



# It has given us a title: Identity-transitions in first-generation students at a South African university

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## Abstract

Most South African students are the first in their families to attend higher education. Like students across the world, they negotiate various personal, relational, and cultural transitions while at university. First-generation South African students are confronted with unique challenges during these transitions. In this study, we explored the salient identity experiences of first-generation university students in South Africa. A group of 17 first-generation students participated in interviews to share their experiences, which were analysed using a descriptive phenomenological approach. First-generation status was an essential marker and critical component of the identity of the students and their families. Being accepted to university was seen as a family achievement and signified not only an academic opportunity but hope for a better future. In their family relationships, participants had to negotiate carefully the expectation to respect their role as their parents' children while simultaneously taking on the responsibility of breaking the generational cycle of poverty. In contrast, the freedom of the university environment, the experience of belonging to campus culture, and what might be called a new family of university friends supported identity transition processes. While most participants experienced the university as an inclusive and enabling environment, they remarked on the conflicting demands of the westernised systems prominent on campus and their African cultural values. The findings of this research study emphasise the value of the university context as a space for authentic identity transitions and the importance of creating spaces where personal, relational, and cultural identities can be negotiated.

**Keywords:** first-generation students, identity transitions, personal, relational, and cultural identities

## Introduction

Being a university student is often seen as an exciting and memorable time of life when young people experience new opportunities to grow and build a foundation for the future. While students engage with the academic challenges of higher education, they contend with various cultural transitions (i.e., the social adjustments between their home and campus lives) and identity transitions (i.e., negotiating a deeper and more nuanced sense of self). This is especially true for first-generation students who are the first in their families to attend a South African university (Liversage et al., 2018; Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). The aim of this study was to explore the salient identity experiences of first-generation university students in South Africa. In the following section, we situate the study and present the rationale for the research by providing an overview of: first-generation student status and the South African higher education context; the construction of identity during the student years; the role of family relationships during first-generation students' transition to university; and university culture.

### First-generation student status and the South African higher education context

In the most recent South African Survey of Student Engagement, 77% of respondents identified as first-generation university students (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023). This is in stark contrast to many developed countries in which first-generation students make up a smaller percentage of university students. This number is high because of historical disadvantages to most of the population who, until the end of Apartheid, had little to no access to higher education. Despite various efforts in the past decades to widen access to higher education and overt commitments to extend success to a more diverse group of South African students, the struggle to transform from a previously exclusive system to being more representative continues (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014).

South African students struggle to adapt to the demands of university and experience high levels of attrition and failure (Motsabi et al., 2020a, 2020b). These challenges and student dissatisfaction with South African higher education are exacerbated by past injustices, inadequate student funding, struggles with post-school unemployment, marginalisation, and feelings of alienation given the lack of familiarity with universities' knowledge systems, delivery modes, and medium of instruction (Mampane et al., 2018). Recent reports show a dropout rate among three-year degree students at about 40% (Council on Higher Education, 2021). The experiences of adapting to university are likely to impact the identities of these students.

There is little extant research on the experiences of first-generation students in South Africa (Heymann & Carolissen, 2011; Motsabi et al., 2020b), particularly on their identity negotiation. Research on South African first-generation students focuses primarily on their inherited disadvantaged status, the impact of their first-generation status on their academic performance, and the related struggles to adjust to university expectations and culture. Understanding how first-generation students experience identity transformation and negotiation has received less scholarly consideration (Badenhorst & Kapp, 2013).

## The construction of identity during the student years

Identities are never fixed but fluid and constructed through representation and positioning in a specific context (Hall, 1997). Campus culture and university life engage diverse groups of young individuals in new environments and with new ideas. Many aspects of the self are thus foregrounded during the student experience (Kamsteeg, 2016). Students between the ages of 18 and 29 (the focus of this research study) are also in a sensitive developmental stage of transitioning into adulthood (Arnett, 2016). As emerging adults, students are responsible for finding a consolidated sense of self (McAdams, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2016). This identity development process is informed by their everyday life experiences, social relations, and societal structures and includes the integration of various personal, relational, and cultural domains (Landberg et al., 2019; Syed & McLean, 2016).

The impact of first-generation status on South African university students' sense of self merits attention. Some international scholars question the influence of first-generation status on university students' sense of self (Orbe, 2004). While some students have reported feeling different from their non-first-generation peers and like institutional outsiders, other students' first-generation identity is not salient (Bettencourt et al., 2022). First-generation students go through a period of adjustment, which is often filled with uncertainty, mainly because they do not learn about university experiences and processes from their parents (Gibbons et al., 2016). As time goes on, however, students move from managing the unfamiliar to learning more about themselves as individuals and developing their personal identity as they are exposed to new experiences (Liversage et al., 2018).

## The role of family relationships during first-generation students' transition to university

Studies have shown that transitioning to university can also influence students' relationships at home and in their home communities, which, in turn, can influence the students' sense of self and belonging (Alcock & Bellugi, 2018; Barry et al., 2009; Bettencourt et al., 2022; Capannola & Johnson, 2022). One way in which first-generation students can integrate their university and home cultures is by staying involved in their home communities and getting so-called cheerleading support from community members (Motsabi et al., 2020b). Alcock and Bellugi (2018) found that students embraced their academic identity and the social capital it brought when in their home communities.

While first-generation students often credit their families with providing the support necessary for their success at university (Capannola & Johnson, 2022), they have also reported tension at home. Barry et al. (2009) found that these students discuss their university experiences significantly less with family and friends than do non-first-generation students. This perhaps can be explained by the study conducted by Liversage et al. (2018) in which South African students reported that their parents without higher education struggled to identify with their experiences.

## University culture

Another aspect of identity that may be affected by the transition to university is the cultural differences between home and university (Maseko, 2019). First-generation students often experience a mismatch between university culture that values independence and self-expression and home cultures that are collectivistic in nature, and this adds complexity to the university experience (Chang et al., 2020). South African universities are westernised, despite most students belonging to African cultures that are more collectivistic in nature (Maseko, 2019). South African students have expressed that Western culture on campus is too prominent, resulting in the need to negotiate the conflicting demands of university and their African cultures (Liversage et al., 2018). For first-generation students, adapting to university is adapting essentially to a culture vastly different from their own (Badenhorst & Kapp, 2013). For many of these students, this is the first time they have been exposed to cultural diversity on a large scale (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). Feeling othered or excluded because of differences shapes perceptions (Hall, 1997) and thus impacts the identity constructions of first-generation South African students.

Especially in post-colonial African contexts, western-oriented universities should consider carefully the connections between the self, the social, the political, and the ecological contexts in education (Belluigi, 2023). The construction and pursuit of knowledge should be relevant to the context, and students should be able to recognise themselves and their lives in what they learn at university (Mathebula, 2019). This relates to a strong call from prominent African scholars for transformation, decolonisation, and Africanisation (Mampane et al., 2018; Ramose, 2004) in the form of an African Movement (Masilela in Ngqulunga et al., 2024) towards an *Ubuntu* philosophy of higher education (Waghid, 2020). These efforts should extend beyond changes in policies, power structures, ideologies, knowledge production, and curriculum design (Knaus et al., 2022; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014; Lustig, 2016; Mathebula, 2019). It will require an ongoing process of rigorous and deliberate engagement between and among committed educators, will need attentiveness to others and otherness, the interdependence of identity negotiations, and finding humaneness in education (Mampane et al., 2018; Ramose, 2004, 2016; Waghid, 2020). It is an ethical necessity that students should feel recognised and respected and that their sense of self be promoted (Ramose, 2016), rather than experience a sense of inferiority when they struggle to transition into the higher education system (Mampane et al., 2018).

From the arguments above, it is thus clear that, for first-generation students in South Africa, the transition to university is a period of change that will likely impact their personal identities and relationships. However, little research has been conducted on students' perceptions of their emerging identities, particularly in South Africa, where fewer students successfully transition to university from school.

## Research methods

We employed a phenomenological lens to understand the salient identity experiences of South African students who are the first to attend university in their families. Since a

phenomenological approach foregrounds the shared experiences surrounding a phenomenon and the meanings participants ascribe to these experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), we regarded it as the most appropriate approach to the study. We followed a participatory peer design (Lushey & Munro, 2015). The research team identified 12 postgraduate students from the institution based on their academic merits, research competence, and interest in the field of identity studies. They received training to recruit participants and collect the data. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution's General Human Research Ethics Committee.<sup>1</sup>

### Sampling, recruitment, and participants

First-generation students from the three campuses of the University of the Free State (Qwaqwa, South, and Bloemfontein campuses) were recruited to participate in the study. A broad definition of first-generation status was adopted and included any student whose parents/guardians did not have any formal education after high school, which meant that neither of their parents had graduated from a university before them (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023). The trained peer researchers (postgraduate students) used their networks to purposively sample volunteer participants. In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used. The final sample (N=17) consisted of 10 females and seven males, with an average age of 22 years (age range: 18 to 29). Participants were from various ethnolinguistic groups and reported the following as their home languages: Sesotho=7, isiXhosa=3, xiTsonga=2, isiZulu=2, Setswana=1, Afrikaans=1, and Sepedi=1. All participants were full-time students; 12 were registered for undergraduate and five for postgraduate studies in various programmes (including Education, Agriculture, Mathematics, and Social Work).

### Data collection

To obtain detailed descriptions of the phenomenon (salient identity experiences of first-generation students), conversational-style interviews were conducted, as are often used in phenomenological research (Willis et al., 2016). Open-ended, non-leading questions were asked, such as "What does it mean to your sense of self to be at university?" Since participants were regarded as experts in their own experiences, the researchers applied active listening skills, and asked follow-up questions, based on their descriptions, to reach the core of each participant's experience. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

### Data analysis

Since this phenomenological study aimed to uncover the essence of the lifeworld of the participants, we applied a descriptive phenomenological analytic approach (Finlay, 2014; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Sousa, 2014). We followed guidelines from Giorgi and Giorgi (2003). First, *Read for a Sense of the Whole* (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 251, capitals in original). At the onset of the process, we both gained a holistic sense of the data by reading and rereading the complete data set. Second, *Determination of Parts: Establishing Meaning Units* (Giorgi

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& Giorgi, 2003, p. 252, capitals in original). We commenced the analysis with an intentional coding process of phenomenological reduction during which meaning units were identified. Third, *Transformation of Meaning Units Into Psychologically Sensitive Expressions* (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252, capitals in original). We synthesised meaning units across the data set into clusters (invariant structures) that reveal the nature, dimensions, and significance of participants' experiences. This entailed distilling meaning and interrelated connections in the participants' experiences through eidetic analysis. Fourth, *The Determination of the Structure* (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 253, capitals in original). We structured the experiences into themes that captured essential features of the experience (and their variations). This was articulated in an integrated descriptive report of the phenomenon (see the next section) that balanced analytical claims with participant quotations as an evidentiary base. Throughout the analysis process, we adopted a phenomenological attitude of being open to discovery in aiming to extract and describe the essence of participants' experiences, as Finlay (2014) and Sousa (2014) suggested. By bracketing prior knowledge, assumptions, and taken-for-granted understandings, we focused on meaning as portrayed in each participant's experience. This was facilitated by a cyclical process of individual work (i.e., we first read and coded the transcriptions individually) followed by reflective discussions to synthesise, consolidate, and challenge preliminary thoughts and themes. The fact that we were positioned in different disciplines and university structures, with varied personal backgrounds and professional experiences, served as a form of triangulation.

## Results

The essential features (with their variations) of the participants' identity experiences as first-generation students were structured into four themes, as summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Summary of the themes from the descriptive phenomenological analysis

Theme	Subthemes
1. Finding a renewed sense of self	1.1 To be the first: First-generation status as a new identity 1.2 The other side of me: Recognition of new aspects of the self 1.3 Between who I was and who I will be: The process of becoming
2. Negotiating changing relationships	2.1 In-between a child and a grownup: Evolving family roles 2.2 It doesn't balance anymore: Changing friendships

Theme	Subthemes
3. Being exposed to a new world	3.1 How other people live: University as a diverse space 3.2 Wow, my culture is beautiful: Deepened reflections on cultural identity 3.3 Questioning culture and identity
4. Securing a place in the university community	4.1 The university community as chosen family 4.2 Not really feeling like myself anywhere anymore

We present these four themes (and subthemes) in the following section. We include participant quotations (with minor edits for clarity), with an identifier in brackets (a letter indicating the participant and a number indicating the paragraph in the transcript).

### Theme 1: Personal transitions: Finding a renewed sense of self

Across all the interviews, participants' reflections on their sense of self and the transitions in their personal identity were evident.

#### *1.1 To be the first: First-generation status as a new identity*

Participants described the opportunity to enrol at a university as a critical component of their sense of self. Being a student and, more specifically, being the first gained prominence in their self-definition: "I'm the first in my family to ever come to varsity. Imagine being the first person to break the generational circle. It has enhanced a lot of . . . elements of my identity" (G17). This new identity was not only an essential marker for the individual but also for the family unit they represent: "This [being at university] has even given us a title. . . People who had given up in my family are now inspired" (H9); and: "I am the one who will represent my family. When they talk about people who have went [sic] to university. . . my parents will say, 'Our daughter went to university'" (H7). These statements show that participants regarded their status as a student not only as a personal achievement but saw it as the whole family gaining a new status.

Many participants mentioned that they never imagined this opportunity would become a reality: "I am going places I never imagined I would be. I am coming from a small town. . . to the University of the Free State. That is a huge achievement" (G23); and: "Growing up in kasi [informal term for township], not to shame kasi. . . schools in kasi, they do not necessarily expose you that much to university life 'cause we are surrounded by, as I've said, kasi" (D12). Participants thus regarded acceptance to university as both an achievement and a privilege: "a blessing, a miracle, because not many people have the opportunity to come to university... anything about university just inspires me. . . if you get the opportunity, know that you are privileged very much" (H11). Using terms such as blessing and miracle highlights how rare higher education opportunities are in the communities in which participants grew up.

With statements such as “Varsity changed my life” (P49), participants explained that university life signified more than just an academic avenue. It represented hope: “something to hold on to” (H7), and it gave participants purpose: “I can achieve my dream life” (A12). It encouraged the belief in a better future: “I can do great things” (L8); and: “It means that I have a bright future ahead of me; it means endless possibilities. . . job security. It meant making myself proud. . . making my family proud. It was a lot in one. . . when you get a degree, the world is your oyster” (M14).

### *1.2 The other side of me: Recognition of new aspects of the self*

For most participants, the university created a space in which to recognise new aspects of the self: “Opened a different side of the box” (D18). They reflected on how the university environment deepened their self-perception: “It’s opened up my views on life and the way I am going, and what I want to do and become” (I6); and: “it challenges you mentally. . . you become a different person once you are in university. So, I think it shows different personalities” (D8). Evidence of their growing sense of self was seen in how participants were able to speak about their strong qualities with clarity and confidence: “That’s the kind of person that I believe I am. I’m a leader, a person of influence, I am in the forefront; yes, that’s me” (N14). Participants mentioned many qualities that were unlocked during their time at university. They often referred to being dedicated, focused, and disciplined: “Becoming a university student made me take myself seriously. It made me focused. It made me see the importance of studying. . . reading. . . sitting down and doing your work” (M10). While stressful, university challenges lead to the realisation of participants’ strengths: “It’s strenuous. I believe that being a student has helped me become more resilient” (I6); and: “It means that I’m strong enough to be outside of my comfort zone and go face the world and grow mentally, emotionally, in every way” (C12). Participants experienced the university as “a confidence booster” (I8) and an inspiration: “It makes me optimistic, it is a motivating environment, to see people who are doctors and stuff” (E28). They gained a more positive sense of self: “Babe, you can do it! Whatever it is you wanna achieve, you can achieve it only if you are determined” (Q22). Through this, it is clear that participants adopted a more resilient perspective on life, believing they could achieve success despite challenges.

### *1.3 Between who I was and who I will be: The process of becoming*

Prominent in participants’ reflections was how they experienced the continuous process of growth: “I’m in transition from being a young man to a man” (B8); and: “It’s me becoming who I want to be. I’m getting closer to who I want to be. . . knowing that just one more step and I’ll be where I need to be” (I8). They articulated clearly the experience of “becoming” while not “being there yet.” This process of growing towards a future identity was described as stressful and confusing: “It does somehow put some pressure on you to say you should always keep on growing . . . as time goes on, you realise that this was just part of the experience. You know, I had to learn these things so that I can be a better person” (N18). While participants often mentioned that they are on their way to being who they will be, they also expressed self-doubt and questioned who they are: “Maybe I feel like I’m just living” (A61); and: “Coming here made me kinda doubt myself coz everything is just so hard. It



made me doubt my capabilities” (L4); and: “I’m always questioning myself” (K32). This process of becoming challenged many participants with the paradox of continuity versus change in the self: “I just have to be myself. . . and not let varsity change me and for me to lose myself” (Q66); and: “It is two people having a conversation. . . I would want something with my heart, but my mind would get in the way of me getting it” (E8). Thus, while appreciating university life’s opportunities, participants understood the complexity of achieving their goals and attaining their full potential.

## Theme 2: Negotiating changing relationships

In addition to personal transitions, participants reflected on how their sense of self was challenged through changing relationships.

### *2.1 In-between a child and a grownup: Evolving family roles*

Participants spoke extensively about their changing family relationships with their parents, siblings, and extended family. They articulated various experiences and often expressed conflicting feelings about their role/place in the family. Their experience fluctuated between feelings of comfort and appreciation for a family that supports and respects them to feelings of frustration and isolation when their families failed to acknowledge and accept their growth and identity transformations.

*I will always be my parents’ child:* For many participants, the role of being [their] parents’ child remained prominent. When interacting with their family or visiting home, they often felt like a child again: “At home, I am a child. At home, I’m taken care of. At home, I am fuelled. At home, I am at peace. Home is a place where I can just sit and do nothing. At home, I always feel complete” (M18). They enjoyed being taken care of: “If I say I’m tired. . . I’m hungry. . . everything is taken care of. . . home is a place where I just relax” (M20); and: “I’m this egg that has to be taken care of. . . Everything I need should be attended to” (G33). The familiarity of their home environment was a source of peace, relaxation, and happiness: “Home is at my core. I grew up there, every practice, every rule, every expectation I grew up knowing; there isn’t something new that has just sprung on me” (G45). Some participants found the time away from their family challenging but also mentioned that it strengthened their relationships: “Being by myself made me realise that I actually need family” (L22); and: “Coming to university has made me love my family more” (E34). Participants frequently mentioned the support they received from their families, not only in financial terms but also in the form of guidance and encouragement: “She [mother] calls every day to check up on me. . . they [grandparents] always ask me how is school going” (J22). For many, their connectedness with their family inspired them during their: “darkest days” (D32). Participants were immensely appreciative of their family’s sacrifices: “When it was my time to go to school, they gave me the opportunity even though it was not simple for them” (B16); and: “Everyone is working together to help me out with everything I need for university. So, it actually has brought us even closer than before, and there is family unity” (G27). This support and family unity strengthened participants’ perception that their education is a family (and not a personal) achievement.

*You cannot be a man in another man's house:* Participants' conflict between the comforts of remaining a child (as in the previous subtheme) and aspirations to be an adult was evident. While some participants felt that home is their refuge where they can be fully themselves, other participants became increasingly aware of the need to restrict aspects of themselves when at home: "I am somehow a caged bird" (E32). This feeling was often associated with customs around the need to show respect: "I cannot be fully myself because you cannot be a man in another man's house, so in my father's home, I need to obey his rules. . . whatever he says goes" (E98); and: "I follow my parents' rules. I can't necessarily have that big of a voice. . . because it's seen as disrespect" (I26); and: "they [parents] will be 'you are rude'. . . when you tell your parents the truth" (O48). Some of this was related to stricter value systems at home: "In varsity, I like chasing girls. My granny doesn't know me as a person who like chasing girls . . . at varsity, I eat a lot of junk food and spend money, but at home, I don't" (P57–59). Participants felt conflicted about the expectation to be their old self at home while wanting to express their developing ideas:

People still have an idea of who they think you are. . . each and every year, I grow, and I become a new person, I learn from my mistakes . . . These people don't want to let go of this idea of who you should be (F88–90).

and

You cannot now come with your freeness and put it on them and be like, take it, this is who I am . . . I pray one day I can fully be myself, but obviously, it will not be under their house (I66–80).

Participants experienced tension between their personal growth and their families not honouring/acknowledging their new identities.

*To be a bridge between generations.* Participants often mentioned experiencing a new sense of respect and pride from their family: "They [parents] start to respect me. . . before they were just treating me like any other kid around the village" (B20); and: "I am a person who made them proud, so everyone is looking up to me" (G27). Many participants realised that their education and new knowledge facilitated deeper, adult-to-adult conversations: "Now they see me as an educated person. . . they allow me to engage with them" (B36); and: "We have more intellectual conversations. . . they acknowledge my perception on life, they're asking me questions" (I20–22). They experienced more independence: "I am no longer that child that they all babied. . . they see me as an adult that has seen parts of the world" (E52–58). This was accompanied by expectations to take on new roles and responsibilities. Participants felt pressure from their parents to do well academically (prioritise studying, pass with good marks, and graduate as soon as possible). This pressure was about doing well in their immediate studies and the broader expectation to bring about change in their families: "My family expects me to finish school and get my degree and get a job and actually be something" (L34). Participants realised that their families are counting on them to improve the family's circumstances: "They are looking up to me. . . they see you as a new breadwinner. . . They just say . . . you are going to change the situation and upgrade us" (D

56–60). These family expectations are exceptionally high since these students are the first in their families to have the opportunity to break the generational cycle of poverty.

Participants placed a lot of pressure on themselves to change not only their own lives but also the lives of people who supported them on their journey: “I am the result of other people’s contributions. . . part of it is the reason why I’m here; people who influenced me and helped me, be it emotionally, mentally, financially, physically, and by all means” (N38). Participants explained that the future of the young generation depends on their success: “To be a university student means paving the way for my family members, for the upcoming generation. To believe, to see that there is more to life. . .” (G23); and: “How important I am to the two generations, which is my parent’s generation and the generation of my children, cause I’m the cross bridge between the two generations” (B6). They often placed the responsibility on themselves to act as role models for their siblings, nephews, and nieces. This came with the pressure (often self-allocated) to not disappoint: “I don’t wanna fail them because they have so much faith in me, so that’s why I wanna work hard” (L36); and: “That image of ‘we look up to you’; . . . ‘we believe that you can make it happen’. It always pushes me” (N16).

## *2.2 It doesn’t balance anymore: Changing friendships*

Participants reflected on their changing friendships since becoming students: “It doesn’t have a balance anymore. It’s like it’s invalid. It’s not the same” (A51). While many attempted to maintain contact with their friends from school/home, they felt the quality of their relationships had deteriorated: “We don’t really talk as we used to talk . . . we have become pretty much strangers that know each other” (C18). Various reasons were provided to explain these dwindling relationships. Many participants reflected on how their peer group continued on different pathways after school: “High school was fun. We were all together. . . but obviously, we branched out . . . Everybody decided to go through their own journeys” (I28). They realised that they were tied together by a shared past rather than a shared future: “Our lives took different turns; others are married, others are mothers. . . the only thing that ties us together are the memories of the things that we used to get up to” (M32); and: “Everyone decided to just take their own path and forget about what we had before” (K16).

Participants frequently used the notion of growing apart to describe how personal growth (such as new interests and knowledge) was the cause of the distance they experienced: “We outgrew each other” (F42–44); and: “There is a distance. . . sometimes I feel I changed on them, but sometimes I think they are the ones who have changed on me” (J24). Many participants attributed this to the new world that the university has introduced: “We are in two different worlds; the university exposes a person to a lot . . . me adopting a different lifestyle. . . causes a drift” (G31); and: “In academia, you start seeing things. . . in a different light. . . it’s nothing against you, and it’s nothing against me; it’s just that I’m growing in a certain direction” (I30).

Since many participants had school friends who did not continue to university, they were met with a blend of respect and jealousy. They often felt accused of: “You think you’re better”

(M46); and: “Acting superior” (G41). As they did with their family members, participants restricted their self-expression with friends in fear of being perceived as privileged:

I am not one to really talk about my university experience because I don’t want it to seem as if I am bragging or rubbing it in (F52)

They sometimes feel I’m making myself clever in front of them. . . I told myself that I will never talk with these people about my school things, never (J46)

Does make me feel like an outsider. . . you are speaking a different language. Sometimes you want to talk about academic things, but you cannot because they just do not relate (H29).

All this contributed to a feeling of not knowing where they belong.

### Theme 3: Being exposed to a new world

Beyond relationships with family and friends, participants expressed how their sense of self was extended through encounters with new ideas and cultures. As first-generation students, their experiences were mentioned in contrast to their home environments and often accompanied by a sense of cultural isolation (especially since their parents had not gone through the same experiences).

#### *3.1 How other people live: University as a diverse space*

Participants experienced campus life as a space in which they were exposed to new and diverse ideas, people, and cultures: “You get to learn about the other different cultures . . . that’s how you learn how other people live” (B12). They noted how increased interaction (more than in their home environments) with different races, ethnolinguistic groupings, social classes, and religious groups facilitated the development of open-minded attitudes: “It has made me more open-minded and more free to learn about other people’s cultures or religions, their identities . . . not to be judgmental” (C24). Many participants appreciated cultural differences and mentioned attempts at finding unity in diversity.

There is no right or wrong culture, but you should always be willing to learn. Be open-minded, and you can actually be far more of a better person. . . We all have a common goal, which is being at university studying. . . We are all here to work and to make it work. So, we are at the service of one another (N40-2).

#### *3.2 Wow, my culture is beautiful: Deepened reflections on cultural identity*

Some participants entered university with a strong cultural identity and a sense of cultural connectedness: “I know who I am. I’m someone who’s proud of her culture, where you come from” (O110). These participants felt that their cultural identity had not changed much since becoming a student: “It is still the same. We still perform our rituals, and traditional things. Being a student at the university has not impacted my cultural status in any way” (H23). They saw the university environment as an opportunity to portray their cultural pride: “My culture

is everything to me, because most people know when you say you are Tsonga, they take you like down there, so I wanna represent it . . . I am trying to upgrade it” (O30).

Other participants admitted that they had not contemplated their cultural identity much before they came to university and only realised its importance when exposed to different cultural ideas:

I haven't been very big on culture. . . Before, I was just narrow-minded on the fact that it's so outdated. But now, with growing and learning and hearing other people talk about my culture as a Sotho person, it's, wow, it's beautiful. . . (I48).

Participants explained how exposure to different cultures not only improved their understanding of others but also resulted in deepened reflection on their own cultural identity: “It has made me aware of my culture, it has made me learn more about it and learn more about other cultures and how to respect them” (L38). This often led to a growing appreciation of the value of culture and an interest in learning more: “Made me realise I am not so aware of my culture. . . I need to learn more about it. . . somehow it made me proud of being Xhosa” (E72).

### *3.3 Questioning culture and identity*

Some participants explained how the university challenged their cultural teachings. Exposure to new information made them question what they were taught:

I'm from the Swati tribe. They taught us as girls that you have to get married at a very young age. . . not important for a girl to go to school because you would have a husband and he would be providing for you. . . so when I got here in university it taught me that a girl can be independent without having a man on her side (K24).

These new realisations were a source of confusion and conflict for some: “It has changed... it is negative. Because now I have a lot of questions” (F60-62); and:

That became a point of conflict with my mom because now she's like, ‘Oh, now you think you are better’. . . I'm able to question things now about my own culture or my way of doing things that I don't think relate to who I am now. Maybe then. when I saw it, it made sense, but now it doesn't make sense (M42).

A few participants mentioned that being a member of a cultural minority group on campus created a lack of cultural belonging. Some participants also mentioned the difficulty of integrating cultural practices with being at university: “I can't go to initiation school... I can't make time to go see other people there, because I have lot of work” (P157); and:

I have a calling, and there are certain things I need to do. I have to Uphahla [daily ritual that allows communication with ancestors] . . . I must do it every night. Sometimes, I'm not doing it, I'm tired, I have assignments, and I just sleep (Q76).

They also critiqued university structures and policies for not allowing enough space for cultural practices.

There are certain rules in our rule books that do not accommodate culture. At res [residence] as well, there are certain rules that does [sic] not accommodate culture and cultural practices. So, the things that I want to do or I am obligated to do culturally like rituals, I can't do them at res, so I have gone back to the Eastern Cape maybe for the weekend. . . the university doesn't understand the cultural obligation that made me to be absent. . . if it's an African thing, you still have to bend to westernise it for them to understand (G43).

#### Theme 4: Securing a place in the university community

Prominent in all the interviews was how the participants negotiated their identities in relation to the university community.

##### *4.1 University community as chosen family*

For many participants, university life came to represent a new home. For some participants, this feeling was instantaneous: "When I first came here, this place was the best. I literally felt at home. . . a home away from home. . . I never felt out of place" (F70). This feeling developed over time for others: "I've become used to being a varsity student . . . now I feel I don't want to go home" (A79). Many participants expressed a sense of connection and community on campus through class discussions, group work, welcoming lecturers, residence activities, cultural societies, academic associations, support services, awareness programmes, mental health services, and campus clinics. They experienced the university as caring, focusing on their physical and emotional safety, and attending to their core needs.

Being a student of the UFS actually gives me the sense or the feeling that I'm in a community that I belong in. We have programmes that look after mental health for students who are suffering mentally. We have programmes that supply students with food/food parcels. . . (B26).

Most participants experienced the university as an inclusive and enabling environment: "I am a UFS student; I'm proud about it. . . people who are willing to just be there" (I56). Furthermore, university friends became their new chosen family: "These are not only the people with whom I go to classes or that I study with, but this is my brother, and this is my sister . . . it is a family" (N46); and: "I've got a new family, a loving one actually" (O98). As students, they experienced the same challenges and supported each other: "We are sharing the same sentiments. . . chat about how school is giving us those weird vibes and stuff. I feel we are just growing at the same pace" (E60). These shared experiences united them: "Even though we come from different provinces or different cultures. . . we all belong" (D74).

Participants emphasised the instrumental role of a supportive community to embrace the opportunities to discover themselves and shape who they are becoming: "Being fully yourself, it takes a lot. . . the people that you surround yourself with. . . good support,

structure and all these things have a contribution to who you can become” (N56). They mentioned, in particular, the freedom to be themselves without judgement: “Here at the university, I can be fully myself because the environment is enabling . . . it allows me to be the person that I need to be” (M52). They enjoyed the space to celebrate aspects of themselves that are less accepted at home:

When I am at the university, I am free, I am more vocal, I just can be me without any rules, I can be myself unapologetically. . . no one is restricting me from being and expressing myself anyway and anyhow (I10–12).

#### *4.2 Not really feeling like myself anywhere anymore*

Participants feeling caught in between spaces and transitions were evident from expressions such as “culture shock or identity shock” (F12); “I’m dying because of that fear” (O38); and: “A lot to have on your shoulders; it’s a lot of pressure” (I44) to explain their initial reactions. Many felt like outsiders at first: “I always cried. . . asked myself, ‘What am I doing here?’ . . . I was not coping. It was hard for me” (J10). Participants from rural areas and with more reserved lifestyles found the size, fast pace, and social life at university intimidating: “Life is moving fast. You need to adapt” (B28); and: “I’m not used to being around a lot of people. . . I like it quiet. . . too much for me to handle” (Q92). Many participants referred to how their shyness and lack of social confidence were inhibiting: “I’m an introvert . . . hard for me to blend in” (K30); “Being around people just freaks me out” (Q84–8); and: “I just withdraw; I just shut down” (Q106). For some, the struggle was related to academic stress: “I do not remember the last time I was feeling like myself. . . always stressed about academics” (H37).

Participants placed a high priority on authenticity: “To be the same person that you are” (D26); and: “Once people notice that you have two different faces, then it will backfire on your side. It is best to be free. . . just be you” (D88). Still, they often mentioned how they struggled to be their authentic selves: “I’m someone who’s stuck in between” (B14); and: “There are two sides of me” (H13). Most opted to suppress certain aspects of the self (either at home or at university): “I can’t be my full whole self because some parts of me are not here” (M50). Many referred to different roles: “There is the work me and there’s the home me” (M54), or different lifestyles: “Back at home I’m a church girl and pray. . . [at university] I drink, I go everywhere I want, anytime” (J16). For most, the struggle was seen in the discrepancies between how they wanted to remain true to themselves while also meeting the conflicting expectations of others: “The real me is here at the university; at home, they are forcing me” (O122); and: “When I am home, I live by my father’s rules, and when I am here, I live by my own rules” (E98). In their journeys to find their voice and identity, participants were thus negotiating different manifestations/sides of the self.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we explored the salient identity experiences of first-generation university students in South Africa. Focusing on how this group of students explore their sense of self, this study contributes insights beyond first-generation students’ academic

performance/challenges. The most prominent findings of this study relate to 1) the importance of first-generation status as an identity marker for students and their families and 2) the transitional nature of the identity development of this group of emerging adult students as they negotiate personal, relational, and cultural domains.

### The salience of the first-generation student identity status

A noticeable theme throughout the discussions was the importance of first-generation status as an essential marker and critical component of the identity of both the students and their families. Being accepted to university signified more than an academic opportunity. It strengthened students' sense of self and gave them a new and important role that they quickly internalised. Also, a new identity was created for their families. Acceptance to university was seen as a family achievement, and by working together to support the student, the family unit was strengthened. As reported in previous studies (Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Motsabi et al., 2020b), participants in this study valued the support from their home community and acknowledged that they are "the result of other people's contributions." Their newly acquired first-generation student identity also gave students the immense responsibility of breaking the generational cycle of poverty and "paving the way for the upcoming generation." While they were eager to embrace this task (as also found by Alcock & Bellugi, 2018), they experienced enormous pressure to succeed, not only for their own benefit but also because their families relied on them. Failure to succeed would thus have a precarious effect on their academic self-worth and also on their relational identity. These findings reflect the immense impact that aspects of South African society and the state of education have on the identity transitions of these young people. Seeing acceptance into university as nearly impossible, a "blessing" or a "miracle" is testimony of the difficulty of entering higher education. Growing up in an environment far removed from the opportunities of university ("being surrounded by kasi") and the perceived impossibility of accessing higher education portrays how disempowered these young people feel. Considering university as a "dream come true" shows how much hope the youth place on higher education as an avenue to change their fate. Their visions of a "bright future" and "endless possibilities" are in stark contrast to the reality of high failure rates and unemployment challenges (Council on Higher Education, 2021).

### The transitional nature of identity

Transition was a prominent experience in the identity journeys of all the first-generation students participating in this study. A sense of in-betweenness, one of the pillars of the emerging adulthood stage (Arnett, 2016), was observed in 1) their evolving personal sense of self, 2) their changing relationships with family and friends, and 3) the differences between their campus and home cultures. Since identity development involves the integration of various personal, relational, and cultural domains (Landberg et al., 2019; Syed & McLean, 2016), the participants' journeys towards a consolidated sense of self were complex.

*Personal transitions:* Participants articulated the experience of becoming while not being there yet. They expressed both the excitement and complexity of personal change. On the one hand, the identity transition process was rewarding, and university life was an opportunity to



discover the multi-faceted nature of the self. True to the nature of the emerging adulthood stage (Arnett, 2016), they faced the challenges of university life with optimism and experienced the university environment as motivational and inspirational. Kamsteeg (2016) mentioned that many aspects of the self are foregrounded during the student experience, leading to deepened self-perceptions. The participants in this study reported how their potential was unlocked and how they realised their strengths, determination, dedication, and resilience. On the other hand, they found the process challenging and confusing. While participants took ownership of these new aspects of the self, they also struggled to find a consolidated sense of self, which McAdams (2016) and Schwartz et al. (2016) described as a prominent aspect of the identity development processes during emerging adulthood. Participants expressed honest attempts to be authentic but struggled to integrate their past, present, and future selves. They used terms such as “stuck in-between”, “two sides of me” and “conversations between head and heart” to describe the difficulty of reaching a stable and continuous sense of self across contexts. This struggle was intensified by the discrepancies between how they wanted to remain true to themselves while meeting the conflicting expectations in various relational and cultural contexts.

*Relational transitions:* During complex identity transitions, relationships and social environments can either facilitate or inhibit holistic and authentic growth. Participants in this study echoed this by reiterating the instrumental role of a supportive community to embrace the opportunities to discover and shape their identities. They expressed both tensions and opportunities in their changing relationships with family and friends. In the family setting, participants had to carefully negotiate the expectation to respect their role as their parents’ children (“to live by their roles”) while simultaneously taking on adult responsibilities (being the “cross bridge between the two generations” who should “upgrade” the family). The tension between enjoying being treated like a child and wanting to be treated like an adult was apparent. Their feelings fluctuated between comfort/appreciation for a family that supports them and frustration/isolation when their families struggled to accept their identity transformations. They frequently dealt with the tension between their need for personal growth and their families (and friends) not honouring/acknowledging their new identities by sharing less of themselves and their university experiences, as was also found by Barry et al. (2009). In contrast, the freedom of the university environment, the experiences of belonging to campus culture, and the support from a so-called new family of university friends assisted identity transition processes and empowered them to be themselves “unapologetically.”

*Cultural transitions* While South Africa is known for its cultural diversity, many young people growing up in rural and insular societies have limited exposure to this. Often, university is the first opportunity for exposure to cultural diversity on a large scale (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). Participants experienced campus life as a space in which they were exposed to new and diverse ideas, people, and cultures. Research by Shefer et al. (2018) emphasised that diverse experiences and the recognition of students across diverse backgrounds can create a space of comfort, belonging, and safety. The participants in this study echoed this. For many, intercultural interactions on the larger university campus

facilitated a less judgemental attitude, an eagerness to learn more about their and other cultures, and a sense of cultural pride.

Various authors have referred to the mismatch between university and home cultures (Chang et al., 2020), especially for Black African students (Maseko, 2019) and first-generation students (Badenhorst & Kapp, 2013). Participants in this study also referred to “two different worlds” to express the contrasting cultural experiences on campus and at home. Students remarked on the conflicting demands of the westernised systems prominent on campus and their African cultural values. As already mentioned, they specifically articulated the opportunity of free self-expression on campus versus the value of respect in their home cultures. While most participants experienced the university as an inclusive and enabling environment, some experienced the university structures as inflexible (“if it’s an African thing, you still have to bend to westernise it for them to understand”). This points to the presence of a prevailing institutional culture that alienates rather than includes, that steepens the learning curve and intensifies the resilience-building efforts of students (Belluigi, 2023; Mampane et al., 2018; Mathebula, 2019; Ramose, 2016).

## Implications for research and practice

In this research study, we reported the experiences of a small group of students from one South African university. More research is warranted since 77% of South African students are first-generation (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023). Considering the conflicting expectations and diverse spaces South African students navigate, more nuanced information on how students negotiate tensions on the intricate journey towards a consolidated sense of self can be of value. Adding students’ voices from other campuses across South Africa and including parents’ viewpoints in future research studies can add insightful perspectives on this important topic. In addition, since the cultural identity transitions are especially prominent in the lives of Black African students (Maseko, 2019), future research studies could focus on how campus culture facilitates feelings of inclusion/ belonging vs cultural displacement/alienation.

The findings of this research study emphasise the value of the university environment as a space for authentic identity transitions and the importance of accepting spaces where personal, relational, and cultural identities can be negotiated. This reimagination is something that institutions and educators should embrace rather than ignore or avoid (Belluigi, 2023). Maseko (2019) advocates for a synergistic student support system that acknowledges communal interaction to facilitate both intrapersonal and interpersonal transformation. The participants of this study recognised various university initiatives already in place that foster personal growth and belonging. By providing more opportunities for first-generation students to interact and support each other (such as orientation workshops, information sessions, and social events), universities can act as important bridges to build social capital and resource-rich networks (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). Hall (1997) also reminded us that people are not passive; they can negotiate, challenge, and reinterpret the meanings of representations. Students can thus be empowered to find ways to assert their own identities. Mampane et al.

(2018) argued for glocal initiatives from the perspectives of young people. By allowing students to participate in institutional initiatives, as suggested by Kamsteeg (2016) and Knaus et al. (2022), the optimism and resilience portrayed by the students in this study can be harnessed to contribute to institutional transformation, societal change, and the building of more secure foundations for the future.

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