origin, or if they were first-generation students provided students with an identifiable space within the in-group (Dias and Sá, 2014a). *Praxe* is found to be essential to first-year integration into the university community, in promoting friendship and peer-ships in the cohort and as a source of entertainment for first-years and senior students while simultaneously serving as training for the future (Dias and Sá, 2014a; Dias and Sá, 2014b). *Praxe* is also viewed as a form of hazing designed with institution and community goals and as a way for older students to have fun whilst causing embarrassment to the first-years students and imposing rules onto first-years (Dias and Sá, 2014a). However, justifying the use of *praxe* is questionable, at best, as to whether it can achieve such incorporation and whether this is even the primary goal of *praxe* (Dias and Sá, 2014a). What *praxe* creates is an affiliation between incoming and older students, creating a space that can help instil a connection and sense of pride in the school (Dias and Sá, 2014a). It also promotes conformity within an institution, which can be alarming when the process is not voluntary (Dias and Sá, 2014a).

Praxe, with its rich history as peer initiation, is a vital aspect of being a student in Portugal through helping with the socialising welcome to the HEI space and developing the skills for -- the student craft -- with the transition from secondary to tertiary student. Further research into *praxe* and similar practices at other universities would be beneficial, especially by anthropologists, to critically engage with the anthropological theories used by HE researchers.

2.3.3. The SA perspective: Hazing, Orientation and First-Year Experience (FYE)

In the early 2000s, parents of children in high schools and universities raised concerns, resulting in the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) launching an investigation

into hazing practices at educational institutions (SAHRC, 2001). The report noted that in 2001 a student from Stellenbosch University (Western Cape) had passed away due to an initiation activity (SAHRC, 2001). Initiation practices at SA universities included sleep deprivation, activities where alcohol abuse was encouraged and peer-pressured onto first-year students, as well as denying access to landline telephones to call family members (SAHRC, 2001). The result of the report was that while hazing at schools and universities in SA banned, the reality is that it did not stop these enculturation rituals that have racist, classist and misogynistic historical backgrounds masquerading as tradition. As de Wet (2017) notes, hazing in academic spaces is as old as the concept of a specialised organisation that focuses on education, with hazing in SA most likely being a product of colonisation because more cases seemed to be occurring in schools that follow the British system. As such, hazing has been embedded within the white, middle- and upper-class SAn education system for over a century (de Wet, 2017: 149). What has been posted in the media are mere snapshots of hazing - of extreme deviant behaviour. Often these snapshots depict blatant racially charged acts, such as the case of the 2007 Reitz Four, four white male students from the University of Free State (UFS) forced five black cleaners to perform degrading activities (Soudien, 2010) and the 2009 Villa Bravado, a predominately black male residence, video whereby four white students were forced to stand on one leg and then crawl around on the water on the floor in front of other students for their initiation (Gabara, 2010; Mail and Guardian, 2010). In 2014 at North-West University's (NWU) Orientation, a photograph of the first-years serenading senior members of the female residence was captured and taken out of context to look like the Nazi salute (Balfour, 2014). While not condoned officially and to the point of banning with official channels now in place at universities across SA, 'illegal' hazing and initiation rituals still occur and are part of university traditions and culture, as Abrahams (2018) found out when talking to current and former students from Stellenbosch University, the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), and the

University of Pretoria. The term initiation regarding HE has been convoluted with hazing. As such, it is crucial to look beyond to see how orientation programmes become initiation rituals in HE.

Research conducted from 2012 to 2013 at RU investigated whether Orientation Week (O-Week) activities could be hazing after a letter of complaint was received by the Division of Student Affairs (DSA) from a student who had a distressing ordeal which made her consider deregistration (De Klerk, 2013). Initiations and hazing activities at Rhodes were banned in the 1970s; however, in the 1990s, practices called serenading became prevalent in O-Week. This practice entails members of the opposite genders meeting in the early mornings, before any scheduled official events begin, and performing songs and dances taught to them by their residence leadership (De Klerk, 2013). Beyond the heteronormativity and patriarchal nature of the songs and dances, sometimes very explicit in their content and suggestive movements, the survey data highlighted the power dynamic between the residence leadership and students. Residence leadership saw serenading as a positive experience, and most first-year students reported being fine or indifferent to the serenading (De Klerk, 2013). Yet, reports also included students who felt coerced by leadership into serenading, which they found uncomfortable or distressing (De Klerk, 2013). The report concluded that serenading was not only a form of initiation but also that "such traditions can become insidious and invisible, deeply woven into the pattern of 'normal campus culture'" (De Klerk, 2013).

The work done on orientation programmes in SA is largely based on anecdotal information. Nyar (2020) argues that SA universities have underestimated the importance of orientation programs, so orientation's role in students' academic success is underestimated. There is a need to investigate in detail and the desire to have a blend of academic and social activities in orientation to cope with one of the critical points of anxiety for first-years: whether they will

fit in and belong (Nyar, 2020). Orientation is the starting point of the first-year student into HE, with the first year the starting point of the student's journey into HE (Nyar, 2021). Nyar's (2019) work with the SANRC has begun to push for creating national guidelines to guide universities on best practices in creating their orientation programme. The importance of this work is amplified by the impact of COVID-19 on first-years undergoing a 'double-transition' (Nyar, 2021). The initial transition is the student learning how to navigate the "complex ecosystem of processes, procedures and specific requirements of the university" (Nyar, 2021: 81). COVID-19 caused the unanticipated transition whereby the whole SAHE system had to navigate academics online (Nyar, 2021). Nyar (2021) outline two ways the first-years would be negatively affected by the double transition: the financial burden from unexpected COVID-19 additional costs, and the cost to their mental health. Regarding their mental health, Nyar (2021) argues that they have been detrimentally affected by the uncertainty surrounding their education and the dilution of their university experience down to online academics. Before we further consider this 'double-transition', what has been written regarding orientation before the pandemic must be discussed.

Koetsier (2009) investigated the use of combined orientation and after-hours academic assistance for part-time students at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The orientation program lasted two weeks for full-time students at UWC (Koetsier, 2009). It comprised guided tours of the campus, assistance in choosing subjects based on introductory lectures, and registration (Koetsier, 2009). On the other hand, part-time students had a one-day orientation programme, which included the above and a workshop on time management (Koetsier, 2009). He came to realise that part-time students were dissatisfied with the one-day orientation programme, noting that part-time students (most of whom were first-generation and/ or older than the traditional first-year student (18 – 19 years old)) who felt it was insufficient for them

to become "inducted in the philosophy and practices of academia" and navigate campus and academic life (Koetsier, 2009: 8).

The focus on the FYE is linked to the dramatic changes to HEIs in SA in terms of "increased access" and has not led to improvements in student retention but relatively low participation caused by a variety of challenges (Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020: 32). Naong et al. (2009: 171) note that students face a multitude of challenges in the transition to tertiary education that institutions should be aware of, including developing new skills and learning styles, accepting that students come from broadly different backgrounds and must adjust to institutional demands. These are persisting challenges, as seen in a study by Uleanya and Yu (2019) that looked at the FYE at rural universities in SA and Nigeria and found that students faced multiple challenges to success in their studies. These students struggled to understand new concepts, were not prepared for tertiary education without a good foundation from secondary education, had difficulty with the language that is the medium of instruction and learning, and struggled to concentrate and foster good relationships with lecturers (Uleanya and Yu, 2019). They also had to contend with infrastructure issues that affected their studies, including the distance between accommodation and campus, and poor internet facilities (Uleanya and Yu, 2019).

Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) further investigated these challenges to develop recommendations for an office within the University of Zululand's Deans of Students' office, which would monitor the progress of first-year students. This comes from their 2016 quantitative study using questionnaire responses from 1479 first-year students at a rural university, the University of Zululand (Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020). Of these participants, 53% attended the orientation programme, with a further 41% reporting that it helped them understand the HE system (Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020). While non-attendance could contribute to the perception that orientation programmes are social events, there were practical reasons for why students could

not attend with 55% reporting that they did not have accommodation during the orientation period (Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020). Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) noted that orientation programmes are intended to assist students with the transition into HE and to transfer information to first-year students about access to support and skills. Being unfamiliar with the campus made it difficult for students to know and access necessary support and resources, and failing to learn and adapt quickly may contribute further to the problems and affect their FYE (Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020). This was especially so for first-generation students, who made up 82% of participants who expressed a lack of adequate guidance from the institution and their families (Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020).

Mayeza and Munyeka (2021) investigated the transition of first-year students to university through the socialisation theoretical framework to explore students' adaptation and response to challenges in their new environment at NWU. Using a Newcomers Experience Model, this study explored first-year students' expectations of university life. Namely, this framework focused on how they expected to be treated, the effort they expected to invest in their academics, time away from family, and the financial investment into their education (Mayeza and Munyeka, 2021). Mayeza and Munyeka's (2021) study at a public rural university²⁸ found that most first-year students had realistic expectations of university life, and their expectations and experiences were not too dissimilar (Mayeza and Munyeka, 2021). Most students experience shock due to the heavy workload and the stricter assessment marking, resulting in lower marks. The participants explained that the first semester was not as complicated as expected and received more support from their cohort than older students (Mayeza and

²⁸ Describes both the geographical location as well as the historically disadvantaged, underfunded and under-resourced universities partially funded by the government (Ntombela and Ntombela, 2022).

Munyeka, 2021). When there was a negative experience, it was often aligned with this being the first time the student had been exposed to the university system, with negative comments often mentioning adjustment to the system, such as "I never thought one semester was such a serious matter in the university", and "It [the semester] did not cater for slow learners because its short" (Mayeza and Munyeka, 2021: 110). The responses captured in the survey were brief and participants unable to go into further depth due to the limitation of using the survey adapted from the model. Regarding orientation, half of the participants did not attend, but those who did found it satisfactory, albeit too short and rushed (Mayeza and Munyeka, 2021). Overall, fostering a sense of belonging to the university in one semester was insufficient, with newcomers identifying with other newcomers and members of their courses (Mayeza and Munyeka, 2021).

At the University of Cape Town (UCT), the focus on the first-year experience has centred on curriculum and academic advice (Sebidi and Morreira, 2017). Epistemological access focuses on how students access disciplinary knowledge and the barriers that hamper students prevent meaningful learning and education (Maniram and Maisty, 2018). Addressing epistemological access is as equally important to addressing admission access into HE, as seen by events in the last decade. In the wake of the #RhodesMustFall and the #FeesMustFall movements, which emerged at UCT in 2015 before moving country-wide, Sebidi and Morreira (2017) investigated the notion of decolonising the curriculum with sociology students' experiences beyond a course feedback survey of two introduction courses, one a Euro-American theory and literature focus and the other focused on sociological theory in local contexts. In the qualitative semi-structured interviews with ten students enrolled on the extended degree, all identified as black, with seven being female and three male, the Euro-American course was described as "very European" with little that the students could relate to their own experiences (Sebidi and Morreira, 2017: 42). In contrast, the course that utilised local contexts was found by 80% of participants to be enjoyable

and they could relate to the theory and apply it in their everyday lives (Sebidi and Morreira, 2017). Sebidi and Morreira (2017) argue that the students had a more academically enriching experience when knowledge is contextualised within their local experiences, which should be considered going forward with curricula to make knowledge, Western or Afrocentric, accessible to students. The significance of this study is the use of qualitative methods by Sebidi and Morreira (2017) is that focus on a particular group of students to investigate a phenomenon related to their experience at university and how it affected their sense of connection to the institution through the aspect of learning.

Concerns surrounding accessibility and how to improve academic advisement have been the focus of a high-impact project that assists in making the FYE successful (van Pletzen et al., 2021). Academic advisement comes from UCT faculty staff members who provide prescriptive knowledge, which focuses on equipping students with the knowledge and means to navigate the university space academically, such as how to build your curriculum and career development (van Pletzen et al., 2021). van Pletzen et al. (2021) discovered that regardless of the range of advice and support, students felt isolated and alienated because they did not know how to access resources. Students were uncomfortable approaching staff for help, believing that staff were not objective in their advice. Students found the UCT communication through email overwhelming with the volume sent and, as such, preferred peer support, which then placed a burden on students trying to provide psychosocial support to other students (van Pletzen et al., 2021). In response to the data, van Pletzen et al. (2021: 38) created the integrated three-tiered advisory model to account for the experiences noted and mediate a solution for students accessing academic advice through referral where necessary:

An Integrated, Three-Tiered Academic Advising Model

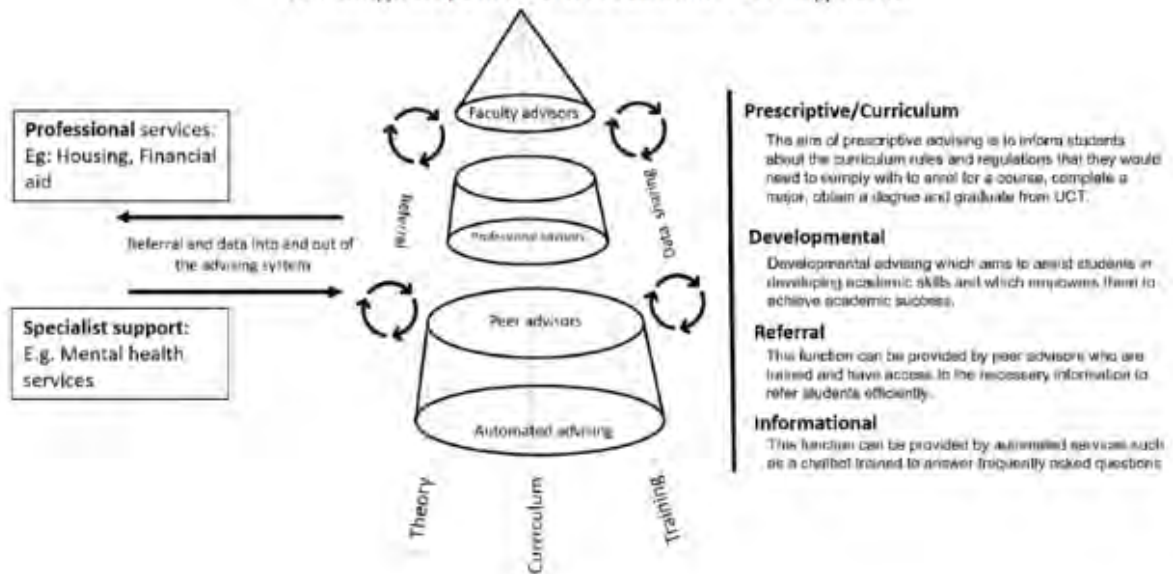


Image 1: An integrated, Three-Tiered Academic Advising Model

(van Platzen et al., 2021: 38)

At the top of the model is 'faculty advice', which has four functions in providing advice: information sharing about the institution and courses, prescriptive advice, developmental skills advice, and referral (van Pletzen et al., 2021:38). At the bottom of the model is 'peer advice', whereby specifically trained students could provide information and support to students and refer them elsewhere (van Pletzen, et al., 2021). In the middle of the model was an envisioned 'professional tier' to work in centralising advising and referrals (van Pletzen et al., 2021). The role of the professional tier would be to assist in the communication among faculties, students, and other stakeholders to assist and develop academic advice further, create guidelines and resources for providing support, train peer advisors, and assist faculties in tracking student progress (van Pletzen et al., 2021). In 2020, this model was implemented with various degrees of success. The peer assessment hub for the Health Science Faculty was too psychosocially draining for the peer advisors as well as too expensive to run longterm, whilst the Science Faculty's career development accredited course was described as a good pilot and had potential

for up-scaling (van Pletzen et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasised the importance "for an integrated advising approach that spans centralised and faculty-specific student advising and support" (van Pletzen et al., 2021). The use of online platforms, email through the UCT Central Advising and Referral Services (CARES), and the WhatsApp Chatbot for frequently asked questions proved to be a cost-effective and efficient means of providing assistance to first-years.

2.4. Emerging literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the FYE

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and adaptation to online or hybrid models of education have been studied worldwide, primarily by psychologists and HE researchers at their home institutions, and with primarily the on the effects on students and staff. Coincidentally, a good portion of the student population that the data was collected from was the first-year student population. While publication of the research is still ongoing, some of what has already been published shall be looked at.

The cohort was first-year psychology students surveyed at a German University exploring subjective well-being, aspects of students' personality, extraversion, and neuroticism during the two COVID-19 lockdowns (March to May 2020 and November 2020 to April 2021), describing them as significant life events (Krautter et al., 2021). Major life events are environmental changes that are a psychological threat, causing individuals to experience unpleasantness and changes in their behaviour (Krautter et al., 2021). Their findings acknowledged that while students were not the population most at risk of the physical health threat of COVID-19, the public health measures that changed society were a threat to students' mental health (Krautter, et al., 2021). During the lockdown periods, there were changes to students' subjective well-being and personality, and these changes stopped when the lockdown period ended; however, Krautter et al. (2021) stressed the importance of having a longitudinal study to see the long-

term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant life event. Quintiliani et al. (2022) provides the perspective of undergraduate students at a medical university in Italy on the psychological impact of distance learning during the pandemic. Nine hundred and fifty-five undergraduate students completed an online questionnaire between 10 April - 3 May 2020, the first phase of the Italian lockdown. They found that 66% of students reported experiencing moderate stress and 23.4% experienced high stress due to the pandemic (Quintiliani et al., 2022). The adjustment to online learning and the detrimental effect of stress in creating favourable environments to study in, may have contributed to most students reporting difficulty in paying attention and studying and concerns about their exams (Quintiliani, et al., 2022). First-year students were particularly concerned about their exam performance, which Quintiliani et al. (2022 :77) suggest could be because they had "little time to settle down into the university context and adapt to new life experiences" due to the shift to online learning.

Similar research has emerged in a SA context regarding the impact of the emergency shift to online teaching and learning on first-year students. Moosa and Bekker (2022) investigated the effect of the shift to online T&L caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on student experiences and well-being at a public university in SA. They found positive and negative experiences that determined whether students felt included and/or supported at their HEI and compromised in their learning (Moosa and Bekker, 2022). Students reported feeling that the institution had made satisfactory, inclusive decisions in the shift to online T&L, albeit the execution was problematic in that there was insufficient data provided, and some students lacked the technology to participate in online T&L (Moosa and Bekker, 2022). Students reported a mixed response to the effectiveness of confident choices in online lecturing and assessments (Moosa and Bekker, 2022). Students with time management, self-directing, and self-regulation skills and the ability to work independently had an easier adjustment period. External forces included a lack of electricity supply (including load shedding), poor network, and household

responsibilities, which harmed their studies (Moosa and Bekker, 2022). Constant communication sent out by the university and online support groups fostered a sense of belonging to the university community, but some students also felt that decisions made by the university, such as closing the residence system, were not in the best interests of students (Moosa and Bekker, 2022).

de Klerk et al. (2021: 61) explored how WITS used a new orientation programme to enable the acquisition of knowledge and skills students need for remote learning. A four-day orientation occurred on the institution's learning management platform and focused on introducing students to WITS' resources available for online learning (de Klerk et al., 2021). The aim of the orientation was three-fold: firstly, to have activities which equipped students for online learning; secondly, to develop a platform of communication during distance learning; and thirdly, to monitor student engagement with orientation and to identify students who were struggling (de Klerk et al., 2021). Data collected focused on user interaction and daily engagement polls on the course to see student's "preparedness, perceptions, and level of comfort", and a final assignment for the course as well as a survey sent to students to evaluate the course (de Klerk et al., 2021). The authors concluded that there was more difficulty than expected when creating the orientation within the emergency of the context and the time constraint of getting academic activities online (de Klerk et al., 2021).

SA anthropologists have focused on lecturers and the curriculum changes to meet the challenges of COVID-19 restrictions. Mkhize et al. (2021) offer auto-ethnographic explorations of the difficulties of trying to adapt the organic conversations which occurred in the physical classroom, or *incoko*, (the isiXhosa term), to digital spaces and the subsequent loss due to the inability to replicate it. Erasmus (2021) referred to the technological constraints that resulted in content and writing practices occurring in correspondence between students and

writing fellow tutors. This correspondence, brought on by the circumstances of distance learning, in the letters/coursework submissions became the embodied experience of students' experiences and tutor's care and nurturing of the student. Price and de Ruiters (2021) investigated how UCT Anthropology lecturers had to adapt their normal fieldtrips, the teaching and mentorship through the research process to create an ethnography, considering the disparity in access to online T&L among the anthropology students, to a virtual field trip that students did asynchronously in their own homes about how COVID-19 affected them. The photo essay of a North West University Honours student captured the experience of being distant from the institutions of learning and the resources available, and the experience of remote learning and the challenges faced by students in trying to access the resources needed to learn as well as overcome the difficulty of digital learning (Monatshana et al, 2021). The papers in this special volume of the Anthropology Southern Africa Journal highlighted the struggle of academics in adjusting to the new teaching platforms, which extended to students. Most of the emerging literature has focused on the narratives of staff members making the transition to online T&L, additionally, with the student's experience of being on the receiving end of the novel online T&L. This dissertation is interested in how the students found the transition to online, the challenges they faced, they also acknowledge the psychosocial stress the students face not only navigating online university, but life in a pandemic.

2.5. Conclusion

The importance of the first year of attending an HEI, and the process first-time students undergo are becoming increasingly important areas of study in SA with the development of SANRC. While initiation rituals are currently illegal in SA HEIs, this does not mean that the *Rites of Passage* Theory is not applicable as a means to explore the transition into university. The first year of university, and especially the first few weeks and the orientation period, share many

characteristics with the liminal stage – of being in between, of a stage of uncertainty and danger. This has been reflected in the limited literature, albeit it needs to be noted that the lack of scope of current papers is what I would call opportunistic, whereby the authors' position leveraged their access to a specific group of students who do not represent the student body. Also, note that these papers represent a snapshot of a specific time in the pandemic, primarily the country of the paper's origin and the first lockdown period. Granted, the scope of the pandemic was unprecedented and unpredictable, but this is a small proportion of the pandemic, and scholars have published research that looks at the changes and development of the pandemic that affected first-year students of 2021.

CHAPTER 3: Approaching university students' formation of identity during the COVID-19 pandemic: A theoretical framework

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I surveyed the literature to pose the necessity of anthropological research into HE, how students are inducted into their universities and the impact of COVID-19 on FYE. This chapter explores the theoretical frameworks that ground what rituals are within an anthropological context within the framework of ritual acts and actions observed in behaviour. In line with the study's aim to understand the significance of orientation as a ritual, this chapter explores the *Rites of Passage* created by van Gennep and expanded upon by Turner and how this is useful in studying HE through Tinto's (1988) work. This chapter develops this theoretical framework to understand and explain students' formation of identities following the pandemic.

3.2. Conceptualising Orientation as Rituals

Rappaport (1999: 138) claimed that "ritual is the basic social act" as a physical manifestation of the social contract which binds people, cultural beliefs, and values together. As such, orientation programmes can be conceptualised as a ritual of initiation for first-time university students (often in attendance directly emerging from secondary education). Thus, I argue that orientation processes are rituals designed by universities to enculturate and assist new students in transitioning into their new role and identity as university student. Drawing upon orientation programmes as rituals has been done by authors already mentioned in this dissertation (viz. Nathan (2005), Dias and Sá, 2012; 2014a; 2014b) who drew upon van Gennep's *Rites du Passage*. These programmes occur in the same manner each year with the same ethos and goal in mind: to 'acclimate', to use Siegel's (2008) phrasing, first-year students. As such, each cohort

receives the same welcoming experience as previous and future cohorts in the university community, creating a thread of familiarity between individuals and cohorts. Siegel (2008) also points out that the ceremonies involved in orientation serve to transfer the university culture, norms and values to the incoming students, which makes them points of enculturation.

Furthermore, Rappaport (1999:24) defines ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequence of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers". He notes that the elements of rituals are not exclusive; rather the structure given to it makes it unique and results in social and material consequences (Rappaport, 1999). In the current study context, while most universities have orientation programs, each is unique in their design and intention for the institution and its students. While Rappaport (1999: 46) argues that rituals do not have consequences of "practical results", for there to be a physical response to ritual failure, to view them solely as symbolic would be a disservice to the power that rituals have in human lives.

For Rappaport (1999), rituals have five essential elements:

- i) They are encoded and passed down through generations, with reinvention not acceptable but newly invented rituals have a place of acceptance.
- ii) There is a formality of the ritual whereby the passed-down ritual's pattern is followed every single time (Rappaport, 1999). There is a small amount of room for spontaneity within the actions in the participant's actions and behaviour in response to the rituals (Rappaport, 1999).
- iii) There is the invariance of rituals.
- iv) For a series of actions to be called a ritual, they must be a performance because "ritual is not simply one of a number of more or less equivalent ways in which the

material embodied in liturgical²⁹ orders maybe expressed, presented, maintained or established" (Rappaport, 1999: 37). It is the performance act of making culture tangible and observable to an audience that gives rituals their power to effect changes on the individual, the group, and even the world (Rappaport, 1999).

- v) The effects of rituals are not intended to physically change the world with the consequence of the "practical results"³⁰, but rather to cause changes to the intangible world (Rappaport, 1999: 45).

If we are to conceptualise orientation as a ritual, we need to note if it is a traditional, consistent, unchangeable symbolic performance. Understanding a ritual as such, the argument could be made that ritual is a mechanism of maintaining the *status quo*. McNeill (2023) notes that with such little change occurring to rituals to maintain the power of the process, so do unequal power relationships with the custodians having the benefit of having exclusive knowledge and accompanying the social leverage.

Affiliation to the university, however, takes far longer than the orientation programme, and as such, the experience of 'living the student life', including socialisation, needs to be considered as well as a form of induction into student life. Social occasions are made up of interaction rituals where a gathering has been formed with an intention and plan for people to interact as a participant, and have a more formalised ritual structure (Goffman, 1966). Social occasions have a ritual form, in how the group gathers, disperses, and meets again repetitively and predictably, with often a pattern of conduct determining acceptable behaviour and actions (Goffman, 1966).

²⁹ The focus of Rappaport's (1999) work is the rituals within religious practices.

³⁰ Although it can. Example of the kaiko, the warfare that occurs after the ritual slaughter and feasting on the pigs the Tsembaga of Papua New Guinea have collected over years of animal husbandry, as a 2nd aspect of the ritual.

For this study, this may be seen in the schedule for Orientation programmes whereby student activities are planned according to 'traditional' activities. All parties involved, despite the differences in their roles and how it impacts the official proceedings of the social occasion, come together to perform the ritual through the presence of their place in the gathering, instruments of communication, and are governed through the regulations of the occasion and will communicate themselves (language, dress, fashion) in a manner deemed appropriate for the occasion (Goffman, 1966). This is reflected in Collins' (2020) take on Goffman's ideas in application in understanding the sense of insincerity of COVID-19-adapted rituals. According to Collins (2020), there are four outcomes of successful interaction rituals, meaning that: firstly, social solidarity is confirmed by members feeling that they belong, and, secondly, emotional energy from a successful interaction is felt. Thirdly, collective symbols of what the group feels is important to them are shared and promote the collective identity (Collins, 2020). Fourthly, moralities of what is perceived as right and wrong behaviour of each member comes into alignment with the collective moralities (Collins, 2020). Public rituals, which mark a ritual interaction between an individual and the larger group and specifically rituals of initiation or appointment, marks the incorporation and legitimisation of the individual's membership to the larger group (Dücker, 2007). In this way, it will be argued that the orientation process is a means to incorporate first-year students into the university community and legitimise their sense of belonging. The importance of public ritual is that they occur between participants that are sharing the same physical space (e.g. residence housing at university). As Collins (2020) demonstrates, when COVID-19 occurred, the online nature of life could not replicate the success of public rituals. As such, the binding nature that comes from a shared experience did not occur through online platforms, such as, for example, an online orientation.

3.2.1. Rites of Passage

van Gennep's key work *Les rites du passage* (1909) took a cross-cultural comparative approach to exploring *Rites of Passage* (Barfield, 1997). That is, he looked at the structural similarities in rites across different types of rituals from different cultures rather than focusing on differences of the rituals (Barfield, 1997). In doing this, van Gennep ([1909]2004) developed the three stages of ritual – rites of separation or the pre-liminal stage, rites of transition or the liminal stage, and rites of incorporation or the post-liminal stage (van Gennep, [1909]2004). These stages reflected van Gennep's (1909) view of life and culture. Culture created the social order, creating divisions within groups, creating different positions within society and hence different individual and group identities (van Gennep, [1909]2004). Within this culturally organised society, the life of the individual "is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another" (van Gennep, [1909]2004). These sequences of passage are mechanisms to deal with the changes within the group rather than ensure social balance is preserved (Hochner, 2018). Thus, these acts, or rites, served to help the individual and society to leave their previous place in society and provide a space to learn the responsibilities of their new role and to step into that position allowing for a successful transition (Schlossberg, 1989). This included the transition to becoming a university student, which van Gennep's theory provides insight on the process and points of danger when the rite is disrupted.

Victor Turner (1969) built on the work of van Gennep through his work with the Ndembu, which resulted in Turner's concept of social drama. Like van Gennep's view of the near-universal three stages of rituals, the social drama is described as "a spontaneous unit of social progress and a fact of everyone's experience in every human society" (Turner, 1980). This meant that rather than looking for the fixed structure that van Gennep was interested in, Turner (1980) was interested in the fluidity of these experiences on social relations (Hockey, 2002).

Within the social drama, there are four stages that the individual or group undergoes to "comprehend experiential structures in the actual process of social life" (Turner, 1980: 144). These four stages are breach, crisis, redress mechanism, and reintegration or recognition of the schism (Turner, 1980). During the breach stage, the individual or group show an "expression of a deeper division of interest and loyalties that appears on the surface" towards the larger group (Turner, 1980: 150). The breach can be perceived as akin to the liminal phase in its role of deconstructing the old; however, Turner (1980) also acknowledged the potential for something positive to emerge from the liminality, such as the development of *communitas* (Hockey, 2002). *Communitas* refers to that "egalitarian and invigorating state that a shared liminality could induce" (Metcalf, 1997: 477). The results of this division appear in the crisis stage as the metaphorical cracks within the social structure is revealed (Turner, 1980). The redress mechanism stage acknowledges the crisis of the social structure and calls on the use of cultural tools for advice on how to address the issue (Turner, 1980). This leads to the reintegration stage, whereby the individual or group are forgiven and brought back into the group, or the recognition of the schism whereby irreparable change has been done to the social structure and the individual or group will separate in exodus from the main group (Turner, 1980).

It is important to note how the concept of liminality has influenced further research regarding being a state of "betwixt and between" categories. Beyond the concept of ritual, it can refer to the state of "being suspended or even trapped between two different sets of role expectations, a condition often leading to impassivity" (Neumann, 2012: 474). In the case of this study, liminality is applied to the disruption and insufficient orientation process experienced by first-year students, leaving them 'betwixt and between' being a high school student and a university student. Beyond the application to HE, the concept of liminality I additionally draw upon is in how it has been used to explain the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in how it stopped

and altered 'normal' life in every aspect of society (see Bell 2021a, 2021b; Imber-Black 2020). To draw back to Nyar (2021), my intention is to research the 'double transition' of students navigating the unknown of HE for the first time while also doing so during the great uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, McNeill (2023) argues that Turner's flexible theoretical framework becomes a good analytical lens to understand the nebulous world of COVID-19 rituals. The limitations of Turner's theory trying to impose order onto instability bring into question if true reintegration, a seamless transition into a new role, is even possible (McNeill, 2023). It brings up the necessity of nuance, uncertainty, and real lived experiences' grit to provide in-depth perspective.

3.3. Bringing van Gennep to University: Tinto (1988) and Tierney (1992)

Despite being old and with critiques, this dissertation draws on Tinto (1988) for the similarities of his studies with my own. Firstly, Tinto's initial analytical foray into student retention drew from van Gennep. My study will do the same in drawing on van Gennep, and like how Tinto separated the stages along the lines of orientation programme, to examine SAHE context that would prefer not to have the terms "ritual" and "university student" in the same sentence. Secondly, Tinto's (1988) application of the framework to the data collected from a small residential university which is the same as my research site, and primarily focused on traditional students. Tierney's (1992) critique of campus diversity is also as important. Firstly, in considering my research objective to establish the orientation programme as a ritual in understanding what comprises the orientation, it would indicate how much, or how little, has changed regarding inclusivity of orientation programmes. Secondly, his critique emphasises the importance of anthropologists to conduct research in their own universities, to create an anthropology of higher education.

Tinto (1988) takes on the idea of HE as a liminal space by using van Gennepe's *Rites of Passage* to create a model to explore student resilience and reasons for voluntarily dropping out. This stemmed from the lack of theoretical models that looked at student attrition rates and causes in the 1970's USA.. Integration in this context refers to "a state of being based on perceptions of student fit with their campus" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009: 416). University is to be seen as a new community, and the student needs to separate from their old community to take their place within this new community (Tinto, 1988). During the separation stage, this separation from old membership, (such as the students' communities and homes), can either be a difficult or easy for-gone natural progression of life goals depending on the view of HE the community holds (Tinto, 1988). These pre-students are expected to leave behind their habits and past life to take on new ones as students, but this process is stressful and disorientating and may serve as a deterrent to going to university, especially for those who must leave their home community to attend university in a different geographical area (Tinto, 1988). In the transition to university, a "period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped associations with communities of the present" can be viewed as the liminal stage of van Gennepe's theory (Tinto, 1988: 444). Tinto (1988) argued that in separating themselves from the past yet to gain integration into the social community and acquire the appropriate norms and behaviour, the student can feel lost, bewildered, and desolate. This can negatively affect the student's ability to persevere and remain in school and so the quicker a student is to gain membership to the social and academic community of the HEI, the better it is for student retention (Tinto, 1988).

Tinto (1988) argued that once the student has reached the incorporation stage, that is, gaining membership into the university community and hence taking on the norms and being integrated with their peers and faculty, their ability to persist increases. Academic integration focuses on students' experiences in both the formal and informal classroom space, and whether these

experiences are positive (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Social integration is the perception of students of their interactions with peers, faculty, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto (1988) notes that there is a lack of formal rituals in public spaces to help students integrate. Suppose there are rituals, like Orientation Programmes. In that case, they are "very short-lived, if not highly symbolic in character, and do not provide for the sorts of extended contact needed for the establishment of community membership" (Tinto, 1988:446). Alternatively, they are organised outside of the university community, for example, the Greek organisations of fraternities and sororities, and are not available to all students (Tinto, 1988). With a lack of ritual, the integration into university and the university community is something students navigate on their own, with the success of incorporation not guaranteed or even wanted at all by the student (Tinto, 1988) As such, Tinto (1988:452) calls for HE institutions to include public rituals and ceremonies "as part of their retention programmes, if not part and parcel of their academic programmes".

While Tinto's model has proven to be popular, it has not gone without critique. Most of this critique is focused on the applicability of the model to non-traditional students and other universities and universities besides residential ones (Elkins et al., 2000; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tierney's (1992) critique was from an anthropological perspective and his own background in retaining Native American students in USA universities. Tierney (1992) argues that Tinto's (1988) model can be disputed in the way he did not interpret or understand the cultural significance of the term rituals and the view of *Rites of Passage*. Tierney (1992: 608) states that Tinto did not consider how universities are not culturally independent bubbles of academia but rather "reflect the culture of the mainstream society", in this case, Western culture. For minority cultural and ethnic groups, Tinto's (1988) model views their integration as undergoing *Rites of Passage* into another culture, something that van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* theory does not consider (Tierney, 1992). Within van Gennep's work, rites of transition

are always within a particular cultural context, not to another group (Tierney, 1992). Secondly, the term "drop-out" in relation to initiation rituals is used to describe a phenomenon that does not exist in culturally-centred ritual practices (Tierney, 1992). In culturally-centred rituals, Tierney (1992) argues, that there are no options to stop undergoing the ritual, bar death, so university students have the option to drop out of university³¹. The subjective view of Tinto (1988) that students had to conform to integrate is a culturally specific view that Tinto (1988) failed to be aware of (Tierney, 1992). This ethnocentric view was found to be held by administrators who held the belief that the dropout rate of Native American students was due to their failure to acculturate to the competitive environment of university (Tierney, 1992). As such, Tierney (1992: 613) notes that "[a]cculturation to the university presumably implies that [Native America] (Indian) students must learn the ways of the white world". Or, as Tinto's (1988) model would have it, minority culture students would have to undergo social suicide of their community to again academic membership to their university (Tierney, 1992). Tierney (1992) concluded that rather than a space of harsh transition, university should be viewed as a space of confirming home cultural beliefs and acknowledging the multiculturalism of the student population.

The concept of ritual failure is part and parcel of rituals and has also been studied. Ritual failure has been speculated to be caused by numerous reasons, such as a disconnect between the cultural beliefs of the group and the actual pattern of social action, resulting in a disconnect (Polit, 2007). What can be attributed as a ritual failure is also up for discussion, such as how the flawed performance of the ritual can provoke questions of the rituals validity and bring into

³¹ The concept of ritual failure was not taken into consideration. Failure of rituals, for the intended outcome not to occur, can occur for a multitude of reasons like incorrect ritual action, on in the eyes of the Garhwali of India, human error by the practitioner, sponsor, person in being impure, lack of proper preparation that mars the divinity of the ritual (Polit, 2007: 333).

critique the institutions involved (Dücker, 2007; Polit, 2007). Polit (2007) argues that ritual failure is still a factor in social change and social consequences. Ritual failure must be acknowledged and engaged with to ensure that the individual's involved do not suffer negative consequences and the failure is not repeated. Transformed rituals may not be regarded as authentic and therefore may be considered invalid, with the wish for a follow-up ritual to acknowledge again under ritual conditions, which has been expressed by my own interlocutors (de Valck et al., 2021). In addition to the precedence that rituals can fail and COVID-19 negatively affected rituals provides a basis for my research with ritual failure in regards the orientation to HEIs.

3.4. Conclusion

Tinto's (1988) model proves that van Gennep's theory already applies to the transition to university. It also proves, as does my own research, that this transition is key in becoming and staying a university student. Tierney's (1992) critique as an anthropologist puts into consideration the socio-cultural contexts of the university and the students within as a point that a more nuanced application of van Gennep *Rites of Passage* than Tinto's will be required in a diverse university.

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology

4.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the concepts and theories which frame this study. This chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach that informs my exploration of students' experiences of entering university and related processes that shapes their identities. Research for this dissertation was conducted with students and staff at Rhodes University (RU), situated in Makhanda, in the Eastern Cape. The study was qualitative, with a combination of research methods to enhance data generation, leading to the emergence of pertinent themes from the data. These methods included an online questionnaire, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations.

4.2. Research Paradigm and Approach

At the heart of this research project is the desire to capture, record, and understand the experiences of the first-year students of 2020-2022. As such, a phenomenological paradigm approach was utilised with qualitative mixed methodologies. Phenomenology directly means studying human experiences, but that does not do it justice. Instead, phenomenological-focused anthropological research "can get at the richness of people's lives, concerns, and engagements in direct and incisive terms" (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011: 97).

Penderson (2020) argues that existentialism phenomenology lays the case for the research focus in using the intersubjective experiences of many to create an emic understanding of how global or general phenomena impacted the world and the local. The global experience in this case in the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on HE, and the local I wish to explore in the experience of first-year RU students. The methods further emphasise the need to capture the emic. Babbie et al. (2006: 270) describe qualitative research as the attempt to "study human

action from the perspective of the social themselves". For anthropologists, this refers to an emic, or insider, perspective to create, as Geertz ([1973] 2008) referred to as 'thick description', an expansion of knowledge rather than search for finite cultural answers. Babbie et al. (2006) argue that qualitative research aims to describe and understand the experiences of research participants in a particular setting as opposed to simply explaining human behaviour and experience, and is oriented toward the construction of meaning in everyday life. Through the depth of detail, qualitative methods enable the researcher to grasp subtle meanings and pull together otherwise divergent information (Babbie et al, 2006). Gusterson (2017: 435) argues that anthropologists have not been doing "enough homework" in the form of "rigorous, systematic studies of the institutions in which academic anthropologists spend so many of their waking hours". As such, this dissertation aims to place the anthropologist into HE through the intention of iterative multi-methodological research. The questionnaire was used first, followed by the interviews and then the focus groups, while participant observation occurred concurrently. By using multiple methods, the limitations of one method could be covered by another whilst creating thick layers of interconnected data, providing depth to the ethnography (Hamann et al., 2017; Dietz and Mateos Cortes, 2020).

4.3. Research Setting

RU, located in the Eastern Cape of SA, opened in 1904 in Grahamstown (renamed Makhanda in 2018). In its first year Rhodes University College had 50 registered students, all white and mostly male (Maylam, 2017). The date when RU first permitted female students to enrol is contested, with de Klerk et al. (2007) stating it was in the 1940s whilst Maylam (2016) argued that female students had been admitted since the beginning of the university and the first female residence, Oriel House, was built in 1915. Male and female students were segregated, with the College passing a rule in 1924 that there should be separate entrances into buildings for both

males and females (Maylam, 2016). The Rhodes Trust provided the funds to found the university; hence Cecil John Rhodes is the namesake of the university, and Rhodes University College sought to be a bastion of British Imperialism in the old Cape provinces (Maylam, 2017: 8-10). The roots of the institution were based on Rhodes' (the man's) beloved Oxford University, with "Oxford in the bush" being the nickname for Rhodes College and taking on an England Oxford ethos was "primarily for character-building and training leadership, and less the pursuit of learning" (Maylam, 2017: 10). The first student of colour applied for a Master's degree in 1933 and was rejected, in essence resulting in people of colour barred from attending RU (Greyling, 2007: 25). In 1946, the restriction was removed through the vote of the Senate, with the provision that RU would accept Black students for courses not offered at Fort Hare University³² (Greyling, 2007: 30-32). The first black student to attend Rhodes was in 1948, the only student of colour during his studies for his Honours degree, and by 1959, only five black students had been accepted at Rhodes (Greyling, 2007: 49).

By then, SA was under the apartheid regime which sought the segregation of races, through legislation and force, in all spheres of society. Maylam (2005: 20) notes that "Rhodes University, for the first 65 years of its existence, operated within, and conformed to, a social and political order based on racial discrimination". RU, like other White universities in SA, was complicit and obliging towards the legislation of the apartheid government, with a few exceptions to the norm being the handful of staff and students who spoke out and acted against the apartheid regime (Maylam, 2005: 20). There are no protest actions of note from the RU Student body against the apartheid government until 1959 when students, staff, and the

³² The sister campus for non-white students.

Administration made their grievance against the apartheid laws that would bring segregation to universities (Maylam, 2005:18).

This seemed to be a turning point for the institution, and the last 50 years at RU have seen a marked change in student activism. Maylam (2016: 32) argues that "as the old Oxford style was gradually eroded at Rhodes, so too was the deference to authority that had characterised the university for the first six decades". The first protest of note saw students occupying the senate rooms in 1969 to protest the non-appointment of liberal academic Basil Moore to the Divinity Department (Maylam, 2016). The year 1976 marked the first use of the quadrangles (quads) as meeting spaces for student activism, with one example being the "quad squat" where students built mock shacks³³ to bring attention to the aftermath of forced removals (Maylam, 2016: 38). Jaffer (2005:171) notes, from her years as a Coloured journalism student attending Rhodes with "special permission", the protest of the 50 - 100 students of colour against the push to segregate university accommodation in 1978. Mati (2005:203) mentions that during his time, he remembers that there were lecturers who were outspoken in their critique of the apartheid system and Bantu education during his attendance in the 1980s. The student newspaper Rhodeo (now Activate) became political and often addressed issues of sexism, rape, and the lack of safety that women students faced in the 1980s, and other notable issues which the Administration ignored, and were often censored for their work (de Klerk et al., 2007: 116). This trend of the Rhodes Administration not addressing issues is a common one with regards to issues of gendered violence on campus and the mistrust students have in the Administration to address problematic issues (de Klerk, et al., 2007: 119; Macleod, et al., 2018: 88). Most recently, protest action occurred in 2015 with the national #FeesMustFall protest and the

³³ Small, rudimentary buildings made with corrugated metal sheets and other foraged materials.

#RUReferencelist protest in 2016 which Macleod et al. (2018:90) argued was "symptomatic of the women students' everyday experience of rape culture and sexual violence". A 2014 student census by Maylam (2016: 341-342) reflected that most students at RU identified as African (50.43%) since 2010, and 59.49% of the student population was female in 2014. The shift in demographics within the institution is critical to note as it is a social justice pursuit that equal access to education is a tool to combat the socioeconomic discrimination of apartheid and gender structures which linger today. Furthermore, socioeconomic factors which affect students before attending university affect their ability to cope at RU, which means that black students, who are more likely to come from a low socio-economic class, are less likely to obtain a Bachelor's degree within five years than white students, who come from a middle or upper-class background (Rhodes University, 2019). Rhodes holds a prevailing notion that it is a liberal university in the twenty-first century that is inclusive for all; however, students' lived experiences challenge this perception. Munyuki (2015: 129-130) argues that the student culture at Rhodes is predominately heteronormative and that students who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community and live in the in-residence system did not feel welcome in the university space. As such, while the university is conscious and making the means to address its institutional culture, the reality of transformation of the university space has been slow.

4.3.1. Student life at RU

In 2020, there had been over 8200 students enrolled at RU and approximately 70% were undergraduate and 30% were post-graduate students, half of whom live in the campus residence (res) system (Mabizela, 2021). There are 44³⁴ residences compiled into 14 dining halls, and

³⁴ As of the end of 2022. There was a new residence being built in 2022, but it was not in use at the time of writing of this thesis. This number includes two postgraduate residences.

most first-years will spend at least a year living in single rooms³⁵, with shared bathrooms and access to three meals a day, wi-fi, and a laundry room (Rhodes University, 2021c). The res support structure includes a warden, sub-wardens ('subbies') who are students of the res who assist the warden, and a student-elected house committee (House Com). Dining halls bring together students from various residences, allowing them to make friends outside of their res'. Dining halls also play host to special occasions, such as the Welcome Dinner (in semester one), the Leaver's Dinner (in semester two). Students who live off-campus (digs), referred to as Oppidan students (Oppies), have the added responsibilities of cooking³⁶ and cleaning for themselves. They have more freedom of movement than res students.

The first-year journey begins during registration weekend, ten days before the academic term begins. Students are administratively registered on Friday and Saturday. Students are issued with a student and a goodie bag, which includes the Division of Student Affairs Academic and Social Support Guide for new students and other pamphlets about RU. Students are then be taken to their accommodation (if they live on campus). Res students are greeted at the door of their residence by House Com members and will meet their warden, collect their room key, have their biometric information recorded (to access the residence and Dining Hall (DH) buildings), and obtain a copy of the DH rule book, and settle into their room. On Sunday, there is a talk at the 1820 Settler's Monument³⁷ building for parents by the Vice-Chancellor, a parent tour of the campus, followed by a parent lunch in their child's dining hall. At this point, the parents' involvement is complete, which results in tearful departures. On Sunday, res students

³⁵ Most rooms are, but in the case of shared accommodation, there is a discount of twenty-five per cent on the residence fee.

³⁶ Oppies have the option of having meals in a dining hall.

³⁷ Generally referred to as the Monument.

are taken on a campus tour by their House Com and begin to learn their 'greetings' for meet and greets³⁸ and work on their routine for the Student Representative Council (SRC) RUCreative competition³⁹ (previously known as RUJamming). Every evening, until the end of O-Week, the House Com hosts reflective meetings for students to discuss their experiences and obtain advice about student life.

O-Week officially begins at the Monument, where students are welcomed to the university by the Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, the DSA Director, Deans, and the presiding SRC President in a compulsory opening session. The talks by the Faculty Deans, focusing on the structure of degrees and subject choices, are held on Monday. Monday to Thursday, academic orientation occurs until 4pm, followed by a psychosocial workshop, and supper. Academic orientation includes academic presentations on the courses offered at Rhodes, introductory workshops on time management, plagiarism, student skills, library workshops (at the Main Library) and computer literacy workshops (those who require it). Psychosocial workshops include topics such as sexual consent, basic safety, fire safety and performances by the Drama Department students on student life. In the evenings, the SRC competition will run over three days. On Friday curriculum approval (this is when student make their course choices), begins and will continue on Saturday. Friday evening is when the Sports and Society Extravaganza takes place to introduce students to the extracurricular activities on offer. Outside of campus, those so

³⁸ Often held in the early morning as to not clash with the busy O week schedule, these are opportunities for students to meet with students outside of their res. A small routine of song and appropriate action is performed by both residences before mingling.

³⁹ Residence or a hall will create a routine drawing on the talents of the first years and can included elements of dance, song, rap, poetry, musical instruments, and visual art like posters. A residence will first compete with other residences or halls in their geographical areas of campus (upper or lower campus), with the top entries competing on the last night for a chance of being placed in the top three and earning prizes. In my first year, my residence came second and won a computer for the residence, and first place won a flat screen television.

inclined can enjoy walks and hikes around the Makhanda area. One of the more notable activities of Rhodents is the nightlife of town, as well as the concern of the excessive drinking culture of the students (Young and de Klerk, 2012).

Once lectures begin, students may begin their day as early as 7:45am (dawn) and end as late as 6:00pm classes (dinner is served until 6:30pm). Through their time at Rhodes University, students will become familiar with various venues across both campuses⁴⁰, primarily due to where their academic activities take them and their interests in extracurricular activities and events. As a Rhodes student since 2017, I am intimately familiar with the university, the campus grounds, culture and community. With this familiarity in mind, witnessing first-hand the drastic changes at RU due to COVID-19 piqued my interest in doing this research project to understand and capture first-year RU students' experiences. Context is also important, and being an embedded researcher allowed me to have a good understanding of the social world of my research participants.

4.4. Sampling approach and participants

Non-probability sampling requires specific inclusion criteria which means that all individuals in a population do not have an equal chance of being selected for participation (Babbie et al, 2006). As such, purposive sampling, which focuses on specific traits and is selective, was used to focus on students who began their undergraduate degree in the years 2020, 2021, and 2022. At RU, it is possible to identify when students register through their student number. An example of a Rhodes student number is G21S2704. The G reflects the Grahamstown campus, while the two numbers after the G indicate the year the student registered at Rhodes. As such,

⁴⁰ Main campus and St Peter's camps. See appendix B Campus Map

my sample population included G20, G21, and G22 undergraduate students, identified through their student numbers and self-reported.

The reason for choosing these cohorts was to allow for a comparison to be made to investigate the changes brought on by the pandemic, namely, the effects and differences in the experience of students. The G20s had a 'normal' start to their undergraduate studies. They were physically on campus and experienced orientation programmes in the traditional face-to-face format. In addition, they had experienced most of the first teaching term face-to-face before the closure of the university at the end of March 2020. From there, the G20s had to shift to online distance learning.

In contrast, the G21s' registration, orientation, curriculum approval and course activities were experienced entirely online, although they were allowed on campus for residence living and access to resources such as the library and computer labs (with firm social distancing restrictions in place). The G22s have experienced a hyper-flex, (hybrid) learning of both online and face-to-face learning interactions as well as most facilities having become available for students to use and the full return of students to campus for the first semester. In the second semester, face-to-face academic activities had returned to total capacity as it was before the pandemic. The target sample was between 10 to 20 for each cohort. However, the total number of participants recruited for the study was 15, broken down as 8 G20s, 3 G21s, and 4 G22s. The majority were recruited through the questionnaire, posted on social media platforms, and through the RU undergraduate student email list. Snowball sampling was used for three of the G22 participants, who were recruited by the other G22 participant.

4.4.1. Student Participants

This section introduces my research participants and provides some context around who they are. A general overview of questionnaire respondents will be presented, followed by an introduction to research participants from the qualitative data collection. All of my participants have assigned pseudonyms, and questionnaire respondents are presented according to the numbering in the response list, e.g. R26. Some participants participated in a combination of methods, which will be noted accordingly.

4.4.1.1. Questionnaire

Fifty-nine students completed the questionnaire. Twenty of them were G20s (37.3%), 12 were G21s (20.3%), and 25 were G22s (42.4%). The ages of the participants vary from 17 of age to 69. The mean age of participants was 20.9 years of age⁴¹. Respondents identified their gender as; 10 identify as male (16.9%), 45 as female (76.3%), 1 as gender non-conforming (1.7%), one as non-binary (1.7%), one as transgendered (1.7%), and one participant did not answer (1.7%).

The racial identification of participants is as follows: 44 participants identify as black/African (74.6%), 8 as white (13.6%), 3 as coloured (5.1%), 2 as mixed race (3.4%). 38 respondents (64.4%) lived in res, 20 respondents (33.9%) are Oppies, and 1 lived at home. The faculties are represented as follows: 38 (64.4%) Humanities, 8 (13.6%) Science, 5 (8.5%) Commerce, 4 (6.8%) Law, 3 (5.1%) Pharmacy, and 1 (1.7%) Education.

⁴¹ One response was omitted from the table of the ages as well as the calculation of the mean due to a typo on one participant's behalf, putting them at 189 years old.

Table 1: Ages of the participants the frequency of responses.

Age in Years	Number of Participants
17	1
18	10
19	5
20	25
21	10
22	4
23	1
29	1
69	1

4.4.1.2. Interview and Focus Groups Participant Information

This study had 21 participants, fourteen of whom were students, and 6 who were staff.

4.4.2. G20 Participant Information

My study included seven G20 participants, who all belonged to the Humanities Faculty, and were in their third academic year of study.

Blue is a 21-year-old, gender non-conforming black person from Johannesburg. Blue is currently enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Drama and General Psychology. They have two older siblings who have attended tertiary education, and Blue is a first-generation student alongside them. Blue decided to come to Rhodes University after attending the 2018 National Arts Festival where they "*fell in love with the Drama department*". They find it ironic that since coming to Rhodes, due to the pandemic, they have not been able to participate in performances. They are currently living in a residence on campus. They participated in the research via the questionnaire and an interview.

Sunflower is a 21-year-old black female from Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth). Sunflower is completing her three-year Bachelor of Social Science degree in General Psychology and

Political Science and International Relations. Having lived in a hostel⁴² during high school, Sunflower took to res life easily. 2022 marked the first full year that Sunflower lived in the residence system. Rhodes University was her first choice of university since she was in Grade 10, stating that "*Rhodes University is a very prestigious university that will kind of like catapult me further into, you know, the world of everything, I guess*" and "*it's an internationally well-known brand*", noting that it was from her parents she had learnt this from. She participated in my research through the questionnaire and an interview.

Tshepo is a 23-year-old, black female from Gauteng. She is completing a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and General Psychology. She is an Oppidan student currently, but during her first-year in 2020 lived on campus. She participated in the research through the questionnaire and the focus group.

Minentle is a 20-old black female from Mthatha. She is completing her Bachelor of Music degree. She is an Oppidan but lived in res during her first year at Rhodes. She completed her secondary education at a school in Makhanda that had close ties to the Rhodes University Music Department, which inspired her to enrol here to continue to study music. Due to the pandemic, and the difficulty in sourcing a keyboard to continue with studies of musical practice in piano, she changed to study musical theory and history. She participated in the questionnaire and focus group.

Tendai is a nineteen-year-old black female from Limpopo. She is completing her Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Political Science, International Relations, and Anthropology. Tendai lived in res, and in 2022, she was a House Com member and the head student at her res. Before coming

⁴² Accommodation at a secondary school for pupils.

to RU her ideas were shaped by her sister, who went to Nelson Mandela University (NMU), who told her that "*Rhodes is in a very shady place in the jungle*". She participated in the focus group and the questionnaire.

Sibanye is a 21-year-old black female from Rustenburg. She is completing her Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Anthropology and General Psychology. Although she is from Rustenburg (North West Province), she also spent time in Port Alfred (Eastern Cape) with her family, which influenced her decision to attend RU. Sibanye lived in res and was a sub-warden for res in 2022. She participated in the focus group.

Buhle is a 19-year-old black female from Mthatha. She is completing a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Political Science and International Relations, and Legal Theory. She is currently an Oppidan student. She participated in the focus group and the questionnaire.

4.4.3. G21 Participant Information

Three G21 participants were involved in this study. Two participants belonged to the Humanities Faculty and one to the Science Faculty and were in their second year of study.

Don Quixote is an 18-year-old black female from Pretoria. She is studying towards a Bachelor of Science degree. Don has lived in the same small residence since she was in her first year. Due to the disruptive nature of the pandemic, Don thought, "*I was not going to go to university because you didn't know if it was gonna be if you're gonna die or something*". She applied and was accepted to the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) and the University of Johannesburg (UJ), but decided she wanted a change of scenery and, on the advice of a friend that the crime rate was lower in Makhanda than in Johannesburg, she chose to come to Rhodes University. Don participated in the questionnaire and interview.

Sihle is a 20-year-old black female from Langa in Cape Town. She matriculated in 2020, and the pandemic impacted where she finds herself today as a second-year Bachelor of Arts student at RU. Sihle participated in a postgraduate student's research, which spurred her decision to attend RU. Although she is based in the Humanities Faculty, Sihle's subjects include Environmental Science and Geography. Sihle describes her academic self as being "*split between humanities and science*". Sihle participated in the research by being interviewed.

Nande is a 20-year-old black female from Johannesburg. She is in the second year of her Bachelor of Social Science degree. Nande did not initially want to come to RU, it was her second choice of university. Nande was a late registration student at RU and missed O-Week. Nande participated in the research through the interview.

4.4.4. G22 Participant Information

In total, there were four G22 participants in their first year of study at RU, three based in Commerce and one in Humanities. All four were participants in a focus group.

Jean is a 19-year-old, coloured male from Makhanda. He is currently enrolled in the Extended Studies programme, studying towards a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting degree. Jean is originally from Makhanda and lives with his family. Jean coming to RU was influenced by three factors:

- "*My parents found out that I smoke [marijuana]...so basically I was the perfect child and then everything just went down bad*". As a result, his parents made him come here instead of University of Cape Town (UCT) to keep an eye on him.
- His sister also studied at RU.
- Jean received a partial scholarship as a prize for a competition he entered in high school.

Jean played an important role in recruiting the other G22 participants for a focus group.

Aphiwe is a 22-year-old black female from KwaZulu-Natal. When the pandemic began, she was in her second year of a business degree at a private technical and vocational education and training institution and subsequently decided to take a gap year⁴³. As a result of this, Aphiwe chose to register for a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music in 2022. She admitted that adjusting to university was difficult, but her motivation to persevere is her brother and sister, who did not complete their own degrees. Aphiwe is an Oppidan student.

Fundiswa is a 19-year-old black female from Durban. Fundiswa is registered for an interfaculty Bachelor of Commerce degree, taking subjects from both the Commerce and Science Faculties. She is an Oppidan student. She chose to attend Rhodes because she wanted to move away from the busy city life which she felt would distract her from her studies, *"so I knew for a fact that I did not want to go to Joburg because the person I am, big time, was easily influenced by my surroundings."*

Dzunani is a 19-year-old black male from Acronhoek, Mpumalanga. He is studying toward a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting degree and is an Oppidan. He was generally positive about coming to Rhodes: *"I like two different things. The freedom is the major thing which makes everything so different, but then the friends that I've made, and my life, it's yeah, it's really good. Academics wise, at school is never good to anyone. But I feel like Rhodes does more than most universities do, in terms of, you know, pushing me to tears and everything else."*

⁴³ A period of time, normally a year, to take a break from academics and to gain life experience or to make money.

4.4.5. Staff participants

In addition to the students, staff members were also of interest to this study. Specifically, staff members were not directly involved in academic activity, but rather the extracurricular student life, which was not featured in the literature. As such, in this dissertation, only staff who were directly involved in facilitating the induction and introduction of first-year students to university life in a hands-on approach. The initial target sample was 10 to 20 staff; however, the final number was seven. These staff members included five residence and hall wardens of RU; they oversee the operation of the residences and halls they are appointed to, as well as the well-being of the students who live in their residences. The residence wardens were an important point of referral because wardens spend much time in contact with students living in their residences and are a point of assistance for their students. Residence and Hall Warden details are available on the university staff directory; I emailed each one inviting them to participate in my study. The remaining two staff members knew me prior to starting this research project and volunteered themselves to help. As they are not key informants, and to keep this thesis within word count and a focus on students, information from their interviews will be added to supplement the data from key informants where necessary. Further publications will explore the student-facing staff COVID-19 experience.

4.5. Data Generation

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, it was expected that special consideration was needed on how the data would be generated, especially concerning protecting the participants and the researcher. Although strenuous, modifying the research processes to ensure safety was important to consider. Conducting research safely during the pandemic also required rethinking feasibility and reconsidering alternatives to traditional methods of data generation. All data

collection methods, except the online self-administered questionnaire, had a face-to-face and online plan to implement.

I began generating the data at the beginning of February 2022, during Alert Level 1, which meant that face-to-face interactions were allowed with adherence to social distancing and mask-wearing protocols. My participants decided whether they would be interviewed in person or online. Throughout the pandemic, I became proficient in the technology required to host virtual meetings, and Google Meets was the preferred platform. As noted, the following methods used for data collection: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Data collection was completed in September 2023.

4.5.1. Questionnaire

The first method of generating data for the study was disseminating an online questionnaire. Lietz (2010) defines a questionnaire as encoded questions organised in a logical flow and answered in a logical sequence to obtain information about the phenomenon the researcher is trying to gain insight into. For this project an online self-administered (Google Forms) questionnaire was chosen for the convenience to the researcher, the anonymity it assured participants, and ease of access as participants could complete the questionnaire in their own time and anywhere (Bernard, 2006; Cleave, 2023).

The questionnaire was utilised to seek clarity on the expectations held by first-year students for O-Week and their first year, how they formed these expectations, and whether the pandemic had impacted their expectations or experience. The questionnaire further explored O-Week activities and first semester activities (both academic and social) held by the university (see Appendix C). All questions had a "write in" option, which when selecting "other" participants could elaborate on their own experience. This provided open-ended question sections for

respondents to elaborate or provide an answer that was not considered previously in the design and would be accommodated in the interviews (Bhat, 2023).

Drawbacks to questionnaires lie in how participants interpret questions, which may skew the data, and the difficulty in conveying emotions within close-ended questions (Cleave, 2023). The drawback faced in my research was the interpretation of the questions whereby some participants interpreted the question to refer to not only their first year but also information from their following academic years. A link to the questionnaire was distributed online via RU-related Facebook groups⁴⁴ and the RU Undergraduate mailing list. The target was 100 responses, but only 59 responses were received. While less than what I wanted, the questionnaire was not the main point of data collection but rather was used to gather broader insights held among the different years and as a means to recruit students to further participate in the study in the interviews and semi-structured interviews.

4.5.2. Semi-structured Interviews

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students and seven staff members. In-depth semi-structured interviews are a fundamental and useful data collection method to supplement participant observation (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Interviews are commonly used to gain insight into *how* people navigate their lives and to understand their narrative experience (Fontana and Frey, 2005). They were used in this research project for this purpose - the emic perspective. Interviews are useful in once-off encounters whereby you are uncertain if you will be able to meet the participant again (Bernard, 2006: 212). Considering the finite time and busy

⁴⁴ UCKAR (University Currently Known as Rhodes), the RU SRC page, and the Rhodes First Years 2022 pages.

lives of students and university staff members, it was decided that this would be an efficient way to gather data.

Semi-structured interviews were used as a general interview schedule for consistency across interviews, but also the flexibility that allowed for unscripted questions for follow-up for clarity or tangents (Bernard, 2006: 212). As this study aimed to understand first-year students' experiences during COVID-19, semi-structured interviews were considered the best fit as they would allow participants to expand on their narratives.

Two interview schedules were drawn up: one for students⁴⁵ and one for staff members⁴⁶ at RU. The interview schedule for my student participants focused on their experiences of their first year, or semester if they were G22s, at RU and to explore if and how the pandemic affected their experience. The aim was to go more in-depth with the answers than in the questionnaire to gather their experience and anecdotes. The schedule enquired about the expectations students had for their first year of study at university and their lived experiences at university. Students were also asked to reflect on what they understood the term 'student' to mean and how their university experience during the pandemic affected how they saw themselves as students. The focus of the interview schedule for staff members was to explore their role at RU and interactions with first-year students broadly during the pandemic to supplement data gleaned from key participants. The interview schedule was also used to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected this role. The interview also provided the opportunity to see how changes developed in response to the pandemic by both the Government and RU. All interviews were

⁴⁵ Please see Appendix D

⁴⁶ Please see Appendix E

audio recorded with permission from participants, with the audio transcribed using the software Otter.ai, and I double-checked the transcription against the audio and my handwritten notes for accuracy.

4.5.3. Focus Groups

Focus group discussions are when a group of individuals gather to discuss a particular topic (Bernard, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2013). In anthropological studies, the benefit of using focus groups is that they encourage conversation and foster a more open flow of discussion than one-on-one interviews, which may result in richer data (Gundumogula, 2020: 301). The richer data can include points of interest and follow-up questions that the researcher did not consider in the research design (Gundumogula, 2020: 301). Focus groups are useful in collecting data on how people feel about or their experience of a phenomenon, which was important for this project. The benefit of the focus group was that it encouraged each person to speak about their experience, discuss shared experiences and feelings about a particular matter, and helped participants to think about phenomena they may not have when doing the one-on-one interview. Three focus groups were conducted, with students as the main participants. The first group was made up of 4 G20 students, and the second group featured 4 G22 students. The focus groups were held in one of the seminar rooms in the Anthropology Department. At the time these focus groups were running, there were no COVID-19 measures. These two focus groups gave permission to be audio-recorded, and the audio was transcribed through software. The third focus group, comprised of 2 G20s participated in four, one-hour sessions over four weeks, had a visual focus with these sessions having the story circles to discuss the prompt "My experience of becoming a student in the COVID-19 pandemic" with the idea each participant would make a short 2-5 minute video in response to the prompt and discussions. In addition to collecting

the video for data collection, field notes during and after the sessions recorded where also collected.

4.5.4. Participant Observation

One of the hallmarks of anthropological research is the methodology of participant observation. As an "experience-orientated research" method, the researcher intends to immerse themselves into the everyday life of their participants, preferably over a lengthy period (Johnson, 2005: 206). Bernard (2006: 360 - 370) lists some of the skills required for participant observation: being able to learn the language; building awareness of small details; building memory to remember these details to record in fieldnotes; maintaining naiveté to be "someone who genuinely wants to learn a new culture"; build on writing skills; work on the art of hanging out and building rapport to develop trust between the researcher and the participants for ordinary conversations to take place; and gaining objectivity.

I received my ethical clearance in October 2021 and therefore began my observation during O-Week 2022. During O-Week I observed campus life from the library, library quad, and various lawns around campus⁴⁷. My job at the library allowed me to observe G22s first-years' experience of the O-Week programme. My other job within the department as a tutor was spent getting to know students, which results in an exchange of experiences between tutor and first-year students. As a senior tutor, I also sat in on lectures throughout 2022. In my interactions with participants outside of interviews and focus groups, we did 'hang out' and discussed their concerns, often centring on their enrolment as a student. I recorded field notes and discussed my observations with my supervisor. My various positions in the university enabled me to gain

⁴⁷ Bicycle, Drostdy and Barratt

insight into students' thoughts and experiences that would become apparent in the interview process.

4.6. Data Analysis

All raw data from the site, including the questionnaire, was collected and transcribed into written text for manual coding. The exception was the auto-generated graphs Google provides from the questionnaire responses. A grounded theory approach to coding was utilised. Grounded theory coding begins with the analysis process of understanding your data in the process of collecting it and once you have left the field (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). It is this constant comparison aspect of grounded theory, of analysing your data while collecting it, that categories, concepts and themes emerge from the data (Clandinin, 2005). In my research process, my "aha" moments were noted down in my research journal and discussed with my supervisor during my fieldwork. Once data collection was completed, I then open coded the data with an open mind in search of data that (flexibly) addresses the question of 'what would help me answer my research question?' (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). I further my focus with the four sub-questions, using different coloured highlighters and key to make note of which data would best suit answering which sub-question. From there, focused coding went through the open codes to find themes, which I noted down in pen in memos (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014).

4.7. Ethics

As mentioned earlier, ethical clearance for this study was issued in October 2021 [2021-5075-6313] (see Appendix F). Anthropology Southern Africa (ASnA) notes that as anthropologists our concern should be on the well-being of our participants and ensuring that the research process never causes them harm or distress nor places them in a vulnerable position and should

this occur, the research must cease at once (ASnA, 2004). Ethics considers responsibility to various stakeholders, the discipline, and oneself as a researcher. What follows is a brief discussion on my various ethical responsibilities as a researcher.

4.7.1. Reflexivity: reflecting on my positionality and practice

"Higher education researchers are immersed researchers – all of us are products of higher education and many of us currently research within its institutions" (Scutt and Hobson, 2013: 18).

My positionality as an embedded researcher is important to engage with, considering it was my position as a RU student which inspired me to undertake this research project. Rowley (2014:19) notes that embedded researchers are in a mutually beneficial relationship with their participants – the researcher is provided greater access for data collection and their participants often receive academic expertise and critical insight into academic operations. The concept of embedding oneself into the community and culture is not a foreign concept within the field of Anthropology but rather the foundation of the discipline. An embedded researcher has access into your participants' community, you have access to the field from the first day as you are already part of your field site and are already involved in the activities and therefore have increased opportunity to collect rich data (Lewis and Russell, 2011: 8; Rowley, 2014: 19 – 21). This embedded positionality means that it is imperative to keep critical reflection on what knowledge is collected and created and the role the embedded researcher plays in knowledge creation (Braun and Clark, 2013).

Okley (1996: 24) referred to the "double knowledge" that comes from anthropologists that emerged in research within their own context and the dual position of simultaneously holding an emic and etic perspective. Okley (1996: 5) called for anthropologists to become aware of

the immense cultural differences within their own cultural spaces and argued that it was essential to make the "exotic familiar and the familiar strange". She noted that through participant observation and learning the culture and ways of being of those under study, while simultaneously being an anthropologist, that one is a product of a specific environment, and this may result in one having a double vision of the world (Okley, 1996). Okley (1996: 25) noted that Malinowski had experience of this double vision or knowledge because he could "see the white administrators' view of the Trobriand landscape while he was attempting to understand the Islanders' experience of it". A separation of this double knowledge is hard to do especially within your home context as the anthropologist cannot split their identities nor flee the field once done with data collection (Okley, 1996).

This dual role has the benefit of emic knowledge in the creation of the research project, unique access to participants and phenomena of interest and the familiarity helps limit the risk of misinterpretation local phenomenon (Rowley, 2014: 22). It also places the researcher between their stakeholders which can affect the trustworthiness of the researcher in the eyes of the participants (Lewis and Russell, 2011: 15; Rowley, 2014: 22). The familiarity with the site was positive as I was able to design a research project that was actionable as I knew the site and the participants. The researcher is in a state of flux regarding their identity and relationship to the field, constantly moving between roles. I could relate to this and had to be cognisant of this during the process. There were points where I had to consciously reiterate to myself which role I was fulfilling in a given time, and using my phone as a scheduling calendar was a useful reminder to meet the responsibilities and requirements of the various roles I held with the integrity they deserved.

As much as I considered myself an embedded researcher in this project, there was an aspect of being an outsider. This was due to my experience of having a 'normal' face-to-face induction

and instruction for my undergraduate degree. Additionally, being a postgraduate student is very different to undergraduate experiences and common ground is difficult to be found based on a shared student identity from the same higher education institution (HEI).

The state of fluctuating between roles was something that I noted in my approach to the field. By the time I had begun data collection in 2022, I already had different roles within the university, and I had to consider this for how I would interact with students. It also provided me, in some cases, greater insight into the daily lives of undergraduate students and the processes that occur within the academic space in educating undergraduate students that I had never considered when writing my proposal. For example, as a graduate assistant who assisted with the coordination of Anthropology 1, I was made aware of the administrative process that occurred on departmental and faculty levels, which were invisible to students but did impact their experience. I also had to consider that I did not abuse this insight in my responsibility not only to my participants but also to the general student population, who were unaware that a researcher was in their midst. As a tutor, when meeting with a new group of students in my introduction to them, I revealed my research made it clear that the tutorial period was their time and not for my research. I added that if they were interested in hearing about my research, they could talk to me about it in both a capacity of interest to participate or curiosity about postgraduate research. In my position in the department, I did not recruit participants; rather, I relied on the methods mentioned earlier. I was cognisant of the power dynamics that were in play with me being a tutor, in a place of authority over my students. Therefore, my positionality was something which I tried to be always aware of and to remain objective, I used my fieldwork journal to make notes on my feelings concerning my research and my research participants and critically reflect on my actions and engagements with people throughout the research process.

4.7.2. Ethics of Using Online Platforms in Research

The use of online platforms and the ethics around how researchers engage on these platforms is vital to consider. The nature of the internet and how individuals navigate, take their place, and create their identity in the 'online world' (through social media platforms and online communities) needs researchers' sensitive and respectful approach (Kelley, 2016). Some of the ethical concerns that should be taken into consideration is the negotiation of what makes up the private and public space, who negotiates this, as well as the researcher becoming a 'lurker'⁴⁸ and conducting covert research, and how this impacts on their participant's privacy, representation, and ownership (Roberts, 2005; Kelley, 2016; Góralaska, 2020; Winter and Lavis, 2020). Kelley (2016) calls for 'goodwill' research practice to be used, so that researchers observe the norms of the online communities to learn how to engage in acceptable behaviours. Roberts (2005: 320) adds that the presence and intention of a researcher should be made aware to the participants. For my research, the Facebook groups utilised were groups that I had been a member of since my first year at RU. In these spaces it is common for calls for students to participate in research projects to be posted on there. Therefore, I was familiar with the etiquette of conducting oneself in advertising my study for participation. My online posts included a link to a Google Docs folder which held the gatekeeper permission letters I received from the Registrar's Office and the Director of Human Resources to conduct my research at RU.

4.7.3. Ethical Responsibility to Participants in Research

As anthropologists, our primary concern lies with our participants before, during and after research (ASNA, 2004). All harm participants may face by participating must be anticipated

⁴⁸ Someone who has membership on platform or social media group but does not participate or contribute to the group.

and mitigated to the best of the researcher's ability. With COVID-19 being both a physical and psychological danger to participants, it was important to ensure that national and university guidelines were followed during the research process. Online options were available for interview participation, and COVID-19 regulations of wearing a mask and keeping at least a metre and a half space apart as set by the government and university were followed when in place. When the focus groups were held, these restrictions were repealed, however, my participants and I minimised contact and used sanitisers to clean shared spaces. While no triggering incidents occurred during the data collection, I ensured that my participants had the contact details of the RU Counselling Centre.

My informed consent documents for the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews noted that participation in the study would be anonymous and no identifying information would be produced in my notes (which would be coded) nor in the thesis. For the interviews and focus groups, I emailed the informed consent document to my participants to read through, ask questions, sign, and return the document to me prior to the session. This gave my participants ample time to carefully read the document and raise questions they believed pertinent before the interview or focus group. As an added layer of protection, I read the document to my participants before beginning the interview to ensure that they were aware of their rights and my responsibilities. I scanned the informed consent document and emailed my participants a copy and retained a digital copy for my records. Additionally, I asked permission to record the conversation with a voice recorder app on my personal cell phone. I ensured that participants were aware that I would also be handwriting notes and that as it was a semi-structured interview, I would also be asking questions to address additional points of interest and to also follow up on tangents. The audio files were kept on my personal phone and transferred to my personal laptop for transcription. These devices are only used by me and are under password protection. The transcripts were kept in a form on the RU Google server. Similarly, access to

the answered questionnaires on the Google form was only allowed to my supervisors and me. Physical printed copies made for coding are kept in a personal safe, which only I can access.

4.8. Limitations

There are two limitations to this research. Firstly, the sample's number of participants does not accurately represent the RU population. Fifty-nine students is not large enough of a sample to be representative of the RU student body. Gaining access to the student body to find active participants was easy enough, however, finding students willing to take the time to complete the questionnaire and/or be interviewed proved difficult. I sent out notifications for my questionnaire numerous times on the various platforms, however, the response was low. Secondly, participants for the interviews and focus groups are predominantly black female G20s from the Humanities Faculty. The G21s, originally my key target cohort, was underrepresented due to difficulty accessing and recruiting them. Additional efforts, including contacting the G21s specifically over email lists and attempting to recruit at lectures with lecturer's permission, had little result. The Humanities Faculty is over-represented and there was no representation of the Education, Law or Pharmacy Faculties in the interview and focus group data collection. While still a lower turnout than expected, I do not consider my number of participants a severe limitation, detrimental to the validity of the findings. This is due to saturation being found in the data collected across the different methods.

4.9. Conclusion

The sampling techniques and data collection methods used in this study enabled the collection of a rich data set, which I found to be well-rounded and well-informed. The data collected enabled me to engage with the study's aims and objectives and discover the answer to my research question.

Chapter 5: *Rites of Passage* – Student Interrupted!

5.1. Introduction

This chapter examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected first-year students' transition into the identity of university students. The central research question of this study was: What has been the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on RU's orientation rituals for incoming first-year students, and how has the students' integration into the university community been affected?

The previous chapter introduced the site and participants as well as explained which and how methods were used. This chapter (and the next) weaves together the data generated in answering the question. The theory underpinning this chapter is van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, which will be discussed towards the end of the chapter. Before that, his three stages will mark out the three sections of the chapter. Separation, focusing on my participants' journey towards higher education (HE) and how they built the idea of their first-year. Transition covers the experience of O-Week, as well as the FYE of each cohort. The focus here is how COVID-19 shaped their environment and how my participants experienced this COVID-19-mediated education in their first-year, as well as the G20 and G21 2022 experience of non-COVID-19 education. The incorporation stage centres in this chapter surrounding student identity, of understanding how COVID-19 disrupted the student identity process.

5.2. Separation: The journey to university

For all participants, separation begins with their matriculation from secondary education. The separation stage, the period of anticipating the life-altering ritual, is the preparation for this change through helping the initiate (for this study, the high school learner) to separate from their original status (Forth, 2018). In this section, I argue that the end of the phase of separation

is marked by saying goodbye to family and friends, and the student unpacking their belongings in their new place of residence; whether this is in digs or on-campus res. In doing so, the student separates from their old life more completely, having moved into a new space, and begins the transition into a new life and new identity, which they are now learning about in this transitional space they find themselves in.

All my participants indicated that before attending university, they had formed an idea of what going to university would look like from various sources, such as teachers, family, and social and popular media. They suggested that once they had completed and passed their matric examinations, their identities as school pupils no longer apply. Instead, they had begun to prepare for life beyond high school, which included researching what their lives might be like if they attended university. The responses demonstrated these preparations on what influenced their expectations, as illustrated in Table 2 below. The questionnaire responses suggested that family and friends were most influential in forming their expectations. The second most considerable influence was the media they consumed, followed by the influence of the advice from teachers and what they saw on social media.

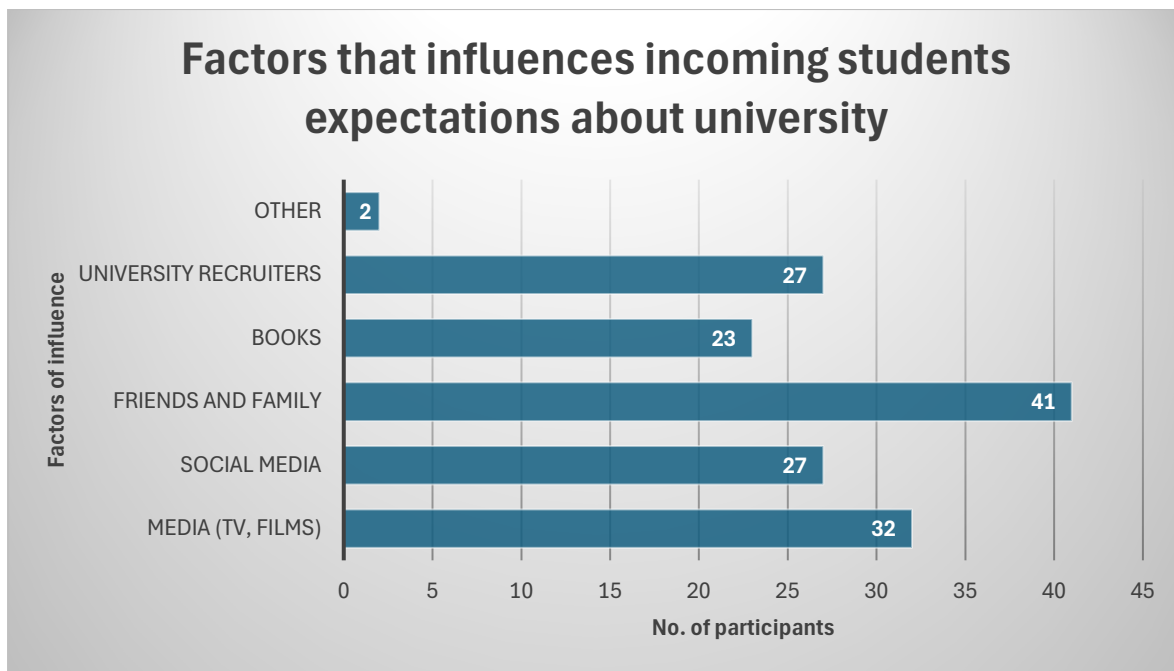


Table 2: What influenced student expectations of university

The questionnaire findings were further supported by data from students interviews and focus groups. For example, Don’s teacher chided a fellow pupil that they would have to be responsible for themselves because they would no longer be under the tutelage and care of teachers but by lecturers who expected their students to be responsible. My participants reported that their understanding of university life as primarily a ‘party culture’ was informed mainly by American media like *Grown-ish* and *American Pie*. For those who had vested interests in becoming a Rhodent, their focus was on RU, and alumni would have informed them; for example, Sunflower’s family friend’s warning of the party culture and Buhle’s sister’s tales of freedom and student events like the Great Field party. Lerato, who was intrigued about RU0 YouTube vlogs⁴⁹ created by Rhodents on the nightlife, of cheap and readily

⁴⁹ A combination of the words video and blog, a vlog is a video narration on a topic, generally on everyday life through an individual’s perspective.

available alcohol, and said that part of the allure of RU was that “[i]n Grahamstown, you come up here, and yeah you get shots⁵⁰”.

Once acceptance offers arrive and the initiate chooses a university, they begin to prepare for their lives for the next three to four years. Some, like Nande, Sihle and Jean, had to shift their expectations of their future, with some disappointment lingering. Nande and Sihle were late registrations for RU after not being admitted to their first-choice university. Both G21s missed their O-Week. Jean’s initial plan to attend university away from his family was dashed based on being caught smoking marijuana by his parents during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Physical preparation includes procuring funding (such as Jean’s scholarship that cemented his fate for RU), and documents; a good proportion of this preparation is mental preparation for the future university student. In separating from their high school identity, the initiate leaves behind behaviours and a routine they have held for the last five years to prepare to learn what being a university student entails.

While most first-time students are initially accompanied by their parental figures to the university, they leave extended family members, long-time friends, and their communities behind. Most of my participants did not discuss how they felt during this stage, nor if COVID-19 changed how the initial leaving home to go to university. Even during the height of pandemic in January-March 2021, RU still allowed first-years to start their year on campus. Sihle said that her mother could not come with her, and a relative in Gqeberha picked her up from the airport and drove her to RU. This might be the first time in the future university student’s life that they will be away from their home and their communities for an extended period, and their life as they know it will inevitably change. When they return from vacation,

⁵⁰ A small measure of straight spirit normally drunk in one gulp.

the student will not be who they were when they left. My participants knew that they would be undergoing a difficult phase in adjusting to the learner to the student.

5.3. Transition: Betwixt and Between – Becoming a student

Becoming a student is a process that extends into the first semester, if not beyond, as students learn what it is to be a student independently (Tinto, 1988: 446). During one's first year, learning what it means to be a student comes through immersive practice, 'trial by fire,' of going from concept to experience. Like a prophecy, Don's teacher's claim of self-accountability can be seen in the response from two G21 from the questionnaire, feeling that they were "*just thrown in the deep end*" (R19; G21), as "*we did not have much of an introductory week in 2021 they immediately bombarded us with assignments*" (R22; G21). R38 (G21) admitted that their first-semester experience did not fully prepare them for academic activity. The lack of preparedness was frustrating for them, particularly in developing referencing skills, and the unintended consequences of being found guilty of plagiarism. That frustration can be seen below in capital letters (which reflects shouting): "*I do not understand why some of the lecturers deducted huge percentages when I was found to be guilty of plagiarism. I WAS IN MY FIRST SEMESTER FOR CRYING OUT LOUD! I DID NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT REFERENCING*" (R38:G21). It is a process of learning by doing during the academic term, engaging with skills and learning behaviours, put into action, practised through repetition, and internalised, becoming habits and part of everyday life (Du et al., 2022).

5.3.1. O-Week

During O-Week, the student will receive a 'crash course' in the necessary norms and behaviours they will need to exhibit as a student through the O-Week programme. They will

begin to acquire RU institutional knowledge (such as academic rules and acceptable behaviour), the information to navigate the physical campus and to make sense of the world around them. Key aspects that assist the initiate in acquiring the necessary knowledge include faculty talks and academic talks, which assist in degree structure and course choices. These activities help students understand what is expected of them and what they may expect from RU. ‘Official’ academic programme defines these expectations. The ‘Unofficial programme’ based on the social aspects of orientation is in Chapter 6. The basic grasp of these skills needs to be acquired by the end of O-Week, marked by curriculum approval and the imminent start of semester one.

This marks the beginning of academic student life, in which the first-year student can only keep developing their student-hood after making essential decisions (subject choices) to continue their student journey. This is reflected in the survey responses from G20s and G21s on utilising the information from the Deans and Administration in their third and second year of studies, respectively. G20 R9 noted that they received “*essential information that is still relevant in my third year, so I’d say they were helpful*” while G21 R39 noted that:

“Though I did not attend the actual O-Week. I did manage to watch the Dean’s talks on YouTube. The Dean mentioned things like handing out exclusions to some people who do not perform well academically. This was some sort of a wakeup call to take my school work seriously as there are many things that can distract us as the youth.”

O-Week marks the beginning of the transition/liminal phase; however, this phase continues into the first semester as the initiate continues to learn new behaviours and skills to be a university student. In this research, however, we are dealing with three versions of O-Week shaped depending on where events occurred during the pandemic. 2020 had a ‘normal’ orientation, happening on campus and full of opportunities to meet new people. G21s had a

socially distanced online orientation while the G22s, with COVID-19 easing, had a hybrid of both online and in-person events. From the table below, the G20s (face-to-face) and G22s (hybrid) participants noted that they participated in more O-Week activities than G21s (online). All the events were available as in-person and/or online versions, but considering that O-Week 2021 was online-only, suggests student disengagement was more prevalent with O-Week programme offerings through online-mediums.

Event:	G20 participation (by % or respondents)	Perceived Usefulness of the Event G20 (by % of respondents)	G21 participation (by % or respondents)	Perceived Usefulness of the Event G21 (by % of respondents)	G22 participation (by % or respondents)	Perceived Usefulness of the Event G22 (by % of respondents)
Talk with University Administration	81.8	36.4	33.3	8.3	72	40
Talk with Student Representative Council	72.7	27.3	33.3	8.3	48	32
Talk with Faculty Dean	86.4	68.2	50	50	84	64
Residence meetings with wardens, sub wardens and house comm	77.3	86.4	33.3	16.7	76	60
Library Tour and Orientation	86.4	77.3	25	8.3	88	68
Introduction Lectures	90.9	72.7	58.3	41.7	76	68
SRC Events	59.1	18.2	16.7	0	44	28
Online Orientation ¹	31.8	18.2	66.6	25	52	36
Sports, Societies and Community Engagement Extravaganza.	NA ²	72.7	NA	8.3	NA	28
None:	4.5	4.5	8.3	25	4	4

¹ Pre-COVID-19, refers to student's guided introduction to the online platforms used by RU for administration purposes (ROSS) and academic (RU Connected), as well as workshops on computer literacy.

² Orientation Week Programme ends on Thursday with Extravaganza is held on Friday evening. This is technically also an SRC event, but it has been singled out by participants.

Table 3: O-Week events across three cohorts

I interviewed the G20 cohort about their experience as the last pre-COVID-19 cohort for a 'normal' face-to-face orientation and induction into RU. It was essential to gain insight from a recent cohort of students whose memories would be fresher than previous cohorts. It was also valuable because the G20s are easily accessible because they were on campus at the time of data collection, and thus, it was easier to locate participants. For the last 'normal' orientation, the G20s seemed to have enjoyed their experience. Sixty-five percent of the G20 participants from the survey answered 'yes' when asked if their experience of O-Week met their expectations. O-Week proved to be a positive start to the G20's first-year, allowing G20s to become comfortable at Rhodes and to start making connections with peers before academic student life began. The events and activities of O-Week had made participants, "look forward

to being at Rhodes” (R1), easing them into the RU environment and instilling a sense of optimism about their university journey.

When the academic calendar for 2021 began, South Africa (SA) was in Lockdown Level One for four days. With the restrictions, face-to-face activities were still not allowed; however, G21 students were allowed on campus for easy access to resources (e.g., Wi-Fi) to ensure an efficient online teaching and learning (T&L) engagement. Most G21s belonged to the matriculating class of 2020, completing their secondary education during the disjointedness and chaos created by the pandemic. Although they were entering an environment where online and distance learning was not the norm, RU was better at online practice and interventions than previously. The reality of social distancing restrictions did not allow for the follow through on expectations of enjoyment and socialisation, resulting in an O-Week experience almost exclusively occurring in their residence rooms. Students expected to feel and be welcome; however, my informants expressed feelings of confusion and being under-equipped with the information they needed for their student journey, and R18 notes *“I found none helpful cause till this day I’m still confused. They were just less informative plus it was online which limited us”*. There was a mixed response concerning whether expectations were met, with 38.5% of G21s responding ‘no’, 30.8% responding ‘yes’, and 30.8% responding ‘maybe’. For those who responded yes, their expectations for academic mentorship were met. The virtual nature of O-Week was underwhelming and incomplete, with my G21 participants feeling ill-equipped on their academic journey. The events in O-Week that students found most helpful were those most focused on imparting academic information. While not seamlessly translated to virtual, these events could still occur whereby the social events were scrapped in compliance of COVID-19 regulations.

Fifty percent of G22s who were surveyed reported that their experience of orientation met their expectations, while 31.8% reported ‘no’ and 18.2% ‘maybe’. For some, like R4, O-Week “*exceeded my expectations. Everything was just so heart-warming*” and R10 remarked that it was “*engaging and had enough activities to help me get used to the space*”. The expectation to make friends and feel welcome was also met. There were two reports of COVID-19 restrictions negatively impacting events, and R50 wrote that “*It wasn’t as exciting due to the social distancing protocols. There has to be a way to introduce first-years with excitement and more entertainment*”, with R53 noting “*COVID meant fewer activities. I did not really engage*”. The lack of events that were focused on socialisation was also a reason given for O-Week not meeting expectations, as the struggle G22s students experienced trying to access events - as noted that some of my participants “*found the night events hard to attend because of transportation issues*” (R20), which resulted in a “*slightly exclusionary and underwhelming*” (R34) experience.

Students begin their transition when they step onto campus to confirm their registration. The O-Week programme is designed to enculturate students in preparation for their life as a Rhodent. It marks the beginning of their journey to becoming a Rhodent. Their first induction comes from the Department of Student Affairs (DSA)’s booklet ‘Welcome to Everything (official) You Should Know About Rhodes’, acquiring a student card with their unique student number, and signing various declarations for admittance to RU. The transition period into university for the first-year student provides the opportunity to learn the skills (student craft), and coping mechanisms.

5.3.2. After O-Week: Entering the Academic Year

This section will discuss the experiences of the student cohorts in their first year. The interviews with my G20 participants focused on disruption and the scramble to online T&L due to

COVID-19 restrictions. For my G21 participants, their story is that of the first fully online RU cohort that had to become students away from lecture halls and their peers.

5.3.2.1. G20

G20 students experienced a ‘normal’ start to their tertiary education experience. In addition to an face-to-face (f-2-f) O-Week experience, G20s experienced most of their first term of the RU academic calendar on campus and in-person. Their expectations of university life included f-2-f academic experiences, such as attending lectures in lecture halls, *“To really engage in the course content, have debates and discussions in lectures and tutorials”* (R24; G20), and having peer socialisation to find a community. The transition to university was expected to be difficult, but the G20s were optimistic that they would be able to handle academic pressures and the challenge of settling into the RU environment, as seen in R13’s comment that, *“it would be an easy ride although it would be hard to transition from high school.”*

One of the most vital points to emerge was that my participants did not expect to spend three-quarters of their first year at home. When they started their academic journey, COVID-19 was still primarily a threat to countries far away from SA and the Makhanda community. The G20’s *“did not expect a pandemic or online learning”* (R21) and had expected to have a f-2-f university experience on campus”. Almost forty-one percent (40.9%) of survey respondents said they did not find their semester helpful because of the abrupt end to the first term and the drastic shift to online learning. Their orientation to university was for f-2-f while the reality became distance learning, *“I got a glimpse of the real varsity, but it didn’t really hit until second year”* (R13).

All of my G20 participants agreed that the abrupt shift negatively impacted their experience of becoming a student for the first time, and they felt anxiety, stress, and uncertainty about their

future. Their experience is shared with other first-year students across the globe regarding their mental health (Krautter et al., 2021; Quintiliani et al., 2022) as well as with fellow SAn students regarding the shift to online T&L (de Klerk et al., 2021; Moosa and Bekker, 2022). This shift was the rug being pulled out from beneath them before they could even stand. Minentle talks about hearing feet constantly going up and down the staircase in her residence as students prepared to go home, with the anxiety of not knowing what will happen next. Tendai remembers that time as stressful, *“people had these weird rumours going on saying that it’s possible that universities will never open again. So it’s possible that you have to start over maybe three years”*. Tendai’s emotions about the topic emerged with hand gestures over the events of mid-March 2020, and she said, *“Why would I be going and the fact that I just came to Rhodes for like a few weeks, then after the delay sending that email, you have 48 hours to evacuate. I remember going to Checkers, having to change my ticket to a closer date and Checkers was full. It was stressful. I hated that time, sorry, but I hated it. Because I ended up using a very dodgy bus”*. Students took personal risks in the rush to get out of their residences. Tshepo contracted COVID-19 while going home.

At first, the chaos of going home after the shutdown was a relief, and the three-week National Lockdown was something to weather. Students, however, did not expect it to last so long. Sibanye said, *“it’s a bit chilled for like a couple of weeks, maybe two weeks, and the third week started coming up like noise about me, what’s going on? And then June happened. We started school. Then six July, everything was due and everything went to hell week”*. My participants noted that the shift to online learning was abrupt, even with the break and online orientation. For many students, like Lerato, this would be the first time they would be using the university’s online academic platforms. Now, they were doing so exclusively for all academic activities, which was a learning curve. Thus, the orientation programme, planned and presented in

February 2020, did not meet the purpose of the reality that students and academics found themselves in by April 2020.

The focus group elicited two key aspects: financial challenges and feelings of disembodiment. The financial challenges of virtual learning included access to data (prior to RU intervening with mobile providers), poor mobile reception, unstable electricity (for many students who live in rural areas and loadshedding), and access to learning devices (laptops and/or tablets). Tendai brought up the protest held in 2020 by the SRC to stop the online orientation until all students could participate but also recalled that in the beginning, she used her own money to purchase data to submit assessments. Tendai also mentioned the confusion about NSFAS allowances for residence students who were no longer on campus but at home; *“They stopped allowances. There were complaints going on that ‘we can’t be at home hungry’ because they just stopped giving people allowances and like it’s not making sense.”*

Students expressed that they were unprepared, and online orientation was limited in its guidance. My participants expressed uncertainty, fear, confusion, anxiety, and feeling isolated and stressed because of everything they needed to learn to be able to continue to study online. Tendai said it was *“[v]ery stressful. I was scared... It was that bad, you’re at home, nothing has been said, weeks are going by month, nothing”*. Buhle said *“one minute, we’re on campus. Next thing everyone go home”*. The next challenge was to equip students with the knowledge and skills to enable online learning. R52 felt they had a *“very good start”* being on campus but *“having completed most of my first semester at home, it was a challenge because now we had to switch from the little normality we knew to learning online, which was a huge challenge because we had not been taught how to conduct online learning”*.

The online lectures were fast-paced and caused anxiety and frustration. Tendai said *“imagine you have to familiarise yourself with online things - Zoom, Google docs, Google meeting,*

everything - they're just talking and pushing... they don't care how you do it but you have to continue". Buhle noted the difficulty with the online shift and the lack of support, especially coming from her expectations of being able to "to attend on campus lectures, be around people, you know, but then I became isolated, it was just me and my laptop throughout". R24 highlighted that the "in-person experience was helpful for the first half of semester one but then in the second half of the first semester the adjustment to online learning was difficult and ill-facilitated".

The second challenge was disembodiment caused by online platforms. The G20s felt a disconnect from their expectations of their student-hood, in-person and on campus, and how they were orientated to university. The reality of their first year was mediated through a screen hundreds of kilometres away from fellow members of the RU environment. Their learning experience was out-of-body, mediated by name on Zoom and chatbox discussions from peers nationwide. The G20s also felt that lecturers did not understand their lived experience and how they approached their courses. Tendai expressed the impersonal nature she felt one politics lecturer had over Zoom; *"Like who are you? No introduction, no nothing. What if we are being lectured by students?"*.

Students felt pressured by RU's decision to pursue completion of the 2020 academic year within 2020. The reality that students faced was engaging with the material without immediate support from staff⁵¹ and tutors. Communication was completely online, and students could not simply walk into a lecturer's office or speak to a lecturer after a lecture. They had to send emails and wait for a response. My participants explained that they no longer had easy access

⁵¹ Some lecturers chose to pre-record their lectures and not hold live classes. This meant that students could not ask for clarification during the presentation, which was something that could occur during a live lecture.

to their peers through tutorial groups or common spaces such as the library or residential spaces.

Post-COVID-19 2022 has resulted in students pulling names and voices out of the nebulous void of Zoom (in many instances, lecturers kept their cameras off to reduce bandwidth to save data) to real three dimensional people. Tendai mentioned one of the Anthropology lecturers being a shock to meet until he said, in one of his lectures, *“It just looks like you guys are not doing your readings”*, which made the connection in her mind between the two versions of the lecturer. This disembodiment was not exclusively for lecturers. Buhle first mentioned the term ‘COVID-19 friendships’ about people she met in the Zoom’ lecture hall’ private message function. Buhle added that you might not even remember their name, but you might end up working and attending the online lectures together. When I asked for clarification, Lerato said, *“It’s just like, ‘bro, what was he saying in the Zoom? Can you please explain, I don’t understand what is happening. The textbook is also showing me flames. I don’t understand these words. I just need help. And then you just hit it off from there”*.

While most G20s expressed displeasure in the changes the pandemic made to their first year, Blue and Sunflower found a silver lining in that it allowed them to reflect on their journey as students. Both stated that they were struggling with burgeoning student life. Blue was forced to slow down and stop the trajectory of the kind of student she was becoming. Blue described their first six weeks at Rhodes as living the *America Pie*⁵² experience as *“I got here from never having failed a single test to failing my first Sociology test... I never had sex with anyone. By the time I left [for first lockdown] it was like three people”*. Blue had a mental breakdown within the first six weeks at university – *“I think I got overwhelmed by being here”*. They were

⁵² A series of coming-of-age teen sex comedy movies.

lucky to have the support of their sub-wardens and warden. They express gratitude for the subwarden who:

“walk [with me] from Guy Butler to Hilltop 8... so when it came to my first-year, and the people guiding I was very blessed... instead of, jumping down my throat and giving me hours or bashing me. You know, the very next day she calls me to her office and tells me that I have to go for therapy. She said to me to figure out what was going on because... she said from the person she met when I arrived, I seemed way too intelligent to just randomly go off with a stranger”.

Sunflower’s struggle came from transitioning from the structured world of the classroom to having to take responsibility for creating and maintaining her own routine. Sunflower struggled with the “*rush-rush*” routine of student life, the constant demands placed upon the student to complete within a short time period;

“It’s just rush, rush, rush. You have to register for everything starting on the first class on the first week, you know, so it was quite a jump, and the COVID pandemic gave me a moment to just relax and think about what I actually wanted to do in the future. So it did impact my life in that way. And it was quite a positive way. Obviously, it wasn’t great seeing all this devastation happening on TV and whatnot. But selfishly, it gave me a moment to just like, breathe, calm down, and rethink everything”.

Sunflower could think about what she wanted to achieve as a student and adjusted her path accordingly, changing degrees from a four-year Bachelor of Arts (BA) to a three-year Bachelor of Social Science (BSocSci).

Sunflower was not the only student who had to face a new routine of structuring their new student activities back into their old home environments. Many students had to balance learning

from home with household responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of siblings. These are gendered activities which affect female students more than their male counterparts. Buhle remembers her family trying to set up a new routine. With so many people in the house, they had to work out bathroom times in the morning and plan their day and how the space in the house would be used. She said, *“Everyone is at home, trying to figure out this whole thing, then we had a routine. We all wake up at seven you, shower 10 minutes each, have tea at eight, you know, and start our day. You will see random people walking around with earphones, and it’s just at the time you don’t even know what’s happening”*.

Minenthle lived with her parents, her two cousins (also first-time distance learning students), and her younger brother (primary school) when the pandemic started. With the lack of space and data bundles, Minenthle said that she and her cousins had organised their lives into shifts – when one was on the day shift, they worked in the common spaces of the lounge and dining room, while the one who came off the night shift slept in their shared bedroom. Being around family, however, was not negative. Minenthle fondly reminisced on the family activities of gardening, movie nights, and indoor picnics during the Lockdown.

Not all experiences were positive. Blue, who had access to a laptop and wi-fi, noted that their experience of the COVID-19 lockdown was *“tough”*. Blue’s family, like other students, faced financial struggles and Blue also expressed that being at home led to tension within the household as chores, for example, were gendered and unequally distributed. They were expected to do *“female”* domestic work, which made the relationship with their brother the *“craziest love-hate relationship”*. They were also receiving treatment for Major Depressive Disorder and academics provided a means to cope with the changes in the world for Blue;

“The university giving work and stuff. I think I just accepted it as a necessary part of life. Yeah, it was easier for me to accept the fact I had to do school work than the fact that I had to live in a pandemic”.

Being dealt with the brunt of adjusting to online T&L, with a steep learning curve, the G20s did feel the brunt of this first-year not turning out the way they expected. For most, their experience was negative, with the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations and adjustment to a foreign online environment and distance learning. For a few, the pandemic did provide the opportunity to step back from their journey as a student, to reassess and address before committing back to their studies.

5.3.2.2. G21

G21s had expectations of university life and a first-year experience similar to G20s. They had to adjust their expectations to the pragmatism of the situation they found in themselves. However, they were acutely aware that there was a loss and that their ideals would not be met. My participants expressed expectations of self-discovery and being active participants in campus and academic life, expecting *“the Grown-ish⁵³ type of varsity life, have fun and just be myself but instead, I felt so unwelcome”* (R18). Their expectations were unmet due to the pandemic because their concept of an f-2-f university experience of socialising and attending class could not occur under COVID-19 restrictions. This came after a tumultuous matric year, for many, which students had hoped would have been considered. R26 responded:

“Academically, I had hoped for leniency from lecturers, considering that we had been the first Matriculants to write exams under a pandemic and thereafter get used to the

⁵³ Television sit-com series which spin-off of television show *Black-ish* and follows the lives of the Johnson family’s children as they enter college and adulthood.

university environment. I had expected challenges here and there, but throughout the entire year, I had challenges, especially mentally, emotionally, and physically, with all the COVID protocols that we had to follow. I had also expected to have a nice time, but I just did not even experience that in my first year”.

Fifty (50%) of students in the survey noted that they found their first semester unhelpful in adjusting to university. Some of the reasons included feeling unprepared for the academics of university life, which they felt was because RU did not spend enough time instructing them on what being a student entails. Don mentioned the frustrations of seeking assistance that came with navigating the unfamiliar academic space. With virtual spaces becoming the only point of interaction between first-years and academic staff, there was frustration in getting assistance in a timely period through email enquiries. As a tutor, in 2021, I used WhatsApp, phone calls, and Zoom to consult with my students about queries and feedback on assignments. In general, however, the conversation would inevitably move to the general frustration in contacting other departments’ lecturers and tutors and finding out how to apply themselves more for better marks. Don mentioned that her contact with lecturers was via email, and she understood why the response was slow, *“wait two days before you get it or more because there’s like so many students sending. Sometimes you don’t end up getting a response”*. Even when the eventual reply, this did not abate Don’s anxiety for her academics but rather amplify the anxiety around her her holistic student experience. Similarly, the distance learning approach and the demands of being at home were a point of frustration for R58, which impeded their ability to learn and was a reason their first semester was unhelpful, *“it was extremely hard to work from home, especially because one was struggling to grasp a few concepts and also being home was frustrating so it was impacting the willingness of trying to learn”*.

The majority of the G21s had no previous experience of in-person lectures, tutorials, or practicals in 2021 as would be expected of first-time students. This lack of previous experiences to draw upon, however, did not impede the students' general disappointment with the online academic year. While Don's complaints about having to wake up for 7:45 lectures would not be out of place, her plight of being lulled back to sleep while sitting in front of the laptop is unique to the COVID-19 cohort. With Don's exclamation that "*online was really hard*" and the additional struggle of self-teaching content after not understanding the lectures late into the night while having to wake up early for a 'dawnie'. My G21 participants expressed feeling that lecturers were unsympathetic to their plight.

My participants explained that adjustment was personal, with two participants noting how they settled into a routine around their academic work. A prior meeting with someone in university marketing⁵⁴ told Sihle that "*online based work is suited for someone like me*". Taking this recommendation, Sihle quickly settled into a routine of waking up, showering, and then sitting in front of a laptop. The routine was important as Sihle admits that "*I know I struggle academically*", noting that she sometimes struggled with grasping the content. Having the routine allowed Sihle to complete all the activities she needed to do in the morning for submission and not leave work at the last minute, so if she needed to untangle a concept, she could in due time. Like Don and my other participants, she did note that she felt that there was a lack of engagement between her and the lectures, often attributed to the method of lecturing. Sihle contrasted her experiences with one course, a pre-requisite for any student wanting to take Environmental Science as an elective, which used pre-recorded videos and a chatbox section on RUConnected, with her experience with Anthropology, which used Zoom. The

⁵⁴ Not Rhodes University.

Anthropology lectures, despite also being hosted on an online platform allowed for “*actual engagement on Zoom, even though it’s not physical, but it’s still some engagement where we can ask questions*”. Nande, like many others, did state that they broadly hated online learning; Nande did state that in her first year, she “*actually created a very, very nice first-year*”. While lacking in her expected physical lectures, interacting with people on campus and being able to go out, she attributes setting up a routine of “*spending the whole day at the library*” to overcoming her academic disappointment and having the drive to do her studies. On days where she remained in her res room, she noted that being able to wear pyjamas all day as acceptable attire was a silver lining. In a specific regard, being able to accept the conditions and live life around them made life easier in some aspects.

G21s highlighted the lack of socialising and interaction during their first year; “*no socialising, no friends, no nothing*” (Don). Don remembers how scared she was when two of her housemates tested positive. As someone who describes themselves as anti-social, Don said that the conditions she found herself in exacerbated it. Don spent most of her time in her room, only going outside one to two hours a day, with most of her social contact occurring through phone calls. In addition to this, her anxiety about academics made Don want to “*quit school and go back home*”. Don eventually made friends in her residence, which helped her cope with general situations. Other participants, however, were not as fortunate. Both Nande and Sihle’s ambitions to form study groups did not materialise.

Nande made a few friends in her residence, but like the G20s, she made virtual COVID friendships with people in her online tutorial groups. Due to Sihle’s late registration and subsequent late arrival at the residence, it took a while for her to make friends in her residence. Despite her wish for a study group, Sihle also mentioned that “*I don’t work in group settings*”, preferring to have one or two close friends. Sihle’s residence promotes self-study, and she

thought, “*maybe if I had made a close group of friends, like we were intimate, and we challenge each other, I would love that. But it doesn’t happen a lot.*”

The first fully online cohort (and probably the last for the imminent future) had difficulties in their first year. While they, unlike the G20s, were aware of the situation they were entering when attending university, their expectations were unaltered by the pandemic. Regardless of why their expectations were not adequately adjusted, they were not met regarding the actual experience of the G21s. Their first year occurred within the four walls of their residence room, behind a screen, with no one around.

5.3.2.3. G22

For the G22s, COVID-19 did not affect their expectations of their first year, unlike the G20s and G21s. The impact of the pandemic, social distancing and other restrictions were not mentioned in my participants' expectations, nor did it play as significant a role in their first-year with the State of Disaster coming to an end and the gradual repealing of the COVID-19 restrictions throughout the first semester of 2022. In my field notes, I noted how everything felt ‘normal’, like before the pandemic, in a somewhat disconcerting way:

One of the Anthropology lecturers ran into me outside of the Great Hall in early March 2022 – the temporary base for the Anthropology 1 Term 1 tutorial programme while the department was undergoing renovations. She was on her way to give a lecture and stopped by to have a general check-in. I answered honestly “It looks the same except with masks” ...I returned to campus early for the two student jobs⁵⁵ and campus was quiet until 14 February when students returned to town. During O-Week, I spent much

⁵⁵ One at the circulation desk at the main library and the other as the first-year graduate assistant in Anthropology.

of my free time in the library quad, the Postgraduate Commons, general green spaces on campus⁵⁶, and Pepper Grove Mall. This gave me a glimpse into student activity, particularly G22s, and I observed the movements of students and life and activity returning to town and campus. Since the initial shutdown in 2020, I had been on campus a total of five times and all those times there were very few people moving around on campus and even fewer interactions between people, with the preference to observe social distancing protocol strictly. What cemented this return to ‘normal’ for me was the in-person Library Orientation programme in the form of a competition – Welcome to the Amazing Place – because it was so like pre-COVID experiences. First-year students are taken across the four levels of the library they have access to, and they collect a stamp at different stations after hearing about the various services the library offers. Students, wearing masks, either listened intensely and asked questions, or were uninterested, “please stamp this so I can leave and grab a goody bag”. The only difference was the maintenance of social distancing and the Perspex plastic barrier at the circulation desk. (Reflection from researcher’s fieldnotes)

Instead, the G22s’ expectations for their first-year focused on them settling into RU space. This included finding their feet regarding their academic pursuits, and responses ranged from adjusting to the calibre of academics required at university to more ambitious expectations to “*uphold discipline and stay up to date with my schoolwork. My expectations for my first-year was[sic] to excel in my academics*” (R4) or “*simple and easy... as I am introduced to a new type of learning in a higher standard and learning about the course I chose*” (R12).

⁵⁶ Mainly by the Bicycle Lawns (referred to by the statue titled Cycle of Life, made up of bicycle arranged in an arch) and Barratt Lawns by the Barratt Complex.

More frequently in the responses was the expectation to easily adjust academically and socially. The G22s' expectations indicated their hope to develop their social network and ties to RU by forming friendships. These responses were not solely focused on forging social bonds with peers and lecturers but rather on the expectations of being able to embrace their new identity as students. This self-identification focuses on the experiences that come from attending university for the first time, being away from home, and consequently having to be self-determined and proactive in meeting one's personal needs and wants in a new environment.

For many of my G22 participants, this first semester was a crucible of self-discovery and newly-found independence. Fundwisa noted that coming to university was the first time she had experienced this independence *“because this was my first time being away from my mom, because I grew up in a home where everything was done for me. So now having to transition, I wasn't bold. I was very dependent on my mother”*. Being a student and marking a rebirth of an individual is an anticipated part of the RU process. R20 expected to *“build a new life for myself at Rhodes and find out what I truly enjoy studying”*, and R31 had hoped to *“truly be my own person and learn much more about myself”*. Many students felt the need to *“grow up”* and take on adult responsibilities. Fundwisa attributes the changes in her character to getting used to academic demands whilst taking care of her personal needs, *“I like to manage myself and my social life as well because as much as I want to drown in my studies, I also have to maintain balance and be there for my friends.”*

Jean's expectations stand out from the rest as they focus solely on the social aspects of being a student. More specifically, having fun through attending parties. Jean had expectations that his varsity experience would be *“better than this, I guess. I expected more. Oh, alcohol, I guess. More partying or going out? Smoking should happen”*, but his disappointment was not from COVID-19 but from *“Grahamstown”*.

Most of the G22s in the questionnaire felt that their university experience thus far was beneficial to them. Almost seventy percent (69.6%) stated that they felt that the first semester was beneficial in helping them feel like a student. Most of the responses were focused on experiences that occurred during the first semester rather than specific events, having *“experienced the varsity life I anticipated”* (R47) and *“just being exposed to university culture in the first semester has helped with my transition into student life”* (R56). The in-person activities were the reason for a positive response. Some responses focused on how the G22s had found navigating the academic space. For students who felt that they had adjusted, their responses looked at how they had managed to cope with RU-appropriate level workload and that there were ample resources as well as willing staff to assist them. For some, this transition to coping with university learning came from first-hand experience, *“I got to experience campus life and got to see how lectures and tutorials take place”* (R27).

The focus group noted that they did feel welcomed and supported by the student community. Aphiwe notes that the friends they made and *“freedom is the major thing that makes the difference”* helped her settle into the space. Fundwisa noted the importance of house comm, and specifically, in her case, highlighted the importance of the Oppidan Committee saying that *“com members made us feel so, so at home”*. Fundwisa also mentioned that regarding the larger student community, her identity as an LGBTQIA++ member was something she could express in public on campus, *“You could see some people were in the closet, maybe they gave you a platform where you could just be yourself and be free without having to face repercussions”*.

While not explicitly related to identity, respondents in the questionnaire noted the vital work of fellow peers, mostly on house comm, welcoming them into the larger university committee, noting that they were *“very welcoming and open and really helped with the transition and*

getting used to the place” (R7), and students acknowledged the help of the support provided by the sub-wardens.

There were some students who did not feel positively about their first semester and found the adjustment difficult. Some responses referred to the pressure of the environment, noting that *“time isn’t just on my side”* (R33) and *“It’s fast-paced”* (R6). Responses spoke to feelings of trouble with coping with academic demands and being independent. The topic of coping and student mental health also emerged in the focus group. While most joked about suffering in their studies being something they had come to expect, Dzunani expressed that he wished there was more awareness of student mental health and more than RU could have offered. This came after a protest that was held in the lead-up to the June exam season regarding student mental health, congested, inaccessible counselling services and the general student population feeling underprepared for the first complete sit-down examinations since 2019. What started the protest was the body of a student found in Botanical Gardens, with the cause of his death presumed a suicide. While there were jokes about the *“mental health [picnic] benches”*⁵⁷ placed in Steve Biko Lawns, Dzunani felt that the student population as a whole was dealing with the aftermath of COVID-19 and *“would really benefit from the school hiring more people to assist them. Because if you read on Rhodes Confessions on Instagram, you’ll see that there are suicidal posts”*.

Some of the G22s felt settled in their place in their first-year compared to the G20s and G21s, because COVID-19 had less of an impact on their first-year. While they still had to be vaccinated or have a medical reason not to, to register as a student and have hybrid lectures,

⁵⁷ An attempt to improve mental wellness in the student population, picnic benches were placed on the lawns of Steve Biko Building to encourage students to spend time in green spaces. These were then dubbed online as mental health benches when ridiculing the universities actions.

these measures fell far more into a ‘normal’ experience of campus life, the general expectation of all students’ cohorts so far, as compared to the G20s and G21s. During the focus group, it was evident that in some cases the G22s did not know the extent of the measures that impacted what being a student was like for those enrolled in 2020 and 2021.

My data shows that my G22 participants experienced a ‘normal’ first-year and did not have the same setbacks as previous cohorts. They could form an identity as a student and socialise with their peers more freely, openly, and in real-time. Their expectations of university life were met.

5.3.2.4. Making Sense of Transition

With the academic semester fully underway in week two, the novices, the first-year students, is entirely in the university system as intended by the institution. Initiates can start developing their social support structures through shared experiences with peers and learning more about their role as a student through practice. In assisting fellow initiates in the process of becoming students, these peers can offer social and academic support (such as shared notes, reassurances that there are everyday experiences and that the individual is not the exception), and sympathy that can increase student’s resilience as they adapt to the unfamiliar and challenging environment. While the university provides services if a student is struggling with adjustment, the onus is on the student to seek them out and notify the necessary staff members for assistance.

While learning about and taking in their new roles, first-year students are in a liminal, or transitional, state. They become incorporated as university students once they successfully navigate and integrate into the university system. COVID-19, however, has led to an extended liminal state where students, particularly G20 and G21s, have constantly been renegotiating

and relearning their roles as students. These students have been left feeling matter out of place, being caught betwixt and between.

5.3.3. COVID-19 and Lingering in the Liminal Phase

The inherent danger of the liminal phase, being out of place, being betwixt and between, has been applied to understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on people's lives. For van Gennep (1909), liminality came from being between two social roles in the transition from the past role to the future. Bell (2021a; 2021b) refers to the liminality that the pandemic brought to everyday life. It disrupted the mundane and became a point of reflection on the fragility of the human-made and mediated world. The realm of HEIs was not unaffected by the world-altering nature of the pandemic. COVID-19's new rules of engagement interrupted established cultural ways of being at HEIs, interrupting processes carefully designed to enculturate and transition adolescents into particular ways of being at university. The scramble to create new O-Week programmes in a novel situation saw the creation of new ways of being and doing in the world. This resulted in an interruption to the orientation process because the liminal phase, the transition, was something that no one had experienced before. Usually, with initiation rites, the older cohort (who have already been incorporated) aid those in the liminal space with the transition by providing wisdom and support. This was removed because the experiences of those who are, arguably, incorporated into the university student life do not have the same experiences and cannot provide the appropriate support and advice in this novel situation. My G20 participants, Tendai and Buhle, who became student leaders in house committees and a sub-warden, respectively, noted their difficulty in helping G22s in their transition to campus life. For example, they struggled with providing directions to venues around campus, reflecting a lack of familiarity on their part. The pandemic was a great equalizer, making the new and old cohorts novices online. As a tutor, I struggled to advise first-year students on navigating online

learning and exams as I had no previous experience. Like the first-years I tutored, I was learning how to be an online student for the first time during my Honours year and went through the same online orientation in 2020 that first-years had. G20s and G21s were being initiated into an entirely new context, with a different culture and new ways of being that no one else has been experienced. Trying to navigate studenthood pre-COVID was difficult, but senior students were available to guide and advise. In contrast, in 2020 and 2021, all students were trying to navigate a new system while their sense of student-hood was impacted.

An interrupted orientation leads to an interrupted transition and a delayed and/ or fragmented incorporation phase which negatively affects the resulting identity formation. As my participants noted, Orientation was important not only for academics but also for social experiences. University students do not exist in an academic vacuum. Transitioning includes learning how to manage academics and a very different and less restricted social life than ever experienced before. Social activities are an integral part of university life and a student's life. Social activities were limited due to the restrictions, and social aspects became ignored during the pandemic. The focus was strained on academics and completing the academic year at Rhodes. New social skills, etiquettes, and coping mechanisms were being developed in real time for the online experience. G20s had a jarring restart to their academic year in 2020. Instead of easing into the incorporation phase, they were placed into a new liminal phase with poor induction as everyone tried to make sense of what was happening around them.

All of this has resulted in G20s and G21s struggling with the transition to studenthood and leaving them in a prolonged liminal state, with feelings of heightened anxiety, isolation, confusion, and uncertainty on how they are meant to navigate the university space and how they are meant to 'be' in the [university] world. These cohorts acknowledged that they felt they were not as settled with their student identity as they wanted.

5.3.3.1. *The COVID-19 Student Meets the 'Normal' University World*

"I still feel like I'm transitioning into student life even in my third year." (R37; G20)

There was no easing into the 'regular' academic routine for the G20s and G21s, who, at the point of 2022, had spent most of their time as university students behind a screen. My G20 and G21 participants noted the difficulty they experienced in transitioning to in-person T&L measures. Most notable was the lecture experience. For two years, students could watch recorded lectures and work at their own pace and replay parts of the lectures they found confusing. This was no longer available to students as lectures took place in real time and recordings were mostly unavailable. Only a few lecturers still recorded and uploaded their lectures. Sometimes, the PowerPoint slides were scant, which some of my participants called "*skeleton slides*". These skeleton slides had replaced the more detailed slides available during online T&L. Lerato said, "*like they [the university] sabotage because... because I'm genuinely struggling to understand what people are saying. It's like you want me to understand you within that 45 minutes, like you expect me to understand. When we were having lectures uploaded, I was able to go back if I didn't understand something and work on it. But now I don't have the opportunity to do that. Your PowerPoints, they're missing slides. You don't even want to upload*". Sihle mentioned that only one of her lecturers retained the complete COVID-19 education set-up – slides, lecture notes, and podcasts. R9 (G20) stated that "*being back to full face-to-face learning has been a challenge, especially for me who has been online more than I've been on campus. The transition was drastic and lecturers and departments are just moving along and not considering the adjustment it takes to switch learning styles. I have found that the university is heavily slacking in ensuring that students don't "drown" in this return to normalcy*". Both Sihle and Tendai spoke about their experiences of having their first sit-down exam in their second and third year as students. Tendai specifically mentioned being lost in

finding the exam venue and figuring out how the venue works. Sihle touched on the stressfulness of the situation, saying, “*it is nerve-racking. I mean, it’s kind of just like a matric exam... And I mean, I’ve got a lot of anxiety but I know how to hide it. Something as small as an invigilator walking past my desk is annoying to me. They’re not even looking at my work, they just walk up and down, it’s just annoying to me*”. Nande remarked that she felt that:

“last year we had time. Even though we didn’t, but we also had time to go through the reading. Now you prepare today and do tutorials. So you have to make sure that okay, this is finished now. So I know what is happening to talk about also in the tutorial. And now it’s face-to-face. You can’t hide behind the camera, or type questions and comments. Because those are in person mostly and now you have to speak”.

While the transition was tough, returning to campus and experiencing f-2-f learning was still a positive aspect of 2022 to the G20s and G21s. For Don, 2022, “*This is my first-year I’m experiencing because I am like them [current first-years G22s]. Because what I had last year was, I don’t know, what isolation is preparing me for? So it’s nice to go back to class because right now I have a bunch of friends now, and my classes and communication with the lecturers and it’s so nice*”. As the G20 focus group put it, the previous years they had the UNISA student experience of distance learning. Now they are finally RU students after a nearly two-year hiatus. All my G20 and G21 participants expressed gratitude for being able to see who they were interacting with online. This includes seeing their friends, staff members, and being able to put a real-life human to their tutor's name, voice, and picture.

The return to f-2-f T&L for my G20 and G21 participants was not easy, and they believed that they needed a reorientation to help them adjust. It was not a return to pre-COVID normal for them, because they had not experienced that. Their ‘normal’ was online T&L, so they had to unlearn and learn new student craft skills to help them navigate the post-lockdown university.

Since June 2022, RU operated under pre-COVID conditions, and students returned to lecture halls. As noted, G22s had a less restricted O-Week than G21s, so they already had more of a 'normal' university experience than G21s. In their final year, the G20s underwent sit-down exams, an unfamiliar assessment process with rules and processes. Both the G20s and the G21s did not feel equipped with the skills required for f2f academic activity, especially note-taking, holding attention during lectures, and being active participants in class. As such, in their third and second year, respectively, they were with the G22 first-year students learning how to be a campus, in-person student. The G20s and G21s thus remained in a prolonged liminal state as they had to learn new skills (e.g. how to plan and manage a sit-down examination) and adapt to a new context and environment, which they had to learn to navigate (physically and psychologically). G20 and G21s were constantly reminded of their liminal state because the disruption meant that they, particularly the G20s, lacked the experience they otherwise would have had as third-year students and were navigating similar situations as G21 and G22s, as opposed to being seasoned students who offer guidance to new initiates.

The struggle of the G20s and G21s in 2022, I would argue, may be explained through the environments they were moulded in during their first year. Once a student feels that they are a student, they should be equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to face student challenges. Their test of student craft competencies emerges when students see if they can meet the academic challenges while maintaining their mental, physical, and social health. The G20s went through two orientation periods; the first was for 'normal' activity cut short of testing their skills and the second for a newly created, untested, online academic activity effectively lengthening their liminal period. The G21s received the refined G20 online orientation and what could be brought online from the original O-Week. So, Zoom rooms replaced lecture halls, keeping the academic introduction (regarding the content covered) in place; social

interaction is not for public safety. While there is mention of the efficacy of translating f2f rituals to the online sphere, the delivery medium should not be the only focus. Instead, the content and the intent behind it should be examined. During the formative period, the transition period, in the G20s and G21s, the academic world they were interacting with was online. This world was different from the ‘normal’ world, with different jargon and skills required to navigate, they found themselves in 2022.

5.4. Incorporation: Interrupted and Delayed

This thesis aimed to examine the experiences of becoming a student during the pandemic using van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*. An integral part of this theory is identity acquisition, whereby once the initiate has been separated from their past identity, they learn and take on their new identity and role within the community. This section considers how the participants understood what a student is, as well as if they consider themselves university students with a sense of belonging.

5.4.1. What is a student?

When I began my tertiary education in 2017, I defined a student as someone who went to university to study towards a degree. Most of my participants indicated that their understanding of being a student and attending university came from their friends and family (69.5%). In comparison, the influence of teachers was tied with social media at 45.8%. Popular media was the second highest influence at 54.2%, and many students mentioned that their vision of university life would be like America sitcom television series *Grown-ish*.

When asked what it meant to be a student, my G20 participants believed that someone was at university to learn, do assessments, experience stress, be responsible, manage time and tasks, and learn to be an adult. Some of my participants noted that being a student involved creativity,

quick thinking, and flexibility. Blue described a student as “*someone who writes exams and you’re supposed to learn*”, and Buhle had a slightly pessimistic outlook in that being a student was about “*seeing how much misery you can take*”.

The G21s hold a broad set of definitions yet contain similar themes about what a student is, i.e. someone who attends lectures, is in the process of obtaining a degree and is taking on the responsibility of adulthood and their studies, even when this might be difficult for them. Don includes that due to attending university, a student like herself “*needed to grow up and be my age*” to be self-motivated and take responsibility for their studies. Due to the high unemployment rates for SA youth, Sihle said, “*it’s hard to just think of being a student. I’m constantly thinking about after the student life, like am I going to get a job? Is the degree worth it?*”

The G22s explained that being a student is about self-discovery, developing interpersonal skills, adaptability to challenges and finding your community while studying. Dzunani said being a student is “*about discovering yourself. I mean, in the six months that I’ve been here I’ve learned so much more about myself*”. It is the connection with peers and fellow students that provides Jean with a “*bond [with] me and my OG⁵⁸ bitches, yeah, so we have a sense of community by supporting each other*”. Jean sees this support as financial, for example, with them taking turns to purchase marijuana or cigarettes. However, it is also social through using these opportunities to come together, hang out, and step back from student responsibilities.

Across the groups, there is a similar understanding that being a student means participating in academic life, facing new responsibilities, and dealing with the consequence of these new

⁵⁸ Slang for ‘original’ or ‘originators’, the first of something.

responsibilities, whether it be for the present in learning how to manage workloads or the responsibility of having to plan for your future once graduated. It seems that, for the most part, it is the years of experience of being a student, rather than the impact of being a student at different stages of the pandemic, that affected their definition of what it means to be a student.

5.4.2. Being and Becoming Students Through COVID-19

The pandemic altered university student life. One of the critical questions posed to my participants was whether their sense of belonging and being a student was affected. The resounding response was ‘yes’. It was very strongly noted that my participants felt that the environment in which they were introduced to university life affected the kind of student they had become. The operations, options, and opportunities available for students in all facets of university life were limited, even more so during the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. There is no argument that the actions taken by governments, universities, and health organisations were essential and lifesaving. They did, however, have consequences that are far-reaching and still developing. There has also not been a plan for reintegration to the ‘old normal’, which, at the time of writing, was the direction RU took. These students, G20s and G21s, were moulded in a specific environment. Transplanting them suddenly into a new environment is not to the benefit of the student or RU.

The G20s, with their sliver of a taste of normalcy and nearing the end of their studies, have a rooted concept of their time as a student being incomplete. They were away from campus and partaking in distance learning for most of their undergraduate degree. They were the group faced with the transition to online learning and RU's struggle to study online. Come 2022, when the cohort was allowed to return to campus for their third year, it was to an unfamiliar environment. Buhle said that “*the most interesting thing about G20s is even today I'm still discovering corners of this campus*”. Sibanye mentioned that she thought that if you were not

part of the house comm, you probably would not know how to navigate around campus. Even then, she was grateful that a G19, a fourth year, in the house comm of their brother residence, could give a tour to their G20 house comm members during the 2022 O-Week. This provided her with the means to learn more. Tendai provided an anecdote of helping first-years in 2022 find the Education Faculty and Environmental Science buildings using Google Maps as she was uncertain of their locations. As a returning student, I am used to assisting first-years with directions; however, in 2022, I found myself assisting second and third-year students with directions, which was a novelty.

The G20 focus group referred to their time online as a “UNISA student” to discuss the lack of campus life since March 2020. Sunshine, while happy that she could meet her own academic goals during her first year, admitted that “*a lot of things didn’t happen that you think university is about*”. R40’s response shows how peer socialisation was negatively affected in 2020, resulting in students experiencing isolation from their peers;

“There was no way for any sort of camaraderie to form. Res life was obviously majorly impacted as we were all sent home. Not only did this halt the ability for first-year students to connect with and get used to living like that, it also meant that the benefits res was meant to provide was unavailable ... things like food and quiet became unavailable... Obviously, in university the main focus is work, but normally one makes friends and everyone can feel supported. However, online learning ensured complete isolation, and for those of us who struggle already with issues of shyness and the like, this resulted in an end to first-year (and even to now) where barely anyone is known.”

During the interviews, when the G20s were asked if they felt like a student, most said they were a student now in 2022, three years into their university experience. For Sunshine, who always felt like a student, and being enrolled played a minor role in confirming her

studenthood, the pandemic did not have as much impact. However, she noted that she missed out on companionship during the pandemic, which made her interactions with old residence members even sweeter in 2022. With Blue's concept of a student being tied to being enrolled at an institution, they noted that they feel like a student with RU giving them "*cool folders filled with stuff*", referring to their academic work. Buhle felt that she had experienced "*85% of everything a varsity student has experienced because I've been through it or especially being an augmented, mentally, financially, socially, I have faced all those hardships*". While the situation of the hard lockdown made finding connections to RU space difficult, her experience taught her the importance that "*no matter how much you want to isolate yourself and you tell yourself you can you can leave, you need that support from every sphere of your life*", from friends, family and tutors. Buhle noted that finding that sense of belonging was significantly harder without the support.

My G21 participants felt they were entering studenthood in their second year. Like the G20s, being at university in 2022 during a time of limited to no restrictions from the second semester allowed them to participate in the student life they had in mind when they enrolled, which they missed out. Nande said she was starting to feel like a student in her second year as she was finally adapting and acquiring the necessary skills, like referencing and essay structuring, which she felt she struggled to master in her first year. In her second year, being allowed to attend classes and be more involved in extracurricular activities⁵⁹ allowed Nande to catch up with what she "*missed out on ... during my first year*". Being grounded into university life in 2022 has allowed Nande to shift away from what she refers to as a high school "*top student*" mentality regarding work and feelings of accomplishments and towards being a

⁵⁹ RUCÉ Budding Q programme.

university student as she is “*starting to feel like one because now I know what it is like to work under pressure. I know how it feels when someone says I’m stressed because of these assignments*”. Don similarly spoke about shaking off the “*mentality of high school and realised that I needed to grow up and be my age*”. As Don does look significantly younger than her actual age, often being confused by others for a high school student, being able to walk to lectures, attend lab practicals and generally be able to move around campus has been beneficial in helping her feel like a university student and that she belongs. Being able to participate in what she sees as typical behaviour of students has made her feel more like a student. Overall, for the G20s and G21s, achieving their studenthood status is linked to being physically present and directly engaging with the RU environment. While they all noted that academic pursuit was an integral part of being a student, one- to two-years of online classes did not cement their status as students as much as being physically on campus. Being able to participate in student life; namely, attending class and moving between venues on campus for tutorials and practicals, was meaningful in forging a sense of studenthood and feeling like they belong in the RU community.

G22s explained that for them, it is coming to grips with the workload that students undergo to experience the workload themselves that helps them feel like students. Dzunani mentioned the “*run, run, run*” mentality of completing assignments to move from one to the next that makes him feel like a university student, as this is what studying looks like to him. Aphiwe also felt most like a student when working to complete an assignment. Beyond academics being a point of feeling like a student for the G22s, being on campus and in the larger community also helps them connect to their studenthood. Meeting other people and hearing about their life stories is an integral part of RU for Fundwisa, even advocating that the opportunity to meet new people should be a reason why people should attend universities. On the other hand, Jean enjoys the diverse community that RU fosters with people from across the country and the world, which

could provide a space and group of people where he feels accepted. In his home community, Jean would be labelled a 'weirdo'. However, at RU, (although in the same town), Jean explains that he can be himself without any fear of chastisement and experience acceptance. To have this space for Jean to “*come here and seeing people doing shit that’s kind of weird, where I come from, it actually very nice. It’s cool. If you like, I found my people here*”.

5.5. Discussion

In this analysis section I argue that for the first years of 2020 and 2021, their orientations into university life, which I conceptualise as *Rites of Passage*, were interrupted. They are caught in the liminal phase of becoming a student. They are aware of their status of being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969: 95). Identity formation and social role status were abruptly disrupted. They were forced into a stage of separation through the change to online T&L and the attempt at re-orientation to the ‘new normal’, placing students in a lengthened liminal stage. The reality is that the attempt to assist students in the transition to online teaching and learning was not a re-orientation process but rather an original orientation process on its own, and perhaps if there had been an overlap, it might have been a smoother experience for students. For example, how assessments would be explained to students so they understood why they take different forms and have different constraints when an online submission or a sit-down assessments.. G21 students, whilst not having the same interruption in their university experience, expressed that they did not feel fully incorporated into student life, and the lack of social and physical contact (both during the orientation and day-to-day university life) played a decisive role in this.

The transition into studenthood can be separated into the three stages of van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*. To reiterate, first is the separation stage, with anticipation of imminent change in the individual’s life. The individual prepares for this change by casting aside their past identity. Becoming a university student would be when the student starts to break away from their life

as a high school student (Elkins et al., 2000). Across the cohorts, there was very little differentiation regarding their experience.

The second stage, the transition or liminal stage, is the most dangerous because they are unsure of where they belong socially, which affects their sense of being and belonging. This is the stage where the student is no longer a high school learner or a fully incorporated university student (Tinto, 1988). As such, they do not have a fixed place in their community. This stage is about unlearning the habits and routines of a high school learner and learning the skills to be a university student; that is, learning new processes, behaviours, and coping and managing skills (Tinto, 1988). In this stage (not just Orientation Week), students acquire the skills and knowledge they need for academic and social life while being enculturated into the university community. Once the initiate arrives at RU, they begin transitioning into university students, for whom O-Week is a crucial facilitator. During this week, students receive a ‘crash course’ of knowledge and skills to assist their transition to university student. Tinto (1988: 446) notes that orientation programmes are “very short-lived... symbolic in character, and do not provide the sort of extended contact needed to establish community membership”.

Finally, the incorporation stage means the conclusion of the rite of passage, indicating that the individual has been incorporated into the community in their new identity. This is when the student and the university are confident that the student is equipped and able to meet the requirements of a student (Tinto, 1988: 446). In Tinto’s (1988) research focusing on student resiliency, he argues that the incorporation stage in the student’s journey to becoming a part of the student community is reached when the student will not ‘drop-out’ as they have the necessary community support and information to persist. With the student feeling settled and accepted within their new community instead of being caught between two stages of their life, the danger of the liminal phase is over, or at the very least, not as prevalent. This sense of being

a student should ideally occur within the student's first year at university, often achieved by going through critical events seen as necessary to being a student. For example, I felt secure as a student once I received the marks from the first exam season I wrote in 2017.

Undoubtedly, the phase of incorporation for G20 and G21 students was interrupted and delayed as they experienced an ongoing liminal/transitionary state due to the changes experienced. At the time of data collection, in semester 2 of 2022, my participants felt that they were students or nearly completed versions of students. For my G22s, they felt that they were in the process of becoming a student when we sat down in the second semester. The reason for this is having experienced some aspects of student life, such as Dzunani's experience of the intense workload and Jean finding "my people", creating a community of peers while acknowledging that they still had more to learn, such as Fundwisa acknowledging that while she had come to grips with her independence, her skill in self-responsibility was still in progress. The G22s, in comparison to the other cohorts, had the most 'normal' first semester on campus. However, the G20s and G21s did not, and this has reflected how they see themselves as students. In these cohorts, participating in academic activity was an essential aspect of student life in their definition of a student, which it was universities were largely able to move into online spaces, albeit changed to fit the online context. There was limited social engagement that what students had expected – less than anticipated but still there, even if caught covertly. The G20 focus groups had COVID-friends over social media, Don's covert meetings in residence and Tendai's curfew breaking for groove was illicitly grasped moments of social interaction. The shift to hybrid (and then to complete face-to-face) in 2022 gave the G20s and G21s a chance to 'catch-up' on these experiences and participate in the student life they thought they would have had back in their first year. Both Nande and Don stated that 2022 felt like their first student year. Through being able to participate in student life in person, they have felt they are closer to becoming university students and moving away from high school learners. For my G20 informants, 2022

was their last year as undergraduate students. In 2023, provided they had fulfilled the requirements, they would be graduating, a ceremony that marks the end of their studenthood. They acknowledge that they did not have the complete student experience, feeling like altered students. Buhle noted that she had experienced “85% of everything a varsity student experiences” but acknowledges that missing the social aspects of the university, such as making friends and fun events, as well as the experience of online studies, has made her very resentful towards the university for their treatment of her and fellow students.

G20 and G21s had a long and disconnected sense of being and belonging. They finally felt some sense of studenthood toward the end of 2022 as they experienced a more holistic engagement with the university environment. My informants, therefore, have been incorporated as university students, even though it took a long time for most of them to feel that way.

5.6. Conclusion

Through the application of van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* in understanding the student experience, it is clear how ritual plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of becoming and belonging within the university space. The separation and liminal phases may be mentally and emotionally draining. In the position where the student feels unable to incorporate into their role as a student fully, the mental stress continues to increase feelings of anxiety, unsureness, and possible inadequacy, which ultimately affects the student’s performance. This chapter of the thesis has argued that regarding the development of the student identity and craft, the G20s and G21s were caught in a liminal position due to the environments in which they found themselves in their respective first years and in 2022. Firstly, there is disharmony between students’ expectations of becoming a student and the reality of the G20s and G21s formative periods during the pandemic. Finally, the experience of the G20s and G21s and their discomfort

with the return to normal f2f academics was seen through the lens that they underwent a ritual to equip them to online studenthood, with little assistance from the university to assist with the transition to f2f. As such, all three cohorts were still in the liminal stage when it should only have been the G22s. The interrupted and delayed completion of ritual is attributed to the constant changes in the environments of the G20 and G21s and the re-learning that occurred in their time at RU.

Chapter 6: *Communitas* during a time of no Social Contact

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter organised and discussed the data surrounding van Gennep's *Rite of Passage*. Regarding incorporation, my G22 participants emphasised the social connections with peers assisting their student identity formation. These connections begin in O-Week and strengthen throughout the year. This chapter posits what social connections cannot be during social distancing. Through Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*, the lack of connections between student and student and student and institute during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed.

6.2. *Communitas*, Liminality, and the Pandemic

Continuing with Rappaport's (1999) view of ritual as a social act, what would it mean for ritual to occur in an anti-social gathering bubble? Turner (1969) argues that human connections are forged during the trying periods of liminality. This human connection "emerges recognisably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (Turner, 1969:96). The basis of the connection, unlike other connections brokered based on shared identity such as class, is the shared experiences of undergoing a rite of passage, stripped of previous status and identity (Turner, 1969). The experience of *communitas* emerges within liminal spaces outside ritual spaces. For example, the feeling of connectedness of people who had experienced a disaster, such as Imber-Black (2020) noting the evening salute of applause for critical workers and drawings of rainbows in windows during March/April of 2020 as recognition of the shared experience of the COVID-19 lockdown. However, as Collin (2020) notes, removing the

physical presence of humans in rituals and replacing them with online adaptations of the ritual cheapens the impact of the ritual.

RU is a residential, contact university that, under the conditions imposed by the pandemic, could not deliver on the student experience for two years. The pandemic's threat rightfully shifted to online and social distance measures that prioritised the academic project. Whether the university successfully turned the academic aspect of being a student online is debatable. In Chapter five, my G20 and G21 participants expressed that their online academic experience was stressful with a steep learning curve. They could still successfully navigate through their first year of studies and even missed certain aspects of online learning with the return to in-person academics in 2022. To chalk up the student experience to be academically successful is a reductionistic view. van Pletzen et al. (2021) point out that to encourage academic success in students, there needs to be systems in place to encourage students to engage with their university's academic and social communities.

6.3. Searching for connection during O-Week

This section, for contrast, outlines how *communitas* is created during O-Week. Then it considers how the conditions of social distancing and the online university experience provided limited means to create and experience *communitas*.

6.3.1. Connection under 'normal' circumstances

As noted in Chapter 5 in the table, the House Committee (House Comm, colloquial) plays a vital role in the transition phase of O-Week planning activities, and they lead with bonding exercises aimed at creating connections between students, which helps first-years to form attachments, and with their sense of belonging. In this transitional phase, first-years must learn how to navigate the physical campus, which is essential for one's sense of belonging.

House Comm members are key to a guided introduction to student life, providing a glimpse of what to expect, what to be wary of, and what to get excited about. With the new students moving away from their support base at home, the House Comm members became a new support structure, from the warm welcome noted in survey responses to interventions in Blue's case and a continuous warm presence in student life, as Sunflower said.

The residential meetings helped the G20s settle into resident life and the social life of RU. House Comm members was specifically noted for their assistance with the G20s transition. The House Comm plays a hands-on role as peer support for students, and their overall contribution to the O-Week experience is noted very fondly by the G20s, which is attested to by the following responses: R9 wrote that *"their House Comm had formed a sisterhood"* which marked a successful transition for her. The House Comm members were *"kind and patient"* (R13), making sure that *"we were comfortable and that we were at home away from home"* (R52). These initial bonds created in a week have a lasting impact, as Sunflower notes that:

"[I]n my six weeks of being here, I think I created a really good bond with the girls in my res. I think that was my welcoming gift. They made me feel welcome, especially my house comm members. I'm still friends with one of them today, with most of them actually. One of them moved off campus, and I didn't see her for two years, but we still have that connection. So I think I felt a lot of welcome come from my res."

The House Comm also provided a crucial role in peer mentorship on student life and culture. In various ways, they provide the 'inside scoop' of what it is like to be a student in that space. R29 wrote that residential meetings *"was getting to know people who have already been in the space of Rhodes, so it was easier to assimilate into Rhodes with their guidance"*. To draw on Turner (1969:96), incoming first-years *"submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders"*, older students and staff members, who lead the new initiates through the liminal period

of assimilating into the university community. The nature of this guidance ranges from getting assistance in navigating campus, academic life, and the social environment (both the positives and the negatives). R13 wrote about the guidance House Comm members gave her, who “*gave me an idea on what to expect in the academic life as well as how to be cautious around older people*”.

The secondary purpose of O-Week events is to allow students to socialise with their new peers. My participants expressed that in-person events made it easier to communicate with the administration and made it possible to socialise with other students on broader platforms. R59 responded that these events, “*played a key role in getting one to break out of their shell, they were highly informative as well*”. The social events helped my participants to make friends beyond their residences and digs, which was necessary for their well-being and peace of mind, R52 wrote:

“I found these events helpful because I made a lot of friends, friends that I do the same modules with. Some of these events were very fun, they were icebreakers and made me comfortable, and they made me believe in myself, and they reassured me that I do belong here, that my hard work has brought me to be here”.

While socialisation is a secondary purpose, it plays a key role in creating students' social ties to universities through their peers and friends. The basis of this relationship is mediated in the commonality individuals find between each other, besides being RU students, through the shared experience of activities. Many of these activities encourage students to get to know each other (ice-breakers).

Finally, events like Extravaganza and RUJamming are purely for socialisation and fun. Extravaganza is an event that provides students with insight into student life outside of the lecture venue and within the university’s official extracurricular activities. The Friday night

before lectures begin, student-led societies and sports clubs advertise themselves to entice first-years to sign up (for a fee). Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE), a division of RU, advertise its student volunteer programmes, which students can join for free. In 2020, the Extravaganza was held in the Great Hall due to rain, unlike Great Field. However, it was still a well-attended event and a “*great way to meet people and get excited about the university experience beyond academics*” (R24). RUJamming (an SRC event) was another (social) event that students found useful. Students appreciated the fun they had with the competition, from working with their residence members in planning and rehearsing their act to performing. Blue especially enjoyed the activities, remarking that “*RUJamming and serenades⁶⁰ are a beautiful thing*”. The more fun and informal aspect of O-Week was also brought forth. Sibanye became involved with what she termed her “*prospectus life.*” If there was a university-organised event, she would get involved during O-Week and continue to do so into the first term until its abrupt end.

In contrast, the Oppies, apart from the G22s, felt they did not have as strong a welcome to the university community. This was attributed to the lack of activities arranged by the Oppidan Committee or poor execution of any activities arranged for the first-year cohort that did not consider the needs and logistics for Oppies to participate. As such, the Oppies lacked the support that House Comm members gave the residence students in transitioning from high school learners to university students. This then lengthens the liminal phase as Oppies navigate studenthood with little guidance. With the emphasis of RU being a residential university,

⁶⁰Attempted to be re-branded as ‘Meet n Greets’, these are when the first years of residences meet under a pre-arranged time to meet fellow first years. Normally, this includes performing a rehearsed chant or song followed by some socialising. Considered as hazing (see De Klerk (2013)), the name was changed from serenades (which in my first year referred to heteronormative patriarchal behaviour) to meet and greets but as indicated, by the time Blue arrived, the name remained informally as serenades.

Oppies are the non-traditional university student, which aligns with current literature on the need for universities to create programmes dedicated to their non-traditional students (Koetsier, 2009).

6.3.2. (Dis)connection under COVID-19 conditions

The first point of social disconnection began to occur in 2020. In addition to the G20 ‘COVID friendships’ formed online only to disintegrate with the return to campus, the students did not feel any connection or familiarity with staff members. The G20s also felt that lecturers did not understand their lived experience and how they approached their courses. Tendai expressed the impersonal nature she felt one politics lecturer had over Zoom; “*Like who are you? No introduction, no nothing. What if we are being lectured by students?*”. The academic-focused lectures online lack the *incoko* or organic spark of academic and social engagement between students and lecturers that Mkhize et al. (2021) discussed. The G20s felt a disconnect from their expectations of their studenthood, of being in-person and on campus as they were initially inducted into, and the reality of their first year which was mediated through a screen hundreds of kilometres from fellow members of the RU environment.

For the G21s, unlike the G20s and G22s, online orientation became *the* orientation into the university, with the official programme run through the DSA, faculty and departments occurring online. Students remained in their place of residence and attended O-Week events through Zoom. Juliet⁶¹ noted that the experience was somewhat disconnected because, in many instances, students were muted in the webinar, which the host controlled. Questions could be typed into the chat or question box, but the interaction was limited. Sometimes, the presenter

⁶¹ Who worked in the DSA on the O-Week 2021 project as an intern.

did not turn their camera on, which added to the impersonal atmosphere. My participants said they chose to attend contact universities because it is an important learning experience. Connecting with academics and peers is essential and enhances the experience. My participants said the online experience felt cold, detached, and impersonal, often resulting in a negative experience. Juliet explained that the G21s were “*left to fend for themselves*”.

G21s highlighted the lack of socialising and interaction during their first year; “*no socialising, no friends, no nothing*” (Don). Don remembers how scared she was when two of her housemates tested positive. As someone who describes themselves as anti-social, Don said that the conditions she found herself in exacerbated it. Don spent most of her time in her room, only going outside one to two hours a day, with most of her social contact occurring through phone calls. In addition to this, her anxiety about academics made Don want to “*quit school and go back home*”. Don eventually made friends in her residence, which helped her cope with general situations. Other participants, however, were not as fortunate. Both Nande and Sihle’s ambitions to form study groups did not materialise.

Nande made a few friends in her residence, but like the G20s, she made virtual COVID friendships with people in her online tutorial groups. Due to Sihle’s late registration and subsequent late arrival at the residence, it took a while for her to make friends in her residence. Despite her wish for a study group, Sihle also mentioned that “*I don’t work in group settings*”, preferring to have one or two close friends. Sihle’s residence promotes self-study and she thought “*maybe if I had made a close group of friends, like we were intimate, and we challenge each other, I would love that. But it doesn’t happen a lot.*”

Meaningful connections between students and staff members occurred during the lockdown periods when House Comm and wardens deliberately chose not to follow the regulations set by the government or RU. The G22s highlighted the importance of the residence warden and

House Comm as beneficial to their Orientation experience. Specifically, sub-wardens and House Comm helped them transition into university, with, for many, it being the first time they had been away from home. The House Comm helped make students feel “*comfortable and settle in easily and quicker. They also filled the void of feeling alone, since it was the first time I was away from my family*” (R4) and helped new students “*know more of what to expect and they helped us prepare ourselves for the first term*” (R36). Students were also not allowed to have guests in their rooms, which was another form of rule-breaking. Don, who describes herself as shy, said:

“The only friends that I had was in my res, it was for first-years. So when we got there, I think it’s the culture – the house [com] members made sure we spent a lot of time together because they were friends. So we [first-years] also wanted to be friends because we spent time together. That’s how we survived. So sometimes we’d sneak into each other’s rooms when we’re not feeling okay and then try and talk. And you know, we’re doing this against the rules of the university. The fear of being caught, because that’s scary”.

To Don, there was an unavoidable necessity to breaking the rules about how many people are allowed in a room that overrides the fear of being punished, “*If I’m breaking the rules, we’re breaking the rules because we’ve got to, that’s how we pulled through*”. Don’s experience of sisterhood in residence occurred in illicit territory as opposed to Sunflower, who was allowed to create bonds of connections openly.

Some of my other participants, specifically the G20s, recalled requesting permits from Rhodes to return to campus to experience groove⁶². Sibanye commented that people in her residence

⁶² Colloquialism to refer to a place with music to dance to and alcohol available to drink.

were “*only applying for certain things. I know some ladies in my res were playing, saying there's no network at home, we live in a two bedroom. But they only just wanted to come back to go out*”. To access the university experience, students had to convince the university to let them back onto campus by sometimes lying to get through the campus gatekeeping. Sibanye also remembers that in 2020, students in her residence group chat complained that the recent string of permit applications being banned was due to the behaviour of the returned students going out and, hence the increased danger of infections in residences. Buhle mentioned that the asynchronous, online nature of how academic activity operated during the pandemic resulted in students having more free time on their hands. One of the ways that they spent this time was going out; “*People had more time for groove like every week, even during the week, not just the weekend. And it was very heavy, like in terms of groove in 2021, was good, I guess people were bored. So that was the idea of fun and passing time*”. Qambela and Lupindo (2021) concur that the ‘risky’ behaviour of groove provided a release from the stress and grief that comes from living through a global pandemic while seeking necessary human, physical connection in a period that prohibited.

Once back on campus and in residence, students had another restriction to overcome: curfew. Mandated by the government and enforced by RU, breaking curfew was the most notable form of rule-breaking. Beyond the Campus Protection Unit (CPU)⁶³ and SAn police officers enforcing the rule, RU used biometrics to enforce a curfew. Every time a student enters their residence, they must scan their finger, which keeps a time log. Leaving the building, however, only required one to unlatch the door from the inside. An 'inside person' was needed to bypass

⁶³ Security and law and rule enforcement on campus, comprised of both Rhodes employed staff and security officers from the contracted private security company, Hi-Tech.

the system and not be tracked. A friend would open the residence door from the inside, and there would be no record of the student breaking curfew. Blue said “*we were doing the weirdest things. Man, if you were going out and you knew that it was going to be a wild one, you’d have to text back which friend is back in res so that they can come and open the door for you*”. Sihle noted how this caused friction between those who stayed in, or returned on time, and those who did not, “*I think it puts strain on social relations as well ... They were standing outside and making a noise knocking on my window ‘please open for us’*”.

2022 O-Week events were a mix of in-person events and activities and online events (such as introductory lectures). The Library Orientation⁶⁴ was the event that had the most participants, and my participants also believed it to be the most helpful. According to R34, the Library Orientation was “*personally the only time I got to engage with the campus and other students*”. The G22 focus group noted that they did feel welcomed and supported by the student community. Aphiwe notes that the friends they made and “*freedom is the major thing that makes the difference*” helped her settle into the space. Fundwisa noted the importance of House Comm, specifically in her case, highlighted the importance of the Oppidan Committee of 2022, saying that “*com members made us feel so, so at home*”. Fundwisa also mentioned that regarding the larger student community, her identity as an LGBTQIA++ member was something she could express in public on campus, “*You could see some people were in the closet, maybe they gave you a platform where you could just be yourself and be free without having to face repercussions*”.

⁶⁴ Just over a thousand signatures were counted at the end of the first day.

6.3.3. Institutional Isolation

To hammer at this point, RU is a residential university in a small town. All my participants, save Jean, had to physically move to the small town of Makhanda and take up residency either on campus in a residential hall or off-campus rental properties colloquially referred to as 'digs'. Students have to make a dramatic move to become a student, and O-Week events emphasise becoming an RU student. O-Week encourages students to build relationships with their peers and connect to RU as a place. O-Week encourages they create a sense of belonging, of RU to be a second home for the student to be at ease and open for self-reflection and development (Mallet, 2004). The sense of belonging, of an emotional, psychological and sometimes physical connection, is often mediated through membership or ownership of a place (Antonsich, 2010). O-Week provides membership through registration, and student ID card provides campus tours to familiarise students. The official programme emphasises the positives of being a RU student through a fun experience. The student builds a relationship with RU's physical campus and RU as a space, a community and an institution.

COVID-19 disrupted the relationship building between students and the university. This was to the point of animosity expressed by my participants. The G21s noted the limitations placed on O-Week, and what was missing was noted by students like Don, who heard about the fun had by her G20 friend, with R18 (G21) noting that "*we didn't get an O-week like the G22s' - ours was so boring which is one of the reasons I hate this place*". It was often RU, the institution made of upper management, who contributed to the negative relationship between the university and students, especially with the intense focus on saving the academic year. This led to intense feelings of disembodiment and isolation. Buhle explained:

"I'll never forgive this university for what they put us through in 2020 because they were expecting a lot from us as first-years when we're so isolated from our lecturers

and tutors. We are coming straight from high school, we're used to the environment of having teachers in front of us teaching you on the board. So now to have the same expectations, but was so far from it... It was just it was too hard."

Buhle blames the university for the mental toil the G20's had to negotiate through in 2020. This negative relationship between student and university is not novel in SA, as seen by the #FeesMustFall movements since 2015, nor at RU with the Reference list protest of 2016⁶⁵. Even without the pandemic, there is nothing to say that students would have been guaranteed to have a good relationship with the university as a place. G20s like Buhle might have become jaded towards the university regardless in a world without the pandemic. However, the pandemic, and the administration's' response, that has become a focal point of student's disgruntlement with the university. They registered for an experience that the university, under government order, could not provide. It is not the fault of either party, but at the end of the day as R43 (G20) noted, "*COVID robbed us off that experience. We can't really say we know the 'varsity life'*".

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter explored how social connections and *communitas* were not leveraged during the transition into studenthood. As demonstrated in the G20 cohort, O-Week plays a vital role in establishing a space for students to form relationships. These spaces are either built into the programme or are a secondary, accidental effect. *Communitas* creates a support network for the student and a social connection to the university through the student's investment and interest in the university's social community. However, these social spaces did not translate

⁶⁵ A student protest against the mishandling of sexual assault and rape cases by RU management and larger rape culture at RU in 2016 (Mail and Guardian, 2016).

through the online medium of how academic activity was conducted from 2020 to June 2022.
This resulted in students feeling disconnected from their peers, lecturers and institution.

Chapter 7: Discussion and conclusion of the study

This study was interested in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the orientation process for incoming first-year students and assesses the students' abilities to integrate into university processes, structures and communities during this period. It is argued that there is a limited understanding of the implications of the national and institutional COVID-19 responses for first-year students' ability to integrate effectively into university life. It sought to answer the question:

What has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the orientation process for incoming first-year students, and how has the student's integration into the university community been affected?

Related to these objectives, the study was framed by the following questions:

- How were university orientation processes for first-year students impacted by COVID-19?
- How have students' ability to integrate into university structures been impacted by COVID-19?
- How has student life (defined as student culture, community and identity) been shaped by the onset of COVID-19?

COVID-19 had a profound impact on orientation processes, as demonstrated in Chapter 5. Depending on which year students entered between 2020-2023 determined their experience. The G20s, who enjoyed their O-Week before the pandemic resulted in the sudden shutdown and evacuation of the university towards the end of the first term, felt distressed with the emergency transition to online teaching and learning (T&L) and felt they were unequipped

with the necessary skills. The G21s, allowed on campus but confined mainly to their rooms for O-Week and academic activities in general, faced social isolation and disappointment at not having the student experience of attending face-to-face (f2f) classes, which they had envisioned for themselves. The G22s, in contrast, had their first year when the pandemic and government restrictions were lifting, enjoyed the social in-person aspect of their hybrid O-Week but did not see the relevance of the online aspect as the return to 'normal' academics.

COVID-19 also impacted the integration of students, primarily my G20 and G21 cohorts, into university structures. For the G20s and G21s, in addition to the disappointment of online academics, it was a distressing space having to re-orientate themselves to online learning. They felt disconnected and unsupported from the university academically and holistically. The 'return' to 'normal' had the G20s and G21s feeling like first-years again having had to navigate various learning environments and finally a fully f-2-f student experience for the first time. This, too, caused them stress whereby they had to learn a new student craft to keep up with the demands of in-person learning. The G21s, second-year students at the time of data collection, were excited about being able to have their 'real' student experience in 2022, while my G20 participants (in their third and exit year of study) had a mixed response, from feelings of animosity towards the university, acknowledging their unique position, and looking ahead to their future as postgraduate students.

Student life, due to COVID-19, was nebulous and experienced differently. The G22s felt secure in their process of becoming students, with my G22 participants noting the support of their community being a crucial aspect of their student identity. This is because they were allowed to celebrate and experience *communitas*. In Chapter 6, the importance of O-Week for creating *communitas* was discussed, and how *communitas* could not be transformed onto the virtual world. Finding connections to the university and with peers was significantly harder for them to do. Regarding student culture, the G20s were aware that they lack institutional knowledge

because they were away from campus for most of their education. The creation of a COVID student culture maybe seen in covert groove, COVID friendships and different routines. For the studenty identity of the G20s and G21s, in 2022 they felt like student, or mostly, in 2022. This is due to after a significant time spent in the liminal state of COVID-19, G20 and G21 students eventually began to be incorporated into studenthood, finally being able to think of and present themselves as university students in the traditional sense.

The contribution of this study is in how this study framed orientation as a rite of passage. I do acknowledge that putting the words “orientation” and “initiation” in the same sentence is contentious in South Africa. To do so, regardless, adds more depth into the contemporary conversation surrounding the importance of Orientation Week for students holistically. Using *communitas*, I argue that orientation is not a top-down process which contributes to the importance of peer socialisation and connections. Perceiving orientation as a rite of passage also allows for the acknowledgment that it is not a limited, once-off process that occurs in a week. Orientation, from the student perspective, takes a semester or even years depending on the university environment and the student’s unique background and journey through higher education (HE). My study may be of benefit for the university when they are considering designing student services and programmes.

My research aimed to provide student voices a chance to speak on their first-time student experience during a global pandemic. It started out as a way to understand the “poor first-year students”, but I possess genuine respect for the tenacity and resilience of all students, especially my participants, who had to navigate their first-year in an already tumultuous HE landscape the uncertainty compounded by the pandemic. I hope that this thesis stands as a testament of their journey.

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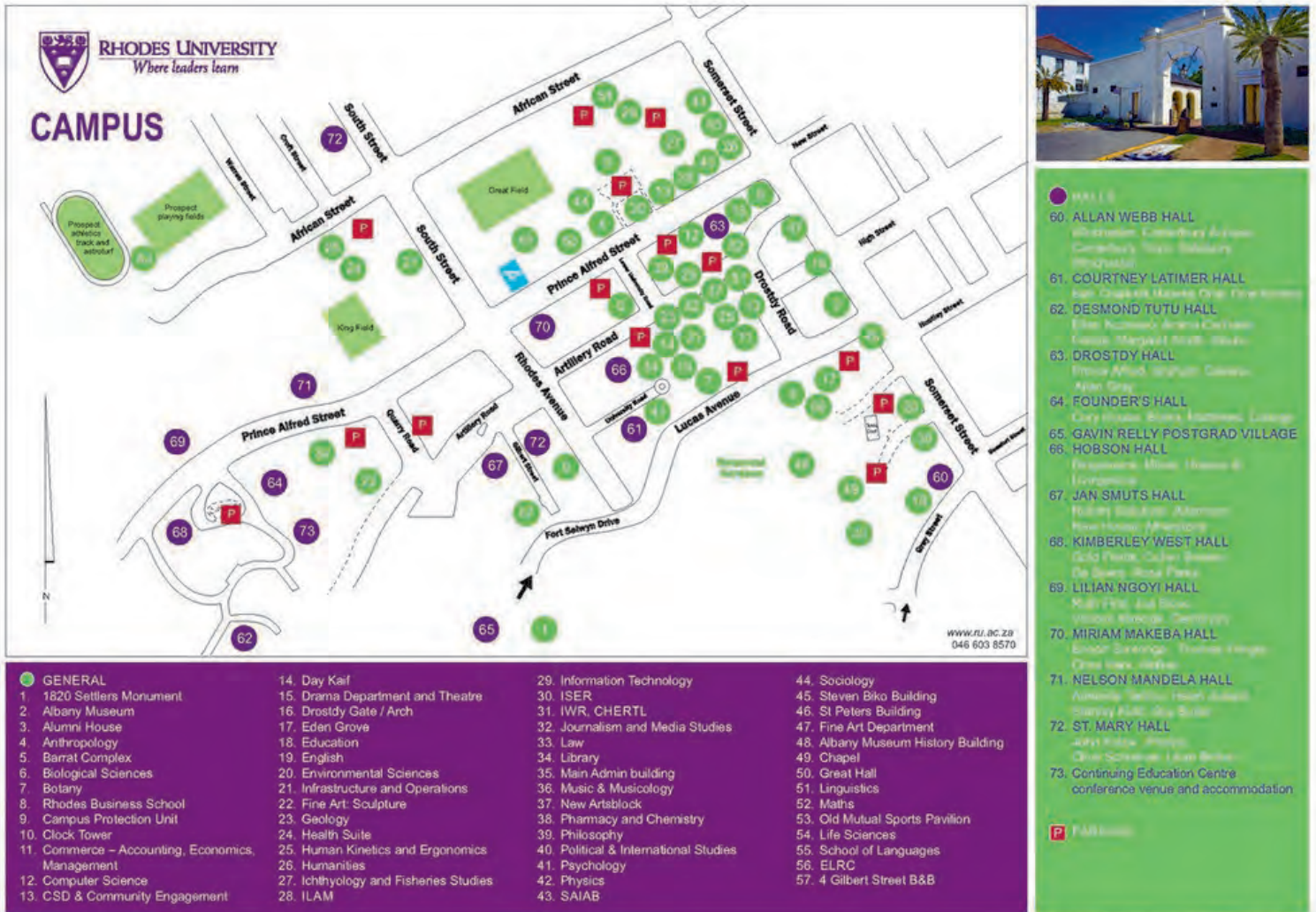
Appendix A: COVID-19 alert levels

	Alert Levels				
	Alert Level 1	Alert Level 2	Alert Level 3	Alert Level 4	Alert Level 5
Objective	Most normal activity can resume under precautionary health guidelines	Physical distancing and leisure and social activity restrictions to prevent resurgence	Restrictions on many activities, including work, to address high transmission	Extreme precautionary measures taken to limit community transmissions with limited normal activity allowed	Drastic measures taken to contain spread and save lives
Restrictions	Most everyday activity can resume under guidelines (i.e. social distancing and face masks required when outside dwelling).	Physical distancing and restrictions on social and leisure activities to prevent resurgence. Curfew in place. Face masks required when outside dwelling.	Restrictions on many everyday activities (including work), services and goods to prevent transmission. Curfew in place. Face masks required when outside dwelling.	Extreme precaution to prevent community outbreaks with limited services and good available. Those who can work from home, must. Curfew in place. Face masks required when outside dwelling.	Only essential goods and services available. Only essential workers able to work. Curfew in place. Face masks required when outside dwelling.
When in place	21 September 2020 – 28 December 2020 1 March 2021-30 May 2021 1 October 2021-4 April 2022	18 August 2020- 20 September 2020 31 May 2021-15 June 2021 13 September 2021-30 September 2021	1 June 2020-17 August 2020 29 December 2020-28 February 2021 17 June 2021-27 June 2021 26 July 2021-12 September 2021	1 May 2020-31 May 2020 16 June 2021 28 June 2021-25 July 2021	26 March 2020-30 April 2020
Students allowed to return to	All not invited previously but within the	All students who used laboratory and specialised	Final year undergraduate students; postgraduate	Fourth-year pharmacy; Clinical and Counselling	None

RU campus 2020	50% venue capacity limit (Mabizela, 2020f)	technical equipment; ll honours students; Bachelor of Laws third and fourth year students; Journalism third and fourth year students; Accounting 1 students who needed access to special computer programming, and; Postgraduate diploma course students, namely; journalism, media management, enterprise management and business analysis (Mabizela, 2020d).	students, who required the use of laboratories and special equipment for their courses, as well as students who needed practical training; students undergoing their Postgraduate Certificate in Education in the Education faculty who had teaching practicals, and; students in the Commerce department set to write national board exams (Mabizela, 2020d).	psychology Master's students; and pharmacy doctorate students based in national hospitals were allowed to return to campus and to their internship programmes (Mabizela, 2020d).	
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(South African Government, 2023)

Appendix B: A Map of Rhodes University



(Rhodes University, 2019b)

Appendix C: Questionnaire

1.1. Student number:

Please select which student

g20 g21 g22

1.2. Age:

What is your age: _____

1.3. Please select which faculty you belong to:

Humanities Science Commerce Education Pharmacy Law

1.4. Please select if you stay in university residence hall or off-campus (Oppidan)

Residence Oppidan

1.5. Please write down your gender identity: _____

1.6. Please write down your racial identity: _____

Questions

2.1. What were your expectations of coming to university? Please write down for:

2.1.1. Orientation week:

2.1.2. First semester:

2.2. How did you form these expectations? Select all applicable

- Media (TV, Movies)
- Social Media (Tiktoks, YouTube, vlogs, Face Book)
- Family and friends stories
- Books
- University recruiters
- High School teachers
- Other:

2.3. For g21 and g22s, did Covid-19 have an impact on expectations for university. If yes, please elaborate:

- No

- Yes: _____

Orientation week:

3.1. Did your experience of orientation week meet your expectations?

-Yes

-No

3.4.1. Why did you answer so?

3.4.2. What activities of O-Week did you participate in? Select all applicable.

- Talks by University administration

-Talks by Student Representative Council (SRC)

-Talks by faculty deans

-Residence meetings with wardens, sub-wardens and house committee

- Library tour

-Introductory lectures and talks

-Online orientation

- SRC events

- None

3. 4.3. Which of the above events did you find helpful to getting use to the university space?
Select all applicable.

- Talks by University administration

-Talks by SRC

-Talks by faculty deans

-Residence meetings with wardens, sub-wardens and house committee

- Library tour

-Introductory lectures/talks

-Online orientation

- SRC events

-None

3.4.3.1. Please write down why you found the event(s) helpful.

3. 4.4. Which of the above events you did not find helpful to getting use to the university space? Select all applicable.

- Talks by University administration
- Talks by SRC
- Talks by faculty deans
- Residence meetings with wardens, sub-wardens and house committee
- Library tour
- Introductory lectures/talks
- Online orientation
- SRC events
- None

3.4.4.1. Please write down why found the event(s) unhelpful.

3.5. Did you feel that Covid-19 affected the efficacy of the Orientation week

- Yes
- No

3.5.1. Why?

3.6. Do you have anything else to add about your experience of the orientation week?

- No
- Yes:

First Semester of First year:

4.1 Did you first semester helpful in integrate into student life? Please elaborate why?

-No:

-Yes:

4.2.1. Which academic activities where you able to participate in? Please select all applicable:

- Lectures

- Tutorials
- Seminars
- Lecturer's office hours
- Laboratory practices
- Other:

4.2.2 Did you participate in additional academic programmes offered by departments and the library? If yes, please write down which ones:

4.2.3 Did you partake in any of the SRC run events?

- No

- Yes: _____

4.2.4. Did you participate in any residence events?

- No

- Yes: _____

4.2.5. Did you participate in activities of: Please select all applicable:

- Sport

- Society organisations

- Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE)

4.2.5.1 If yes, which one and which activities:

- Sport: _____

- Society organisations: _____

- RUCE: _____

4.3. Did these events impact you becoming a student?

- Yes

- no

- maybe

4.3.1 Was it a positive impact? Why?

4.4. What did event did you wish was available for first year students during your year?

4.4.1. Why?

4.5. Did you think the COVID-19 adjustments impacted on the events efficacy? Please indicate which one and please write down which ones and why:

- Academic activities:

- SRC events:

- Sport/Society/RUCE:

Appendix D: Interview Schedules

Student Interview Schedule

1. What year did you start your first year at Rhodes University?
2. Which Faculty are you in?
3. What was your impression for how your first year would be like?
4. How did you come to these ideas?
5. How did COVID-19 impact your first year?
 - 5.1.Choice of university?
 - 5.2.During your first year?
 - 5.3.Your perception of what your first year would be like?
6. What were you looking forward to in your first year? Was this met?
7. How did you find the adaptation to COVID-19?
8. Did you feel that something was lost in the adaptation?
9. Were there anything you felt the university could do to make the adaptation to COVID-19 better?
10. How do you understand what a student is?
11. Do you feel like a student?
12. Did the university help you become a student?

Staff Interview Schedule

1. What is your position in the university?
2. How long have you been in your position?
3. How does your position result in your interaction with first year students?
4. How did COVID-19 affect this interaction?
5. Did this change over time?
6. Did you think that COVID-19 affect this interactions effectiveness?

Appendix E: Ethical Clearance



Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee
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e: s.mangele@ru.ac.za
NHREC Registration number: RC-241114-045

<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>

22/10/2021

Kelsey Nebbe

Email: g17n4274@campus.ru.ac.za

Review Reference: 2021-5075-6313

Dear Ms Shabnam Shaik

Title: Becoming: The journey of Rhodes University first year students formation of identity through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Principal Investigator: Ms Shabnam Shaik

Collaborator: Ms Kelsey Nebbe

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee (RU-HEC). Your Approval number is: 2021-5075-6313

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.

Please ensure that the ethical standards committee is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the ethical standards committee should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloguing number allocated.

Sincerely,

Prof Arthur Webb

Chair: Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee, RU-HEC

cc: Ms Danielle de Vos - Ethics Coordinator

Appendix F: An O-Week poster

RHODES UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
FIRST YEAR
O-WEEK 2021

WELCOME TO THE AMAZING PLACE!



zoom link to follow shortly

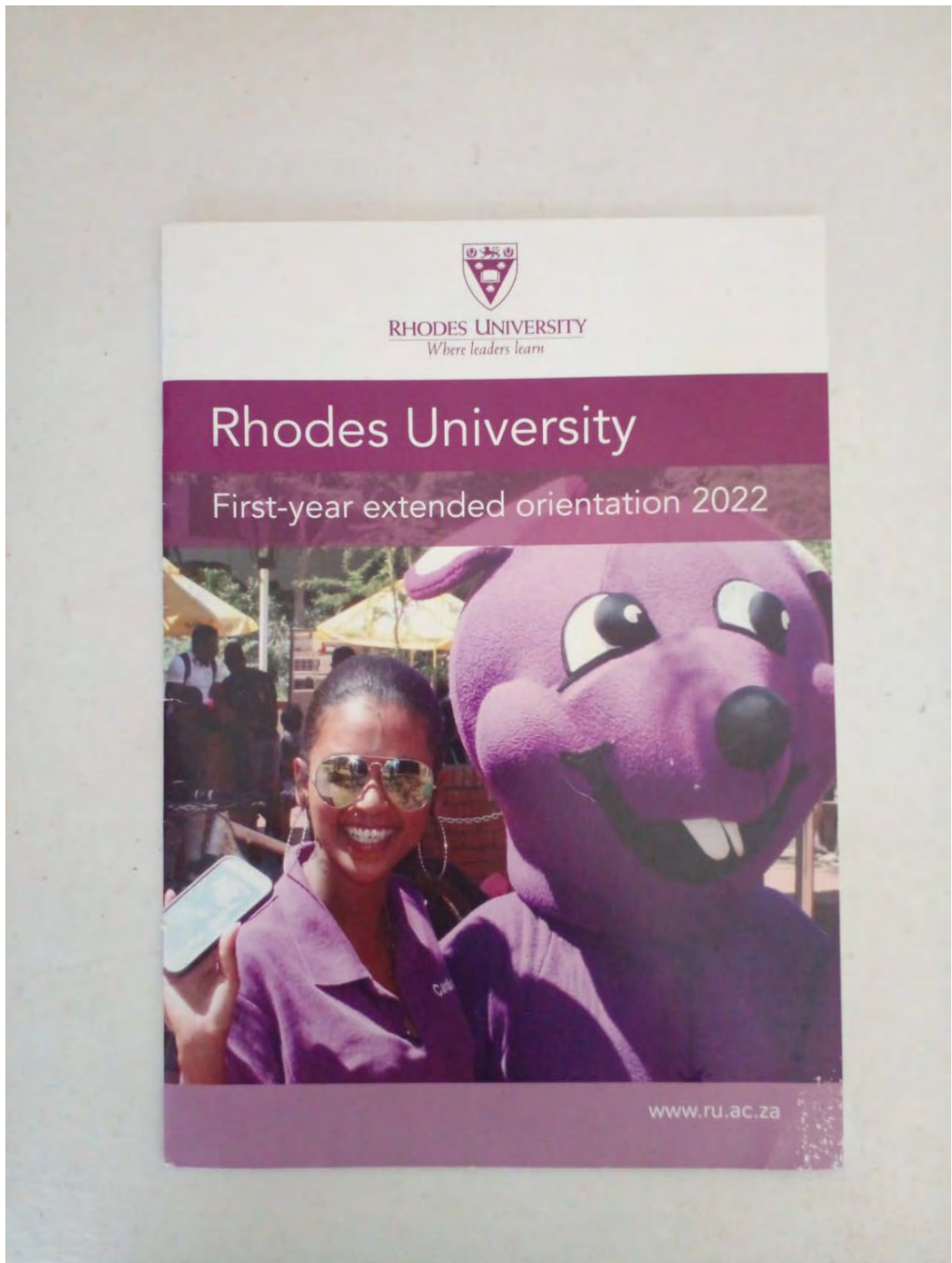


DATE & TIMES
10 & 11 MARCH 2021
16H30 TO 17H30

participate in our online poll and stand a chance to win great prizes !!!

(Rhodes University, 2021d)

Appendix G: Picture of DSA First-year extended orientation 2022



(Photo by Kelsey)

Appendix H: Turnitin Report

feedback studio Melusi Dlamini Kelsey Nebbe MA Manuscript

Match Overview 3%

Preface: higher education, the 'student journey' and COVID-19 disruptions

This study has been in the making for over a decade. My first 'taste of university life' and exposure to Higher Education (HE) happened when I was selected to participate in the University of the Witwatersrand (2023) Targeting Talent Programme/Development in June 2014 with other learners from my school in East London. This programme aimed to provide learners from disadvantaged schools across the county with opportunities to prepare them for university. During the June/July vacation, we ran around for two weeks at the University of the Witwatersrand, attending advanced classes in STEM¹ subjects, Social Sciences (incidental my first exposure to Anthropology) and academic English. This experience proved to be a pivotal moment in my personal and educational development. I still maintain that nothing I subsequently faced during my studies has been more challenging than those two weeks. Consequently, my enrolment in the programme sparked my interest in the 'student journey'.

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