



**THE INFLUENCE OF STRESS ON STUDENTS AT A TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL  
EDUCATION AND TRAINING COLLEGE**

**by**

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## DECLARATION

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*L Nefdt*

*02/09/2024*

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**Signed**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research has revealed that learners in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges often face substantial stress which can influence their physical well-being, mental health, and academic achievements. This study investigates the influence of stress on Business Studies students attending a TVET college located in the Western Cape region of South Africa. Key factors contributing to student stress were identified, including financial constraints, social challenges, family-related difficulties, daily hardships, and demanding academic workloads. The study also explored the coping strategies employed by these students, particularly during high-stress assessment periods. As part of this research, a convenience sampling method was used in which a group of students volunteered to participate. These students kept diaries over three months and participated in two interviews about their experience with stress and stressors. The findings underscored the significant influence of stress on TVET students, corroborating previous research findings that have identified similar sources of stress and the coping mechanisms observed in this study. This study reinforces the pervasive nature of stress within technical and vocational education environments and highlights the necessity for targeted support strategies to address this issue. The following recommendations are made: students should be taught how to manage their workload and stress levels to enhance academic success and their overall health; peer support groups should be established to mitigate these stressors; and curriculum integration of diary writing and utilizing recreational activities as means of reducing student stress should be considered.

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## **DEDICATION**

My beloved son, Jezeus Nefdt, this work is dedicated to you. Through every challenge and obstacle, remember, never give up. Believe in yourself with unwavering faith, for you possess the power to achieve anything you set your mind to. Embrace your dreams with courage and confidence, knowing that you have the inner strength to make them a reality. Your potential is boundless and your future is bright.

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## **GLOSSARY**

### **Terms/Abbreviations**

### **Description**

**TVET**

Technical and Vocational Education and Training

**DHET**

Department of Higher Education and Training

**NATED**

National Accredited Technical Education Diploma

**NSFAS**

National Student Financial Aid Scheme

**Non-traditional students**

Students who do not follow the typical characteristics of first entry college applicants because they may be – older, have dependents, be a single caregiver, do not have a high school diploma, be registered for part-time study, work full or part time, etc.

**COVID 19**

Coronavirus disease of 2019

**OLC**

Open Learning Centre

**MS**

Microsoft

**NQF**

National Qualifications Framework

**N4/N5**

Known as NATED (National Accredited Technical Education Diploma) or Report 191 are post-matriculation national certificates that allow the individual to obtain a national N-Diploma.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Tinto (2012), whose work is widely used in the analysis of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) level student attrition (Lawrence, 2016:129), argues that many students withdraw from college very early in the year because of their inability to withstand the amount of stress induced by academic pressure, something which has been on the increase since the 1990s (Tinto, 2012:98). In the context of this study, the focus is restricted to stress caused by academic pressure and not to other contextual or personal stress factors that could influence an individual's behaviour. In the 1990s, globalisation and technological advancements led to a more competitive job market and increased academic expectations (May, 2015:24). Additionally, enrolment in higher education has grown significantly over the past decade, presenting new challenges in meeting the academic and social needs of a broader student population. Many students balance studies with financial concerns because of economic pressures, including the rising cost of education and living expenses. As a result of policy changes emphasising greater accountability and standardised testing, students face greater academic demands (May, 2015:24). May (2015: 24) further points out that if these stressors are not managed, they can negatively affect academic performance.

This study, which was located at one TVET College in the Western Cape, South Africa, explored students' perceptions of stress and the influence it had on their overall well-being. Stress factors that TVET students experienced were identified and analysed. This chapter provides a broad outline of the study on students' perception of stress and its effects, along with the advent of theories and models used to guide studies on mechanisms to cope with stress. Section 1.2 provides the problem statement, and the research questions derived from it. Section 1.3 describes the objectives of this study and explains what the researcher aimed to achieve. Section 1.4 presents the literature on stress. Section 1.5 briefly describes the theoretical framework of this study; and Section 1.6 outlines the research design and methodology. Section 1.7 notes the contribution this study could make to the well-being of students and colleges; and Section 1.8 concludes by outlining all the chapters.

Jonker (2016:4) argues that since 1994, student stress levels have been on the rise at TVET colleges. Stress levels have risen in South Africa following the end of apartheid, a time of educational reforms and increased access to education. Therefore, since then TVET colleges include guidelines on the importance of developing "coping strategies" on their websites to

support students. These guidelines reflect the ongoing efforts to address the increased stress levels noted since 1994.

Powell et al (2024) highlight additional factors affecting students' performance at TVET colleges, such as insufficient academic support and limited resources. Stress levels are exacerbated by these factors, and students are less likely to be able to meet academic expectations as a result. Those findings align with Bell's (2018:52) observation that the assessment of academic performance, which measures how well students meet institutional standards, can amplify stress. Stress manifests physically and emotionally in a variety of ways, such as headaches, fatigue, depression, anxiety, and feelings of overwhelm (Dusselier et al., 2005:150). The inability to cope with these stressors can lead to negative academic outcomes.

The authors of Engelbrecht et al. (2020) further examined the coping processes of South African first-year university students and found that resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms play a critical role in mitigating stress' adverse effects. Students' academic performance and overall well-being can be significantly enhanced through effective coping strategies, such as time management, social support, and mental health resources. In addition, Engelbrecht et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of institutional support and tailored interventions in helping students cope with stress.

A person's ability to cope with stress strongly affects how they handle stress (May, 2015:25). May (2015:25) claims that people who handle stress well are unlikely to experience anxiety.

According to Bell (2018:52), assessment of academic performance indicates how well a student performs, guided by the standards and norms of government and education institutions, but this could also aggravate stress among students as there is pressure to perform well. Emotional and physical symptoms, such as headaches, fatigue, depression, anxiety and feeling unable to cope, can be aggravated by stress (Dusselier et al., 2005:150). How stress is handled depends strongly on an individual's stress coping abilities (May, 2015:25). May (2015:25) argues that a person who handles stress well will hardly experience anxiety. However, those who do not have the appropriate coping mechanisms are prone to high levels of anxiety.

Those without the appropriate coping mechanisms, however, are more likely to suffer from high levels of anxiety. Students may be able to avoid the "destructive consequences of excessive stress on academic performance" by identifying stress factors and developing effective coping strategies (Owusu & Essel, 2017:9). As a TVET lecturer, I have noticed that some students are able to identify stress symptoms in themselves and their peers, and have

developed strategies for coping. Thus, it is necessary to investigate why some students seem to cope better than others.

## **1.2 Background information**

Most students receive bursaries as a form of financial aid. The National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) Business Studies course includes an 18-month theoretical and an 18-month practical course. It takes six months for a student to complete each level, e.g., 6 months to obtain a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) 4 Certificate, and another 12 months to complete NQF 5 and NQF 6. However, for students to be NQF certified, they must complete another 18 months' practical component (workplace integrated learning, or WIL) and hand in a portfolio of evidence.

Career-focused education and training are provided by TVET colleges to individuals who have left school. Several industries require knowledge, skills, and attitudes provided by colleges (Sibiya & Nyembezi, 2018:5). It is the focus of TVET colleges to provide training and education for mid-level workers in the engineering, construction and tourism industries, as well as general business and management, all of which are considered essential to the development of the South African economy and provide employment (Sibiya & Nyembezi, 2018:5).

A student can qualify for a bursary from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme if they come from an environment where tuition is unaffordable. Even though bursaries cover students' fees, the inability to afford fees is often accompanied by other financial challenges, contributing to students' elevated stress levels. As a result of such stress, academic performance, as well as emotional and social well-being, could be negatively affected (Tran et al., 2018:847).

## **1.3 Purpose of the study**

This study investigates the effects of stress on TVET students' academic performance and overall well-being. Tinto (2012) and Jonker (2016) have documented the rise of stress among students, with Lawrence (2016) observing that early withdrawal from college is often due to inability to handle academic pressure. In this study, stress will be examined in relation to academic performance, mental health, and overall health. As a lecturer, I have observed how students are subjected to stressful situations daily. By identifying the specific stressors that affect TVET students and by creating a conducive learning environment for all technical and vocational students, TVET colleges could develop targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance students' educational experience and long-term success.

#### **1.4 Statement of the problem**

Any NATED programme begins with an N4 qualification. Those who have completed their National N4 Certificate may continue their studies at the next level, N5, and then concludes with an N6 qualification. By enrolling for this programme at a TVET college, students are able to gain the relevant knowledge and skills of a particular field of their choice so that they may proceed to their desired career. In this study, the researcher examined the influence of stress on N5 students in a TVET college setting.

As this study focused on the N5 level, stressors were identified that are unique to this transitional period. The study aimed to investigate the influence of stress on TVET students with the hope of finding ways to enhance their current positive coping strategies that would aid them in reaching their desired goals successfully, such as tailored interventions and support mechanisms. The researcher noted in the findings that, as a result of academic demands and personal challenges, students exhibited stress-induced behaviour just before exams or important assignments. Students' inability to cope with the workload, fatigue, headaches, and anxiety were the most common symptoms.

The objective of this research was to assess whether students at a TVET college in the Western Cape, South Africa, recognised stress, and could identify the stressors they encountered. The researcher then evaluated the influence that the stress had on their academic performance. Additionally, the researcher aimed to investigate coping mechanisms among students and to consider their effectiveness in managing stress, especially when transitioning to N5.

##### **1.4.1 Aim of the research**

In this study, the aim was to investigate how stress had an influence on students enrolled in a TVET college. Furthermore, the purpose was to understand how stress affects their academic performance, mental health and general wellbeing, as well as exploring coping and support mechanisms that may mitigate the negative effects of stress.

The following objectives emanate from the research aim are to:

- Identify the types of stress experienced by students
- Examine how students perceive stress and how it affects their academic performance.
- Examine the coping strategies employed by students to cope with stress.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of students' coping strategies.

**Main research question:** How do students experience stress in a TVET college?

**Research questions derived from the problem statement to expand on the main research question are:**

1. What types of stress do students experience?
2. How do students perceive stress to be influencing their academic performance?
3. What coping strategies do students use?
4. How effective do students find their own coping strategies?

### **1.5 Literature on Stress**

It was noted by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) that the dynamic relationship between emotional responses to stress and cognitive appraisal can promote adaptation when perceived as a challenge. When stress is experienced, it can be addressed directly with problem-focused approaches, whereas emotional reactions can be mitigated with emotion-focused approaches.

#### **1.5.1 Causes and implications of stress**

Stress arises from social and psychological factors and disrupts daily functioning, requiring adjustments (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:62). While eustress promotes well-being, distress is emotionally and physically draining (Owusu & Essel, 2017:9). In academia, stress impairs attention, social interaction, and self-esteem, leading to depression and fatigue, especially during exams and presentations (Douce & Keeling, 2014; Owusu & Essel, 2017).

#### **1.5.2 The influence of stress on academic performance**

Students who experience stress often feel overwhelmed and isolated, which adversely affects their academic focus, creativity, and emotional flexibility (Younger et al., 2008). These challenges may be exacerbated by high workloads and unaddressed stressors, resulting in severe emotional distress or even suicidal thoughts (Owusu & Essel, 2017:28).

#### **1.5.3 Coping strategies for stress**

Engelbrecht et. al (2020:2) recommend solving problems, thinking positively, and seeking social support as effective coping techniques. Using Lazarus and Folkman's (1986:223) framework, situational changes are addressed through problem-focused coping, and emotional management is handled via emotion-focused coping. Student stress can be mitigated by understanding and implementing these strategies.

### **1.6 Theoretical framework**

The study uses Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1986), focusing on cognitive appraisal and coping strategies. In primary appraisal, events are deemed harmful, threatening, or challenging, while secondary appraisal evaluates coping skills. To

manage stress, it is essential to address the gaps between needs and capabilities, problem-focused and emotion-focused solutions.

## **1.7 Research design and methodology**

### **1.7.1 Research design**

A qualitative research design was applied in this study, with a narrative approach. According to Kvale (2003:275), interviews, rather than questionnaires, are a useful and powerful tool in prompting narrative data, thus ensuring that researchers obtain an in-depth understanding of people's views. Interviews are also a useful method for discovering an individual's thoughts and views in a natural setting. Therefore, this design and approach provides a naturalistic view of students in their natural environment in which sense is made of a phenomenon and the meaning that students attach to this phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013:7). The natural environment in this research would be the institution which students attend; and the phenomenon under study is students' stress and their current coping methods.

### **1.7.2 Research methodology**

#### **1.7.2.1 Site selection**

The site for this study was one campus of a TVET college in the Cape Town area of the Western Cape, South Africa. The site was purposively selected for this research study due to the lower academic performance of students at this campus compared to that of other campuses of the same college. This campus offers Business programmes at TVET level N4 to N6<sup>1</sup> and most students receive bursaries to cover the costs of their studies but not their living expenses. Bursaries are only offered to full-time students who do not work, or if their parents' combined income does not exceed R350 000 per annum. This is determined as meeting the criteria for a student to qualify for a bursary because they are from a socio-economic environment that makes payment of fees unaffordable. Bursaries usually cover students' fees; but the inability to afford fees is often accompanied by other financial challenges, contributing to students' stress as there are many other expenses that are not covered. Such stress could negatively influence their academic performance, as well as their emotional and social well-being (Tran et al., 2018:856). It takes 36 months to complete this course, including 18 months of theoretical instruction and 18 months of practical instruction. Each level of the National

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The N4 to N6 certificate programmes that are known as NATED (National Accredited Technical Education Diploma) or Report 191 are post-matriculation national certificates that allow the individual to obtain a national N-Diploma. This is a South African TVET College National NATED Diploma programme. The N4 to N6 programme has four subjects, each to be completed within six months. At the end of each level, each subject includes an external national examination. The qualification itself consists of 18 months of theory and, thereafter, another 18 months of successful relevant work experience which will earn a National Diploma or National Certificate.



Qualifications Framework takes six months to complete, so it takes 6 months to complete an NQF 4 Certificate and another 12 months to complete NQF 5 and NQF 6. However, to become NQF certified, students must also complete an additional 18 months of practical training (workplace integrated learning) and submit a portfolio of evidence.

#### **1.7.2.2 Participant selection**

As a first step in the research, the selected TVET College in Cape Town, Western Cape, focused on the population of interest, which encompassed NQF levels 4 to 6 Business students across the various campuses. The institution's inclusive definition encompasses a wide range of students engaged in a Business Studies qualification. To facilitate a more focused and in-depth analysis of their experiences and challenges, this research focused on N5 students at a particular campus, despite the fact that Business Studies students are enrolled at multiple campuses and on various NQF levels. The reason for focusing on the N5 students is that, while N4 students represent the fresh intake, N5 students are navigating increased workloads and challenges associated with the transition from N4 to N5. At this point, some students may encounter heightened stressors, leading to their dropping out before reaching N6. At this particular campus, there were three classes of approximately 30 students each who were all enrolled for the Business Management course, resulting in a total of 90 students at the selected campus. They had completed six months of their course and faced another 12 months of theory-based learning. This marks the midpoint of a three-semester programme.

The academic demands, social expectations, and personal challenges of this period put heightened pressure on students. Therefore, the study examined whether stress could be linked to underperformance among this group. Convenience sampling was used to select students who had just begun their N5 studies, who faced an increased workload and a faster-paced curriculum. All 90 students were informed of the study and invited to participate. Among the 90 students invited to participate in the study, 19 aged 18 or older volunteered to participate in the research. The intention of the study was to gain insight into the stressors experienced by these TVET college students and explore their coping mechanisms. To gather detailed, rich data aligned with the study objectives, telephonic interviews were conducted to allow participants to express their experiences freely.

#### **1.7.2.3 Data collection**

To gain a rich understanding of the participants' experiences, individual open-ended questions were asked in the telephonically conducted interviews. Information gleaned from the two sets interviews was further substantiated by entries in journals that students were requested to keep during the time of their participation. They journaled from the time of the two sets of interviews, starting in January and continuing to the end of the academic semester in June. Journals were

used to express personal feelings, views and opinions of their situations, how they experienced stress, and their coping strategies. Insights from the data collected were considered alongside the journals of participant students to indicate the effects stress had on their sense of well-being.

#### **1.7.2.4 Data analysis**

Data was analysed by means of thematic analysis. Howitt and Cramer (2007:331) suggest that employing thematic analysis as a means to examine textual data, including transcripts from interviews and written diaries. This method entails pinpointing, analysing and documenting recurring patterns (themes) within the data, offering a comprehensive and in-depth portrayal of the dataset. Each participant's responses to the interview questions were telephonically recorded and transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. Following that, the researcher identified codes which were then organised into categories. Based on the categories, themes, and sub-themes were identified and indicated, with the corresponding direct quotes from each, on an Excel spreadsheet. The coding of the journal data was guided by the thematic analysis of the interview data. In this way, the research questions mentioned above were addressed.

#### **1.7.2.5 Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (2000:8) regard trustworthiness as truth-value, which determines the extent to which a reader can have confidence in the truth of information that the participants provide. Klopper and Knobloch (2008:5) similarly note that "truth value is usually obtained from the discovery of human experiences as they are lived and perceived by the participants". Trustworthiness was ensured by triangulating the data from the interviews and journal.

#### **1.7.2.6 Researcher's position**

According to Sutton and Austin (2015:226), qualitative work involves having the researcher reflect and write on his or her role throughout the research process, even before and after the research. As the researcher, my role was to interview the participants and then analyse data obtained and present the findings. I am currently working at the institution where the research was performed. As the researcher, working for the institution served as an advantage as it facilitated obtaining the data, but I did not teach nor have any direct interaction with the student participants at the specific campus where the research was conducted. Therefore, they did not know me, nor did I have any influence over their academic outcomes. This potentially reduced the possibility of their feeling intimidated and increased the chances that they would expose their true experiences.

### **1.7.2.7 Ethical considerations**

Ethics approval for the study was received from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (Appendix A). Approval to conduct the study was also received from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) through the Deputy Principal who granted permission for the study to be conducted at one of their campuses in the Western Cape (Appendix B).

Henning (2004:73) notes that respondents must be made aware of the details of the research and the process of the interviews. Henning states further that confidentiality must be protected and participants must be informed about what will happen to the information they provide and how it will be disseminated. Once approval for the research had been granted and prior to conducting the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The participants were adolescents who understood the interview and journal process and who were made aware that their involvement was anonymous and their identity and views would remain confidential; and they also knew that they had the option to withdraw from the research at any time without any negative consequences. Students were given a consent form (Appendix C) which they signed. These were completed prior to the interviews. Once data had been utilised, it was stored in a safely locked cupboard and will be destroyed once it is no longer needed.

### **1.8 Contribution**

This study contributes to existing research on how stress affects students' academic performance. TVET colleges can utilise these insights to better understand and address the challenges students face in a stressful college environment. It offers evidence-based recommendations for implementing support systems that directly target these challenges by identifying key stressors and their influence on academic success. The findings of this study may also help institutions develop policies that prioritise student well-being. A policy may include strategies for identifying stress-related issues early, establishing mental health programs, and integrating stress management workshops into the curriculum. The study aims to create a supportive academic environment in TVET colleges by influencing such policy changes.

### **1.9 Chapter division**

#### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter provides an introductory outline of the study objectives, with a clear roadmap for the investigation. The chapter explains the significance and importance of the study in detail. The research methodology, including approaches to the data collection and analysis, are briefly covered, giving the reader a general understanding of the methods employed. As a

whole, the chapter serves as an in-depth introduction to the research, laying the groundwork for the detailed exploration to follow. In addition, it provides a clear understanding of the study's objectives, significance, and methodology.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

Significant challenges and stressors faced by students at TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) colleges are discussed in this chapter. Students face a wide variety of academic, social, and personal pressures, and these pressures can affect their overall well-being and performance. This chapter examines the various sources of stress that students face. The pressure to excel academically, the demands of coursework and assignments, the challenges associated with balancing academic responsibilities with personal life, and the potential financial burdens associated with a higher education are among these concerns. Additionally, this chapter discusses the emotional and psychological effects that these stressors can have, such as anxiety, depression, and overwhelming feelings. The chapter also emphasises the importance of developing effective coping strategies to help students deal with these challenges. It delves into the various techniques and resources that can be utilised, such as time management skills, stress management techniques, counselling and support services, and the cultivation of a healthy work-life balance. The chapter also underscores the significance of creating a supportive and nurturing environment within TVET colleges, where students can access the necessary resources and guidance to thrive academically and personally. Towards the end of the chapter, the study's theoretical framework, Lazarus's stress and coping model (1966), is explained in detail. The framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how students perceive and respond to stressors, forming the basis for analysing the coping mechanisms and support systems discussed in this chapter.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter explains the research methods used by the researcher. It describes the main goals of the research and the different tools and techniques used to collect the necessary data and develop insights.

An important part of the research was having the participating students keep a detailed journal. They wrote about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the study. This qualitative data provided valuable first-hand accounts and perspectives of the students. In addition to the journals, the researcher also conducted in-depth interviews with the students. They were asked important questions to get more comprehensive and detailed responses. These interviews were carefully analysed and included in the overall findings of the study. The process of analysis is explained in Chapter 3.

## **Chapter 4: Research findings**

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the data collected through the research process. The data was obtained from various sources, including the participants' personal journals and the one-on-one interviews conducted with them. These sources of data were directly linked to the original problem statement, research aim, and objectives that were outlined at the beginning of the study. The presentation and analysis of the data in this chapter is in relation to the relevant literature that was reviewed earlier in the study. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic by placing the collected data within the existing body of knowledge. The comparison highlights the similarities, differences, and potentially new insights that emerged from the current investigation. By thoroughly examining the data in relation to the problem statement, research aim and objectives, as well as the literature review, this chapter provides a detailed and nuanced account of the research findings. The analysis delves into the key themes, patterns, and relationships that were identified through the data collection and synthesis processes. This ultimately contributes to answering the research questions and addressing the original problem that motivated the study.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations**

This chapter summarises the key findings and insights from the research. The conclusions in this chapter provide a strong and evidence-based synthesis of the different parts of the investigation. The chapter draws together the crucial observations, analyses, and interpretations that emerged during the research project. Building on the data collection and analytical processes in the previous chapters, this final section of the report distils the essential takeaways. It also puts forth a set of targeted recommendations to address the central issues and challenges explored in the study. The conclusions not only capture the main points and overall trends identified, but also outline a clear way forward. They propose actionable steps and strategies that can be implemented to drive meaningful change and progress in the areas of focus. By integrating the diverse range of evidence and perspectives gathered, this chapter serves as the culmination of the study. It provides decision-makers, stakeholders, and the broader audience with a coherent and impactful set of findings and proposed solutions.

### **1.10 Summary of Chapter One**

This chapter described the aim of this study which was to explore students' perceptions of stress and the influence it had on their wellbeing. The students were selected from one Technical Vocational Education and Training College (TVET). The chapter gave a short overview on stress and outlined the problem statement and the research questions. This was followed by a description of the objectives of this study, and what the researcher aimed to achieve. The theoretical framework which grounded the study was briefly explained, followed

by the research design and methodology used for the study. The chapter concluded by explaining the value and contribution this study could make to the field and provided an outline of all the chapters. The next chapter provides an in-depth literature review of research done in this field and provides more information on the notion of stress experienced by students in higher education.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter One provided an overview of this study and concluded a broad outline of the objectives and aims of the study. Chapter Two goes on to review relevant literature regarding stress within the TVET sector, providing an understanding of students' perceptions of stress, its effects on academic performance and the theories and models used to guide studies on coping mechanisms. Section 2.2 presents literature on historical inequalities and its effects during and after the apartheid era, the challenges within TVET, and positive outcomes of education reforms. Section 2.3 provides a detailed literature study on stress and students, and the causes of stress. Section 2.4 focuses on stress and academic performance, and includes the dual nature of stress: distress vs eustress, perfectionism and stress, and the impact of stress on an individual's cognitive and emotional processes. Section 2.5 provides an overview of coping strategies and the role of the educator. This section further discusses coping strategies that studies have shown may be effective. This section includes the coping strategies that can be used as support mechanisms in combating the effects of stress. Section 2.6 outlines gender differences in coping with stress and provides an understanding of how coping with stress may vary for males and females. Section 2.7 describes the theoretical framework that underpins the study and guide the analysis. Chapter Two concludes with a summative discussion of how the combined works of theorists are applied to this study.

#### **2.2 Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector**

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) plays a crucial role in higher education by providing specialised skills and practical training for a wide range of industries (Sibiya & Nyembezi, 2018:5). It is essential to understand the historical context of TVET if one is to fully grasp the significance of the institution, such as the influence of previous political regimes and the ongoing reforms aiming to make TVET even more effective. The purpose of this section is to explore the history of TVET, with a particular focus on historical inequalities and how they have influenced education, apartheid's influence on TVET, and the post-apartheid educational reforms in South Africa after apartheid ended, followed by a discussion on the challenges that the TVET system is currently facing. This comprehensive study aims to provide a solid background for understanding the causes and effects of student stress within the TVET sector as a whole.

### **2.2.1 Historical inequalities and the impact on education**

During the apartheid regime in South Africa, education was subject to profound inequalities. From 1948, racially segregated policies denied non-white South Africans access to quality education, perpetuating cycles of poverty, social marginalisation, and political disenfranchisement (Buthelezi, 2018:15). It significantly impacted the socio-economic and political landscape, limiting opportunities and stunting the potential of millions.

Apartheid's legacy still influences education today, despite democratic reforms ending apartheid. This means that TVET institutions still suffer from historical imbalances. Addressing these inequities is the key to creating a more just and inclusive society (Buthelezi, 2018:16).

### **2.2.2 Influence of apartheid and its effects on TVET**

The historical inequalities and injustices embedded within the education system during the apartheid era have had a lasting effect on both students and educators. The transformation process aimed at addressing these deep-rooted issues has been complex and time-consuming, as the legacy of apartheid continues to permeate the educational landscape. Decades of discriminatory policies, resource allocation and institutional biases have created a system that struggles to provide equal opportunities and support to all learners, regardless of their racial or socioeconomic background (Buthelezi, 2018:16).

The disparities in access to quality education, educational infrastructure and educational resources between historically advantaged and disadvantaged communities remain a significant challenge. Students from marginalised backgrounds often face additional barriers, such as financial constraints, lack of academic support and limited exposure to relevant career paths and skills development opportunities (Buthelezi, 2018:16).

The ongoing effects of apartheid, including entrenched discrimination, pervasive socioeconomic hardship, and deep-rooted resentment, continue to impact TVET students profoundly. Many of these students come from impoverished communities that were systematically marginalised and deprived of resources during the apartheid era (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:63-64). The educational experiences of TVET students are often marked by the challenges of attending underfunded and under-resourced schools which struggle to provide scholars with the necessary academic support and learning environments. This, in turn, leads to lower academic performance at the TVET level, as these students face significant obstacles in developing the skills and knowledge required for success in their technical and vocational programmes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:63-64). Furthermore, the psychological and emotional toll of growing up in communities scarred by the lingering effects of apartheid can



be immense: many TVET students grapple with the trauma, resentment and sense of disenfranchisement that have been passed down through generations. These effects may also impede their academic and personal development (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:63-64).

Due to the ongoing effects of apartheid on students, more specifically those in TVET, many students from impoverished communities with limited resources, struggle with poor academic performance. These low-income communities experience a variety of stressors, including poverty, racism, conflict, and violence (Mzangwa, 2019:4). According to Sidney (2018:171), past policies of segregation and discrimination have resulted in poverty and inequality, along with low economic growth. Many students come from fragmented families and live in crowded homes; therefore, these factors continue to play a huge role in their daily lives (Sidney, 2018:171).

### **2.2.3 Post-apartheid educational reforms**

The transition to a democratic system of governance in 1994 marked a significant turning point for the country. This shift in the political landscape necessitated the development of new policies and strategies to drive the transformation of the social, economic and cultural fabric of the nation. The primary objectives of these policies were to establish and nurture a democratic ethos, safeguard human rights, promote national unity and cohesion and foster social equity and inclusiveness (Fullan, 2003:22). Recognising the pivotal role of education and training in shaping the future of the country, these policies placed a strong emphasis on reforming and reinvigorating the education sector. The aim was to align the education system with the democratic values and principles that were now enshrined in the national agenda. This involved revising curricula and adjusting pedagogical approaches and educational infrastructure to create an environment conducive to the holistic development of citizens who could actively participate in the democratic process, champion human rights and contribute to nation-building efforts (Fullan, 2003:22).

The implementation of these new policies was a complex and multifaceted undertaking, requiring the coordination and collaboration of various government agencies, civil society organisations, and educational institutions. It entailed extensive consultations, pilot programmes, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the intended outcomes were being achieved, with any necessary adjustments made along the way (Fullan, 2003:22). The impact of these policy initiatives was far-reaching: they not only transformed the education and training landscape but also had a ripple effect on the broader social, economic and political spheres. The emphasis on democracy, human rights, and social equity helped to foster a more inclusive and just society, where marginalised communities could access opportunities and participate in the decision-making processes that shaped their lives (Fullan, 2003:22).

#### **2.2.4 Challenges in the TVET system**

With the advent of a new democratic system of governance in 1994, new policies were required to transform society. These policies aimed to address and promote democracy, human rights, nation-building, and social equity, significantly impacting education and training (Fullan, 2003:22).

South Africa's TVET colleges have played a critical role in post-apartheid educational reforms. These institutions provide practical skills and training for various industries and trades. However, TVET colleges face significant challenges, including high attrition rates and low programme completion rates (Lawrence, 2016:19).

Despite the government's stated intentions to develop a robust TVET system, the reality on the ground paints a different picture. TVET colleges across the country are grappling with a severe shortage of critical resources, hampering their ability to deliver quality education and training to students (Lawrence, 2016:19). One of the most pressing issues facing these institutions is the lack of qualified and experienced instructors. Many TVET colleges struggle to attract and retain skilled professionals who can effectively teach the practical and theoretical components of their curriculum. This shortage of qualified teaching staff often leads to suboptimal learning experiences for the students, as they may not receive the hands-on training and specialised expertise needed to develop the necessary skills for the job market (Lawrence, 2016:19).

Furthermore, the insufficient funding and resource allocation to TVET colleges has had a detrimental impact on their infrastructure and learning environment. Classrooms and workshops often lack the modern equipment, tools and materials required to provide industry-relevant training. This disconnects between the colleges and the evolving demands of the job market directly affect the employability of TVET graduates, as they may not possess the up-to-date skills and practical knowledge sought by employers (Lawrence, 2016:19).

#### **2.2.5 Managing stress amidst educational reforms**

Historically, TVET colleges were reorganised to assist the most vulnerable, including previously disenfranchised students, early school dropouts, and students with disabilities (Ntombela, 2019:51). Additionally, TVET was intended to deliver education and training for mid-level skills crucial to the growth of the South African economy, specifically in sectors such as construction, engineering, tourism, hospitality, and general business and management studies (Sibiya & Nyembezi, 2018:5).

The complexity of change management in the TVET sector is explained by Kraak et al. (2016:5) who note that constant changes in college numbers, mergers, and staff employment affects the way colleges operate. There is a lack of unity between students, lecturers, and the curricula that have been reformulated or created, resulting in considerable tension in the educational relationship, (Buthelezi,2018:2). Buthelezi (2018:8) further argues that these tensions originate from the perceptions and experiences of lecturers and students, both of which are underpinned by the state's vision for skills development and to build the global economy to ensure that the youth can experience the economic benefits of educational reforms. Despite expectations that TVET reform would address the needs of unemployed youth, Kraak et al. (2016:6) argue that the necessary changes have been resisted by the community and government, with colleges perceived as underperforming. However, though TVET colleges are criticised, they continue to offer adult education, especially to those who have never attended school (Ntombela, 2019:65).

Apart from the ongoing effects of apartheid (like discrimination, hardship, and resentment) that are characterised by an "imbalance between demands and resources" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:63), the authors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:64) argue that individuals have access to resources and skills that they can use on a daily basis; and that how people handle "pressures and stressors" is determined by how well they use them. The government keeps expanding student access to minimise economic pressure on households by increasing training and employment opportunities, but stress continues to exist, and much of it goes unnoticed.

## **2.3 Stress and students**

There are two types of stress according to Lazarus (2006:38): sociocultural stress, which is a reaction to how society is organised; and physiological stress, which is a reaction to physical problems. Stressors are defined as "any circumstance or event that has the potential to disrupt people's daily functioning and to force them to adjust to their surroundings" (Monroe & Slavich 2016:25). There is no doubt that college students today face more complex problems than they did decades ago (Kumaraswamy, 2013:135).

### **2.3.1 Causes of stress**

A wide range of stress factors can contribute to a student's stress levels, such as an increased workload in the classroom; being on one's own in a new environment; changes in family relationships; changes in social life; and being exposed to new ideas and temptations. According to Kumaraswamy (2013:136), forming social relationships with others is one of the causes of stress. Overcrowded homes and high levels of stress can prevent students from developing supportive relationships which are essential for their emotional well-being. In the TVET sector, this issue is compounded by the demanding nature of technical and vocational

programmes which take up significant time and energy, leaving little room for social interaction. Moreover, many TVET students come from disadvantageous backgrounds, which makes it difficult for them to meet their financial obligations. In addition to creating a stressful environment, these factors negatively impact the mental health and academic performance of students (Kumaraswamy, 2013:137).

#### **2.3.1.1 Social factors**

Kai-Wen (2009:1) describes various social factors that contribute to stress among students. The study highlights the significant increase in the enrolment of "non-traditional" students, typically defined as adult learners who do not follow the traditional path of entering higher education directly after secondary school. This shift in the student demographic has introduced a new set of challenges that educational institutions must address. The research identifies several key social factors that contribute to heightened stress levels among this growing population of students. One prominent factor is the rise in poverty and the lack of resources available to many non-traditional students. These individuals often juggle the demands of work, family, and education, leaving them with limited financial and material support. The strain of balancing multiple responsibilities can take a significant toll on their mental and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, a study by Pribesh et al. (2020:229) explore the impact of parental involvement, or the lack thereof, on student stress. Parents may not be able to provide the same level of guidance and support to non-traditional students as they do to traditional students, especially in the case of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A lack of support can lead to feelings of isolation. In addition, students and their families' education levels must be taken into consideration. Those from households with lower educational attainment may find it more difficult to navigate the complexities of the educational system, contributing to their frustration and stress. Language barriers also play a significant role, especially for non-traditional students who are English language learners or immigrants. Stress and anxiety can be exacerbated when students are incapable of communicating effectively with instructors, administrators, and peers (Pribesh et al., 2020:229).

Conflict in families is often caused by a lack of understanding or support within the household or within the parent-child relationship (Kai-Wen, 2009:1). Academic achievement of students is heavily influenced by family factors.

The main contributor to increased stress levels that was identified in the study by Kai-Wen (2009) was social factors, and it was found that female students tend to be more stressed than male students. Further, students with a high sense of self-esteem are less stressed than students with a low sense of self-esteem, according to Galanakis et al. (2016:687). Muchineripi

(2017:4) states that students at institutions of higher learning not only face social factors, but also a variety of other significant stressors such as financial and academic stress which result in social and mental challenges and this could have a significant impact on academic performance of the student.

Shalaby and Agyapong (2020:2) maintain that psychological stress factors result from psychological and mental pressure. Strumpher (2018:16) proposes that identifying which factors contribute to and alleviate stress could lead to the creation of programmes and knowledge that could allow students to cope with stress more effectively.

In addition to the challenges discussed above, personal circumstances may also influence academic performance. A study by Otegbayo et al. (2023:383) revealed that college students who fall pregnant fear humiliation and judgment from their family and peers; and women who had to hide their pregnancy experience depression and isolation during the pregnancy, both of which negatively impact their academic performance.

Though education is seen as a means of escaping poverty in South Africa, poor education systems often sustain poverty cycles in townships (Nortje, 2017:47). Poverty ripples throughout the community when parents do not have qualifications, nor the resources to pursue them, resulting in the child growing up in poverty, with unemployed parents who are struggling economically in (Nortje, 2017:62).

It is still possible for students to succeed in their studies despite financial difficulties. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training, (2018), the South African government wants to ensure swift transformation in South African institutions of education and training, whilst at the same time making education accessible by providing financial aid to students who cannot afford the rising cost of education. Providing students with appropriate resources to cope with stress should be a key function of higher education learning institutions, according to Yeo and Yap (2023:120).

Parental involvement influences the way these students experienced college life (Workman, 2015:30). Since many parents have never been to college, they cannot relate to or understand everything that students go through. Additionally, Workman (2015:25) found that increased parental involvement resulted in less stress and better academic achievement among low-income families. Moreover, the researcher emphasised the problems that poor students face: Students from lower-income homes who lack parental involvement in their academic life often have lower academic performance and fewer educational opportunities. For many students,

the lack of parental involvement is a major stressor (Workman, 2015:23); in addition, having unsupportive parents likely negatively influences their academic performance.

Most TVET colleges in South Africa deliver courses through the medium of English, which is often not the first language of students. Students may not be able to fully comprehend learning materials if they struggle to read and comprehend in English, according to Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2015:46). In addition, low English language proficiency contributes to high dropout rates and high stress levels. Language barriers pose significant challenges to learners in the Western Cape, where most TVET courses are taught in English. Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2015:32) point out that these reading and comprehension difficulties can severely hinder students' ability to understand information. Due to their limited understanding of both the language of instruction and the subject content, students often experience high levels of anxiety and fear of failure.

#### **2.3.1.2 Financial stress**

Financial stress is common among TVET students in South Africa. In addition to tuition fees, they must also pay for transportation and food (Lawrence, 2016:25). To alleviate this burden, Gaffoor (2018:11) states that, NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme), established pursuant to the NSFAS Act (Act 56 of 1999), enables state institutions to provide financial assistance to students seeking education. The scheme aims to make higher education and training more accessible to more students without adding to their financial burden. According to Van Wyk et al. (2013:72), over 60% of NSFAS fund expenses go to successful students. It is important to note that funding is available, but that challenges continue, some of which are crippling (Van Wyk et al., 2013:3). Some of the challenges include late graduation or students remaining in the system for longer than the duration of TVET programmes, as well as 'late return', which refers to returning students who do not arrive when classes begin and drop out before the programme is complete. The funding of students who remain on the system places a burden on the NSFAS, the economy, and the community (Gaffoor, 2018:11).

Despite financial assistance provided to students from low-income households, Strumpher (2018:15) states that these students are more likely to receive poor grades or repeat academic levels compared to their peers from higher socio-economic backgrounds. This disparity can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

#### **2.3.1.3 Academic stress**

Various studies have explored the factors contributing to student stress in academic settings. According to Galanakis et al. (2016:693), student stress is strongly correlated with examination

preparation and exam results, a source of anxiety and pressure for many students. In light of this, both Galanakis et al. (2016:689) and Kai-Wen (2009:250) argue that a heavy academic workload significantly contributes to stress levels among students. Often, students are required to juggle heavy course loads, extensive reading assignments, and numerous project deadlines, leaving little time for rest and relaxation. As Sohail (2013:67) elaborates, students have limited leisure and personal time due to the overwhelming amount of information and work they are required to complete. Academic pressure and the need to perform at a high level can have a significant negative influence on a student's mental and emotional health.

### **2.3.2 Stress and academic performance**

Stress is the body's reaction to internal or external challenges or problems, resulting in physical, psychological and emotional reactions (Owusu & Essel, 2017:15). Stress directly affects brain function. A person's inability to manage stress can result in brain malfunction, physiological problems and psychological issues, such as depression, anxiety and burnout. It is important to note, however, that not all stress is harmful. Stress can be channelled into positive actions, resulting in 'eustress,' characterised by intellectual engagement, curiosity and enjoyment (Owusu & Essel, 2017:16). Owusu and Essel (2017:17) state that, high levels of stress can have a significant negative impact on academic performance, impairing concentration, memory and cognitive functions. However, when stress is effectively managed, it can enhance motivation and focus, thereby improving academic performance. For students to achieve their full academic potential, understanding and managing stress is crucial (Owusu & Essel, 2017:17).

#### **2.3.2.1 The dual nature of stress: Distress vs eustress**

Stress is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can have a significant influence on an individual's physical, mental and emotional well-being. Developing effective coping strategies and maintaining a positive attitude are crucial in cultivating eustress and mitigating the detrimental effects of distress. By engaging in stress-management techniques like meditation, exercise, or mindfulness practices, individuals can learn to regulate their physiological and psychological responses to stressful situations better, channelling the energy of eustress towards productive and fulfilling ends (Galli & Reel, 2012:199). Additionally, fostering a positive mindset and reframing stressful events as opportunities for personal development can help individuals harness the benefits of eustress, leading to enhanced creativity, productivity and problem-solving capabilities.

Achieving a balanced life and improved well-being is the ultimate goal of managing stress. By reducing the negative influences of distress and actively cultivating eustress, individuals can create a healthier, more resilient and more fulfilling lifestyle. This holistic approach to stress

management not only benefits the individual, but can also have a positive ripple effect on their relationships, work performance and overall quality of life (Galli & Reel, 2012:212).

#### **2.3.2.2 Perfectionism and stress**

Perfectionism is a significant source of stress that can have far-reaching consequences for an individual's well-being and life choices. When the unrealistically high standards set by perfectionists are not met, they often experience a range of negative emotions, including dissatisfaction, disappointment and low self-esteem (Lessin & Pardo, 2017:78).

This relentless pursuit of perfection can be detrimental to an individual's mental health, as it can lead to debilitating anxiety and chronic stress. The pressure to perform constantly at the highest level can be overwhelming, causing perfectionists to become overly critical of themselves and their abilities. This self-criticism can undermine their confidence and self-worth, making it difficult for them to take risks or try new things for fear of falling short of their own expectations. Furthermore, the negative effects of perfectionism can extend beyond an individual's personal life, influencing their academic and professional endeavours as well. The constant striving for perfection can lead perfectionists to become overly focused on the end result, neglecting the importance of the learning process and the opportunity for growth. This singular focus on achieving perfection can hinder their ability to adapt to new challenges, as they may be unwilling to try new approaches or accept feedback that does not align with their idealised vision (Madigan, 2019:234).

#### **2.3.2.3 Influence of stress on an individual's cognitive and emotional processes**

Stress can have a profound influence on an individual's perception and response to a given situation. According to the renowned psychologist, Richard Lazarus, the way a person perceives and reacts to a stressful encounter is largely determined by the stakes involved (Lazarus, 1986:63). When a person experiences academic stress, the consequences can be far-reaching and detrimental. Students who face high levels of stress may find their self-esteem declining and their future opportunities becoming increasingly limited (Lazarus, 2006:22). This can create a vicious cycle, where the pressure of poor academic performance leads to a sense of helplessness and further exacerbates the stress.

The influence of stress on an individual's cognitive and emotional processes is well-documented. Stress can be addressed directly with problem-focused approaches, whereas emotional reactions can be mitigated with emotion-focused approaches. In response to stress, people may interpret and appraise situations differently, leading to distorted perceptions and increased emotional reactions (Lazarus, 1986:63). This, in turn, can shape the individual's coping strategies and decision-making processes, potentially resulting in maladaptive



behaviours or choices. Furthermore, the physiological effects of stress, such as the release of hormones like cortisol, can have far-reaching implications on an individual's physical and mental well-being (Lazarus, 1986:64). Chronic stress has been linked to a variety of health problems, including cardiovascular disease, weakened immune function, and the development of mental health disorders like anxiety and depression (Lazarus, 1986:64).

#### **2.3.2.4 The influence of stress on academic performance**

Students' academic performance can be significantly affected by their stress levels. When students experience high levels of stress, their grades may suffer (Lazarus, 1986:63). Academic performance, based on Bell (2018:12), is the comparison of a student's performance against standards and norms set by the state and educational institutions. Kadapatti and Vijayalaxmi (2012:171) argue that positive stress, also known as "eustress," can actually enhance learning experiences and result in better academic outcomes. This type of stress can motivate students to work harder, be more focused and rise to meet the challenges they face in their studies. Experiencing some level of stress can help students develop important coping mechanisms and build resilience, which are valuable skills for academic and professional success. However, the researchers also note that excessive or chronic stress, often referred to as "distress", can have detrimental effects. Sohail (2013:2) found that high levels of stress can cause a range of health problems, including headaches, muscle tension, fatigue and difficulty sleeping. Prolonged stress can also lead to lower self-esteem, as students may feel overwhelmed or doubt their abilities to meet the demands of their coursework. Eventually, this distress can cause significant deterioration of academic performance, as students struggle to concentrate, retain information and perform well on exams and assignments.

Furthermore, Sohail (2013:2) explains that a chronic state of distress resulting from accumulated negative experiences can even lead to more serious mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or generalised anxiety disorder. These conditions can further impair a student's cognitive functioning, emotional well-being and overall academic success. It is crucial for educational institutions to recognise the influence of stress on students and implement strategies to help them manage stress effectively, promoting a healthy and supportive learning environment.

The Western Cape Province has higher matriculation rates than other provinces (Van der Berg & Burger, 2003:7). Official statistics also indicate that youth are currently achieving higher levels of education than their parents (Van der Berg & Burger, 2003:5). As noted by Son et al. (2020:1), academically anxious students are more likely to suffer from depression; and when anxious students hear stressful news, or overhear their families discussing traumatic

experiences, they can lose focus because they tend to concentrate on these incidents. As they try to return to their normal thinking state and listen and learn, they become overwhelmed by anxieties, worrying about school, their performance, and whether they will pass (Son et al., 2020:2). As reported by Ndahepele et al. (2018:20), depression and anxiety contribute to students experiencing burnout and low academic performance due to poor sleep and poor concentration.

Kaplan et al. (2005:1) argue that poor academic performance results when students experience a negative educational environment: "Students may suffer poor academic performance as a result of stressful negative school experiences, or as an effect of these experiences" (Kaplan et al., 2005:1). Similarly, Chambel and Curral (2005:135) posit that student satisfaction directly affects performance. Younger et al. (2008:447) assert that the effects of stress lead to loneliness and feelings of discomfort when among others, which in turn decreases social interaction with peers and negatively affects self-esteem. As a result, classroom interaction and academic performance are affected.

A similar theory is presented by Cowden (2010:9): anxiety about studies prevents students from speaking up. Instead of taking care of their own needs, they just agree and try to please others. This results in problems not being addressed, although there is an awareness of such issues. The result is that students aim to satisfy others, but this simply increases their anxiety (Cowden, 2010:9).

As stated by Owusu and Essel (2017:23), excessive work could also increase a student's stress levels because, when students have many demanding subjects, they think they will not have enough time to handle everything to the best of their ability. These feelings of incompetence lead to tension and stress, which negatively influences academic performance. In Owusu and Essel's (2017) study, they contend that a busy life combined with excessive academic demands causes stress.

It is possible for individuals to perform better when experiencing good stress. However, when negative stress and pressure are not controlled, they can result in fatigue, depression and a variety of other physical and emotional ailments, which can negatively impact academic performance and reduce attendance (Owusu & Essel, 2017). Further, Iurea and Safta (2018:153) note that the presence of high stress levels among university students is concerning, especially when the level of stress impacts academic performance among students. Researchers Pillay and Ncgobo (2010:235) examined the prevalence of stressors in students' daily lives, and fear of failing was the most frequently reported stressor (92.5% reported).

## **2.4 Coping strategies of students experiencing stress**

Lazarus and Folkman highlighted psychological and behavioural components of stress that led to a more comprehensive understanding of stress before the 1960s (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:06). Consequently, since the 1960s, people have been recognized for their ability to deal with stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:06). The dynamic state of stress encompasses important aspects such as coping resources, their costs (e.g., disease and distress), and their benefits (e.g., competence growth and triumph over adversity). The study of stress and coping has evolved over the years, with researchers exploring the complex interplay between the individual, their environment, and the stressors they face. Stress is not merely a physiological response, but a multifaceted experience that involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components. The way individuals perceive and respond to stressful events can have a profound impact on their overall well-being and resilience (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:07).

Vulnerable students, those who face various challenges and adversities in their lives, may resort to negative coping strategies as a way to deal with their difficulties. These negative strategies can include engaging in anti-social and even illegal activities, such as substance abuse, violence, or criminal behaviour. These harmful actions often provide a temporary escape or a misguided attempt to alleviate the underlying problems the students are facing. However, these negative coping mechanisms can ultimately worsen the students' struggles and lead to further negative consequences in their personal, academic, and social lives.

According to the Lazarus stress coping theory, the specific coping skills and resources available to an individual are directly linked to the types and levels of stress they encounter (Folkman, 1980 Lazarus, 1986). This theory suggests that individuals who lack the necessary coping skills and strategies will face greater difficulties in managing and overcoming the stressors they encounter, particularly in academic and professional settings. For example, students who have not developed a robust repertoire of coping mechanisms, such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, or seeking social support, may struggle significantly when faced with the demands and pressures of academic life. Without the appropriate coping skills, these students may find stress management and academic success particularly challenging, potentially leading to adverse outcomes, such as poor academic performance, mental health issues, or even dropout. Conversely, individuals who have had the opportunity to cultivate a diverse set of coping strategies during their formative years may be better equipped to navigate the stressors they encounter later in life. These individuals may be more resilient, adaptable, and capable of employing the right coping mechanisms to manage stress effectively, ultimately leading to more positive life outcomes.

Coping resources, which can include personal characteristics, social support, and problem-solving skills, play a crucial role in mediating the effects of stress. When individuals have access to effective coping strategies, they are better equipped to manage the demands of stressful situations, reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes such as physical and mental health problems. Conversely, the depletion or lack of coping resources can lead to increased distress and a diminished sense of control over one's circumstances. Milks (2018:166) found that students who had social support structures persisted in their academic performance.

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2015:11) the introduction of the national norms and standards policy for TVET College funding aims to make TVET Colleges available to economically active youth and adults, outside of the school system, seeking to improve their skills or obtain better employment opportunities (Eicker et al., 2017:52). The number of 'non-traditional' (adult) students attending TVET colleges has increased (Tilley, 2014:1). In addition to the age criterion, other criteria include students who have taken time off before returning to school (Tilley, 2014:2). Those who are married and who work part-time or full-time in addition to attending college are also included (Tilley, 2014:3).

Younger students who are recent school leavers experience a different set of stressors than adult students. Kohler et al. (2006:246-263) suggest that inter-role conflict increases stress levels in adult students, where external or household stressors are the most common. Non-traditional students have been shown to be stressed by relationships or married life (Chung et al., 2017:87). Adult students can experience stress when they have families or marriages because they must adjust to situations, such as adjusting to household duties when a partner returns to school or feeling pressured to make tuition worth its cost (Forbus et al., 2010:67). However, non-traditional students have been shown to cope with stress better than younger students because they can use adaptive coping strategies such as seeing stressors as challenges (Chung et al., 2017:87).

#### **2.4.1 The development of coping mechanisms and the education institution's role**

Coping mechanisms are the strategies and behaviours that individuals develop to manage stress, adversity, and challenging life experiences. These mechanisms begin to form during the formative years of early childhood and continue to evolve throughout adulthood. Individuals who have faced significant hardships or trauma during their childhood often find it more challenging to cultivate and apply effective coping mechanisms later in life. The experiences and environments they were exposed to during their formative years can significantly influence their ability to navigate and manage stress as adults.

Educators should play a crucial role in equipping students with effective coping strategies to prevent burnout and anxiety associated with extreme stress. This is particularly important for first-year students who often face a significant transition from high school to the demanding academic environment of college or university. Integrating resilience-building techniques into the curriculum can help these young learners develop the necessary perseverance and coping skills to navigate the challenges they encounter (Owusu & Essel, 2017:9).

Educators who listen to students' concerns and show empathy can significantly improve students' performance and stress management. When students feel heard and understood, it can foster a sense of trust and connection with their teachers. This, in turn, can lead to the student experiencing increased engagement, motivation, and a willingness to take risks in the learning process. By demonstrating care and concern for their students' well-being, educators create a supportive environment that enables students to navigate challenges more effectively (Gibbons et al., 2008:282).

Beyond just teaching these skills, it is essential that educational institutions also provide healthy support structures to ensure students are able to complete their studies successfully. This may include access to counselling services, peer support groups, tutoring programmes and other resources that address the holistic needs of students. By fostering a campus culture that prioritises mental health and well-being, educators can create an environment where students feel empowered to overcome obstacles and thrive academically. Furthermore, it is crucial that educators recognise the unique stressors faced by different student populations, such as their being first-generation college students, international students, or those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Tailored support and mentorship programmes can help these students develop the necessary academic skills and social connections to succeed in their educational journeys.

Successful students often have supportive relationships with their educators have a positive outlook on challenges. These students are typically able to benefit from educators who are able to provide encouragement, guidance, and a listening ear when faced with academic or personal difficulties. They have developed the ability to reframe obstacles as opportunities for growth and learning, rather than viewing them as insurmountable barriers.

Furthermore, research suggests that students who receive emotional support and have their emotional needs met are more likely to develop resilience and coping strategies to manage stress (Gloria & Steinhardt, 2016:156). This emotional support can come not only from educators, but also from their peers and other influential individuals in their lives. By cultivating a culture of empathy and understanding, educational institutions can play a crucial role in

nurturing the holistic development of their students, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and overall well-being.

#### **2.4.2 Managing stress, emotional intelligence and self-leadership**

Stress makes it difficult for students cope effectively with daily demands, leading to headaches, fatigue, depression, and anxiety (Dusselier et al., 2005:15). Stress management is therefore crucial to maintaining a healthy balance and preventing these detrimental effects. Effective stress management strategies such as practising relaxation techniques, exercising regularly, prioritising self-care, and asking for support from trusted family, friends, or mental health professionals will help students cope with challenges and maintain their mental- and physical health (May, 2015:25).

Houghton et al. (2012:238) emphasise that emotional intelligence and self-leadership are crucial components for effective coping and stress management in today's fast-paced and demanding world. Their extensive research shows that these factors have a significant influence on an individual's ability to cope with stress. Students who balance emotional intelligence, self-leadership, and stress management, are able to control their emotions and demonstrate strong self-leadership skills, which helps them to cope with academic and personal challenges (Houghton et al., 2012:238). As a result, these individuals are capable of identifying and addressing the root causes of their stress, as well as employing effective coping strategies to mitigate its negative effects.

Given the importance of emotional intelligence and self-leadership in promoting healthy stress management, it is recommended that educational institutions integrate targeted development programmes into their college curricula (Gohm et al., 2005:1017). By providing students with the necessary tools and resources to cultivate these critical competencies, colleges and universities can empower their students to thrive in the face of stress, ultimately leading to improved academic performance, well-being, and overall life satisfaction.

The incorporation of emotional intelligence and self-leadership development programmes not only benefits students during their academic journey but also equips them with valuable skills that can be transferred and applied throughout their personal and professional lives. As they navigate the complexities of the modern world, individuals with strong emotional intelligence and self-leadership abilities will be better positioned to manage stress effectively, maintain a healthy work-life balance and achieve personal and professional success.

### **2.4.3 The role of humour in coping**

Maintaining a positive and light-hearted attitude can be a powerful tool in managing the stresses and anxieties that often accompany the academic journey. Research has shown that students who possess a well-developed sense of humour are more adept at employing constructive coping mechanisms, such as positive reappraisal and effective problem-solving strategies (Sekonyela, 2018:16).

The act of laughing and finding humour in the midst of adversity can have tangible physiological benefits. Laughter has been shown to release endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals, which can help alleviate tension and improve overall well-being. This, in turn, can bolster the student's resilience and capacity to tackle academic obstacles head-on, fostering a more productive and fulfilling learning experience (Sekonyela, 2018:16). Additionally, the use of humour has been recognised as a powerful tool in coping with adversity. Laughter and the ability to find humour in challenging situations can help individuals gain a fresh perspective, reduce tension, and boost their overall sense of well-being (Aldridge & Roesch, 2008:350). By incorporating a combination of these coping mechanisms into their daily lives, individuals can cultivate a more resilient and balanced approach to managing stress and anxiety, ultimately enhancing their overall quality of life.

In the high-pressure environment of academia, cultivating a strong sense of humour can be a valuable asset. By embracing a light-hearted and problem-solving-orientated approach, students can not only mitigate the negative influences of stress and anxiety but also enhance their overall academic performance and personal growth.

### **2.4.4 Enhancing mental and emotional well-being: Effective coping strategies and practices**

Practices that promote mental and emotional well-being have been widely studied and shown to have significant benefits for individuals. Meditation, for instance, has been extensively researched and found to be an effective tool for reducing stress, improving emotional regulation, and enhancing cognitive function (Goleman & Davidson, 2017:25). By training the mind to focus on the present moment and cultivate a sense of inner calm, meditation helps individuals develop greater resilience and cope better with the challenges of daily life. Cultivating a positive mindset, characterised by optimistic self-talk, reframing negative experiences, and focusing on personal strengths, has also been shown to be an effective coping mechanism. Positive thinking can enhance emotional resilience, foster a sense of hope, and promote overall well-being (Aldridge & Roesch, 2008:346).

Similarly, engaging in recreational activities, such as playing games, has been linked to improved stress management and problem-solving skills. Games, whether they are digital, board, or physical in nature, can provide an avenue for individuals to step away from their worries temporarily, engage in playful competition or cooperation, and develop strategies for navigating complex situations (Goleman & Davidson, 2017:26). The cognitive and social aspects of game-playing can enhance an individual's ability to handle conflicts and find constructive solutions. Furthermore, engaging in leisure activities, such as hobbies, exercise, or social interactions, can provide a much-needed respite from the stresses of daily life. These activities not only offer a temporary distraction but also facilitate the release of endorphins, which can improve mood and reduce feelings of anxiety (Ben-Zur, 2009:356).

Support groups have also been shown to be beneficial for individuals who face various challenges, such as chronic illness, addiction, or mental illness. These groups provide a safe and supportive environment where individuals can share their experiences, receive emotional support, and learn from the coping strategies of others (Shalaby & Agyapong 2020:2). By fostering a sense of community and promoting mutual understanding, support groups can empower individuals to manage their stress better and improve their conflict-handling abilities. Researchers have found that students with effective coping strategies, such as seeking support and advice from others and engaging in open communication, have lower levels of stress and better long-term outcomes (Tully, 2004:43). When students have access to supportive resources and are equipped with the necessary skills to cope in a healthy manner, they are better positioned to overcome adversity and thrive in their academic and personal lives.

Effective time management is also a crucial skill that can significantly reduce stress levels and enhance academic performance. Planning and organising tasks meticulously can provide a sense of control and alleviate the burden of overwhelming workloads (Cahir & Morris, 1991:414; Devonport & Lane, 2006:127). When students learn to prioritise their responsibilities, allocate time wisely, and create realistic schedules, they can better manage their time and avoid the pitfalls of procrastination. This, in turn, can lead to improved academic outcomes, as they are able to dedicate adequate attention and effort to their studies without feeling overwhelmed or constantly playing catch-up (Rathi & Chaudhary, 2024:24). Furthermore, effective time management can have a positive influence on an individual's overall well-being. By reducing the level of stress experienced, students can enjoy better physical and mental health, which can further contribute to their academic success. When students are able to maintain a healthy work-life balance, they are less likely to experience burnout, anxiety, or depression, which can hinder their ability to perform at their best (Douce & Keeling, 2014:179).



Coping strategies that focus on problem-solving and receiving support from others can significantly reduce academic-related stress. When faced with challenging academic demands, students who actively engage in identifying and implementing effective solutions to their problems, rather than avoiding them, tend to experience lower levels of stress and anxiety. Similarly, seeking emotional and practical support from family, friends, professors, or campus counselling services can provide a valuable outlet for students to share their concerns, gain different perspectives, and feel less isolated in their struggles (Pierceall & Keim, 2007:703; Engelbrecht et. al (2020:3). Direct problem-solving involves a methodical approach to addressing the root causes of one's concerns, breaking down complex issues into manageable steps, and taking constructive actions to find solutions. This proactive strategy can help individuals regain a sense of control and reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed by challenges (Aldridge & Roesch, 2008:340). In contrast, well-adjusted students, those who have developed healthy and adaptive methods of coping, typically utilise more constructive problem-solving strategies. These students may seek out support from trusted adults, engage in positive extracurricular activities, or employ mindfulness and relaxation techniques to manage stress and navigate challenges. By employing these effective coping methods, well-adjusted students are able to avoid negative behaviours and maintain a better overall well-being.

In addition to problem-solving and social support, engaging in recreational activities and exercise can also be highly beneficial for managing academic stress. Taking regular breaks from studying to participate in enjoyable hobbies, sports, or other leisure pursuits can help students maintain a healthy work-life balance, reduce feelings of burnout, and recharge both physically and mentally. Exercise in particular has been shown to have a positive impact on mood, cognitive function and overall well-being, making it an effective stress-management strategy for students (Pierceall & Keim, 2007:703; Engelbrecht et al., 2020:13).

Numerous studies have emphasised the significance of incorporating effective coping mechanisms into our daily lives to mitigate the impact of stress and anxiety. Researchers have found that employing a variety of strategies, such as direct problem-solving, positive thinking, engaging in leisure activities, and utilising humour, can have a profound impact on our overall well-being (Aldridge & Roesch, 2008; Ben-Zur, 2009:356).

Overall, these practices that promote mental and emotional well-being, such as meditation, game-playing and participation in support groups, have been consistently shown to enhance individuals' coping skills, stress management, and conflict-handling abilities, ultimately leading to improved overall well-being and resilience.

To conclude this discussion on effective coping strategies and practices, by understanding the contrast between negative and positive coping strategies, educators, counsellors and policymakers can work to implement preventative measures and provide resources to support vulnerable students in developing effective coping mechanisms. This, in turn, can help promote the overall well-being and success of all students, regardless of the challenges they may face. Therefore, through implementing this multifaceted approach to stress management, students can not only improve their academic performance but also cultivate a greater sense of overall well-being, enabling them to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

#### **2.4.5 Gender differences in coping**

Coping strategies can vary significantly between male and female students. Female students tend to rely more on emotion-focused coping methods, such as seeking emotional support from others, venting their feelings, and engaging in self-care activities (Brougham et al., 2009:85). These approaches help female students manage the emotional influence of stress and challenges they face in their academic and personal lives.

In contrast, male students often adopt a more problem-solving orientated approach to coping. While they may also utilise emotion-focused strategies, they are more likely to combine these with active, problem-solving methods. For example, male students may focus on developing action plans to address the source of their stress, seeking advice from mentors, or engaging in physical activities to manage their emotional state (Brougham et al., 2009:85). This combination of emotion-focused and problem-solving strategies allows male students to address both the emotional and practical aspects of their challenges.

Regardless of gender, however, social support from friends, family and peers remains a widely used and effective coping method among students (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012:122). Having a strong support network can provide emotional comfort, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, all of which can enhance an individual's ability to cope with the demands of academic and personal life. Both male and female students often rely on their social connections as a primary means of managing stress and overcoming difficulties.

Understanding the gender differences in coping strategies can help educators, counsellors, and support services better address the unique needs of male and female students. By providing resources and interventions tailored to their preferred coping styles, institutions can empower students to develop a healthy and effective range of coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges of higher education.

## **2.5 Theoretical framework of the study**

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping underpins this study, therefore, the theoretical framework selected for this research is the Lazarus Theory (1966). Lazarus' Theory of Stress and Coping (1966), emphasises cognitive appraisal, as a crucial step in assessing stress and coping mechanisms. The study objective of examining how people perceive stress and deal with it through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mechanisms is well aligned with the theory's emphasis on primary and secondary assessments. This theory has been used in other similar research, such as Owusu and Essel (2017) on academic pressures, El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) on college students, and Ben-Zur (2009) on teenage coping methods. Therefore, it was considered to be well-suited to studying stress in academic settings due to its adaptability in addressing situational and psychological aspects of stress. Two concepts related to psychological stress theory are discussed by Lazarus: appraisal and coping. Appraisal refers to how an individual evaluates the significance of what is happening for their well-being and determines how the individual feels about the experience. The reference to coping, means how one manages one's thoughts in coping with the demands of life in the face of these stressful events.

An individual's understanding of the term 'stressor', as well as their reactions or responses (such as their behaviour and coping efforts) are dealt with in transactional models such as Lazarus and Folkman. Many factors affect an individual's understanding of stress, including his or her personal and social resources, as well as the characteristics of the stressful event.

As Lazarus explains further, primary appraisal is about how stressful events affect a person's emotional state and how much harm the stressful event causes, while secondary appraisal is about the person's ability to cope with the event. Primary and secondary appraisals are associated with different types of stress. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) identifies three types: harm, threat, and challenge. Three types of primary appraisal are available as part of primary appraisal, and three components of these may be evident: (a) irrelevant, where the individual has no stake in the transaction or outcome; (b) positive, where the individual believes the situation is positive with no potential negative consequences for him or her; (c) stressful, where the individual perceives only negative consequences or that the circumstances adversely affect him or her. In the secondary appraisal, these perceptions would be used to determine the extent of harm caused by an event: harm or loss, threat, or challenge. The concept of harm or loss refers to the belief that one has suffered physical harm or emotional loss in the past. There is a threat of future harm or loss when there is an expectation of future harm or loss.

Specific types of emotional reactions accompany these different kinds of psychological stress.

Lazarus (1993) identified 15 basic emotions. Nine of them are negative (anger, fright, anxiety, guilt, shame, sadness, envy, jealousy, and disgust), while four are positive (happiness, pride, relief, and love). Hope and compassion are also mixed emotions. Adapted from Lazarus (1991), anxiety is a response to perceived threats or uncertainties. Anxiety, for example, occurs when existential threats or uncertainty arise. When the distressing condition that conflicted with one's goals has been resolved or removed, relief is experienced (Lazarus, 1991).

During the 1950s, Lazarus conducted field experiments that led to a conclusion that stress impairs skilled performance in either arousing excessive drive tension or causing interference or distraction. Under failure-induced stress, he argued a marked increase in variance rather than an average increase or decrease in performance effectiveness. Later research indicates that stress affects performance in a variety of ways, with some experimental subjects doing much better and others doing much worse. In response, the body produces high levels of stress hormones that influence a student's academic performance through physiological, psychological, and emotional changes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:64). Douce and Keeling (2014:5) maintain that "stress impairs learning: it decreases intellectual and emotional flexibility, undermines creativity, and eliminates interest in new knowledge, ideas, and experiences".

In his work, Lazarus (1993) discusses how emotion results from an individual's subjective understanding or evaluation of important events or situations; therefore, it is the evaluation of events that determines one's status as a safe individual in relation to one's environment. Coping with events is intimately related to cognitive appraisal and, therefore, to the stress that individuals experience. To cope, a person must decide what behaviour to use in response to the event, based on their internal resources and external environmental demands. It involves reducing the perceived discrepancy between situational demands and personal resources. Coping strategies can be employed in two ways: problem-focused coping, which involves actively modifying the external person-environment relationship, or emotion-focused coping, which involves modifying internal or personal meanings. As part of problem-focused coping, efforts are channelled into behaviourally resolving distressing situations, gathering information, decision making, conflict resolution, resource acquisition (knowledge, skills, and abilities), and instrumental, situation-specific, or task-orientated actions. An individual using this type of coping can focus attention on situation-specific goals and feel a sense of mastery and control as they work toward achieving them. In contrast, positive reappraisal is an element of emotion-focused coping. By cognitively reframing typically difficult thoughts in a positive manner, deeply held values become apparent when certain conditions occur and are needed to cope. Some situations, however, do not require coping strategies to deal with a distressing event or situation. Additionally, stress can be viewed as 'healthy', especially when it is perceived as a

challenge, a view which can result in individuals becoming more flexible and adaptive in responding to stress.

Individuals' ability to cope with stress and challenges is closely related to their cognitive understanding of emotions, (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980:223), in which the individual's judgement of a situation or event at the time directly impacts his or her emotional response. Lazarus's (1966) study addresses two factors: a person's predisposition to stress, as well as identifying resources needed to eliminate or cope with stressors (coping mechanisms).

Individuals can utilise a variety of coping mechanisms. It is possible to cope with stress by using an emotion-focused approach, which involves reducing negative emotional reactions such as embarrassment, fear, anxiety, depression, excitement and frustration, by means such as journaling, using substances and even suppressing negative thoughts or emotions. A second approach is problem-focused coping. By determining the reasons that cause stress and tackling the problem or stressful situation that is causing stress, this approach aims to reduce stress more effectively. The 1966 theory proposed by Lazarus will guide my investigation into how students at a TVET college perceive and manage stress, which, in turn, affects their overall well-being and academic achievements.

## **2.6 Chapter Two summary**

In this chapter, the combined works of theorists were applied and presented. Stress, its effects, and students' coping mechanisms are discussed in the reviewed literature, along with positive and negative coping mechanisms and the effects of stress on academic performance. The chapter also discussed the nature of stress and some external socioeconomic factors that contribute to it. Additionally, some stressors highlighted were social factors, financial stress, language barriers, poverty and a lack of resources. Academic performance is negatively affected by all these factors. As opposed to those who rely on friends and family for support, students who use problem-solving-based coping mechanisms tend to deal with stress better. Through funding, the South African government hopes to give more students access to TVET colleges. This will lift a great burden from students who struggle financially.

The next chapter describes the research methodology used to answer the research questions related to this study on the influence of stress on N5 TVET college students in the Western Cape, South Africa.

## CHAPTER THREE

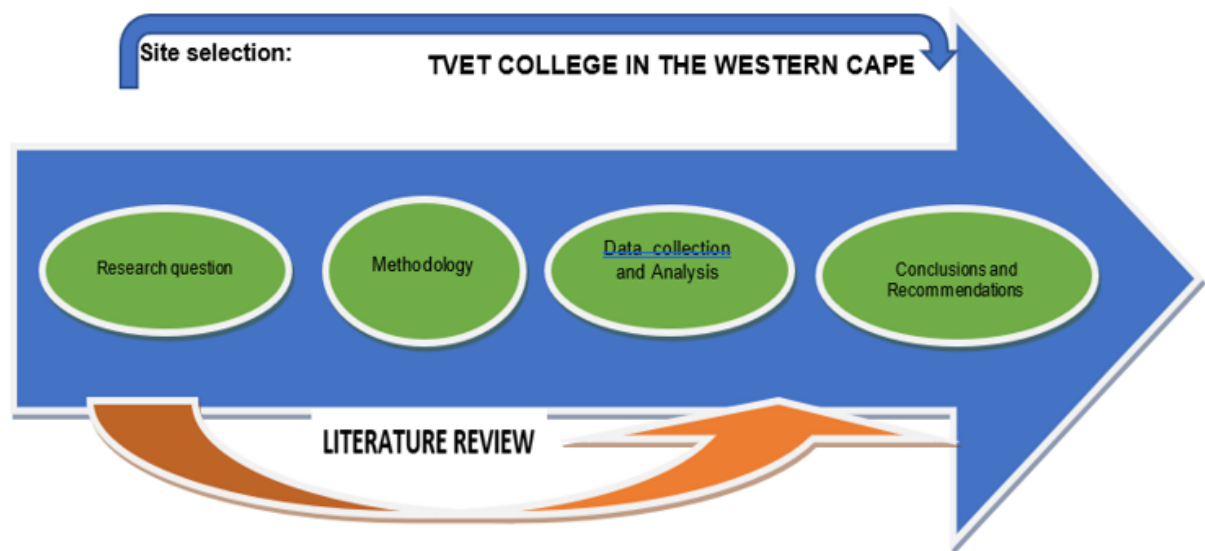
### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

The literature review in Chapter Two provided information derived from published research on how stress affects academic performance and how students cope with stress. The third chapter presents the research design and methodology. The early sections of this chapter foreground the purpose of the study, detail the research problem and outline the research objectives. Section 3.5 outlines the research design; and, in Sections 3.6 and 3.7, the student population and data collection are discussed, as well as the rationale for the questions asked in the interviews. In Section 3.8, a discussion of the analysis of the data is provided. The importance of trustworthiness in research is discussed in Section 3.9. In Section 3.10, confidentiality and ethical considerations are discussed.

In summary, TVET stress was the topic of the study, and N5 participants were chosen to share their experiences and knowledge. The convenience sample comprised 14 student volunteers. Two sets of interviews were conducted over the course of the study and students had the option to provide additional information in a journal provided for this purpose.

Figure 3.1 depicts the research process undertaken in this study. This illustrates that the researcher followed a logical process and that the structure of the research flows well.



**Figure 3.1 Research process**

#### 3.2 Research design

The research design outlines the plan and structure of the study, followed by data collection and analysis. Akhtar et al., (2016:68) defines the research design of a study as the description

of the method of collecting, analysing, and interpreting data for attaining the intended outcomes of the research. The research design is discussed using two terms, namely "the conceptual design" and "the technical design", as suggested by Tobi and Kampen (2018:1211). The conceptual design specifies the "why" and "what" of the research, whereas the technical design identifies its "how". This means that the conceptual design outlines the overarching purpose and objectives of the research, answering questions like why the study is being conducted and what it aims to achieve. However, the technical design delves into the specific methodologies, procedures, and techniques to be used to carry out the research, thereby addressing the practical factors of how the study will be executed and data collected. The conceptual foundation usually sets the foundation and direction for the study, while the technical design provides the roadmap for implementation. With these foundations in place, it was then possible to execute the research.

The research design, research aim, and research questions required setting up a linear, step-by-step process and the steps of this process were planned in relation to the research problem. The researcher was able to make recommendations at the end of the process. Using a qualitative research design and narrative research tradition with use of one-on-one telephonic interviews, the researcher captured the experiences of TVET students. As this was a qualitative research study, it involved the collection of data through interviews conducted in a natural setting, sensitive to the context and people of the study. An interview, according to Kvale (2003:290), is a conversation with the aim of capturing descriptions of the interviewee's life and interpretation of its meanings. As such events are rarely directly observable, talking to people was an effective method of achieving and exploring such constructs. During interviews, the researcher was able to ask for complete, clear answers and probe into any emerging topics.

The researcher used telephonic interviews for data collection: two telephonic interviews were conducted with each participant, one at the end of January and the other at the end of June. The researcher conducted interviews using open-ended questions, using a narrative approach to the research in line with the research guidelines of Creswell and Poth (2016:43). The researcher explored the participants' understandings about the problem addressed, reflecting multiple perspectives. After listening to the views provided, the interviewer drew conclusions and proposed solutions (Kvale, 2003:297). This qualitative study therefore involved an interactive approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016:50). In this way, the researcher could provide an open-ended response when they were asked a question. The qualitative data were collected and manually analysed using Microsoft Word® and Microsoft Excel®. The data were analysed, collated, and interpreted using a narrative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the

topic. Braun and Clarke (2006:79) contend that this method enhances the rigor and depth of qualitative research by allowing systematic coding and theme development.

### **3.3 Research paradigm**

Creswell and Poth (2016:18) define research paradigms as approaches to social science research. The interpretivist approach to this study is based on the assumption that reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed (Creswell, 2007:19). Creswell (2007:20) states that people want to comprehend the world around them. Using the interpretivist paradigm, I could see the world through the participants' perceptions and experiences. From the data gathered, I constructed and interpreted my understanding based on these shared experiences. I used methods that allowed me to understand in depth the participants' experiences of stress and coping mechanisms implemented. Participants with different interpretations of stress were asked to provide their perspectives.

### **3.4 Population sample**

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014:5), a population is a group of people or events from which a sample is drawn and to which results can be generalised. Samples represent specific populations from which data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:6). In this study, the population and sample were drawn from students of one TVET college in Cape Town. Specifically, the sample was drawn from a population of N5 (NATED) Business Studies students. These students were divided into three Business Studies classes, each comprising approximately 30 students, resulting in a total target population of 90 students. The students were in their second semester, and facing an additional 12 months of theory-based study. During the N5 semester, the workload increases significantly, with more advanced study material. For the researcher, it is challenging to obtain information from the entire population because of time and accessibility constraints (Cohen et al., 2007). Therefore, it was necessary to use a smaller group of the total population to collect rich data.

#### **3.4.1 Sampling**

The convenience sample was drawn from the student groups that were accessible to the researcher because the students were in programmes at the research site where the researcher was employed. This made it cost and time efficient. Purposive sampling according to Etikan et. al (2016:2) is a form of non-probability sampling which involves selecting participants who are readily available and easy to reach. In this study, convenience sampling and purposive sampling were combined because the researcher was employed at the research site. In this study, purposeful sampling was useful since it allowed for the selection of TVET college bursary students in their second semester, a group identified as experiencing higher levels of stress because of increased academic and financial challenges. The purpose of



exploratory research is to gain insights rather than generalise findings to a larger population (Etikan et al., 2016:2). A lecturer, who taught a specific subject to the three N5 groups and who was familiar with the students, informed the students of the study. Of the 90 students, 19 volunteered to participate in the study and 14 students (74%) arrived on the day to form the actual sample. These student volunteers were in the middle of their 18-month course.

### **3.4.2 Site selection**

This study was conducted on a TVET college campus in Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa. The campus was chosen for convenience as I work there so it would be easier for me to make contact with the participants. This TVET College is located on two campuses, both of which offer Business programmes at TVET levels N4 to N6.

### **3.5 Data collection**

Interviews and journaling were used to collect data from the students at the selected TVET college. Van der Bijl (2015:62) states that in-depth interviews provide a broad range of information. Additionally, participants were asked to keep a journal over a six-month period, recording their thoughts and feelings related to stressful situations and their coping mechanisms. The journal provided further data to complement the responses to the interview questions and was particularly for sharing information they felt uncomfortable verbalising during interviews.

To address the research problem within the NATED programme, a qualitative narrative approach was employed Kvale (2003:275). Research populations and samples were identified. 14 students volunteered to be part of the research. Qualitative data collection methods were used to collect and convert the information from the study participants Kvale (2003:275).

#### **3.5.1 Journals**

The researcher requested the students to keep journals of their experiences. This was voluntary. During the first interview, journals were handed to the 14 participants and 7 (50%) were returned at the end of the second set of interviews. The participants wrote in their journals to express their feelings, and their opinions about their experiences of stress, as well as their coping strategies. Some felt that they did not feel comfortable writing down their feelings and others felt that they just did not have the time, so they could not comply with this request. The researcher decided to allow the students freedom of choice due to having to share their personal feelings and experiences thus obtaining a true reflection of their experiences. According to Woodbridge and Rust O'Beirne, (2017:12), in clinical studies, journaling was used for introspection, reflection and to obtain the client's perceptions on certain issues, for example,

how they would behave and react. Journaling can be noted as a worthwhile tool to obtain information on how students handle problems and how they are able to find solutions to these problems (Woodbridge & Rust O'Beirne 2017:12). Academic journaling is usually in the form of dialogue and narrative approaches, whereas reflective journaling requires students to provide their perceptions on information and analyse the information, and/or share life experiences. Journals is a non-traditional way for students to express their personal experiences. Journaling allows students to improve and it promotes critical thinking for students (O'Connell & Dymment, 2010:235).

The data obtained from the journals and interviews were captured and processed, after which qualitative data were collected from selected participants by means of open-ended interviews to justify the journal findings. By evaluating the evidence obtained from the journals and analysing and verifying it by means of qualitative methods, empirical questions, as set out for the research interviews, clearly defined and answered the evidence collected. Conclusions were drawn based on the questions that were answered by the specified research population. In the TVET study Fritson (2008:75), found that the use of journals allows participants to become more aware of their feelings and how they react to stress, thus establishing healthy coping mechanisms that they can incorporate in changing their lives for the better. Participants will be required to identify precise thoughts, feelings and behaviours and use journaling to record their experiences. Following the completion of the interviews, participants could use the journals to record their stressful experiences and how they overcame them.

### **3.5.2 Interviews**

The participants were informed that two individual open-ended interviews were conducted, one in January and the other in June, to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. The same questions were asked at each interview. The reason for holding the interviews at these two different times was to determine if the students' experiences had changed over the semester. The information gathered from interviews was substantiated further by students' journal entries during their participation in the study from the time of the first interview to the end of the semester.

Kvale (2003:275) argues that interviews are useful in stimulating narrative data and ensuring that the researcher is able to investigate people's views in depth. In interviews, a researcher can take the lead, encouraging interviewees to speak freely and assist the interviewer to gain a deeper understanding of their personalities. As mentioned previously the narrative approach to interviewing encourages the respondents to talk freely about a subject, allowing for an "in depth interview" and interviewees being able to express their emotions rather than merely answer "yes" or "no" in response to a question (Kvale, 2003:6). As a result of this flexible use

of research techniques, overinterpretations and overgeneralisations from case studies can be overcome (Creswell & Poth, 2016:62). Interviewees' views can also be discovered through interviews in a natural setting. Thus, narrative interviews provides a naturalistic view of interviewees (in this case, of students) in their natural environment, in which sense is made of a phenomenon and the meaning participants attach to a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013:7).

Lazarus (1993) made significant contributions to our understanding of stress, its influence on individuals and the strategies employed to cope with it. Lazarus's (1993) innovative work on stress and coping mechanisms provides valuable insights into how individuals appraise and respond to stressors, emphasising the dynamic and subjective nature of stress. The research highlighted the importance of examining both the sources of stress and the coping strategies utilised by individuals. This directly informed the development of the questions for this study as these were aimed at identifying the specific types of stress experienced by students and their coping approaches. Lazarus (1993) explored the unique stressors faced by students and their influence on academic performance, which was crucial for formulating questions related to students' perceptions of how stress influences their academic outcomes. Their research shed light on the psychological and academic impacts of stress experienced by students. Their influential study served as a foundation for developing a comprehensive set of interview questions that delve into the complex nature of student stress and its far-reaching implications.

The 11 interview questions formulated for this study were informed by a thorough review of existing research and recommendations from prominent experts in the field of stress and coping strategies. This approach ensured that the questions were based on the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, thereby enhancing their relevance and comprehensiveness. The 11 interview questions in this study were therefore carefully crafted to address the research questions of this study in a holistic manner

Due to COVID-19, telephonic interviews were preferred and adopted as a suitable alternative to face-to-face interviews. Nineteen students from the research site were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in recorded telephonic interviews and 14 responded. It was explained to participants beforehand that the interviews would be recorded and that their personal identifiers would be omitted during transcription. Participants were also informed that two interviews would be conducted, one in January and one in June. In June, and that the same questions would be asked to determine if anything had changed from January or if participants still felt the same way about the issues.

Each interview lasted between five to eight minutes and all information was recorded using a voice recorder. In these interviews, students discussed the stress they experienced, how it affected their academic performance and what coping methods they utilised.

The questions asked aimed to uncover the various types of stress that students encounter, their perceptions of how stress affects their academic performance, the coping strategies they employ, and their evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies. This meticulously designed approach ensures that the questions are not only theoretically grounded but also have practical relevance, enabling a deeper understanding of the challenges and adaptations related to student stress in the context of TVET colleges. Furthermore, the selected questions were adjusted to fit the context (see Appendix D). Based on the ideas of Van der Bijl (2015:63) the questions selected for the research follow a funnel approach, that is, they flow from broader questions to more specific, detailed enquiry. Van der Bijl argues that interview questions are framed to identify specific respondents' experiences with the aim of identifying forms of stress and the influence it has on academic performance.

The student participants' journal entries were used as a stimulus during the interviews, so the journals aided in generating the findings from the interviews. Interviews served as another opportunity to hear the students share the information expressed in the journals (Kvale, 2003:5).

### **3.6 Data analysis**

The researcher analysed transcripts of interviews and written journals. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word documents. Data familiarisation involved thoroughly reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and journal entries to immerse in the participants' accounts. Segments of text relevant to the research questions were identified and systematically coded; and, from the codes, categories were then organised into headings representing themes and sub-themes, with relevant quotes captured in an Excel spreadsheet. The journal data coding process was guided by the thematic analysis of the interview data, aligning with the research questions. Thematic analysis, based on Lazarus's Theory of Cognitive Appraisal (1993), was used in this study to investigate TVET college students' experiences with stress and their coping strategies. Thematic analysis, as defined by Howitt and Cramer (2007:331), is the process of examining textual materials, such as journals and interviews, to identify key themes.

Data analysis involved data coding, which required identifying and categorising segments of data. Instead of printing out the transcripts, the researcher worked on soft copies in Word format. The researcher read the data carefully to be familiarised with the information before

starting the coding process. Passages and sentences were labelled using "text highlight colour". Themes and sub themes were derived from the coded data and inserted in an excel document. Alongside each theme and sub theme were the direct responses taken from interviews and journal entries were included as quotes. The responses were inserted under the specific theme and subtheme to which they related (see example, Appendix E).

Themes identified included academic workload, external factors affecting students, personal factors, and coping mechanisms. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were consistent with Lazarus's theory. The researcher identified pertinent direct quotes from interviews to illustrate sub-themes, including academic context, learning challenges, personal circumstances, financial circumstances, mental well-being, time management, negative coping mechanisms, positive coping mechanisms, COVID-19 pandemic influences, transport issues, and load shedding.

In order to analyse the data, the researcher used Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word manually. Data was transcribed using Ms Word and a digital highlighter called text highlight colour. The themes that were developed from the codes were entered on an MS Excel document with each theme highlighted in a specific colour to aid in identification. The MS Excel document contained four columns: themes, sub-themes, interviewee numbers and quotes (See example in Appendix F).

Throughout the writing process, the researcher refined data coding to ensure accuracy and consistency, preserving the original context of data fragments and maintaining the integrity of longer responses. Chapter Four provides a detailed analysis of the data, framed by Lazarus's assertion that individuals assess stressors in terms of the significance of the stressors and the individuals' ability to cope.

### **3.7 Thematic analysis of data**

The thematic analysis conducted on N5 Business Studies students revealed several intricate and interconnected themes that shed light on the nuances of participants' academic and personal experiences. The overarching themes included "Academic Workload," "External Influences on Students," "Personal Factors," and "Coping Mechanisms". The depth and breadth of these themes highlighted the intricate and nuanced experiences of the N5 Business Studies students, reflecting the diverse challenges, coping strategies and personal factors that shaped their academic and personal journeys.

The application of Lazarus Theory guided the analysis of coping mechanisms identified in interviews, distinguishing between problem-orientated coping strategies aimed at resolving

stressors and emotion-orientated approaches focused on managing stress responses. This framework provided a structured lens to understand how students navigated academic and personal challenges.

Comparing the thematic findings from the study with the existing scholarly literature on stress and coping, particularly through the conceptual lens of Lazarus's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, helped to validate the identified themes and sub-themes. This integration of the study's empirical findings with the well-established theoretical framework of Lazarus's model situates the current research within the broader scholarly discourse on stress and coping in educational settings. By aligning the thematic structure that emerged from the study's qualitative data with the key constructs of Lazarus's theory, such as primary and secondary appraisal, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, and the mediating role of psychological and social resources, the researcher was able to demonstrate the relevance and applicability of this influential theoretical perspective within the specific context of education.

The Lazarus Theory promotes the usefulness of various coping methods, while also highlighting aspects where students could potentially gain from extra assistance and guidance. This comprehensive approach, ranging from data gathering to analysis, offered a solid structure for exploring students' perspectives and guiding potential actions within educational environments.

Data analysis revealed four themes based on participants' views during data collection. The themes and sub-themes are represented in Table 3.1 below.

**Table 3.1: Summary of research themes**

<b>THEMES</b>	<b>SUB THEMES</b>
1. Academic	1.1 Academic context 1.2 Learning challenges
2. Personal Factors	2.1 Personal circumstances 2.2 Financial circumstances 2.3 Mental well-being 2.4 Time management
3. Coping mechanisms	3.1 Negative coping mechanisms 3.2 Positive coping mechanisms
4. External factors affecting students	4.1 COVID 19 Pandemic 4.2 Transport 4.3 Loadshedding

### **3.8 Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (2000:8) refer to trustworthiness as the degree to which a reader is able to trust the information the participants provide. According to Klopper and Knobloch (2008:5), "truth value is usually discovered through the discovery of human experiences as they are lived

and perceived". To ensure trustworthiness, data from interviews and journals were combined to ensure the data obtained was checked from different sources and accurate.

### **3.9 Researcher's role**

Sutton and Austin (2015:226) propose that qualitative research involves the researcher reflecting on and writing about his or her role throughout the entire research process. In my role as a researcher, I interviewed participants telephonically, analysed data, and presented the results. The research was conducted at the institution where I work. I do not, however, teach this group of students, they are taught by other lecturers. Although I work for the institution, since the students do not know me, they did not feel intimidated to share their experiences. The fact that I did not know about their experiences or circumstances reduced the possibility that I would impose my views on them.

### **3.10 Ethical considerations**

Ethics approval for the study was received from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (Appendix A). Approval to conduct the study was also received from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) through the Chief Executive Officer of the TVET College involved (Appendix B).

According to Henning (2004:73), respondents must be informed about the research and the process of the interviews; and they must also be informed about what will happen to their information and how it will be disseminated. Informed consent was therefore obtained from participating students (Appendix C). The researcher ensured that each participant received a consent form to complete prior to the interviews with them. The details and purpose of the research were clearly explained and each participant understood that they had the freedom to withdraw from the research at any time. All participants, including the TVET College, remained anonymous in this study. The confidentiality of each participant was guaranteed, and their privacy was always respected. Data collected was only used for this purpose of this study and was handled with great care. Furthermore, the collected data was stored on a controlled computer that is password protected. Only the researcher and supervisors have access to the data.

### **3.11 Chapter Three summary**

The research design for this study outlined the plan and structure for data collection and analysis. The conceptual design focused on the overarching purpose and objectives of the research, while the technical design outlined specific methodologies and procedures. The study used qualitative research methods to explore the experiences of TVET students, with data collected through interviews and journals. The research paradigm was interpretivist,

emphasising the subjective and socially constructed nature of reality. Students' experiences with stress and coping mechanisms were explored through in-depth interviews and journaling stored in a locked cupboard in my office. The study was conducted at a TVET college in the Western Cape Province, with a sample of 14 student volunteers who participated in the study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, with a focus on identifying key themes related to stress and coping strategies. Ethical considerations were taken into account, with approval obtained from the Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Higher Education and Training.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the findings derived from the students' journals and one-on-one interviews with the participants are discussed. The study examined how stress influenced students at a TVET College in the Western Cape. During the research process, three sets of data were obtained, with the first and second set being interviews, and the third being the journals. Interviews were conducted with the participants as arranged and discussed in Chapter Three. Eleven questions were prepared for the participants who were midway through their qualification in Business Studies at a TVET College. During the interview process, all interviewees were able to answer all the questions, which provided data that were analysed to deliver a complete overview of similarities and differences between the two sets of interviews (one conducted in January and one in June). The same questions were asked in both interviews to determine if there were any changes in their responses and to obtain a richer understanding of their experiences. The researcher conducted the first set of interviews at the beginning of the year and the second set near the end of the semester to have a complete overview of stress and how it influenced the participants, especially since the second set of interviews took place just before examinations, thus providing a different perspective to the start of the semester. When analysing the data collected in the two interview data sets, and from the journals kept, the researcher determined if any changes had occurred between the first and second interviews.

#### **4.2 Biographical data on participants**

##### **4.2.1 Background to obtaining the data**

This study was conducted on one TVET college in the Western Cape and the results were discussed and explained in Chapter Three. This choice was based on convenience and the number of students enrolled in the NATED Business Studies programme provided a manageable and appropriate sample size. A lecturer of the course for which the students had enrolled who taught this subject identified and invited 19 participants from this group to join the study. Although there were no specific requirements to participate in this research, their lecturer chose students who were reliable. With the lecturer's assistance, the selected participants volunteered to participate in this research. On the day of the explanation of the study and the signing of consent forms, 19 students consented and signed, but then 14 agreed to participate. The other five students did not give a reason why they would not participate; they simply indicated to their lecturer that they were not interested. All 14 students were available for the two interviews.

Participants were referred to anonymously as 'Participants' and numbered from 1 to 14. All participants consented to be interviewed on two occasions. Each participant arranged a time that was most convenient for them and set it on their cell phone calendar.

The researcher conducted 28 interviews and these were telephonic because of the restrictions during the Covid pandemic. Interviews with each participant were conducted twice during the year, one at the beginning of the semester and then again towards the end of the first semester (June). Conducting two interviews allowed the researcher to see if any new experiences or perspectives had arisen in the time between interviews. Once the interviews were conducted, the data were then combined and analysed.

The third set of data obtained was from the reflective journals of the students. The students were to keep a record of any stressful events that they might have experienced during the six months between the first set and second set of interviews and were asked to provide the coping strategies they used at the time. All 14 participants were interviewed again in June. The researcher conducted a total of 28 interviews. Seven journals were obtained from the participants, which is a 50% return rate. Some participants did not feel comfortable with sharing their personal thoughts. The journals were a way to obtain a richer understanding of the participants' experiences which they did not share at the time of the interview.

Table 4.1 depicts the data collection process:

**Table 4.1 Data collection process**

Data collection process	Timing	Method	Participants	Duration
Set 1 interviews	Beginning of semester	Telephonic semi-structured interviews	Students (n=14)	60–70 minutes
Set 2 interviews	End of the semester	Telephonic semi-structured interviews	Students (n=14)	60–70 minutes
Journals	Throughout the 6 months	Journal entries	Students (n=7)	Daily/weekly entries

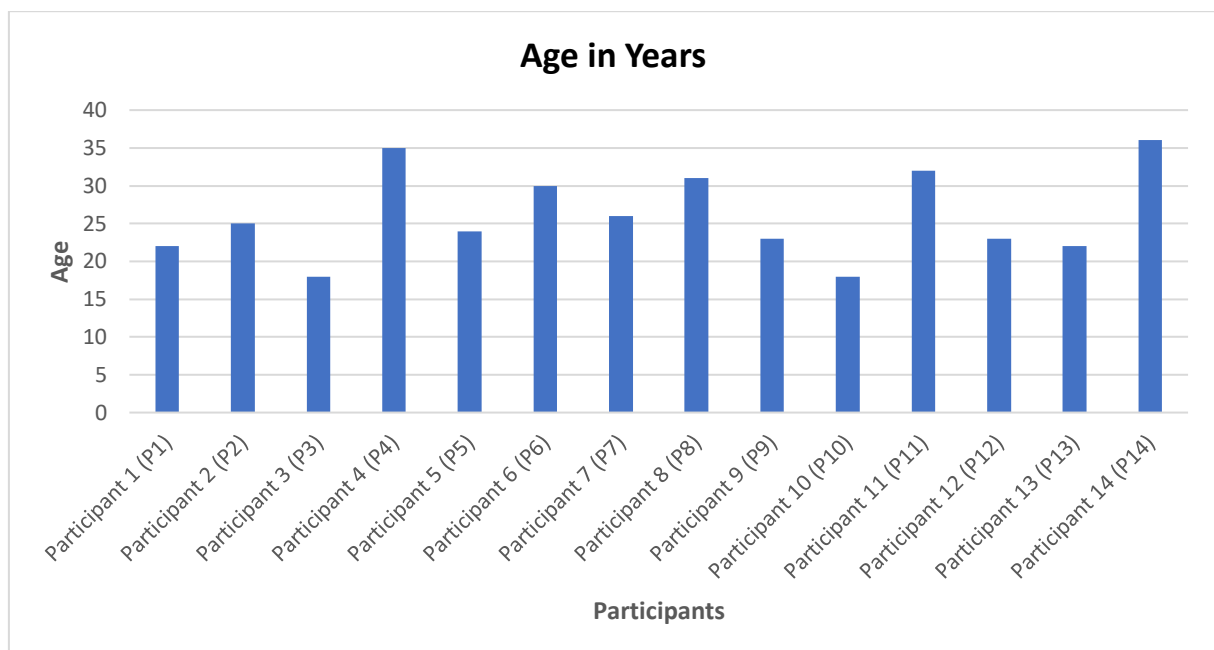
#### **4.2.2 Participant selection and demographic summary**

Only students from the N5 level (who were in the middle of the three-semester programme and studying towards a 36-month business qualification) were considered for selection. As explained in Chapter Three, students were provided with the opportunity to volunteer for this study. The total student population was 90 and all students were enrolled for the same course and were offered the same subjects but they had different lecturers teaching them and therefore they might have had different academic experiences. They wrote the same exams and assignments, however. The assessments for a specific subject were marked by the different lecturers teaching the various groups of students.

This table (4.2) summarises the respondents' biographical information:

**Table 4.2 Summary of the N5 respondents' biographical information**

Respondent	Gender	Age
Participant 1 (P1)	Male	22
Participant 2 (P2)	Female	25
Participant 3 (P3)	Female	18
Participant 4 (P4)	Female	35
Participant 5 (P5)	Female	24
Participant 6 (P6)	Female	30
Participant 7 (P7)	Female	26
Participant 8 (P8)	Female	31
Participant 9 (P9)	Female	23
Participant 10 (P10)	Female	18
Participant 11 (P11)	Female	32
Participant 12 (P12)	Female	23
Participant 13 (P13)	Female	22
Participant 14 (P14)	Female	36



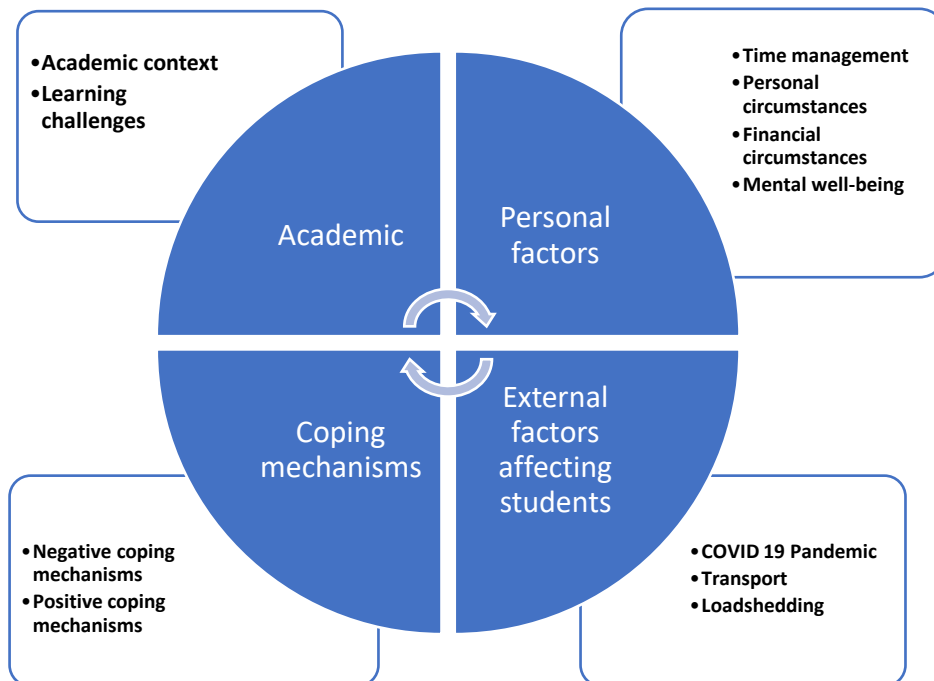
**Figure 4.1 Graphical representation of the age of participants**

### 4.3 Analysis of the themes

Instead of providing names, each interviewee was given the code name 'Participant' and a unique number. For example, "P1" is for participant 1 and "Int1" means interview data set 1;

and “J” followed by a unique participant number, is used to indicate the journal entry (e.g., “J3”).

The themes and sub-themes are represented in Graphical presentation below as figure 4.2



**Figure 4.2 Graphical representation of the themes and sub-themes**

### **4.3.1 Theme 1: Academic**

#### **4.3.1.1 Academic context**

Students experienced various daily academic challenges. At times, the workload excessive. They struggled to grasp the work, especially if lecturers changed. This occurred frequently, especially during Covid due to lecturers falling ill and temporary lecturers being required. Sometimes a lecturer was transferred to another department. This was a challenge as students had become used to the lecturer they started off with and struggled to adapt to the new lecturer's way of doing things.

Students often did not have the adequate resources at hand to cope with the workload or to simplify their study methods. These factors contributed to the uncertainty they experienced in reaching their goals. From the study data, it was clear that the students did not have the correct mechanism(s) to handle issues at hand and this would then increase their feelings of stress.

A journal entry indicated: *“One lecturer has not come to college for three weeks so we missing out on a lot of work and this is stressful. Lack of understanding with the work, some of things explained I do not understand. Studying three subjects in a row with no off time in between*

*makes me feel stressed because of the pressure. Getting a new lecturer making things more difficult, this lecturer is different to the other one so I must adjust and it disturbs my focus” (P4: J 4).*

Many students cannot cope with multiple tasks at the same time. The work accumulates and then the workload can become very overwhelming for students, especially when they do not have a lecturer consistently present or where the lecturer does not explain the work clearly. The students then spend much time trying to figure out what is expected of them to pass or reach their desired academic goal. Researchers have discovered that overloading students leads not only to academic stress, but also to mental and physical health problems, which hinder learning (Galanakis et al., 2016:688).

One of the journal entries confirms the above statement: *“Previous year of studies was much less stressful than this year, the workload is much more” (P1:J 1).* Then P1 one goes on to say, *“Yes, definitely. Definitely, because this year has been extremely tough because I don’t know, somehow N5 has just been more difficult than N4 for some reason” (P1:ln 2).* Another participant generalised the stress-related workload statement and commented: *“Personally I feel that stress to me it actually comes down to a lot of things, a lot of things that you need to handle day by day” (P6:ln 1).* Then P3 stated: *“The work it’s too much sometimes. It is too much work ma’am ... it’s just like they give too much work and it’s a lot of pressure” (P3:ln 2).*

Many participants reported feeling overwhelmed by their workload and unable to cope with the stress, which was also reported by students in similar situations at other institutions, as described in relation to research findings from other studies reviewed in Chapter Two, sections 2.2 and 2.3. Lazarus and Folkman (1986:64) contend that individuals can use resources and skills every day to cope with "pressures and stressors"; and how well they use those resources and skills affects how they handle pressures and stress. In Chapter Two, it has been argued by both Galanakis et al. (2016:694) and Kai-Wen (2009:250) that increased academic workloads significantly increase stress levels. This anxiety and stress had a direct effect on students' studies as they were unable to focus on all subject evenly, resulting in them falling short in some areas. This shortfall can be a huge problem, both in terms of academic performance and health.

#### **4.3.1.2 Learning challenges**

As described by Lazarus in Chapter Two, among the symptoms of anxiety is a feeling of existential threat and uncertainty. Lazarus further argues that learning under uncertainty causes students to have trouble concentrating on the task at hand. Thus, their academic performance is more likely to be negatively affected when they study less efficiently. In Chapter

Two, it was also mentioned that English is the medium of instruction for all subjects and this adds stress to students because it is not their first language. In addition to language stress, Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2015:32) report that students are anxious because of a lack of subject knowledge and a lack of understanding of a specific subject.

One participant who found that the work could be challenging to understand indicated: *"I sometimes do yes, stress is when I am struggling to un-band something because sometimes I just, I just don't get everything right"* (P2:Int 2). A journal entry confirms this by stating: *"Struggling to grasp the work, I cannot grasp the work clearly, I struggle to keep it in my head"* (P2:J 1:).

The participant's performance is negatively affected and this is evident when the participant mentions that focusing becomes a problem and the participant cannot keep his/her mind under control and this affects performance: *"It makes it hard for me to focus, ma'am, it makes me sometimes feel emotional. The marks have gone down but I still do pass, not the way that I wanted to but so it has affected it negatively"* (P11:Int 2).

In chapter two, Sohail (2013:1) states that the effects of high levels of stress, particularly negative stress, can reduce self-esteem and result in poor academic performance. Another participant expressed the view that stress is linked to not knowing, to uncertainty of what to expect in the exams and pointed this out by stating, *"the exams are just not knowing what to expect, so I have undergone that treatment now and just the anxiety of writing exams and not knowing what to expect"* (P5:Int 1). Another participant felt that, when their standards are not reached and they do not know if they will pass, it is stressful: *"Not being able to focus. Sometimes when I expect to get a certain percentage and then I maybe didn't get it and then I'm stressed because I don't know if I will pass. I don't know"* (P8:Int 2). This participant, in a way similar to P8, commented: *"When you struggle to focus and don't know what to expect something like that, ma'am"* (P10:Int 1). Another also stated: *"It makes it hard for me to focus, ma'am not being sure, it makes me sometimes feel emotional"* (P11:Int 2).

Another participant explained their view: *"I could describe stress and it's something that actually disturbs your normal functioning of your brain and your normal routines. I think my focus is distracted a little bit by this stress. I had improved before so when I was told all these things that's when everything started to come back down now but I'm actually trying to work on it as well on my own as I said I don't have support at the moment. Socially it has affected me because I don't hang around with anybody"* (P11:Int 1).

One other participant indicated: *"It's hard to study like just stay at home and it really puts a lot of stress on me"* (P7:Int 2). Participant P11 commented: *"The pressures of actually wanting to pass and stress upon stress. So, it's different kinds of stresses"* (P11:Int 1). Another participant like P2 experienced stress that was linked to not understanding the work and commented: *"Yes, I do often, ma'am. Like sometimes I don't understand the work very well. We have question papers of 2016 and we actually need question papers of 2018 and 2019"* (P4:Int 2). One of the participants further indicated: *"The question papers that I received from the lecturer isn't up to date"* (P14:Int 2). As noted in chapter two by Son et al. (2020:2), students become overwhelmed by anxieties, worrying about school, their performance, and whether they will pass. Burnout and poor academic performance are associated with depression and anxiety (Ndahepele, 2018; Daniels, 2018; Kasi, 2018; Nabasenja, 2018).

There are concerns expressed by participants regarding their examinations. Either not knowing the content or how the content will be asked appears to increase their anxiety. Additionally, they express concerns about failing and receiving bad grades at the end of the year. As one participant pointed out, participants have high anxiety levels and struggle to focus.

#### **4.3.1.3 Summary of Theme 1**

Students face a number of academic challenges on a daily basis, including excessive workloads (and inadequate resources to handle the workload), and difficulty adapting to new lecturers. As a result, reaching academic goals can be stressful and uncertain. Multiple tasks are often handled simultaneously by students, leading to stress and mental and physical health issues. Overburdening students can cause academic stress, mental health problems, and hinder their learning.

Many participants had very similar comments stating that an overload of work would increase their pressures and make them feel stressed. Too much work can be harmful for a student as stress is increased. It seems that many participants find it challenging to cope and are not sure how to manage all the tasks they receive at once. Furthermore, the participants indicated similarities under the sub-theme 'learning challenges. Participants mentioned that it was stressful not knowing what to do, either because the work was not explained clearly or the resources received were outdated. Many participants also mentioned that they struggled to focus as they did not know what to expect and they feared not knowing whether they would succeed, based on their experience of previous examinations. According to the data, many students lack time management skills and this directly and negatively influenced their stress levels.

The workload and related stress reported by students is similar to that reported by students at other institutions. According to Lazarus (1993), individuals can cope with pressures and stressors by using resources and skills; but how well they use those resources and skills impacts their ability to cope. As a result of increased academic workloads, stress levels increase significantly, affecting students' academic performance. They are not able to adapt to new teaching methods and are unable to stay focused on their studies.

#### **4.4 Theme 2: Personal factors**

Personal related stress involves socio-economic factors that contribute to feelings of stress and influence students' academic life. Personal obstacles can lead to stress and negatively affect students academically. Several factors were identified, including family responsibilities, child-rearing and financial responsibilities, as contributing factors to their stress levels. Stress also entails feelings of fear, anxiety and depression that hinder their progress or makes them lose focus. Students' emotions are at times so overwhelming that they are not able to cope with daily tasks. Students could become withdrawn as they do not have the correct coping strategies. Fear of the unknown and not knowing what the future has in store for them leads to stress. Challenges and pressures of life can also be a barrier to success.

Participants discussed and shared how personal factors such as their home environment contributed to their feelings of stress and how it influenced their academic life. It was also noted that personal challenges they faced led to stress and was linked to their poor performance. The following challenges mentioned that contributed to their stress included family responsibilities, mental health and financial responsibilities.

##### **4.4.1 Personal circumstances**

When referring to the stress they experience, the participants mentioned that their personal challenges at home were a contributing factor. Study results by Sohail (2013:1) indicate that stress at home can negatively impact teenagers' performance at school for days. Participants were asked about the stress factors they experienced and the following information was provided:

A participant experienced a lot of pressure with having to focus on academic studies and personal challenges: *"N5 has just been more difficult than N4 for some reason and it's more pressure on us because of my home situation as well. Like maybe when you are going through something at home. And then it's just that one thing that you think about all the time. I live with a two-year-old also now it's my mother's. He's not so called my brother but lives with us so it's not easy to get around to my studies because you must take care of him while my mother's working"* (P1:Int 2).



Another participant also mentioned: *"Personally, I feel that stress to me it actually comes down to a lot of things, a lot of things that" you need to handle day by day. Despite the studies all the other tasks at home. At home I do have a task that I need to make food every day"* (P6:Int 2).

Some participants also mentioned household stress and the frustration of having to study whilst tending to other personal matters: *"I mentioned I'm at home and I must study from home ... children and they're here. I don't like doing everything at one time and ... with Covid-19 I must study; it's hard to study like just stay at home. I stress it out and I take it out on my sister and I take it out with the kids because I feel a lot angriness because of it"* (P7:Int 2).

Not just being a student but also a housewife with children makes it difficult to manage academic studies: *"I'm a housewife first of all then I'm a student and I first have to look after my children and then the little time that I have left I must study. I must provide for my children and sometimes I must use my allowance, not sometimes, all of the times, so I'm using my allowance to buy food and electricity and then I must still pay the rent because I'm renting a house. The house chores, I need to do it because we can't just leave everything till, we've finished studying"* (P14:Int 1). Another participant also expressed similar frustration: *"I still need to run around the house and travel with children and doing school work and my school work"* (P8:Int 2).

A journal entry indicated: *"Not easy having a two-year-old sibling in the house"* (P4:J 4). Another journal entry also indicated: *"I am a 39-year-old married with two children, studying now again after 21 years is tough. Loss of my father this year really impacted me"* (P2:J 2). Another dealt with many challenges besides academic stresses, but was also not receiving support from a loved one but instead receiving emotional abuse: *"My husband isn't very supportive with learning from home. I've been in a verbally and emotionally abusive marriage for 3 years. I am a mommy, a wife, a student and I am myself"* (P5:Int 1).

Participants reported that many personal factors contribute to stress, as well as getting in the way of their studies. According to some, they must first satisfy the needs of their households before they can concentrate on their studies. As a mother, wife, breadwinner, or guardian, many participants do not have the support of their loved ones, making it more challenging to cope.

#### 4.4.2 Financial circumstances

In Chapter two, section 2.2.1, Lawrence (2016:25) mentions financial challenges students experience and explains that students are reliant on bursaries. The researcher found that the participants' financial stress is a great burden as this hinders them from going to college. Older participants felt the guilt of studying full time and being obligated to use the bursary money to provide and contribute to their family's day-to-day needs. This was extra stressful because it meant choosing between satisfying the family's needs or the participant's needs and thus influenced their academic performance.

One of the participants supported the above statement: *"I have bills, I have a child, I have a home that I have to take care of because none of the people that I live with are employed right now so we're struggling financially"* (P2:Int 1). Another participant also expressed this concern: *"Financially, I am stressed because there is no income getting in because everyone is locked in and some of the people are not allowed yet to go to work so that's stressing me"* (P5:Int 2). One other participant explained: *"like no-one is working because of the pandemic so finance would be one of the stress factors that I have at the moment"* (P3:Int 2). This participant stated that she was fine when she had a job but added: *"I used to have a part time job and it didn't work out for me because I used to work and I used to study but it didn't work out for me and then there's also my child that I need to take care of every day"* (P6:Int 1).

More participants, like P6, stated that they were *"working before and I'm used to a salary. Allowance it's less – less than the salary that I had and I have a daughter that is in Matric now, so there's more money issues. Feel like I can't provide for my children like I used to because when my daughter is asking, she needs a book for Economics at school like the beginning of the year when the allowance didn't pay February, so she needed R150.00 for a book. Then I asked her, 'Forgive me because at this moment I don't know what to do because some things need money and now, I'm stressing where's the money coming from and where am I going to get the money'"* (P14:Int 2). Another participant also stated: *"Financial ones but that's because once you study full time you can't work so money is always a problem"* (P12:Int 1). This participant expressed concern: *"the benefit allowance so I have to make everything work with just R1000. I have to be there to support my parents and my siblings as well, to be there for everybody"* (P1:Int 2). Another further expressed: *"I didn't get my allowance so I don't know how I'm going to get to college end of the month"* (P9:Int 1).

There are many stressors that individuals experience and the participants explained that this takes a toll on them in many ways. Some participants do not have solutions to the problems or challenges they are facing. This becomes a build-up of stress over a long period and has a negative effect on their overall wellbeing, which will be discussed in the next point.

#### 4.4.3 Mental well-being

Dusselier et al. (2005:15) point out that stress is both physical and emotional. In the absence of relief from stress, distress can occur as a negative response that disturbs the body's internal balance, causing physical symptoms such as headaches and upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, sexual dysfunction and sleeping difficulties, as well as emotional problems like depression, anxiety and panic attacks. Stress and anxiety affect the well-being of individuals. These issues were clearly identified by the participants who mentioned that the stressors became so overwhelming that it led to depression, feeling drained and moody. This in turn affected their academic performance and they noticed that their grades were lower than usual. It was further suggested that academic stress is the single most dominant stress factor affecting college students' mental health. Stress may be more prevalent in some groups of students than others. Theme 2 describes how feelings of uncertainty could confuse or overwhelm students and consequently may affect their academic performance.

A journal entry confirms the above statements: *"that's what I experience. It makes you sick, you get headaches. It's a lot of stress you can't eat, all that stuff"* (P4:J 4). Then one of the participants explained what effects stress had on them by stating: *"My definition of stress is, Miss, I tend to stress a lot and when I stress, I get terribly ill. Like I would experience headaches and confusion mostly"* (P4:Int 1). Another participant stated: *"losing my hair and stuff like that. My dad wants us to stay with him and my granny wants us to stay with her. I lost my mom, they are fighting"* (P10:Int 1).

Similar to P10, this participant revealed: *"That's the only stress that I can say you know and like my hair falls out you know because I stress so much I don't like – some people gain weight but I lose hair unfortunately and that that's you know thinking about you you're going to survive eventually. It makes you sick you know, like worrying about marks and stuff like that."* In a journal entry, P12 mentioned: *"Bronchial issues so that contributes to me feeling stressed and anxious"* (P12:J 12).

Another participant also stated that their health causes overall stress: *"Yes, I'm currently experiencing stress right now because of my health. The fact that I'm having fever right now is stressing me because yes, I don't symptoms of Corona but you're just not sure with that okay and my other stress would be the fact that I would have to go to Cape Town, one of the hotspots in the country back to school"* (P5:Int 2). One participant indicated: *"Oh, and now because of what is happening, my daughter is asthmatic, so I have to ensure that she is always fed all the time and she can't be outside and being in danger of contracting the virus. So, it's just those things that I can think of right now"* (P2:Int 2). A participant stated that her emotional state had already been affected by prior incidents and now stressors triggered ill feelings: *"gives me*

*major anxiety, ma'am because I was in a car accident when I was at the age of 11 so sometimes it scares me. It tends to make me sick. Low blood pressure, fainting"* (P4:Int 1). Then another participant how all these stressors and thoughts made them feel by stating: *"I had a headache and I couldn't sleep, you know, all this anxiety. That's what it does to me"* (P12:Int 1). Another participant indicated: *"I've got this thing called low thyroid and they told me also, that have bipolar"* (P11:Int 1).

A participant evidently mentioned the how stress took a toll on her and stated: *"Tired and drained all the time because of so many things happening in my life all at once. Burst with anger when things don't go my way"* (P4:J 4). Another participant becomes frustrated and lashes out at loved ones: *"Sometimes I just sit and like one or two times I was screaming actually at my daughter. Then when I finished screaming, I was sitting and then I called her back and then I asked her something"* (P14:Int 1). A journal entry stated: *"Crack under pressure I can't control my emotions. Exhausted and anxiety most of the time these days. Fear goes through you on how dangerous this virus is"* (P1:J 1).

This journal entry stated: *"my fight or flight anxiousness, like I get nervous no matter what. Personally, I don't handle stress very well. I get anxious like – like I shiver in fear basically, I panic a lot so I don't handle it very well. I want to be calm about it but I try to do it in myself and with the people around me, I try to stay calm and handle what I can"* (P1:J 1). Another participant also felt that these stressful emotions became so overwhelming that it led to depression: *"I feel like I'm going into depression mode because there's not much that I can do about what is happening you see. Amount of thoughts that just overwhelm you not being able to control your emotions all"* (P2:Int 2).

This participant indicated: *"I get irritated like sometimes I just can't handle it on my own"* (P6:Int 2). Similar to P6, another participant indicated, *"I'm moody. Sometimes I'm angry, sometimes I just feel like screaming. Sometimes I'm also just emotional"* (P13:Int 2). Concerns over the family's well-being were often greater than their own, as one participant stated: *"so I'm more worried about what are they going to eat than what am I going to eat, so that causes anxiety and leads to anxious and stress"* (P3:Int 1). Some family members are not supportive enough, or even at all: *"It makes me feel despondent and but he doesn't really consider how important my studies are to me like he will know I'm going to go write exams now. I'm very stressed out. I won't put the blame on him for everything but I make it known, 'I don't like this'. And I'm irritated or I'm rude. I'm very short-tempered when I don't get to do what I want to do for something that is going to benefit my family"* (P8:Int 2).

Many of the participants do not have the correct methods and felt overwhelmed to the extent that they felt that they want to quit: *"I just want to say now I'm giving up, I don't want to go ahead anymore because I can't provide as I used to provide and sometimes, I say to myself but if I'm not going through this trouble how am I going to survive next time?"* (P14:Int 2).

Many students feel that they cannot focus under immense pressure. Their mind is either focused on other concerns, they have negative feelings about themselves, or they lack motivation to go on. There is no correct way of keeping their mind or feelings under control and so they end up reacting negatively and therefore are not able to function well thereafter.

#### **4.4.4 Time management**

Time management was one of the stress factors by not having a structure or a plan on how to approach certain subjects and not knowing what subjects to focus on led to students to have many feelings of stress and anxiety. With reference to chapter two, Owusu and Essel (2017:23) suggest that having too much academic work can also increase a student's stress levels because, when students have a lot of demanding subjects, they think they will not have enough time to handle everything properly. Due to these feelings of incompetence, tension and stress will negatively affect academic performance.

One of the participants confirmed the above statement by stating: *"doesn't give me the energy or the time to like do anything. I get lazy you see and then like okay, just leave everything"* (P7:Int 2). Another finds that having too many things at once leads to more stress: *"it's a lot on my plate. Like every day I need to like schedule as myself, this is what I'm going to do this time of the day, this is what I'm going to do when I get home from college"* (P6:Int 1). Another similar answer was: *"It's not something that I have a schedule and I can stick to."* (P8:Int 2). The participants mentioned that they become anxious when they are overwhelmed with many responsibilities and have no structure such as a timetable or schedule. One participant mentioned: *"this my first subject that I'm starting and I'm stressing about the two subjects that we are writing, it's one day apart and the subjects that we have, it's very – you must learn it, you must study it very hard"* (P14:Int 2). Another participant finds it challenging to meet deadlines, stating: *"to get the work actually done on time"* (P11:Int 2). The cause of the stress is therefore on more of a personal basis, as the participant indicated: *"I'm kind of a person like procrastinating you know. So, I leave everything to the last minute then you know, the stress just comes up. like those two weeks to do stuff and so that was very, very stressful"* (P12:Int 2).

The participants clearly indicated that the stress and anxiety they experienced with not having the correct mechanisms in place, led to frustration. Having too many responsibilities and not having the energy to find solutions is due to many factors that contribute to their stressors. In chapter two, the research by Cahir and Morris (1991:414) suggests that time management reduces stress levels in students.

#### **4.4.5 Summary of Theme 2**

The study revealed that the students, personal obstacles at home play a role in causing stress which, in turn, had a detrimental effect on their academic achievements. The individuals in the study felt pressured to prioritise their studies while also dealing with personal issues like taking care of a two-year-old child and being a working mother. Balancing these duties was particularly difficult for mothers with children. Some participants had to use their allowance to cover expenses like food, utilities, and rent, all while keeping up with their studies. Furthermore, having a sibling in the household added to the challenges they faced. Additionally, before focusing on their studies, participants reported that they had to satisfy the needs of their households. Common factors that remained consistent were the fear of not being able to provide for their families or feeling guilty for choosing to pursue their studies and therefore, not being able to work on a full-time basis. For many, this was a huge adjustment as they had previously regularly received income to provide for the needs of the family but, in making the decision to study further, they could no longer meet those expectations based on the amount of funding received from their bursary. Seeking better opportunities sometimes means having to sacrifice certain things. Performing day-to-day domestic tasks under such circumstances as studying would most likely affect their academic performance. Priorities beyond studying could result in them missing days of class. According to Devi et al. (2019:796), stressors influence mood, well-being, behaviour, and health. Young, healthy individuals may be able to cope with acute stress, but the long-term effects of stress may damage their health. One's emotional well-being can be compromised if stress is not controlled properly. Often the individual experiences so much stress that they become overwhelmed with emotions and cannot control them, leading to depression. In such cases, there may be feelings of wanting to give up because of not having a good support structure, or not having the ability to handle these stressful periods in their lives. Their emotional states may be so compromised and the build-up of pressure so overwhelming that it directly affects their performance, resulting in the feeling of wanting to give up their studies. All of these personal factors contribute to stress and hinder students' academic performance.

### 4.5 Theme 3: Coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms that students were using were either negative and unhealthy or positive and healthy. Many coping mechanisms were described by students; and even though they were ways of coping, it does not mean that they were good methods. Unhealthy coping mechanisms would include resorting to alcohol or drugs to forget one's troubles; and negative mechanisms would include frequent crying and then isolating oneself. The healthier methods would be, for example, to write in a journal or speak to someone. Many students chose these healthy options.

A key component of coping is adjusting to unexpected demands, or stressors, as defined by Lazarus Theory (1966). To accomplish this, greater effort and energy is used than in your normal day-to-day activities. When effort is prolonged, however, stress-related hormones can be elevated, resulting in physical breakdown and illness.

According to Lazarus (1984), people use different coping strategies or prefer certain methods over others. Usually, these differences in coping styles reflect differences in personality. Having a rigid approach to coping with demands in different situations is less likely to help than adapting a flexible approach to coping. By recognising the signs and symptoms of stress, a person can figure out ways to cope and avoid unhealthy coping methods, like smoking and drinking. The various coping methods will be discussed next.

#### 4.5.1 Negative coping mechanisms

Negative coping methods are displayed when participants do not have the correct support structures in place, so they also end up leading unhealthy lifestyles. Choice This was evident in the participants' interviews. Some of life's pressures become overwhelming to the extent that it becomes difficult to cope and persevere in their studies. One of the participants confirmed this by stating, *"generally makes me feel better is drinking, so I would just buy myself a bottle of wine and drink it all up"* (P2:Int 2). Another mentioned that she preferred this method of stress relief: *"I prefer being alone go through whatever I'm going through and then come back at a later stage"* (P3:Int 2). Another participant stated: *"I'm a nail biter, ma'am. And I tend to smoke"* (P4:Int 1). Yet another participant deals with her stress differently: *"I cry a lot. Whenever I feel overwhelmed because of stress I go to my room and cry a lot"* (P5:Int 1). One other participant responded, *"I just go to sleep; I sleep all day"* (P10:Int 1).

These statements indicate participants believe that the coping mechanisms used help them, but they do not realise at the time that these choices only make them feel worse and do not assist them in dealing with the challenges they face.

A participant explained: *“so if I see that I’m struggling with something and then I don’t have any kind of way to ask for assistance, then I think I happen to stress myself about it. So instead of just being with people, I prefer being alone go through whatever I’m going through and then come back at a later stage. I always cry. I always cry, maybe cry myself to sleep sometimes. Wake up crying at times and I just want to be alone most of the time so I just – I draw in and I just don’t want to be around people because I – you would just know”* (P2:Int 2).

Participant P7 explained how stress affected her: *“I would tell you feel like you have anxiety and you don’t know how to handle it and how to cope with it. It is just like things get too hectic and then your mechanism inside just takes over and just comes into play”* (P7:Int 2).

Another participant mentioned: *“Like when I get anxiety when stuff gets too much for me. So, I start worrying and I feel anxious”* (P3:Int 1). Participant 13 mentioned details: *“I like postponing dates all the time like maybe I’ll say okay I’ll study today, then again, I say no man I’ll study later on, so I’m not a person like that, I think my focus is distracted a little bit by this stress”*s” (P13:Int 2). One sadly mentioned an absence of support and stated: *“I think support, look, like I said I don’t have anybody”* (P8:Int 2). A journal entry also mentioned a lack of support: *“No support structure at home or at college”* (P3:J 3). This next participant mentioning their way of coping: *“I always drown myself in my books, so I just want to forget about everything that is happening”* (P2:Int 2).

From these transcripts, it seems that some students do not have the correct coping mechanisms in place: *“for an example I am sure there are students who are like me who don’t actually have the necessary tools and not sure how to do deal with this kind of stresses”* (P13:Int 2).

Because of not having the correct support structures, many students choose unhealthy coping methods. A study referred to in the literature in chapter two (section 2.4) found that receiving support from friends, family, and other students was the most popular method of managing stress (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012:122). Research studies (Chapter Two) have shown that successful students have supportive relationships and a positive outlook on challenges. Furthermore, students perform better and cope with stress better when educators listen and respond to their concerns.



#### 4.5.2 Positive coping mechanisms

Some coping methods assist the students well and seem to help in certain instances. such as when the person is so overwhelmed with stress that they seek help and take medication. Many participants had similar solutions that would assist them. For example, talking to someone and just having someone listen to them would make them feel so much better. In the literature reviewed (chapter two), Ben-Zur (2009:92) suggests that talking to a supportive person about a stressful event can be effective for managing stress. The effects of stress can be greatly reduced by seeking external support instead of self-isolating and internalising the stressful situation.

Various positive coping methods were shared by the participants. One stated that their method is: "I just isolate myself for a few minutes, recoup and just breathe basically. It's quiet – so none of those distractions is around me so I just lose focus on what is actually going around" (P1:Int 1). Another stated: *"I will sit by the park and I'm near my house like just alone without my phone."* The participant added: *"Sit on my phone, listen to music in my room alone and then it makes me calm down"* (P7:Int 2). One other participant mentioned these coping methods: *"I pray. I read. I read so I've got a few books for my birthday this year from friends so I read books. I watch shows on YouTube like musical shows on YouTube so yes that's how I try and deal with it. It helps me because for me it's somehow some sort of meditation. So, if I pray, after I pray, I regain peace and I think clearly"* (P5: Int2). Another participant stated a similar coping method: *"I will just take a reading book; I'll just go and sit and say to myself I'm going to read this book finished then I'm going to start over just to calm myself"* (P14:Int 1).

In the literature in Chapter Two, Owusu and Essel (2017:15) argue that students are less likely to burn out and suffer from anxiety associated with extreme stress when they are taught successful coping strategies. Moreover, support structures should be put in place to ensure that these students complete their studies. Using coping mechanisms such as direct problem-solving, positive thinking, leisure activities, and humour, can reduce anxiety and contribute to students' overall well-being.

One of the participants' methods was interesting, namely, the diary that was provided for this research was identified as one of the benefits: *"Using the diary and talking to my mother. Sometimes I self-isolate myself"* (P3:Int 2). Another participant felt the same and stated: *"I have a diary that I write everything. It does help, Miss, the feelings that I write down"* (P4:Int 2). When feeling stressed this participant stated: *"just take a walk"* (P9:Int 2). Another participant also mentioned that: *"I go for a walk or eat and sleep"* (P10:Int 1).

Many participants have common coping methods. A participant explained: *"taking walks just to calm myself down and have positive thoughts, so that's what I do"* (P9:Int 1). Another participant finds that converting the stress into better thoughts helps: *"I write a lot of poetry"* (P13:Int 1).

Another participant indicated in one of the journal entries that this research assisted them in handling their stress: *"Journal helped with relief of my anxiety and stress."* The same participant was also mentioned, *"I cope by handling my stress, just not keeping everything bubbled"* (P1:J 1). Likewise, another journal entry stated that this research had assisted the author: *"Diary entry helped me reflect and grow in these past months."* The same author stated further, *"Jogging sessions helps me relieve stress"* (P3:J 3). One other journal entry mentioned this method: *"I read positive quotes regularly and I watch motivational videos. Also Imagining my life 5 years from now actually helps me feel better about my struggles"* (P5:J 5).

One of the participants felt that talking to someone might assist: *"I think I should really let go and talk about it like my sister told me now the other day"* (P1:Int 2). Another participant felt the same as P1: *"I think I should talk about it more often. So, I have been just keeping everything to myself. More understanding"* (P7:Int 2).

Many participants felt that talking really helps. One of the participants who felt the same way as P1 mentioned: *"a lady friend who I'm talking to, sometimes I'm talking to her. She can relate to me, so sometimes I'm talking then she's giving me hope again and tell me everything is going to be all right"* (P14:Int 2).

Walking and jogging were commonly mentioned coping mechanisms, as well as prayer: *"I'll jog or join a couple of friends for a jog in the morning and have a bit of exercises that we do. I find solace in prayer and I sometimes talk to my close people which is my family, my friends, sometimes it's not even for advice"* (P5:Int 1). One other participant, like P9, stated that watching TV and taking walks would alleviate stress: *"I just watch a little bit of TV, listen to a little music, it helps you relax also. Take walks you know or just you know go and shop and window shopping and that helps with stress to just go get out of the situation for a while so"* (P12:Int 1). As mentioned, some individuals find that they cannot cope well without medication to cope without medication: *"Sometimes I can't cope, ma'am. Sometimes I feel that I need to speak to someone. Go speak to someone and talk to that are able to calm me down. Go to my therapist, I do attend therapy. Chronic medication that I take on a daily basis. So, it can help me cope during the day"* (P13:Int 2). Another participant stated that, like P13, medication was needed to assist in overcoming and handling stress better (P11:Int 2). P11 added: *"I've been put on some medication so I have a daily medication that I take. ... I think it's better to have*

*someone like what we're doing now here ma'am, someone to talk to just to get it off and not keep it inside all the time because when you keep it inside."*

In a study (mentioned in chapter two), it is recommended that students engage in recreational activities and exercise and talk to friends and family to help deal with stress. Interesting to note, not all students liked to drink, smoke, or use other substances. According to Mena et al. (1987:207), students prefer to cope with stress through their social network (friends and family). However, Dumont and Provost (1999:343) argue that vulnerable students tend to engage in antisocial and illegal activities which are regarded as negative coping strategies. Thus, while students who have learned coping strategies use problem-solving coping techniques, while those who have not tend to use negative strategies.

One of the participants confirmed that writing down one's thoughts helps, or even just having someone listen to one: *"I write sometimes in my diary or I talk with my mommy"* (P3:Int 2). Then one other participant mentioned: *"I find solace in prayer and I sometimes talk to my close people which is my family, my friends, sometimes it's not even for advice"* (P5:Int 2). J6 also confirmed that the research assisted with her stress: *"Speaking to my sister and keeping a diary, this helps me with the stress. Being included in this research helped to realise my stresses and how it affects me"* (P6:J 6).

To conclude, the students that participated in this research mentioned that when they talk or write about their feelings and experiences, it assists them in relieving the stress that they are experiencing.

#### **4.5.3 Summary of Theme 3**

Using coping strategies to reduce stress is a necessary condition for preventing the harmful effects of prolonged stress. It has been shown empirically that, depending on how an individual copes with stress, stress can be very harmful to a person's physical and mental health (Sohail, 2013:1).

Many students without a good support system use negative coping mechanisms to cope with life's pressures and this can lead to unhealthy lifestyles. Drinking, isolating themselves, smoking, crying, and sleeping more often than usual are some of these coping mechanisms can be harmful to health and well-being. To the students, it may seem helpful to use these methods, but they can actually exacerbate the situation and make it more difficult to resolve challenges. As a result of not coping positively with their stress, some students feel anxious and overwhelmed, causing them to worry and lose focus. This begins a spiral that can lead to further undue levels of stress and the inability to succeed academically.

in this study, most students, regardless of gender, used some positive coping strategies, including praying, taking action to negate stressors, seeing the good in what was happening, learning from experience, and receiving emotional support from family and friends, as well as learning to cope with and accept the stressful situation. The following useful coping mechanisms were noted from the data obtained: talking to a professional or someone that they felt comfortable with; making use of the journal provided at the start of the research; meditating; exercising to relieve stress; and making use of motivational YouTube videos.

By contrast to the students with sufficient positive coping mechanisms, some students were unable to focus on their studies because of a lack of support at home and in college. It was found that some of these students then engaged in unhealthy behaviours struggled to progress in their studies. The importance of recognising and addressing negative coping mechanisms and developing the necessary tools for dealing with stress cannot be overstated.

#### **4.6 Theme 4: External factors affecting students**

External factors are beyond the control of students at times, such as transport issues and COVID. When referring to COVID 19, several factors that hindered students were identified, such as not having sufficient resources or contact time with lecturers for extra support. Many students were not able to self independently. Transport issues such as strikes prevented some of the students from attending classes and thus they missed out on important information. Loadshedding affected students as they were not able to study or do their homework in the dark. The students mentioned that job loss and other economic factors that prevented students from attending their classes had a negative effect on their performance.

Many external factors play a role in contributing to general stress; however, there are times when an individual is already stressed and overwhelmed with certain things in their lives that they have no control over. Then, when factors like COVID 19 appear and bring along challenges like job losses to add to what these individuals are already feeling, it could make it unbearable and so they are not able to reach their academic goals. These are external factors over which the participants have little to no control. The following external factors were mentioned as contributing to the participants' stress.

##### **4.6.1 COVID-19 Pandemic**

A study by Yasmin et al. (2020) suggests that academic stress affects the mental well-being of college students the most. Depending on the student group, some may experience more stress than others; and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic complicated matters further. At the end of 2019, COVID-19 entered lives worldwide, affecting countless people's health. Due to the mortality rate of COVID-19 and associated factors such as economic instability,

unemployment, stress, anxiety, and insecurity, this pandemic was frightening and stressful for everyone. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching implications, it could be expected that students would feel a variety of thoughts, emotions, and have a range of reactions. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to mental health problems. It has resulted in increased stress levels, and decreased mental and physical health for college students (Yasmin et al., 2020: 2).

Participants stated several points about how Covid-19 affected their studies. One mentioned: *"with Covid-19 I must study; it's hard to study like just stay at home. and it really puts a lot of stress on me. like I'm working like really hard and now this pandemic"* (P7:Int 1). Another participant indicated: *"with this whole virus, you're going to back to college but now you don't know are you safe"* (P12:Int 1).

Another participant explained how they did not feel safe and it was a fear of the unknown, stating: *"My stress factors that I've experience are currently the Corona Virus that's taking place"* (P5:Int 2). Another indicated: *"don't have control of the situation or you don't have the power to change it, turn it around"* (P2:In 2). One of the journal entries indicated: *"Unclarity coming from government makes things more stressful and anxious"* (P4:J 4).

A journal entry linked to P2's statement mentions: *"Online learning, not used to this I am used to face to face, I need guidance. No explanation on the work was given, the lecturer just hands it out then I'm confused. Lecturers not understanding, we all come from different circumstances at home so we have many personal problems and we learn differently. I am not prepared after lockdown; I need guidance on the work received via WhatsApp. New lecturers make things difficult because the lecturer explains differently to previous one"* (P1:J 1). Similar to J1, this journal entry indicated: *"Reckless and stressed out all the time now during lockdown. Damaged. Hurt"* (P5:J 5).

As mentioned, many students felt anxious about COVID19 and not knowing what the future held for them academically. The following diary entries show this. J4 stated: *"Virus starting up in SA making me anxious."*; and: *"Worrying and fear the breadwinner that may lose their job"* (P4:J 4). One other journal entry affirmed what diary entry 4 mentioned: *"risk of coming into contact with someone makes me feel anxious"* (P1:J 1). Also, not knowing what would happen academically, this participant made another statement in a journal entry: *"lockdown and being behind with work and syllabus"* (P3:J 3).

#### 4.6.2 Transport

In the literature in chapter two, section 2.2.1, Lawrence (2016:25) points to the critical role is played by public transport in facilitating the movement of the South African workforce. There are several factors that contribute to the anxiety levels of students when using public transport, including late arrivals and the consequences thereof, as well as constant panic regarding not reaching a destination on time, delaying completion of tasks; there is a rollover of deadlines; and one arrives home late.

A participant confirmed this: *“the travelling to college is a major stress factor because I make use of public transport and sometimes the taxis”* (P4:Int 2). Another participant added: *“I try to because always I’m worrying about how I’m going to get the next day to college or how I’m going to get home”* (P9:Int 2).

Many TVET College students make use of and rely on public transport. When the mentioned threats occur, it is at times beyond the student’s control and they miss out on classes, miss deadlines for assignments and even miss tests. Such events could increase feelings of stress and anxiety, as the student is not able to determine if the lecturer will be lenient and allow the student to write the test or hand in the assignment. In most instances, they will miss the opportunity and forfeit the mark, which adds to the student’s stress and pressure.

#### 4.6.3 Loadshedding

Kai-Wen (2009:1) states that the effects on academic performance and education in general of social-environmental events such as load shedding are multifaceted. This author further stated that the main contributor to increased stress levels was social factors.

One of the participants expressed their stress about loadshedding and their studies: *“I say theoretical course so really, it’s giving a lot of stress especially from [indistinct] because load shedding”* (P12:Int 1). Another student’s journal entry also mentioned this: *“Loadshedding is a problem for me and my studies”* (P4:J 4).

A student's performance can be negatively influenced by academic, social, or psychological problems. Zajacova et al. (2005:136) affirm this, stating that academic self-efficacy relates to students' ability to prepare for and cope with college assessments. When students cannot cope with these, psychological stress may result, and the student may withdraw from their educational institution.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant influence on the mental well-being of college students, with some feeling more stress than others. Economic instability, unemployment, stress, anxiety and insecurity have been caused by the pandemic, making everything stressed and frightened. As a result of anxiety about the future, fear of the unknown and uncertainty about what would happen academically, students reported feeling anxious about their academic future. In addition, they reported having difficulty adjusting to online learning and pointed to a lack of guidance from lecturers.

If some students are only able to study at night due to other obligations during the day, then loadshedding poses a risk to them. Many participants explained that they cannot study at night and this affects their stress levels and performance. COVID was the most serious challenge of Theme 4 because it led to many participants feeling uncertainty and being forced to adapt to a new normal (which was a struggle) and adapt to a blended learning approach. In addition to fearing job losses due to economic uncertainty, students were concerned about coming into contact with infected individuals and felt powerless over the situation. Collectively, these stressors adversely affected the mental health and academic performance of students. The figure below shows the most commonly used words by participants during research interviews. The word cloud visualisation effectively highlights the dominant vocabulary emerging from the participants' conversations, providing valuable insights into their perspectives and experiences.



#### **4.7 Chapter Four summary**

In this chapter, an analysis of the findings was presented and discussed in relation to the research question, "How does stress affect students in TVET colleges?". In this chapter, empirical research findings were presented. The discussion of the findings was based on the semi-structured interviews and journals. A thematic analysis which resulted in the identification of the main themes and subthemes was presented in this chapter. Additionally, each participant's experiences were illustrated with quoted narratives, also known as representative constructions, to retain the richness of detail and the sequence of events and topics. The Lazarus Theory framework provided a useful lens for making sense of the results in this study, especially in terms of how students view and handle stressors. The thematic analysis highlighted common sources of stress, like heavy academic demands, external influences and personal difficulties, as well as a range of coping approaches, some more successful than others. The participants' responses emphasised similar causes of stress and coping mechanisms used in relation to these. Students often raised the issue that if they were not able to understand their work or were not provided with proper guidance, then they experienced difficulties with their academic studies. The conclusions and recommendations emanating from this study, are presented in the next chapter. These conclusions are interpreted, and some coping mechanisms are recommended from the data and literature review.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

An analysis and detailed discussion of the results from 28 interviews and 7 journals which were conducted at a TVET College in the Western Cape are presented in Chapter four. To construct responses to the four research objectives of this study, the data were grouped thematically. These included determining effects of stress on academic workload; personal factors pertaining to stress; identifying the external factors affecting students and identifying their coping strategies; and determining the effectiveness of their personal coping strategies.

In this chapter, the study conclusions are presented, followed by recommendations.

#### **5.1 Overview of key findings**

The following findings were revealed about students' experiences of stress and how stress affects them:

1. During the academic year, many students experienced some form of stress. Many factors contributed to the students' stress, including academic pressure, external factors, personal issues, and financial concerns.
2. Although some students felt that their academic performance was compromised during these stressful experiences, others believed they were able to cope with stress. There were many forms of coping methods mentioned by students, who mentioned negative and positive coping strategies.
3. Most students mentioned that writing in a journal and talking to someone about their stress-induced challenges assisted them.
4. Symptoms of anxiety, depression and some physical symptoms, such as headaches with confusion, insomnia, hair loss and bronchial issues were reported by students. They indicated that stress was the main contributor to these issues, and it thus had a negative influence on their everyday functioning at college and in their personal lives.
5. In stressful situations, students implemented various coping mechanisms. Examples of good coping mechanisms included exercising, talking to friends and family, watching motivational videos, reading and journaling. However, some students mentioned unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol abuse, crying and sleeping a lot. These unhealthy coping mechanisms could be resolved by receiving support and through interventions such as counselling services, along with education and awareness about healthy coping methods through the student support service (that is, a supportive campus environment).
6. According to the findings described, students often did not have a good support system, such as lecturer support, nor sufficient support from family. This lack of support could

have a significant influence on the students and exacerbate the negative effects of their stress. The students in the research noted that, when they spoke to their lecturer or a family member, it assisted them in overcoming stressful feelings.

## **5.2 Discussion of the findings**

The findings presented were in response to the primary question and sub-questions of this research. The main question was: How do students experience stress in a TVET college?

Based on the data obtained and presented in chapter four, the participants were aged between 18 and 36 years. Many participants experienced similar stress, despite their age differences. The participants mentioned that academic, personal and external factors were contributing factors to stress. The anxiety levels they mentioned were high; they experienced feelings of being overwhelmed and changes in their moods, with some participants feeling angry, sad and frustrated; and they took these moods out on their loved ones at home. Some participants reported that their sleeping patterns were disturbed and they suffered from headaches, hair loss and a general feeling of being ill. It was also noted that, when stress levels were high, there was a decrease in motivation towards their academic work, usually around task deadlines and examination periods. All participants indicated that they experienced stress, including both positive and negative stress. In literature reviewed earlier in chapter two, it was noted that Galli and Reel (2012) point to two elements that influence whether or not an individual perceives stress as positive. The first set of factors include cultivating an optimistic outlook, being self-aware, being prepared to comply with requests and acquiring coping mechanisms to draw upon in times of stress. Reducing negative stress is the second set of factors. They contend that students can lead balanced lives and enhance their general well-being by reducing stressful situations and creating more pleasant experiences. Good stress management practices can help students perform better academically (Galli & Reel 2012:212). Some participants indicated that stress motivates them, whereas others indicated that stress produces negative physical and emotional effects. In other research cited in chapter two, Sohail (2013:1) mentions that learning can be improved with good management practices for pupils at the peak of their stress levels. High levels of stress, especially negative stress, can lower self-esteem, and lead to health issues. Many participants indicated a positive method and mentioned that, speaking to someone that they felt comfortable with assisted them in alleviating the stress they were experiencing. The research literature in Chapter two supports this: Tully (2004:43) noted that students who practise healthy coping strategies, such as talking to people or asking for help, have lower stress levels.

As Son et al. (2020:2) argues, excessive anxiety triggers stress, while striving for perfection causes anxiety to be generated. In chapter two, Owusu and Essel (2017:9) advocate teaching students effective coping strategies to avoid the damaging effects of extreme stress to prevent burnout and anxiety. Weber and O'Brien (2017:502) likewise stresses the importance of perseverance and coping skills for first-year students. It is also important to provide support structures to ensure that these students complete their studies. Engelbrecht et. al (2020:2) found that coping strategies that include focusing on the problem and receiving support from others can contribute to academic-related stress among students.

In their study, El-Ghoroury et al. (2012:122) came to the conclusion that getting assistance from friends, family, and fellow students was the most widely used coping strategy for stress management. According to studies by Gibbons et al. (2008:282), effective students have a positive outlook on obstacles and develop helpful relationships. Furthermore, students perform better and handle stress better when teachers' pay attention to their concerns, take appropriate action, and show greater empathy and direction.

Participants also indicated that another coping method was to exercise, or sit alone and pray, as some form of meditation was also helpful in their stressful situations. Research in chapter two mentioned that students who practice meditation, play games, and use support groups show improved coping skills and knowledge of stress (Shalaby & Agyapong 2020:2). Many participants also indicated that their participation in this research and journaling assisted them in coping with their feelings of stress. Negative coping methods which were mentioned were drinking and sleeping a lot; however, recommendations will be made for students to assist them to cope better.

### **5.2.1 What types of stress did students identify?**

Referring to research in Chapter 2, stress has been divided into two categories by Lazarus (2006:38): sociocultural stress, caused by the way society is organised; and physiological stress, caused by harmful medical conditions. According to Lazarus Theory (1966), stress is not merely a reaction to external events but is mediated by the individual's cognitive appraisal of the stressor and their subsequent coping strategies. Weber and O'Brien (2017:512) asserts that stress responses are triggered when perceived threats, challenges, and harm are present. An event or circumstance that disrupts people's everyday functioning is a stressor (Monroe & Slavich 2016:25).

The study found that many participants described negative home situations as stressful. Using Lazarus's framework, these stressors can be classified as sociocultural stressors. Participants had to support their families while studying, a dual burden that increased their perceived threat level.

According to Lazarus's concept of primary appraisal, individuals evaluate the significance of a stressor (e.g., financial instability, family responsibilities) and determine its potential impact on their well-being. A primary appraisal of threat is that participants who previously worked but now rely solely on bursaries experienced significant stress. Furthermore, participants rated N5's increased workload and difficulty in understanding lecturers as overwhelming academic stressors. Another significant stressor was the lack of resources and guidance from lecturers.

Lazarus defines secondary appraisal as assessing one's ability to cope with stress. Stress levels increased as participants lacked confidence in their ability to manage their academic workload effectively due to the lack of support from lecturers. COVID-19 introduced and added uncertainty and fear, which participants assessed as a major stressor due to its unpredictable nature. Transitioning back to college added to their anxiety, as they were uncertain of what to expect, further complicating their stress appraisals. Added obstacles were experienced by those with family responsibilities and only being able to study at night as a result of load-shedding.

Under challenging circumstances, participants were constantly forced to assess their academic requirements and home duties. The Lazarus Theory also emphasises coping mechanisms, which are strategies used to manage stress. Many of the participants used both problem-focused coping mechanisms (e.g., managing time effectively) and emotion-focused coping mechanisms (e.g., dealing with stress through mental and emotional adjustments). By analysing these coping strategies, one can gain insight into how students manage academic, personal, and environmental stress.

### **5.2.2 How did students perceive stress to influence their academic performance?**

In the literature reviewed in chapter two, Chambel and Curral (2005:135) argue that student satisfaction directly affects performance. Younger et al. (2008:447) assert that the effects of stress lead to loneliness and feelings of discomfort, among others, which in turn decrease social interaction with peers and negatively impact self-esteem. As a result, classroom interaction and academic performance are affected. A similar theory is presented by Cowden (2010:9), namely, that anxiety about studies prevents students from speaking up. Instead of taking care of their own needs, they just agree with and try to please others. This results in problems not being addressed, although there is an awareness of such issues. The result is

that students simply increase their anxiety (Cowden, 2010:9). A high level of stress can result in poor judgement, low concentration, low self-esteem, and increased depression and anxiety, according to Shalaby and Agyapong (2020:2).

Participants mentioned that, when they felt stressed, it hindered their ability to concentrate during classes, study and exam sessions. This indicates that stress had an influence on the cognitive functions linked to their academic success. It was noted that not reaching their academic goals was a concern and decreased their demotivation, therefore, it could be said that high stress levels lead to decreased motivation.

It was also noted that participants felt overwhelmed with their heavy workload, changes of lecturers, and keeping up with all the deadlines. According to Owusu and Essel (2017:23), excessive workload can further elevate a student's stress levels as they feel overwhelmed by the demands of multiple subjects and fear not being able to manage everything effectively. These stressors affected their time management and productivity. Feelings of frustration and doubting themselves decreased their motivation to focus and learn. Students face immense pressure to complete their studies within the stipulated timeframe. The research in chapter two suggests that some of the factors contributing to this issue encompass the issue of "late return", which refers to students who fail to attend classes from the beginning of the programme and subsequently drop out before completing their programme. This not only places a burden on the NSFAS, but it also impacts the economy, community, and the students themselves (Gaffoor, 2018:11). Sohail (2013:67) concludes that, as a result of all their stressors like their overwhelming workload and the amount of information they are required to handle, students have limited time for relaxation. Their stressors may not be solely social factors, but rather stem from individual or psychological factors. Cahir and Morris (1991:414) assert that effective time management can alleviate stress levels in students.

In applying Lazarus's theory to student stress, it becomes clear that students' stress levels are influenced by their perceptions of academic demands and their self-assessed ability to meet them. For example, participants' feelings of being overwhelmed by workload and deadlines can be seen as a primary appraisal, in which these academic requirements are viewed as significant stressors. A secondary appraisal is that students feel inadequate to cope with stressors effectively, resulting in frustration, self-doubt, and decreased motivation.

A further explanation of students' responses to stress can be found in Lazarus's concept of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies. According to Cowden (2010:9), emotion-focused coping may explain why some students withdraw socially or avoid speaking up in class due to stressors. Cahir and Morris (1991:414) advocate for effective time

management as a method of reducing stress, whereas problem-focused coping addresses the stressor directly. Overall, Lazarus's Theory (1993) reveals how students' cognitive appraisals of academic demands and their perceived coping resources significantly influence their stress levels and subsequent academic performance. To mitigate student stress and enhance their academic success, this framework emphasises the importance of addressing both external academic pressures and internal cognitive processes.

### **5.2.3 What coping strategies did students use?**

It has been acknowledged since the 1960s that the way individuals handle stressful situations can significantly impact the outcome of those situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986:06). An individual's capacity to cope with stress plays a vital role in their response to stressful situations (May, 2015:25). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1986:06), stress is a result of evaluating the significance of events (primary appraisal) and their perception of their ability or inability to cope with them (secondary appraisal). Primary appraisals of student stress involve assessing academic demands, such as workload, deadlines, and exam pressure, as potential threats or challenges. In the secondary appraisal, student stress is assessed on their perceived ability to deal with these demands, including their resources and coping strategies. Stress levels rise when students perceive high demands but are unable to cope with them.

Folkman and Lazarus (1980) highlight that stress can impact performance, as evidenced by studies on stress and fatigue in human performance. El-Ghoroury et al. (2012:121) reintroduce familiar variables like time pressure, noise, and problem-solving efficiency, but with a new focus on cognitive, motivational, and coping concepts layered on top of the traditional emphasis on performance effectiveness. El-Ghoroury et al. (2012:122) found that the most common coping strategy for stress management was receiving support from friends, family, and peers. According to Gibbons et al. (2008:282), students who are successful tend to have supportive relationships and a positive attitude towards challenges. Moreover, students perform better and handle stress more effectively when educators actively listen to their concerns, provide guidance, and show empathy.

Various coping methods were mentioned by students, including both negative and positive approaches. Many students found solace in writing in a journal and confiding in someone about their stress-induced challenges. In coping with stress, Lazarus's Theory emphasises the importance of both internal and external resources. An individual's internal resources include their coping skills and resilience, whereas external resources include their family, friends and educators. In addition to improving academic performance, the presence of these resources can significantly influence the secondary appraisal process.

Lazarus emphasizes the importance of effective coping strategies for mitigating the negative effects of stress. An individual's sense of control and competence is enhanced by developing problem-focused coping skills, such as time management and planning. Coping mechanisms are developed both in early childhood and adulthood. Individuals who have challenging childhood experiences may struggle to utilise coping strategies later in life. Coping mechanisms are the tools individuals use to navigate life's difficulties, such as dealing with loss or managing financial responsibilities. In the Lazarus stress coping theory, our coping skills are directly related to the stress we encounter. According to Tully (2004:43), students who employ effective coping strategies, like seeking support or advice, tend to report lower stress levels.

The students who adopted healthy coping mechanisms engaged in activities such as exercising, seeking support from friends and family, watching motivational videos, reading, and journaling. On the other hand, some students resorted to unhealthy coping mechanisms like alcohol abuse, excessive crying, and excessive sleeping. To address this issue, it is crucial to provide support and interventions such as counselling services, educational programmes, and raising awareness about healthy coping methods through the student support service. This will help create a supportive campus environment.

Some positive coping methods were identified by the participants, such as talking to someone about their stressful situations and writing in their journals, however, there is no follow up or anything else in place that ensures that these positive methods is not a once-off approach and that there are no potential long-term effects of chronic stress on students when referring to their mental health. In chapter two, Sohail (2013:2) suggests that some people suffer from chronic distress caused by recurring intrusive memories or sad experiences. This can cause delayed reactions, with individuals experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or generalised anxiety disorder. The degree to which an individual is invested in an event determines how well he or she can handle stress, according to Folkman and Lazarus (1980:63). There is no threat, no harm, and no significant advantage, unless the primary appraisal is relevant to the well-being of the individual. The primary appraisal, however, will be posed as a threat, a challenge, or a potential harm if a person has a stake.

The students in the research emphasised that reaching out to their lecturers or confiding in their family and friends greatly aided them in overcoming their stressful feelings.

The Lazarus Theory (1966) provides a robust framework for understanding the complex relationships between cognitive appraisals, coping strategies and stress outcomes among students. This theory emphasises the importance of both internal and external coping

resources to help students manage stress effectively and enhance their academic performance and general well-being.

#### **5.2.4 How effective did students find their own coping strategies?**

With reference to chapter two, Milk (2018:166) discovered that students who had strong social support systems were more likely to maintain their academic performance, while experiencing less loneliness resulted in positive academic behaviour. Additionally, Pillay and Ncgobo (2010:234) highlighted the worrisome levels of stress among university students, particularly when stress negatively affects students' academic achievements. The literature chapter two further states that an individual's coping mechanisms are essential resources to navigate life's challenges, such as dealing with the loss of a loved one or managing tax responsibilities. According to the Lazarus stress coping theory, our abilities are directly related to the stressors we encounter. This theory was formulated by Lazarus (1986) and Folkman (1984). Students can enhance their stress management skills by learning to regulate their emotions and develop self-leadership qualities. College curricula should incorporate programmes that focus on emotional intelligence and self-leadership training. Research indicates that students who lack confidence in their emotional capabilities tend to underutilise their emotional intelligence (Gohm et al., 2005:1017).

The participants mentioned both positive and negative coping strategies. Some of the strategies, like drinking alcohol, provided immediate relief to the participant; however, it left them feeling worse once the alcohol was out of their system. When talking to someone they felt comfortable with also provided immediate relief; however, it did not address the main causes of their stress nor lead to sustainable stress management over time. Some participants used alcohol and were not aware of the long-term effects of using negative coping methods, indicating the need for education and awareness of healthier coping mechanisms.

According to the Lazarus Theory (1966), the effectiveness of coping mechanisms depends upon the cognitive appraisal process and the availability of coping resources. Primary and secondary appraisals play an important role in determining stress levels and the subsequent use of coping strategies. To manage stress and maintain academic performance, students must have access to robust support systems and develop strong coping skills. Students' emotional intelligence and self-leadership skills should be promoted in educational institutions as a means of addressing these issues. Through these programmes, students will be better able to understand their emotional responses and develop more effective coping strategies. Furthermore, increasing awareness and accessibility of student support services can help students manage stress more effectively. A comprehensive understanding of the complex interaction between cognitive appraisals, coping strategies and stress outcomes can be gained



from Lazarus's Theory (1993). To support students in managing stress effectively and enhancing their academic performance and overall well-being, this theory stresses the importance of both internal and external coping resources.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

#### **5.3.1 Recommendation 1: Educate students**

To address student stress effectively, both cognitive appraisals and coping resources must be considered. According to Lazarus (2006:38), stress occurs when individuals perceive a discrepancy between their demands and their resources to cope with those demands. By providing workshops and services to enhance students' coping resources, this stress can be mitigated. The College should provide its students with services, such as counselling, time management, financial management workshops and stress management workshops. In the literature, Lawrence (2016:25) mentions that financial stress is a common challenge amongst TVET students because, besides their tuition fees, the bursary received must also be able to cover their transport and food costs. In Chapter Four, section 2.2, it was noted that students are not able to cover all these costs with the amount provided by the bursary. At present, the only service provided at the College is a campus unit called Student Support Services. In the data presented in Chapter Four, the students did not mention this service and this raises the question of it being useful or sufficiently effective.

Workshops can be implemented by drafting a proposal to the College's executive management outlining the purpose and benefits of such events. Students' primary and secondary appraisals should be emphasised in the proposal, in accordance with Lazarus's Theory. As an example, financial management workshops can help students perceive financial challenges as more manageable (primary appraisal) and provide them with the skills to handle them (secondary appraisal). Furthermore, educators and parents must be aware of these stressors and provide support, guidance, and resources to help students cope. According to Lazarus's Theory, social support is one of the most important coping resources. Students can reduce their stress by promoting a healthy work-life balance, fostering a supportive environment and learning stress management techniques. By implementing these measures, students can reframe stressors as less threatening and enhance their perception of their ability to cope with them.

To conclude, integrating Lazarus's Theory (1966) into the College's support framework can provide a robust basis for addressing student stress. The College can assist students in managing stress better and improving their academic performance and overall well-being by enhancing both cognitive appraisal and coping resources. Education can effectively help

students to prepare for and cope with the workload. It can also focus on stress management to enhance academic success and good mental health.

### **5.3.2 Recommendation 2: Establish peer support groups**

As Pierceall and Keim (2007:703) state, talking to family and friends can help one cope with high levels of stress. Peer support programmes can also create a safe environment for students to share experiences, gain empathy, and learn from others who have faced similar challenges. Furthermore, such programmes provide the opportunity for students to cultivate a sense of community, to act as a valuable resource for other students facing academic and personal challenges, and to share coping strategies among students.

The inclusion of Lazarus's Theory (1993) in this recommendation further emphasises the importance of these initiatives. According to Lazarus' Theory, stress arises from cognitive appraisals during which an individual assesses whether a situation poses a threat, challenge, or harm (primary appraisal), and subsequently evaluates his or her resources to handle it (secondary appraisal). Both aspects of this process can be significantly enhanced by peer support programmes. Through peer support, students can reframe stressors by sharing experiences, making them feel less threatened (primary appraisal). Stressors can be perceived as less severe when peers have successfully navigated similar situations. Furthermore, students can improve their overall coping skills by learning effective coping strategies from peers (secondary appraisal).

Creating peer support groups begins with identifying the stressors students encounter and determining their interest in participating in such programs. To encourage peer relatability, groups should be composed based on common experiences, academic standing, or personal interests. Participation guidelines should be clear, emphasising confidentiality, mutual respect, and regular attendance. Whether physical or virtual, meetings should take place on a regular schedule to help those students who depend on the peer group for academic or emotional and/or academic support. It is possible to structure some sessions around specific themes, stress management activities, or peer-led discussions. It is important to gather regular feedback from participants to ensure long-term success, so that the programme can be fine-tuned and address emerging needs. Peer support groups need support from their various programme departments in order to remain viable, including funding for resources, meeting spaces, and the availability of relevant materials.

In Chapter Four, many students discussed positive coping mechanisms, emphasising the importance of seeking support from friends and family to enhance their coping skills. According to Lazarus, social support is a crucial coping resource. Through peer support programmes,

this social support network can be formalised and expanded, ensuring that all students have access to these beneficial interactions. Fostering a supportive community through peer support programmes aligns with Lazarus's Theory. These initiatives enhance students' primary and secondary appraisal abilities by facilitating shared experiences and peer learning. This comprehensive approach empowers students to manage academic and personal challenges better, promoting their overall well-being and academic success.

### **5.3.3 Recommendation 3: Incorporate journal writing into the curriculum**

In Chapter Four, the study finding that participants greatly benefited from keeping a journal was clear, particularly as a means of reducing stress. Regularly writing in their journal seemed to provide the students who did this with a valuable outlet to express their thoughts and feelings, which ultimately contributed to their overall well-being by assisting them in managing stress. Incorporating Lazarus's Theory (1993) into this recommendation underscores the effectiveness of journal writing as a coping mechanism. Lazarus's Theory emphasises the significance of cognitive appraisal in the stress response, where individuals assess the importance of a stressor (primary appraisal) and their ability to cope with it (secondary appraisal). Journal writing can facilitate both aspects of this appraisal process.

Firstly, journal writing helps students articulate and process their thoughts and emotions, which can alter their primary appraisal of stressors. By reflecting on their experiences, students might perceive their challenges as less overwhelming or threatening. This reflective practice can shift their perspective, enabling them to view stressors as more manageable or even as opportunities for growth. Secondly, journal writing can enhance secondary appraisal by helping students develop and reinforce effective coping strategies.

Incorporating journal writing into the curriculum could be a strategic approach to help students better manage their stress levels. By offering a structured outlet for emotional expression and self-reflection, this practice can empower students to reframe their stressors and develop more effective coping mechanisms. Aligning with Lazarus's Theory, this process can enhance both their primary and secondary appraisal of challenging situations, bolstering their confidence in their ability to handle stress and improving their overall well-being. Life skills lecturers could consider dedicating 5 to 10 minutes of class time for this activity, providing students with a valuable opportunity to cultivate positive coping strategies and alleviate the pressures of academic life. This simple yet impactful practice can be a meaningful addition to the curriculum, supporting students in navigating the demands of their studies and fostering their long-term resilience.

### **5.3.4 Recommendation 4: Implement recreational activities**

Chapter 4 recorded a focus on positive coping mechanisms: several students expressed that engaging in physical exercises, such as taking solitary walks or jogging with friends, helped them manage their stress. Allowing students to participate in both indoor and outdoor activities, such as arts and crafts or sports, can offer them much-needed relief from academic pressures, leading to a more balanced and healthier lifestyle. Implementing these practices within the College can alleviate student stress, greatly contribute to students' mental well-being and improve their overall academic performance. Pierceall and Keim (2007:703) support this notion by affirming that recreational activities and exercise can effectively help students cope with high levels of stress (see section 2.4 of Chapter Two).

The significance of physical activity and recreational pursuits as effective coping mechanisms is clear. Lazarus's Theory emphasises that stress arises from the cognitive evaluation process, where individuals assess the importance of a stressor (primary appraisal) and their capacity to manage it (secondary appraisal). Engaging in physical exercise and recreational activities can positively influence both aspects of this evaluation process. Firstly, physical activities can alter the primary appraisal by assisting students in perceiving stressors as less severe. Exercise has been shown to enhance mood and reduce anxiety, making stressors appear more manageable. This shift in perspective can help students view their academic challenges as less threatening and more controllable. Secondly, participating in recreational activities can strengthen the secondary appraisal by providing students with effective coping resources. Physical exercise and creative activities can serve as constructive outlets for stress, helping students build resilience and develop healthier ways to manage their emotions. These activities can increase students' confidence in their ability to cope with stress, thereby improving their overall coping resources.

Implementing these practices within the College can significantly contribute to students' mental well-being and enhance their overall academic performance. Incorporating physical exercise and recreational pursuits into the College's support system aligns with Lazarus's Theory as these strengthen both the initial and secondary appraisal processes. By offering students chances to participate in stress-alleviating activities, the college can assist them in reframing stressors and cultivating more efficient coping mechanisms. This comprehensive approach to stress management can foster improved mental well-being, a more balanced lifestyle, and enhanced academic achievement.

### **5.4 Limitations**

The researcher faced many challenges during the research journey that were out of her control. The COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions, forcing the researcher to follow strict protocols

and use telephonic interviews. However, while the researcher was able to make alternative telephone arrangements for the interviews some participants, who had initially volunteered, withdrew just before the data collection phase, significantly disrupting the schedule. Ultimately the interviews conducted telephonically allowed the students to talk freely and provided good data.

Reaching out to the students was difficult, as some were unavailable or could not speak due to busy schedules and personal commitments. This made it very difficult for the researcher to ask more follow-up questions. Although this may have limited the study the data gathered was found to answer the research questions.

The relatively small sample size of 14 students may not fully represent the diverse experiences of the larger student body.

The reliance on self-reported data introduces biases, as participants might under report or over report their stress levels due to social desirability or memory recall issues.

The study involved no direct interaction between the researcher and the learners during the interview process. Some respondents may have addressed the questions more fully had the interviews been face-to-face. However, for other respondents the indirect telephonic interview allowed them to speak more freely. Despite the free exchange for some participants, the short duration of the interviews due to some participants not elaborating enough on each question could limit the depth of insights gathered.

Of the participants, 50% returned completed journals. These were shown to include valuable data though it is recognised that the researcher might have gained further important insights if more journals had been returned.

The study was limited to a single college in the Western Cape. There may be benefit from extending the study to other colleges to confirm the relevance of the findings across the sector.

### **5.5 Recommendations for further research**

In this study, stress was examined as a factor influencing students at a TVET college. It was determined that students need assistance in coping with stress. The findings of this study were drawn from a group of 14 students from a single TVET college, indicating a limited sample size. It was found that students respond to stress in various ways, necessitating assistance in managing the pressures they face within the college environment. It is plausible that the

outcomes may not be generalisable to all colleges due to varying circumstances, therefore conducting this type of study on a larger scale could ascertain the reproducibility of the results.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The Lazarus Theory (1966) emphasises the crucial role that students' perceptions and management of stressors play in the stress response process. This influential theory posits that stress arises when individuals feel that the demands placed upon them exceed their available coping resources. The theory underscores the importance of both primary appraisals, where students assess the significance of a stressor, and secondary appraisals, where they evaluate the resources at their disposal to manage the stressor. The key findings of this study suggest that enhancing students' coping resources and reframing their perceptions of stressors can substantially improve their stress management abilities. The research indicates that interventions, such as counselling, stress management workshops, and peer support programmes can provide students with the necessary tools to appraise and cope with stress better. These interventions help students develop a more nuanced understanding of their stressors, recognise their internal and external support systems and cultivate effective stress management strategies.

Furthermore, the study recommends that future research should be conducted on a larger scale to gather more comprehensive insights and develop a more generalised understanding of stress and coping mechanisms among TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) students. A larger sample size would enable researchers to identify patterns, trends, and contextual factors that shape the stress experiences and coping strategies of this student population. This expanded research would ensure that the findings and suggested interventions are robust, widely applicable, and tailored to the unique needs and challenges faced by TVET students. The study's emphasis on customised support frameworks is particularly noteworthy. By addressing the specific needs and circumstances of students, these frameworks can bolster their abilities to cope with the multifaceted challenges they encounter during their educational journeys. This personalised approach recognises that stress management is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour and that students require nuanced, flexible, and responsive support systems to navigate the complexities of their academic, personal, and professional lives.

Overall, the Lazarus Theory and the associated research highlight the critical importance of understanding and addressing the stress experiences of students, particularly in the TVET context. By empowering students with the necessary coping resources and fostering a deeper understanding of their stress management processes, educational institutions can create more supportive and resilient learning environments, ultimately enhancing the well-being and

academic success of their student populations. The original passage suggests that (TVET) can have a positive influence on the overall well-being and academic achievements of the learners. This statement can be elaborated upon further to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) plays a crucial role in shaping the future of learners by equipping them with practical skills and knowledge that are directly applicable in the workforce. This mode of education not only enhances the academic achievements of TVET learners but also positively influences their overall well-being. TVET programmes are designed to provide learners with a hands-on, experiential learning approach that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This approach helps to develop a range of essential skills, including problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork, which are highly valued in the job market. As a result, TVET learners often experience a greater sense of confidence, self-esteem, and job readiness, contributing to their overall well-being and successful transition into the workforce. Moreover, TVET curricula are typically tailored to the needs of local industries and communities, ensuring that the skills acquired by learners are directly relevant and applicable to their future careers. This relevance and practical focus of TVET can lead to higher levels of motivation and engagement among learners, as they can see the direct connection between their studies and their future employment opportunities.

In addition, TVET institutions often provide a supportive learning environment, with access to specialised equipment, training facilities and experienced lecturers who can guide and mentor the learners. This comprehensive support system can contribute to the academic achievements of TVET learners, as they receive the necessary resources and guidance to excel in their chosen field. Overall, the positive influence of TVET on the well-being and academic achievements of learners is multifaceted, encompassing the development of practical skills, increased motivation and engagement and a supportive learning environment. By recognising and harnessing the transformative potential of TVET, policymakers, educators and communities can work together to create a more inclusive and prosperous future for all.

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## Appendix A: Ethics Clearance



***For office use only	
Date submitted	7/2/2017
Meeting date	
Approval	P/Y/N
Ethical Clearance number	EFEC1-3/2019

### FACULTY OF EDUCATION

### RESEARCH ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

This certificate is issued by the Education Faculty Ethics Committee (EFEC) at Cape Peninsula University of Technology to the applicant/s whose details appear below.

**1. Applicant and project details (Applicant to complete this section of the certificate and submit with application as a Word document)**

Name(s) of applicant(s):	Lee-Anne Diedericks		
Project/study Title:	The influence of stress on the academic performance of students in a TVET College in the Western Cape.		
Is this a staff research project, i.e. not for degree purposes?	No		
If for degree purposes the degree is indicated:	M.Ed		
If for degree purposes, the proposal has been approved by the FRC	Yes		
Funding sources:			

**2. Remarks by Education Faculty Ethics Committee:**

<b>Approved: X</b>	<b>Referred back:</b>	<b>Approved subject to adaptations:</b>
Chairperson Name: Dr Candice Livingston		Date: 8/3/2019
Chairperson Signature: <i>C Livingston</i>		
<b>Approval Certificate/Reference: EFEC1-3/2019</b>		

## **Appendix B: Approval to conduct research**

26 June 2017

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

### **PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

I hereby wish to inform you that permission has been granted by the Principal of Northlink College's office, for Lee-Anne Diedericks to conduct research at Northlink College.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RL Cunningham', is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

RL CUNNINGHAM (MRS)

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL: ACADEMIC

## **Appendix C: Consent form**

### **CONSENT FORM**

#### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

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##### **TITLE OF STUDY: THE INFLUENCE OF STRESS ON STUDENTS AT A TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING COLLEGE**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Lee-Anne Liezel Diedericks who is currently studying towards a [Masters](#) degree from the Faculty of Education at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The results of the study will contribute to the completion of a thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your position as a student in the TVET sector.

##### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the research study is to potentially contribute to the field of knowledge and the extension of conceptual understanding regarding how anxiety disorders influence students' academic performance in TVET colleges.

##### **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

##### **Interview**

Partake in an interview of which you will be asked a few questions that will take approximately 60 minutes. The questions in the interview will be supplied to you and its contents explained. Adequate time will be given to you when answering the questions.



## **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

The methodology of the study involves interviews and analysis of documents which were prepared according to standard research methods and institutional protocol. Conduct of the project will follow a strict adherence to the Research Ethics Guidelines for Researchers of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. At the end of the project, possession of the reports will reside with the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the Department of Higher Education and Training. There will, therefore, be no personal risk or discomfort whatsoever to individual participants in this study.

## **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

The information shared from the interview will potentially enhance participants' understanding of how mental disorders need to be taken into consideration in order to assist in further conducting research on implement strategies to overcome these challenges that are faced on daily basis by students, that we are unaware of.

## **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will not receive any remuneration for participation in the study.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with any participant will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of securing the data collected in a locked cupboard in my office. The researcher will be the only person with access to the cupboard. The transcriptions, notes and data will be destroyed six months after the researcher completes the study or as soon as required by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

## **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the

study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If the participant ceases to be in the employment of the TVET college sector, the researcher will terminate the participant's involvement in the study.

#### IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact my supervisors: **Dr. Andre van der Bijl** 021 680 1500, [vanderBijlA@cput.ac.za](mailto:vanderBijlA@cput.ac.za).

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact, please contact **Dr. Chiwimbiso Kwenda**, Chairperson of the Education Faculty Ethics Committee, 021 680 1500, [KWENDAC@cput.ac.za](mailto:KWENDAC@cput.ac.za).

<b>SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE</b>
--

The information above was described to me by Lee-Anne Liezel Diedericks in English and I am in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Subject/Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to (participant's name).

\_\_\_\_\_

He/she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. The interview was conducted in English and no translator was used.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Investigator**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## **Appendix D: Interview questions**

The researcher developed the interview questions for the NATED business studies students based on obtaining information that would assist in understanding if stress influences academic performance. This information was used to address the problem statement, how stress influences students' performance? and what do these students describe as the required coping mechanisms to overcome these stressful situations?

### **Question 1**

(Do you experience any stress in your studies?)

### **Question 2**

(How do you personally define/describe this stress?)

### **Question 3**

(Tell me about these stress factors that you experience?)

### **Question 4**

(How do these stress factors make you feel?)

### **Question 5**

(How do you react or behave when you experience these stress factors and these feelings that you experience as a result of these factors?)

### **Question 6**

(How do you cope with these stress factors and these feelings?)

### **Question 7**

(How does this stress influence your academic performance? So does it have a positive or negative influence on your performance? How so?)

### **Question 8**

(How are you able to focus, and how do you perform academically when using your method or methods of coping?)

### **Question 9**

(What else do you think you can do, to cope with the stress you experience?)

### **Question 10**

(What would you like your college to do to assist you?)

### **Question 11**

(Is there anything else you would like to add? Is there anything else that you would like to add based on the Covid? Was anything interfering with regards to Covid, anything like that?)

## Appendix E: Example of highlighted responses to insert under specific themes/sub-themes

INTERVIEWEE 1: Yes, definitely. Definitely, because this year has been extremely tough because I don't know, somehow N5 has just been more difficult than N4 for some reason and it's more pressure on us because of my home situation as well.

INTERVIEWEE 2 I sometimes do yes, stress is when I am struggling to un-band something because sometimes I just, I just don't get everything right, so if I see that I'm struggling with something and then I don't have any kind of way to ask for assistance, then I think I happen to stress myself about it, so ja.

INTERVIEWEE 3 Yes, ma'am.

The work it's too much sometimes. It is too much work ma'am [indistinct] it's just like they give too much work and it's a lot of pressure.

INTERVIEWEE 4 Yes I do often, ma'am. Like sometimes I don't understand the work very well. I do understand half of it but the other half I'm a bit puzzled by it.

INTERVIEWEE 5 Yes, I'm currently experiencing stress right now because of my health. I was diagnosed with fungal infection a week ago. So I have undergone that treatment now and just the anxiety of writing exams and not knowing what to expect, so ja, I am.

INTERVIEWEE 6 Yes I do Ma'am.

INTERVIEWEE 7 Yes, ma'am.

I don't like doing everything at one time and [indistinct] with Covid-19 I must study; it's hard to study like just stay at home. [Indistinct] and it really puts a lot of stress on me.

INTERVIEWEE 8 Yes.

INTERVIEWEE 9 No, not actually, ma'am. No.

It's only the assignments that's all.

## Appendix F: EXAMPLES OF JOURNAL ENTRIES AND INTERVIEW RESPONSES INDICATING THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

A	B	C	D
THEMES	SUB THEME	INTERVIEWEE NUMBER	QUOTES
ACADEMIC	Academic WORKLOAD	1	somehow N5 has just been more difficult than N4 for some reason and it's more pressure on us
		2	I am struggling to un-band something because sometimes I just, I just don't get everything right, so if I see that I'm struggling with something
		3	The work it's too much sometimes. It is too much work ma'am [indistinct] it's just like they give too much work and it's a lot of pressure.
		4	I don't understand the work very well. I do understand half of it but the other half I'm a bit puzzled by it.
		11	stress that has to do with the anxiety around the pressures of actually wanting to pass and stress upon stress. So it's different kinds of stresses
		14	the question papers that I received from the lecturer isn't up to date
		Diary entry 1	Previous year of studies was much less stressful than this year, the workload is much more
			Struggling to grasp the work, I cannot grasp the work clearly, I struggle to keep it in my head
		Diary entry 2	Stress about computer classes and the loss of time because computer is a difficult subject that you need to practice and I do not have a laptop
		Diary entry 4	One lecturer has not come to college for three weeks so we missing out on a lot of work and this is stressful
		Diary entry 4	Lack of understanding with the work, some of things explained I do not understand
		Diary entry 4	Studying three subjects in a row with no off time in between makes me feel stressed because of the pressure
		Diary entry 6	N5 more difficult than N4, the work is more challenging for me