

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Coping Processes of South African First-Year University Students: An Exploratory Study

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### *Abstract*

South African higher education institutions (HEIs) face significant challenges with high first-year student drop-out rates due to various stressors students are facing. The current study explores the coping of first-year students studying at a South African university. This qualitative study followed an exploratory, descriptive, interpretive strategy to gain a deeper understanding of students' coping during their first academic year at university. Ten participants were recruited through a trusted gatekeeper using purposive voluntary and later snowball sampling methods. Data were collected using the Mmogo method<sup>®</sup> and semi-structured individual follow-up interviews. Interactive qualitative and thematic analyses generated three themes: (1) the availability of and access to coping resources for first-year students; (2) coping strategies first-year students rely on to manage stressors at university; and (3) the effectiveness of selected coping strategies. Understanding the coping of first-year students could assist HEIs in intervening and supporting first-year students appropriately, to enhance their first-year experience (FYE) and overall student well-being. Though limited to a small qualitative study, the contribution to FYE literature is through exploring nuanced coping resources, strategies, and the effectiveness thereof for students, which challenges the 'one-size-fits-all' approach many universities may use. However, there are strategies and awareness of resources that could, in general, be helpful.

### **Keywords**

*coping effectiveness; coping resources; coping strategies; first-year experience; first-year students; South African university*

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## *Introduction*

The South African higher education sector has gone through significant state interventions in the last two decades, with higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa lagging behind its counterparts in other developing countries (Habib, 2016; Van Zyl, 2016). In the face of South Africa's challenging economic circumstances, higher education is a critical force for improved economic conditions through modernisation and development and has the potential to create tax revenue, increased savings and investments, and a more entrepreneurial and civic society (Altbach et al., 2019; Bloom et al., 2006).

HEIs focus increasingly on student attrition and completion of tertiary studies (Barefoot, 2005; Beer & Lawson, 2017; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Bernardo et al. (2016) explain that universities face high drop-out rates between students' first and second years of study. It has long been established that moving from high school to university can be stressful and demanding for first-year students (Tinto, 1982; 1993). Challenges first-year students face include (amongst others): academic performance, adapting to campus life, being more independent, financial concerns, time-management, and managing interpersonal relationships (Kotze & Niemann, 2013; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020). Perceptions of excessive academic demands and workload from student schedules, examinations, assignments, and practical work could cause further stress (Jaffer & Garraway, 2016; Kotze & Niemann, 2013).

Millennial first-year students form part of a group of young individuals who are used to closer integration of technology, learning and communication (Kuron et al., 2015; Turner & Thompson, 2014). HEIs may impose novel demands on young individuals from this generational cohort, where students needs are not necessarily met. Therefore, universities may appreciate understanding the unique coping strategies that first-year millennials employ to deal with stressors, their perceptions of coping resources available to them, and how effective these strategies are.

While coping has been researched extensively in the past with different focuses (see Dewe et al., 2017; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), the majority of coping studies have predominantly focused on the *quantitative* nature of coping in the work setting (Folkman, 2011; Robotham, 2008). Although some research has considered coping in HEI settings (Orel et al., 2017; Polanco-Roman et al., 2016; Strage & Sorkhabi, 2016), there seems to be a lack of in-depth studies exploring coping of first-year students in the uniquely South African university setting.

This study aims to use a qualitative exploratory strategy with a small group of South African first-year students to gain a deeper understanding of their coping in the context of challenges they face during their first academic year at university.

## *Literature Review*

### **A definition of coping**

Coping is defined as a person's cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage, reduce, minimise, master, and tolerate the internal and external demands of a person-environment transaction, which is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources (Folkman

et al., 1986). 'Coping' is an umbrella term used to describe strategies, tactics, responses, cognitions, or behaviours that can be noticed (either by introspection or through observation) and could include internal events or overt actions that are appraised as demanding (Schwarzer & Schwarzer, 1996). Coping is also seen as the continuously changing, cyclical and iterative, interactional processes of emotional, cognitive and behavioural efforts that individuals make, the strategies and tactics they employ, and their responses to manage specific internal or external demands that arise in response to stressors. These stressors can be appraised as threatening, posing harm or loss, beneficial, or challenges to a person's resources (past, present, or future) (adjusted from Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **The transactional model of coping**

Folkman and Lazarus (1985) and Lazarus (1991) explain the transactional model of coping as an interaction between the person and environment that is very dynamic and highly fluid (in Goh et al., 2010). The central tenet of this model is that a potentially stressful event needs to be perceived to trigger appraisal, after which an individual assesses the stressor to be a potential benefit, irrelevant, or stressful. Following the primary appraisal as stressful, the individual will follow the secondary appraisal process, which takes the individual through a global assessment of their coping resources and their ability to react to the situation. After that, the outcome provides essential feedback as to whether further actions are required (Goh et al., 2010), which refers to how good the appraisal and chosen coping mechanism were in leading to a favourable outcome.

The framework considers the experience of stress resulting from the interaction between the stressor and the individual's perception of control over the stressor. This effect (positive or negative) will, in turn, determine the choice of coping strategy utilised (Boekaerts, 2002). The nature of the stressor and the appraisal thereof in evaluating the type of coping strategies employed and the coping resources available, play a role in this framework. The nature of stressors in this sample has been considered (Engelbrecht, 2020), but for this article, we were most interested in describing the coping aspect of the framework (i.e. coping resources and strategies).

### **Coping resources**

Before an individual can decide if an encounter is taxing or exceeding their resources, a person-environment measure is implemented subconsciously, subtracting the demands from the available resources of the individual (Folkman, 1982). Suppose there are fewer coping resources than demands: In that case, the situation is perceived as stressful and potentially harmful, challenging, or threatening, and a coping strategy is chosen to be employed. Hammer et al. (1998) describe coping resources as a psychological capacity inherent to a person, which enables them to manage stressors more effectively and subsequently experience fewer symptoms. Coping resources could include: cognitive resources (capabilities to maintain a positive sense of self-worth, a positive outlook, and optimism); social resources (social networks and support in times of stress); emotional

resources (individuals' acceptance and expression of emotional responses to alleviate long-term negative consequences of stress); spiritual resources (guided by values derived from religious, family or cultural traditions which define their meaning of the stressful event); or physical resources (interacting with health-promoting behaviours to increase physical well-being and decrease negative responses to stress), (Hammer et al., 1998). The availability of these coping resources impacts the choice of coping strategy employed (Lazarus, 1984; Van den Brande et al., 2016).

### **Coping strategies**

Coping strategies are defined as different strategies individuals use to manage stressful encounters and the accompanying, associated distress (Folkman, 2011). When an encounter is appraised as stressful, individuals initiate their available coping resources and choose an appropriate coping strategy in the hopes of alleviating the discomfort, addressing the issue, or challenging themselves. Accordingly, coping strategies can be categorised into two main types: (1) *Problem-focused coping* refers to the attempt to alter the stressor itself, such as finding a solution to a problem and developing a plan-of-action; and (2) *Emotion-focused coping*, which refers to the ways an individuals accommodate themselves to alleviate the feeling of stress, which range from distraction, avoidance, denial, venting, acceptance, focusing on the positive side to finding a more profound meaning from the situation (Folkman 1982, 2011; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Later, Carver et al. (1989) introduced *avoidance coping*, which refers to person- or task-orientated strategies that attempt to avoid the problem, encounter, or emotion elicited altogether. Coping strategies are expanding, as the sensitivity and complexities of measuring and classifying these coping strategies are evolving (Dewe et al., 2017).

### **Effectiveness of coping**

The effectiveness of coping remains one of the most challenging concepts in coping research, as the effectiveness thereof is contextual. No coping strategy can be viewed as essentially positive or negative; some may be more effective in some situations than in others (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). An understanding of coping effectiveness can be generalised under two headings. Firstly, the coping outcome, which views effectiveness in the sense of goals that are achieved through the applied coping strategy. Secondly, the effectiveness of coping can be measured by the *goodness-of-fit* approach, which looks at the process rather than the outcome (Dewe et al., 2017). Such an approach suggests that the effectiveness of a coping strategy concerns the appropriateness of the appraisal the individual made, and how good the chosen coping strategy is in leading to a favourable outcome. Presumably, choosing a coping strategy that fits their appraisal and gains control over the tasks will have a more effective outcome (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

## *Research Methodology*

### **Research approach and strategies**

The study is part of a larger mixed-methods project known as StudyWell: Student Well-Being and Success. The focus of the project is on the development and validation of a comprehensive model of student well-being. It is necessary to scientifically explore student experiences in the South African HEI context, then develop and validate culturally sensitive instruments to inform and apply this model. This model could be used to determine essential predictors and moderators of student well-being, including coping strategies of students.

The current study reports on the qualitative exploration of coping as part of the broader student well-being model. The qualitative approach generated context-specific evidence, which enables researchers to determine the perceptions and meanings that the phenomena might have for participants in greater depth (Tracy, 2020). An exploratory interpretive descriptive approach (Thorne, 2016) was used. Such an approach explored first-year students' coping experiences at university. The researchers considered participants' explanations as relative, which meant their subjective interpretations of the world they live and study in was respected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers accessed elaborate explanations from participants through the collection of data from different methods and analytical strategies (Tracy, 2020).

### **Participants, sampling and ethics**

The present study focused on accessing information from students who: studied full-time, were first-year students for the first time, studying towards an undergraduate degree at a South African university, and were comfortable to talk in English for data collection (translators were available). Participants were purposefully selected using voluntary sampling through appropriate gatekeepers in line with ethics permissions and research conduct (ethical number: NWU-HS-2014-0165). Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Ten first-year students participated in the study. All participants were welcomed to participate, and no limitations were set on gender, ethnicity, home language, living conditions, year of birth, and relationship status (Boehnke et al., 2011). The participants' included three males and seven females of whom five were African, and five were Caucasian. Six of the participants indicated their home language as Afrikaans, whereas three participants spoke Setswana, and one was English speaking. All participants were between 19 and 22 years of age at the time of data collection. Five participants lived off-campus and were not part of a town residence club. Four stayed off-campus, and formed part of a town residence club and one participant lived in an on-campus dormitory. As participation was voluntary and withdrawal carried no consequence, students who wanted to participate did so regardless of their demographic characteristics.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data were collected in two distinct phases, each with its specific analysis techniques. Firstly, the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup> (Roos 2016) was used. This visual, participatory method that explores personal and group experiences related to a specified research question. Participants were asked to build a model in response to the question: “*Tell us something about your experiences of being a student at the university.*” The data collection commenced with opening the group session with participants seated around a large table, signing informed consent, and providing their biographical information. Next, researchers clarified the research objectives and provided the building materials, i.e. malleable clay, beads and grass stalks and a material cloth. Participants were allowed time to build a model or interpretation of the research question using any or all materials provided. Afterwards, voluntary discussions followed on the individual models presented. The group discussions offered additional insights to participants own or each other’s explanations. Audio (explanations and discussion elicited by the built models) and visual data (photos of the models) were recorded, and audio data transcribed for further analysis. A debriefing session followed to provide an opportunity for participants to settle emotions that may have been evoked during the process. Nine students participated in the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup>.

After completing the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup>, information was co-analysed by participants using interactive qualitative analysis (IQA) (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). During the co-analysis, participants indicated that coping with university-related stressors was a prominent concern. A second data collection phase followed using face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews (conducted at a later time). The interviews accessed additional insights into participants’ coping strategies. Three of the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup> participants agreed to follow-up interviews, while one additional participant was recruited. The individual interviews were conducted to provide detailed explanations through flexible, probing and clarifying questions (Patton, 2015) until the phenomenon was represented (Thorne, 2016). An open-ended question led the interview: “*Tell me about your experience when starting university,*” with additional probe questions on coping. Interview data were transcribed verbatim, translated into English where needed, and imported into ATLAS.ti version 8 with the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup> data. The data were analysed using thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, thematic analysis was applied through familiarisation with the data (reading and re-reading and noting key ideas); initial open coding, followed by selective coding; searching for patterns or themes; and reviewing and refining generated themes through meaningful links to the research question. Analyses were conducted in a group format to ensure quality and rigour and minimise researcher bias through multiple coders in the coding process (Friese, 2019; Tracy, 2020).

Selected data examples for this article include explanations from both the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup> and interviews analysed. The initial purpose of the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup> was to explore students’ first-year experience (FYE) in general. The models that participants created (i.e. visual data) were expressions of their overall experiences (which extend

outside the scope of the current article). The explanations elicited from the discussion of the models and the interviews provided the researchers with text–data form conversations generated during both data collection phases.

### *Trustworthiness*

Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for excellent qualitative research directed the quality of the present study. These were: having a worthy topic (relevant, timely, significant, interesting); obtaining rich rigour through sufficient and valid data; transferability of the findings; the sincerity of the researchers; the credibility of research, gaining resonance, and ensuring a significant contribution. In the current study, trustworthiness was ensured through researching a necessary and emerging topic and identifying clear boundaries for participation to gather applicable data. Using multiple data collection and analysis methods ensured triangulation, while researcher bias was reduced. Recording the methods and procedures ensured the transferability of the study (Morse, 2018; Tracy 2020). However, replicating results may differ as participants' experiences are subjective, and the meaning thereof socially constructed. Replication could be achieved by ensuring a detailed description of the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Further, the research aims to contribute to the conceptual, theoretical, practical, moral, or methodological implications for first-year students, South African HEIs and FYE literature. Lastly, procedural, situational, and cultural ethics of this research study were taken into consideration. The researchers attended ethics and methodological training, while meaningful coherence was facilitated with appropriate literature, research questions, and interpretations of findings to ensure quality data were obtained.

### *Integrated Findings*

Three<sup>1</sup> main themes emerged to understand first-year students' coping experiences as illustrated by participant explanations from both the Mmogo-method<sup>®</sup> and interviews, i.e.: (i) the availability and access of coping resources; (ii) coping strategies students rely on to manage their stressors at university; and (iii) effectiveness of coping strategies chosen by first-year students at university.

Once a stressful experience was encountered, appraised, and categorised, participants' coping resource availability was considered in terms of availability, accessibility, and nature (see Table 1).

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1 The original dissertation that informs the current article (Engelbrecht, 2020), included a fourth theme on the nature and domains of stressors. Such findings align with extant literature that consider the challenges first-year students experience in transition to university (cf. Upcraft et al, 2005; Nelson et al., 2006). The domains of stressors were deemed to fall outside the scope of the current article, which more narrowly describes coping. Interested readers are referred to the original dissertation.

**Table 1: Theme 1 – The availability, access to and nature of coping resources for students**

Sub-themes	Formulated Meanings
Availability and access to coping resources	<i>Available/static/not used</i> : Identifying a resource as available yet not necessarily utilised in order to manage the stressor.
	<i>Accessed/processed/used</i> : A resource is available and accessed in order to cope with a stressor, which leads to a coping process/strategy.
Nature of coping resources	<i>Internal (inside a person)</i> : Resources found within a person which could alleviate stress, such as personal resources.
	<i>External (outside of a person)</i> : Resources found outside of a person, such as social support in terms of informational, instrumental, and emotional support.

Students could choose to assess resources to which they had access or were available to them, e.g. internally, or externally as coping resources. Moreover, they could use these coping resources to manage stressful encounters or not. Some internal resources and personal resources reported, included: “*Let me help myself so that I can do better*”, and: “*Also, drawing energy that is positive.*” External resources included social support through emotional, informational or instrumental support to alleviate stress. Examples of emotional support were represented more frequently by the participants: “*Yes, and then my boyfriend, he is very supportive,*” and:

*I think what made it a lot easier for me coming to university is the fact that I live in an apartment with my brother so that feeling of homesickness was kind of avoided in a sense by the fact that he was there and that I was not in a hostel or something like that.*

Some participants reported utilising social support for instrumental reasons, i.e. in order to find assistance to manage the stressor they are faced with: “*Let me ask my lecturer, let me go to facilitation, let me help myself so that I can do better,*” and: “*Having a friend when I don’t understand, I will ask them: ‘Can you please explain this to me?’, and then he will just explain it to me, so definitely that is nice to have a friend.*”

After the coping resources were identified, first-year students selected a coping strategy to deal with the stressors they experienced, presented in Table 2. The current study reports on three main coping strategies, i.e. the experiences and exposure to past stressors to find solutions based on experiences; supportive practices to balance emotions; and create distance to gain perspective and understanding.



Table 2: Theme 2 – Coping strategies students rely on to manage their stressors at university

Sub-themes	Formulated Meanings
Experiences and exposure of past stressors to find solutions	<i>Utilising university and hostel resources:</i> Utilising functions and systems of the university and hostels to manage a stressor such as Reception & Orientation (R&O) programmes to help the adjustment to university.
	<i>Learning from past experiences:</i> Learning from previous experiences from similar situations and using tried and tested methods to cope with the stressor
	<i>Eliminating other activities:</i> Cutting down on activities that are taking up most of one's time, to focus on the stressor.
	<i>Time orientated:</i> Managing time in order to relieve stress by making diary entries, lists, and plan-of-actions.
	<i>Work harder:</i> Just jumping in and working harder and not giving up when times get tough.
	<i>Solution-focused:</i> Finding a proactive way of solving the problem.
	<i>Revision/facilitation/group studying:</i> Revising of work, going to facilitation sessions, and group study, to alleviate academic strain.
	<i>Seeking informational support:</i> Seeking and gaining more information in order to understand the stressor or situation.
Supportive practices to balance emotions	<i>Seeking instrumental support:</i> Seeking support for academic reasons, from lecturers, friends, and family in order to help with academics.
	<i>Journalling:</i> Journalling emotions in order to re-evaluate the situation and consider different perspectives.
	<i>Motivation:</i> Motivating self through keeping the goal in mind and staying positive in tough times.
	<i>Surrounding oneself with positivity:</i> Ensuring you surround yourself with positivity from friends and family.
	<i>Living a balanced life:</i> Maintaining a balanced lifestyle by eating healthy and sleeping enough in order to cope with stressors and challenges of life/studies.
	<i>Religious and spiritual practices:</i> Practising religious beliefs or spiritual practices in order to cope with the stressor/challenge, e.g. prayer, reflection.
Distancing, perspective and understanding	<i>Seeking emotional support:</i> Seeking emotional support from lecturers, friends, and family in order to help with a stressor.
	<i>Distractions:</i> Distracting self and not dealing with the stressor such as smoking, watching series, or partying.
	<i>Accepting outcome:</i> Acceptance of fate of the challenges or ignoring the stressor.

Participants reported experiencing similar situations before, which assisted them in finding a way to manage stressors. For example, through being more time-orientated by planning, scheduling, and diarising timelines, as well as working harder to push through and get the job done, they dealt with time constraints and workload pressure: *“Sometimes, it is best if you have a list of things you need to do and start from the top and start doing it”*, and *“Like I know that if you want to get something in life, it is not easy, you can’t take short ways ... if you want to get out from that hole or whatever you are facing, you need to manage to go and follow your dreams as I did.”* Others also reported relying on:

*... that mentality of when things get tough you drop your head, and you start swinging, and now talking about it, it sounds like the mentality I had when things got tough I just started swinging and hoped it would be fine in the end, I just did it.*

Other participants reported supportive practices they used to balance their emotions and alleviate stressful situations. Examples included having the motivation to carry on, and participating in religious practices and prayer: *“I like to go to church because it is where I find myself, I find peace for my mind, and I get to rest.”* Other examples included:

*Then if the motivation is your thing, then get it! Anything that is going to help you, your mindset, to help you get up in the mornings help you; those are also my things, let’s put those motivations on the wall.*

*Uhm, I feel, if it wasn’t for getting down on your knees and being like: ‘Okay, I need help, and I need God to be in my life right now’, I don’t know how to explain it to you. I know it really helps me whenever I feel down or whenever I feel ‘Okay, all my energy is gone’, then I know where to get it from.*

Some participants preferred to avoid the stressors they face and distance themselves through distractions: *“Soos my vriende het nogals baie gehelp, soos dit was nogals lekker gewees ek het baie uitgekome en my kop van alles afgehaal”* [Like my friends helped a lot, like it was fun, I went out a lot and cleared my head from everything], and *“Okay, mainly at the moment now it’s me listening to music and like drawing more.”*

Finally, in some instances, re-appraisal took place after a coping strategy was chosen, where a participant could re-evaluate their perceived stressor and choose a different strategy altogether. However, the effects or outcome of a strategy could only be evaluated after implementation thereof. Some outcomes participants reported are noted in Table 3.

Outcomes included that it turned out to be a good thing at the end, growing up and becoming more mature, learning more about oneself and others, and having a sense of accomplishment in the aftermath:

*So, I knew that this subject I have to work hard in, and in the end, it paid off.*

*One thing I came to realise from my first year to my second year ... I’m a very serious person, and things need to be very formal, getting to know myself in terms of how much of an introvert I am and also learning patience.*

*The University for me is very involved and multi-cultural and multi-racial and different languages and different people which is really nice because you get to know a lot of people who are different*

Table 3: Theme 3 – Effectiveness of coping strategies chosen by students at university

Sub-themes	Formulated Meanings
Sense of accomplishment and growth	<i>Learning more about self and others</i> : Learning more about self and how you interact with others through self-insight.
	<i>Good thing in the end</i> : A feeling, in hindsight, that the stressor was a good challenge and looking at the positive side thereof.
	<i>Sense of accomplishments</i> : A sense of accomplishment when a stressor has been managed and having peace of mind afterwards.
	<i>Matured/grown-up</i> : Growing up and maturing in order to take care of oneself and becoming more independent.
	<i>Better relationships</i> : Forming a better relationship with friends and family, in the aftermath of the stressor.
	<i>Proving them wrong</i> : A sense of proving the people that doubted you wrong when you faced and persevered with the challenge.
Learn from experiences & applying change	<i>Helping others to not go through a similar situation</i> : Learning from stressors to advise others how to cope in a similar situation.
	<i>Managing a similar situation better in the future</i> : Learning from experience to gain skills to handle a similar situation better in the future.
	<i>Start saying 'no'</i> : Learning when to say no to distractions, bad choices, and people.
	<i>Negative emotions</i> : The aftermath of a coping strategy results in a feeling of anger, irritability, grumpiness, and annoyance.
Supported transition	<i>Making university adjustment easier</i> : The challenge or stressor undergone made adjustments and transition to university easier.
	<i>Increase academic knowledge</i> : Gaining more academic knowledge through managing challenges.

*and you get to see how they work and how they are and like you try and incorporate that into who you are and try to blend with them.*

*I've grown a lot. In my first year, I had to deal with a lot of responsibilities, more than you would have in school. And, uh, I've also learned, things are not always as it seems, and you have to make it for yourself.*

Some adverse outcomes included:

*When you sleep less, you are tired. Ja [yes], I think the worst thing you tend to get very grumpy, and that eventually has an impact on how you treat people as well, and that leads to people thinking that you are just a miserable person in general, which is not great.*

## *Discussion*

This study aimed to use a qualitative exploratory strategy to gain a deeper understanding of South African first-year students' coping in the context of challenges they face during their first year at university. The discussion below integrates and positions the current findings on coping resources students have access to and rely on, the strategies first-year students use to cope, as well as relating the effectiveness of coping with university demands.

### **Coping resources**

Coping resources could be cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical resources available (Coetzee & Estherhuizen, 2010). Coping resources are described as the psychological capacity inherent in a person when stressors are managed more effectively (Hammer et al., 1998). Resources could be internal, personal, or external to a person. Personal resources, as mentioned by Xanthopoulou et al. (2007), include optimism, mastery, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination, locus of control, and self-insight. Whereas external resources could be social support through instrumental, informational, and emotional reasons to cope with a stressor. Social support, as a resource, could be utilised by students to seek assistance and support from others to manage a situation more effectively (Bouteyre et al., 2006). The current study illustrated similar resources, though participants reported more significant reliance on social resources, possibly related to supportive relationships that are embedded within students' support systems.

### **Coping strategies**

Extensive research has been done on coping (Dewe et al., 2017; Folkman, 1982; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The main findings of the present study agree with previous research with some nuanced differences of expression: experiences and exposure of past stressors to find solutions, supportive practices to balance emotions, and distancing, perspective, and understanding thereof (Carver et al., 1989; Endler & Parker, 1990; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Some of the most commonly known coping strategies mentioned in the literature include eliminating other activities in order to focus on the stressor; being more time-orientated through planning and scheduling; being solution-oriented and task-driven; seeking more information to understand the stressor better; seeking instrumental support for academic reasons from lecturers, friends, family, and the university systems; getting the motivation to alleviate stress; surrounding oneself with positive energy; seeking emotional support from friends and family; distractions from the stressor; accepting the fate of the inability to change the situation; mentally disengaging from the stressor; and religious practices and prayer (Carver et al., 1989; Folkman, 1982; Folkman, 2011; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Pargament et al., 2011).

Some emerged strategies reported learning from past experiences to find a previously identified effective solution, or just working harder and pushing through. Other students preferred to rely on the university and accommodation systems to manage their academic

stress through facilitation, study groups, or dormitory programmes promoting university adjustment. Additional strategies included journaling emotions to gain new perspectives and living a balanced lifestyle through eating healthy, exercising, and sleeping enough, to alleviate stress.

### **Coping effectiveness**

The effectiveness of an implemented coping strategy is subjective. While Zeidner and Saklofshe (1996) explain coping effectiveness in terms of goals reached, Dewe et al. (2017) instead explain effectiveness as to how good the appraisal and chosen coping strategy are in leading to a favourable outcome. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) argue that the effectiveness of a coping outcome is the opportunity for personal control, and to gain control over tasks will result in a more effective outcome. Although the effectiveness of the outcome of coping is individualistic and subjective, most participants reported to gain some sense of accomplishment, learning experiences, maturing, and growing relationships, despite some negative emotions.

In conclusion, the first-year student experiences of their coping may be incorporated into the HEI systems to measure student attrition and enhance overall student well-being (Strage & Sorkhabi, 2016). Also, this could contribute to the implementation of more effective management, resource structures, information about the FYE within the HEI and adopting new techniques in supporting students' coping (Nyar & Mosebua, 2018).

### ***Limitations and Recommendations***

The present study has a limited sample particular to the participating university campus. As such, the findings' generalisation is limited. The sample consisted mostly of female, Afrikaans-speaking individuals, and other students from different backgrounds may cope with university transitions differently. Though the sample is small, the value and nature of in-depth qualitative research (Morse, 2018), offers preliminary insights of what first-year students may experience when coping with the demands and stressors of their first-year experiences. Future research should, however, acquire a more representative sample that resonates more broadly with the multi-cultural HEI setting in South Africa.

The recommendations of this study focus on the individual, the South African HEI, and future research. Firstly, the research could inform first-year students' experiences, and challenges faced at university and create awareness on students' coping strategies that yield more effective outcomes that first-year students and those working with first-year students may find valuable. For the HEI, these findings could contribute to knowledge creation on FYE and associated challenges. The current study explored possible coping resources which could be available to assist students and support HEIs in managing anticipated stressors. Lastly, the study provides nuanced insights into literature in terms of first-year experiences and first-year students' coping strategies that should consider that coping may extend beyond the one-size-does-not-fit-all approaches. There seem to be strategies and awareness of resources that could, in general, be helpful, that future research could establish. Finally, the current study could be replicated at other HEIs for comparative results.

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#### How to cite:

Engelbrecht, L., Mostert, K., Pienaar, J. & Kahl, C. 2020. Coping Processes of South African First-Year University Students: An Exploratory Study. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 8(2), 1-16. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v8i2.4443